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Educational Policy Reform and its Impact on Equity Work in Ontario: Global Challenges and Local Possibilities

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the effects of global policy discourses on the educational restructuring of the work of equity workers in Ontario, Canada. Research in two school boards with those directly involved in equity work revealed that the restructuring process had uneven and unexpected effects on the activities of equity workers. Using the critical policy analysis framework, the analysis moves into a discussion of the complexities of policy studies. I argue that the policies introduced at the government level are implemented and practiced on the basis of the historical specificities found at each local site. (Note 1)

Influenced by global policy discourses on education, the Conservative government (1996-2003) introduced major changes in the structure of the education system in Ontario. These changes created a major shift in all aspects of education, such as standardization of curriculum, reduction and

amalgamation of school boards, funding and staffing formulas, and more specifically the centralization of power and control in the Ministry of Education.

The objective of this article is to discuss the effects that the restructuring process has had on the work of equity workers in two school boards in Ontario. It aims at finding out the extent to which the restructuring of education has changed the everyday activities of those who are directly responsible for equity work in these school boards. Using the framework developed by Ball (1991, 1994); Dehli (1996); Gilborn (1994); Taylor & Henry (2000), this analysis does not negate some of the negative effects of the restructuring processes in education. Rather, it discusses how policy implementation at local sites is a more complex and uneven issue which requires further investigation at the level of individual institutions to determine its various interpretations and possibilities. Unlike more deterministic views of the relationship between government policies and their impact on individuals and groups in various educational settings, there are good reasons to believe that possibilities for intervention by those for whom these policies were expected to have a detrimental effect are greater than anticipated.

Context of change

Education systems in many advanced industrial nations have been experiencing significant changes. Reforms in management, governance, assessment procedures and standardization; cuts to education budget; privatization, and more control over curriculum design and content are common elements of these changes. The hegemonic discourses and perspectives around these reforms are justified by the process of globalization, which claims to require restructuring of education system in order to make the nation-state more competitive in the face of the changes in the world capitalist order. Globalization is thus used as a legitimizing discourse that makes the policy changes in education self-evident, necessary, and leaves current education systems with no other alternatives (Bourdieu, 1998). Educational globalization, then, is an attempt to create global policies around education that makes the movement of labor around the globe easier. Educational globalization, however, does not always lead to policy uniformity and homogeneity:

Educational globalization does not imply policy homogenization, but rather that there are tensions within globalization processes that serve both to concentrate and differentiate the policy agenda. Nor is it argued that globalization implies the surrendering of national sovereignty. However, the increasing polycentric nature of governance and hence of policymaking is recognized (Taylor and Henry, 2000, p. 488).

Thus, it is important to discuss globalization not in a deterministic way in which there is no space for resistance, contestation and differences. On the contrary, there is a need to look at globalization both as an impetus for homogeneity and at the same time a stimulus for the production of differences. This conceptualization of globalization is significant in that it allows the local to resist, alter and reinterpret global policies based on the histories of local condition. It is true that the reform package that is introduced in many advanced capitalist

societies shares similarities which could be connected to global and market mechanisms. Still, there are differences in the implementation of such policies at the local levels that cannot be ignored and which must be examined carefully.

The macro level analysis of educational restructuring and reform (Apple, 1993, 2000; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Torres, 2002), although politically significant, does not provide much analysis of their impact at the level of practice. As Stephen Ball argued, "Any decent theory of education policy must attend to the workings of the state. But any decent theory of education policy must not be limited to the state control perspective." He argued that policies are shaped at the local level of practice:

Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete as far as they relate to map on the "wild confusion" of local practice. Policies are crude and simple. Practice is sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable. Policy as practice is "created" in a trialectic of dominance, resistance, and chaos/freedom. Thus policy is not simple asymmetry of power. Control [or dominance] can never be totally secured, in part because of agency. It will be open to erosion and undercutting by action, embodied agency of those people who are its object. (Ball, 1994, pp. 10-11)

