30 YEARS OF EQUITY POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN TORONTO/ONTARIO: "*LOST IN TRANSLATION*"

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ABSTRACT I am an educator who has worked in public education in the city of Toronto for the last 35 years. I have been a teacher, vice-principal, principal, teacher educator, and professional development facilitator. I am a white male who has spent all of my years working towards building a more equitable education system for all students. In this article, a personal narrative based on who I am and my experiences over time, I demonstrate how equity policies and practices have been more or less developed over the past 35 years depending on the political will of the government in power at the time. When there was political will there were also money, staff, and resources that came along with that political will.

At times there has been some form of accountability for putting policy into practice but for most of the last 35 years there has been little accountability and therefore little equity practice has come from the policies. The implications of this lack of accountability for all students, and for racialized and marginalized students in particular, stifled much of the potential for positive change.

This article describes the equity work over those years in four distinct phases: PHASE 1: NDP (and other progressive) Trustees in Power at the Toronto Board of Education (1979-1990); PHASE 2: The NDP in Power Provincially (1990-1995); PHASE 3: The Harris Years (1995-2002), and PHASE 4: The TDSB and a Liberal Provincial Government in Power (2002-present). I question whether equity policy and practice has, in fact, moved forward over the last 35 years and examine factors which may enhance or impede progress in equity education. The positive note is that there are and always have been activist teachers working in schools everyday who do understand that an equity frame and lens to teaching is the essential ingredient to ensuring success for all students. They do not allow their students to become *"Lost in Translation"*.

RÉSUMÉ Je suis un éducateur qui a œuvré dans le domaine de l'enseignement public dans la ville de Toronto durant les 35 dernières années. J'ai été enseignant, directeur adjoint, directeur, formateur d'enseignants et formateur en perfectionnement professionnel. Je suis un homme de race blanche qui a dédié toutes mes années de travail à l'établissement d'un système d'éducation plus équitable pour tous les élèves. Dans cet article, qui prend la forme

d'un récit personnel s'appuyant sur l'individu que je suis et sur mes expériences passées, je montre comment les politiques et pratiques en matière d'équité se sont plus ou moins développées au cours des 35 dernières années en fonction de la volonté politique du gouvernement au pouvoir de l'époque. Lorsqu'une certaine volonté politique se manifestait en ce sens, de l'argent, du personnel et des ressources ont été attribués à cette fin.

Si on a pu sentir sporadiquement une responsabilisation gouvernementale dans la mise en œuvred'une politique d'équité, cette responsabilisation n'a pas été continue au cours des 35 dernières années car peu d'actions concrètes en matière d'équité ont vu le jour. L'impact de cette faible intervention sur les élèves, et plus particulièrement sur les élèves racialisés et marginalisés, est important car les changements significatifs ont été relativement réduits.

Cet article présente le travail qui a été effectué en matière d'équité au cours de ces années en quatre phases distinctes : la phase 1 correspond à l'époque où le Toronto Board of Education était régi par des administrateurs du NPD et les partis progressistes (1979-1990) ; la phase 2 relate les actions menées lorsque le NPD formait le gouvernement en Ontario (1990-1995) ; la phase 3 correspond aux années du gouvernement Harris (1995-2002) ; et la phase 4, à celle du gouvernement provincial libéral au pouvoir (2002 — à aujourd'hui). Dans cet article, je questionne l'évolution des pratiques et politiques en matière d'équité au cours des 35 dernières années et je discute des facteurs qui peuvent promouvoir ou entraver les progrès réalisés en matière d'équité en éducation. Sur une note positive, cet article montre qu'il y a toujours eu des enseignants qui militent quotidiennement en faveur de l'équité dans leurs classes et qui comprennent qu'une approche promouvant l'équité est un ingrédient essentiel pour assurer la réussite de tous les élèves. Ces enseignants ne laissent pas leurs élèves se perdre en cours de route.

"LOST IN TRANSLATION"

I am an educator who has worked in public education in the city of Toronto for the last 35 years. I have been a teacher, vice-principal, principal, teacher educator, and professional development facilitator. I am a white male who has spent all of my years working towards building a more equitable education system for all students. What I hope to do in the next few pages is to give the reader a sense of some of the equity policies and practices in Ontario education over the last 35 years and to try to make some sense of it all. And this is obviously a personal narrative based on who I am and my experiences over time.

What I will attempt to do is demonstrate how the equity policies and practices over time have been more developed and less developed depending on the political will of the government in power. And when there was political will from the powers that be there were also money, staff, and resources that came along with that political will.

At times there has been some form of accountability for putting policy into practice but for most of the last 35 years there has not been much accountability and therefore not much equity practice has come from the policies. The implications of this lack of accountability for all students, and for racialized and marginalized students in particular, stifled much of the potential for positive change.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

When I began teaching in Toronto in 1979 we lived in a very different city. While Toronto has always had diversity, it has changed dramatically since that time. I first worked in the Regent Park community of Toronto (Canada's largest social housing community) in 1984. At that time students were overwhelmingly white, with the beginning of Caribbean and Vietnamese families entering the neighbourhood.