Education policy at the provincial level in Ontario under the Conservative government should be seen within such complex understanding of the state policy formation. The reform package that was introduced has been practiced in complex, unexpected, and unstable ways in the two local settings. This research reveals that the implementation of government policies have not been practiced homogeneously in various local settings. The implementations, interpretations, and the practices at the local level were dependent on the complex histories, cultures and agencies of individuals present in each specific local setting. As Kari Dehli argues, "current transformations in late capitalism have wide-reaching effects in every part of the globe, but these effects are uneven and mediated locally in unpredictable ways". (Dehli, 1996:85)

In recent years, the impact of educational restructuring and the resulting inequities for poor and minority students have been well analyzed and documented by educational scholars and researchers (Apple, 1993; Ball, 1993 ; Dei, 2001; Dehli, 1996 ; McNeil, 2000; Rizvi & Lingard, 2000; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997; Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998; Whitty, 2001). The debate over school choice and marketization of education has been useful in understanding the dynamics of neo-liberal reform in education. In Ontario, the education system has been going through some similar policy reforms as other advanced capitalist societies such as US and England. The task ahead is to find out how these reforms are practiced at the local level and their implications for students, teachers, administrators, and for those who are actively seeking for an education system based on principles of equity and social justice. As Levin argued:

The task of the analyst, then, is to consider the ways in which policies are driven by a particular logic or ideology, but also the ways

in which they are shaped by other factors-historical, cultural, institutional, and political- that they are less predictable. At the macro level, long-term changes in societies and the role of the state are important. At the micro level, chance, in the form of individual personalities or unexpected events, is also an important consideration in understanding reform. Neither the importance of means-ends rationality nor the underlying contingency of life can be ignored-both must be accommodated in an adequate theoretical account. (Levin, 2001)

Today, the general view in Ontario is that the current policies of educational restructuring have significantly reduced equity activities and the institutional mechanisms to adequately address equity issues. This is mainly attributed to the policies introduced by the Progressive Conservative government that took power in 1995 (Dehli, 1998; Dei 2001;Griffith, 2001; Goldstein, 1998; Majhanovich, 2002; Smith, 1998).

There is little doubt that changes to the education system along with the massive cuts in education budget have had serious consequences for all aspects of education. The new policies over governance, funding formula, curriculum and assessment procedures are all facets of the Ontario government's education policy. These policies are adopted and initiated at the government level and they all have a short-time timetable for implementation. These policies are significantly changing the nature of teaching and learning in Ontario.

Educational policy reform in Ontario is predominantly influenced by economic theory with its discourse of market mechanism, efficiency and productivity. The long- term impact of these reforms is not known. Ontario is still at the early stages of such policy reforms and perhaps it is too early to fully comprehend the social impact of such policies.

I do not challenge the view that these changes have had drastic implications for Ontario education. Rather, it is intended to show that policies adopted at the government level are subject to local interpretations and implementation, and may not necessarily achieve its intended objectives in practice. This research shows that despite the draconian measures introduced by the government, there still are spaces for oppositional work at the level of individual institutions.

Methods

Research for this work was conducted during 2001-2002 and used qualitative methods of inquiry (Note 2) in order to explore the impact of policy reforms on equity education from the experience of those actively involved in equity work at local sites. In this case, it explores the institutional changes from the perspective of equity workers' (Note 3) experience of their routine jobs. Six educators from two different school boards (3 from each board) and one from the Ministry of Education and Training who have been actively involved in equity work were interviewed. The school boards were selected based on their activities around equity education. One school board had a long history of equity work and the other one had no history of systematic and on-going equity work.

There were also two focus group interviews (two people in each group and one in each board). The equity workers were not the objects of the research. They were informants rather than subjects. The intention was to draw on their knowledge and experience of their everyday work situation, of their relationship with others (such as administrators, teachers, and parents, trustees) and what the current changes in education in Ontario have meant for them. Interviews were one to two hours in length and semi-structured. They were tape-recorded and then transcribed.

An Historical Overview of Equity Education in Ontario

Until the late 1980s, little systematic attention was directed to issues of equity and social justice in Ontario education. Some school boards, though, developed policies related to race relations and multiculturalism. In 1979, the Toronto Board of Education became the first school board in Canada to set in place an official policy on race relations. By 1990, there were about 40 boards of education in Ontario that developed some sorts of policies dealing with issues of race and culture. (Rezai-Rashti, 1995) In 1985, the Ontario government, through its Ministry of Education, moved to establish an Advisory Committee on Race Relations. The mandate of this committee included, among others, the following duties:

- to promote the development of a Race and Ethno-cultural Equity Policy by all school boards in the province.
- to assist and advise the Ministry of Education in the creation of guidelines for equity policy development and recommend priority areas for policy development.
- to identify strategies that will assist boards in developing and implementing racial and ethno-cultural equity policies.
- to place concepts such as multiculturalism, race, and ethno-cultural relations and anti-racist education in their historical context as an aid to their proper use in equity policy development, and to identify the threads that link them. (Ministry of Education of Ontario, 1987:2)

In 1987, the Advisory Committee on race relations published a report entitled “The Development of a Policy on Race and Ethnocultural Equity”. Although the report was validated province-wide, not much happened until the early 1990s when the centre-left New Democratic Party (NDP) won in the provincial election.

During the NDP government, the Ministry of Education and Training paid some attention to issues of racism and sexism in Ontario schools. In 1993, the Ministry made it mandatory for every school board in Ontario to develop and implement a policy on Anti-racism and Ethno-cultural Equity. To that effect, the Ministry established a unit within the Ministry of Education and Training to support the work of school boards and to make school boards accountable for their work on equity issues. The Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, in 1993, recognized “there have been systemic inequities in educational experiences of minority groups” and the Ministry of Education acknowledged that the educational structures, policies, and programs have been mainly European in perspective” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 45). According to this policy, all school boards in Ontario were to develop a policy on Anti-racism and

Ethnocultural Equity and they were to submit their policies and the implementation plan to the ministry by March 31, 1995. Boards were expected to begin implementation by September 1, 1995. This policy contained clear timelines, expectations, and implementation plan attached to it. The implementation plan to be carried over a five-year period included clear annual objectives and outcomes, partnership with the local communities and the establishment of mechanisms for evaluating progress.

In 1995, the NDP government lost in the provincial election and the Progressive Conservative Party was elected with a majority of seats and a platform of tax cuts, fiscal responsibility, and the elimination of employment equity policy. Soon after the new government took office, the monitoring of the boards' implementation of the policy on Anti-racism and Ethnocultural Equity "just died". From 1995 to 1997, about two thirds of the budget of the unit was cut. The staff of the unit was not allowed to monitor or interfere with boards. As Laura stated:

By that time my staff was shrinking anyway because of budget cutbacks.... I stayed for a couple of years, because they didn't get rid of us immediately. In 1997, the Anti-racism and Ethnocultural Equity Unit was shut down. The few remaining staff were either dismissed or re-distributed to the other branches of the Ministry of Education and Training.

To sum up, liberal and NDP governments supported more equity related initiatives, especially during the NDP, an institutional mechanism for accountability was established. However, these policies and initiatives were faced with various kinds of responses from local sites and coupled with the government's commitment to consultation, by and large did not achieve the expected goals.

Conservative Government and Policy Reforms in Education

The interview data support the view that the restructuring process in Ontario has had a serious impact on all aspects of education, including the work on equity and social justice. This is especially true for the school boards with a long history of doing work in these areas. However, this research also reveals that the actual work on equity and social justice does not necessarily correspond with the Ministry of Education and Training's mandated policies. It shows that school boards may interpret and implement these policies based on a set of complex conditions in their individual institution. At the level of local practice, people in various local settings have been able to interpret such policies based on particularities of their communities.

Two school boards were selected for this research on the basis of their activities around issues of social justice prior and after 1995. The Richmond school board has been a leading board in terms of providing leadership in equity work provincially (work on race, class, gender, culture, and sexuality). After 1995, the effort of the equity workers to continue with the same level of activities was drastically reduced. The Victoria school board did not do much work on equity and social justice prior to 1995. After 1995, some significant activities were introduced and in some ways this board began to play a leading role in recent

times.

The Richmond School Board

The Richmond school board had a long history of progressive work in education. Interviews with several members of the equity department who have been working in this institution for over twenty years revealed some of this history. Marjorie, one of the interviewees, discussed this history from her perspective as an educator in this school board. She talked about how in early 1970s a group of social activists decided that they would run progressive trustee candidates in order to try to get a majority of seats on this board. Until then, political parties were not involved in municipal elections. Trustees would run as independents.

These trustees were interested in a range of equity issues such as parents' participation, multiculturalism, alternative schools, and the education of working class and poor students and parents. The board became a place where issues related to gender, race and ethnocultural equity were actively discussed. The board tried to create positions for people responsible in the system running initiatives that would try to level the playing field for groups that have been identified as having less success in the school system. They also substantially funded the equity initiatives. As Marjorie discussed:

We had the power of the purse to try to make things more even, and we used our power. And.... They raised the mill rate in order to fund these programs that they thought they needed. You know, we had run these programs, we had made our research department backing up some of our initiatives. We had an organizational culture that, even though we didn't always agree with each other, this was the direction, and it was one of the three parts of our mission statement that the last director of the board, kind of pushed through—Equity, Excellence and Accountability, with the emphasis on Equity, not on the Accountability. In other words, his vision was, we have to be accountable for equitable outcomes.

Therefore, before restructuring, this board had more than 20 years of experience dealing with various equity issues. They had developed curriculum materials and their work with teachers and students was a model for other boards of education in the province and at the national level as well. When restructuring was initiated and the amalgamation happened this board had to amalgamate with several other boards of education that did not have the same experience and the level of commitment to equity issues.

Those who were interviewed and who work for the Richmond School Board gave the following reasons for not being able to continue the equity work with the same level of intensity:

- amalgamation- the board was amalgamated with several other school boards. The size of the board became six times bigger than the previous board of education.
- downsizing and reduction of staff with equity portfolios and the elimination

- of some of the programs.
- devaluation of trustees as public figures.
- shifting of the organizational culture and difficulties of generating interest in the system around equity issues.
- the province taking over funding and not allowing the school boards to set the mill rate.

The interviewees indicated that these interrelated factors, together affected equity work in this school board. As Tom, one of the participants in this research summed up:

The old vehicle that was holding the system accountable was the trustee.

On the one hand, trustees' wards have now been expanded to encompass federal ridings, they are huge, so that no trustee has first-hand knowledge of any of the communities or their schools or their principals, you know, they're.. because they have got dozens and dozens and dozens of sites. And the second thing is that the provincial legislation said that trustees could be paid a maximum of five thousand dollars a year [from previous 45 thousand], which means there are no full-time trustees, so not only do the people who are there have these enormous areas that they're responsible for, but they have to have another job or to be independently wealthy... So that it means that the kind of accountability, where before a parent who was having trouble in a school with their child could phone up the trustees if nothing else worked out, today if a parent can find a trustee is a small miracle.

The devaluation of trustees as public figures in this board with such progressive history of work around issues of equity and social justice was a serious problem for equity workers. Considering the history of the board and its unique development since the 1970s, there is no surprise that equity workers within this board perceived trustees predominantly as political allies. This is one example of local particularities that is not generalizable to other boards of education. In my interview with equity workers from the two other boards, the devaluation of trustees was a not an issue because there was no history of trustees' involvement and commitment to equity and social justice.

Another participant, Maria, discussed the size of the school board and the number of schools within the district. She commented that the size of the current board makes it almost impossible to do equity work:

Now, with amalgamation all of that changed. On the one hand suddenly the board became huge... There are 600 schools... Three hundred thousand students. Attempting to make anything work in that kind of massive structure suddenly becomes an administrative nightmare. It becomes really, really very difficult. So, just the size of this new formation itself is a huge impediment to any kind of systematic change, because the system itself is just too large to manage.

In terms of specific impact on equity issues, it was stated that:

When amalgamation happened there were about a dozen people who had different kinds of equity portfolios in the amalgamated board.... Well, this year the equity department consists of one district-wide coordinator, three they are not consultants now, they're learning something-or-other, but they're consultants [inaudible] yeah. And just two student program workers left over, so basically there are six people....

These views, as expressed by the interviewees, reflect the serious impact of the government cutbacks and the restructuring process in their efforts to teach about equity and social justice. They expressed that several of the programs such as work with students (residential camp) was drastically cut.

In addition, they mentioned that with the high speed of restructuring process and the profound changes in the nature of teaching and learning, teachers are just fed up and bitter. As Peter mentioned, " teachers are at their wit's end, and fed up, and any kind of talk of anything that may seem as more work or something beyond what they're already doing, in a situation where they're incredibly stressed seems like add-on and they just don't want to do it."

In terms of their work as equity workers (in various positions) they discussed that unlike the previous situation, now they are mainly responding to crisis and trouble-shooting. As Tom stated, " I end up doing a lot of, you know, one-shot workshops here and there, but generally I'm ending up doing a lot more kind of administrative stuff and trouble-shooting and, you know, stuff that is not particularly interesting or exciting."

To summarize, it appears that equity workers at Richmond School Board are faced with several interrelated issues that impact on their work with equity issues. Together, these issues significantly changed the nature of their work, their relationship to trustees, teachers, and students. A work that had previously been pro-active and creative changed to one of predominantly being a respond to crisis and the carrying out of administrative work.

The Victoria School Board

The Victoria school board was not much involved in equity issues prior to the restructuring of the education system in Ontario. After 1995, however, this school board became involved in some significant work on equity and social justice, initiated several new curriculum documents, and an extra staff member was hired to implement the new initiatives. Remarkably, it was not the board's trustees or administrators who initiated equity activities. On the contrary, a number of people whose job was not initially connected to the equity department pushed and struggled for equity and social justice in the board. In some cases, this work was beyond the job description of some of these people. Despite limited success, they explained that the work on equity issues was not easy and they had to deal with tensions and resistance from people working in the board.

Those who were interviewed thought that some of the following factors might have helped their limited success:

- the board did not have to amalgamate because it was already huge.
- The existence of a network, or group of people connected to the equity network in early 1990s (during NDP government) who continued their work after the educational restructuring.
- some of the senior administrators, including the director, were supportive of equity initiatives.

The initiatives during the NDP government in the early 1990s (mandating a policy on Race and Ethnocultural Equity) created a space for several people within this board to form a group and organize in order to conduct workshops, seminars, and develop proposals around equity issues. They explained how they met one another at conferences, workshops and curriculum initiatives related to equity education (outside of their board). In a focus group interview one of the participants discussed how this all happened and how the group was formed:

I don't know. I really don't. The only thing I can think of is that it's really the mix of people that have come together to do this. We generally trust each other, I mean, "the superintendent" trusts us, and we trust him not to sort of forge off on his own to do something that won't work....

Another participant discussed how they decided on a strategy that would work in their system:

We made connections (4 of them), we started talking about how... we realized that in some ways being subversive would be the only way to get something going on at the system level, so we set up something called [Equity Group Support], which was a network that met for four years, I guess six, five or six times a year and we offered workshops on whatever people wanted.... The participants were teachers, elementary and secondary, resource teachers, some of our professional support staff, teaching assistants, principals, people who worked in this building [board of education office], in the field office and so on and there were about a hundred and fifty people or so on the mailing list.

Most of the workshops were conducted at the teachers' federation offices because some of the issues discussed (for example gay and lesbian issues) were too sensitive to be discussed at the board office. When asked what was the involvement of people who officially had the equity portfolios within the board, they responded:

They were and they weren't [involved]. What we decided to do was set it up as something that was grass root. We were afraid that if it centralized it would get pulled in and destroyed and sort of, you know, hidden away. We had many offers, but we sort of said, "We'd like to run this out on our own."

They discussed how, out of these workshops, they felt the need to provide teachers with curriculum support and develop documents that would support them with equity work in the classroom.

The question is how they could manage to do all of this despite drastic cutbacks to the education system. Anna, one of the participants, responded that most of the cuts were at the management level and it seems that when the administration is supportive, they always find a way to get the support. As Allen, one of the equity workers discussed, “so, they have lost money, it’s.. But I don’t know where they keep finding it. I mean, we are not talking about big bucks.”

Allen commented how the hiring of the new staff member responsible for the implementation of new curriculum documents on equity and inclusive curriculum happened. He discussed how a combination of several factors made the board realize that there was a need to hire a new staff member:

Yeah, you know, I’m thinking a couple of things might have been happening. One is that as we were going through the boxes of documents in the superintendent’s office, and the amount of his time going to this work was just increasing. Like although he kept trying to give stuff to four of us [those involved in equity work], I mean, his.... And I think he started... ‘cause we started to say, you know, “well, we’re getting these kinds of requests. Who will do this?” And the more and more we kept saying that, I think he started to realize... And then we said, “you know, there’s seven corporate goals, there’s a budget for all of them except for this one...”

The fact that the administration at this board became gradually supportive of equity work was mentioned several times by those interviewed. Of course, they also mentioned that this was not always the case.

Two of the participants in the focus group interview discussed how sometimes they themselves do not believe the kind of progress that they have been making:

We just pinch ourselves and say like “is this really happening?” Like how can it all be happening? This can’t be happening. We can’t be this far.” I mean, when they approved the position I couldn’t believe we’d get this position.

In summary, the Victoria school board has been engaged in significant equity activities since 1996, including conducting on-going workshops for their staff, curriculum development and policy initiatives around issues of equity and social justice.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the educational policies introduced by the government had an uneven impact in two local sites. It has been illustrated that policy implementation is far more complex, and in the case of equity workers there have been variations of interpretation, possibilities and spaces for

oppositional work.

The Richmond school board, with a long history of equity work, could not continue the work with the same level of intensity. Several factors were at work here, including the effects of the amalgamation of school boards. The Richmond school board's amalgamation with other boards created two main issues for equity workers, one being that the school board became a very large organization and the other that it amalgamated with boards that did not have the same history of equity work, thus raising a challenge in terms of organizational culture. Another factor that was mentioned earlier and seems to have had an impact for this board was the trustees' diminishing authority. As mentioned, trustees played a historically significant role which government made less important by reducing it to a part time and marginal position. These and other factors contributed to the reduction of equity work at the Richmond school board.

The Victoria school board was not amalgamated because the board was already a large institution. In addition, during the previous two governments (Liberal and NDP) there was a significant shift in the administration of the board with the creation of a network that consisted of a group of educators (mostly teachers) who played an important role in continuing the equity work with more intensity despite the elimination of the Anti-racism and Ethnocultural Equity Unit of the Ministry of Education and Training.

These two case studies show that policy process is never straightforward. Based on various contextual, historical and sometimes opposing interests (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry, 1997) there are unpredictable consequences, some of which could be either intended or unintended by the policy makers.

Practitioners do not confront policy texts as naïve readers, they come

with histories, with experience, with values and purposes of their own, they have vested interests in the meaning of the policy. Policies will be interpreted differently as the histories, values, purposes and interests which make up any arena differ.... Furthermore, interpretation is matter of struggle. (Bowe, Ball, and Gold, 1992, p. 22).

The final point that I would like to emphasize is that the unpredictability of a policy text should not lead educators to think that they should not be resisted or contested. In fact the process of contestation and resistance by those from various positions is natural and may result in testing and developing new ideas and policies. The restructuring of education and the global policy discourses on education that are based on market dynamic and economic rationality have had significant effects for minorities and working class students and teachers (Ball, 1993; McNeil, 2000) and they should certainly be resisted by those who support the creation of a more egalitarian society.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Don Fisher and Roxana Ng for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this work. I am also grateful for the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided through Standard Research Grant No. 410-2001-1622.
2. The research method in this study is influenced by the work of Dorothy Smith and her method “Institutional Ethnography” and its particular interviewing procedures. For further information see Dorothy Smith, 1987, 2002.
3. Equity workers are those whose work is specifically related to equity issues such as race, culture, gender, social class, and sexual orientation. They work with teachers, students, administrators, trustees, etc.
4. Originally, 3 school boards were selected for this project. The third board had no one officially doing equity work, and did not systematically engaged with equity issues prior and after restructuring of education. Only one teacher active in equity work was interviewed.

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