Today the students are overwhelmingly non-white. One of the things that they have always had in common is that they come from families with serious economic challenges. Please see the article in this issue by Gillian Parekh, "Focus on Diversity in Ontario: A snapshot of the Toronto District School Board", in order to get a much more detailed examination of the demographic data of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) at this time. Suffice it to say that racialized students make up 71% of the student population, and socio-economic disadvantage affects huge numbers of TDSB students and that disadvantage impacts racialized students disproportionately. (See FACTS: 2011-12 Student & Parent Census, Maria Yau, Lisa Rosolen & Bryce Archer; Organizational Development/Research & Information Service; Toronto District School Board, 2013.)

I believe it is important for the reader to have a sense of the students attending Toronto schools as well as a sense of Toronto's growing disparities.

It is crucial to understand who we are talking about in order to better understand the implications of equity policies, practices, and implementation over the last 30 years.

EQUITY POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION OVER THE YEARS

From the early 1970's the Toronto Board of Education (one of the 7 local boards of education in Toronto pre-amalgamation) began collecting data on its students through the *Every Secondary Student Survey*. This survey took place every 5 years beginning in 1970 up until the end of the Board in1998. Through its pioneering work in linking achievement data to race and ethnicity data it became clear that the school system was not doing well for certain groups of students—at that time Black, Portuguese, Aboriginal, and Spanish-Speaking students in particular.

Through the publication of these shocking results came a strong push back from both within the Toronto Board of Education and from parent and community advocacy groups. In particular the parents of Black students played a huge role in pushing the school board to take the lack of success for their children seriously. In 1991 (the earliest data available at this time) the students listed as at risk in both English and Math were:

- Portuguese Students: 33%
- Black students born in Canada: 35%
- Caribbean students: 32%
- African students: 39%
- Spanish speaking: 38%
- The Board average was in the low: 20%

From this and other data, and from what many progressive educators were feeling at the time, came much work on policy with regard to seeking new ways to even out the playing field in terms of race, class, and schooling.

PHASE 1: NDP (AND OTHER PROGRESSIVE) TRUSTEES IN POWER AT THE TORONTO BOARD OF EDUCATION

I will now briefly give some of the recommendations that were made over the years. This begins in 1979 with the *Final Report of the Sub-Committee on Race Relations*:

> *"*62. The Professional Development Division of the Personnel Department provide opportunities for in-service programs in human relations, race relations, ethnic relations and human rights for existing Board staff, to equip them with the skills necessary to relate knowledgeably and sensitively with people of different racial and ethnic origins, that such programs be integrated into existing in-service and staff development programs, and that they include an evaluation of the content of such courses for practical application."*
>
> *"*63. The Director be requested to report to the Board on the feasibility of providing orientation seminars on race/ethnic relations to all new staff within the first year of their employment." (p. 49)*

In 1984 in the *Race Relations Program Phase 2* came the following:

> *"Personal and Professional Development (for teachers)*
>
> *b) Search for ways to overcome their own reluctance and that of their students to recognize and discuss racial and ethnic questions;*
>
> *c) Recognize racial and cultural biases in themselves and in students and attempt to overcome them;" (p. 6)*

Then in 1987 in the *Draft Report of the Consultative Committee on the Education of Black Students in Toronto Schools*:

> *"17. That teaching staffs by their methodology, attitude and comments take into account the languages and cultures of all students and through their teaching promote the learning of English and French without rejecting the students' home languages." (p. 35)*

And then in 1988 in the *Final Report of the Consultative Committee on Black Students in Toronto Schools* called for:

> *"Inservice programs, seminars, and courses:*
> *- On Human Relations*
> *- On Race Relations*
> *- On Human Rights*
> *- To develop sensitivity*
> *- To learn how to deal with incidents of racism*
> *- To discuss and review curriculum materials*
> *- To learn how to teach about race and race relations" (p. 13)*

All of these forward thinking and change-motivated recommendations came from a Toronto Board of Education that had a left-wing majority of Trustees (NDP or left of NDP).

PHASE 2: THE NDP IN POWER PROVINCIALLY

In 1990 the first provincial NDP government was elected to power in Ontario and progressive changes came forward in terms of educational equity policy at the Provincial level. The Ministry set up an Anti-Racist Secretariat that put forward strong equity policy and held school boards accountable for its implementation.

In 1992, there was a demonstration on Yonge Street in Toronto that ended in violence. The Black Action Defense Committee (BADC) organized this event, which was initially to protest the acquittal of four white police officers in Los Angeles for the videotaped beating of Rodney King (The Toronto Star 2005). It also took on more significance after a 22-year old black man, Raymond Constantine Lawrence, was shot twice in the chest by a police officer two days earlier. The shooting of Raymond Lawrence was the eighth police shooting of a black person in Toronto since August 1988 (Lawton 1992).

Following the events on Yonge Street, the NDP Premier of Ontario, Bob Rae, asked Stephen Lewis to act as the Advisor on Race Relations to the Premier and to report back with recommendations for change following the 'riot'. In his report (commonly known as the *Stephen Lewis Report*) to the Premier he recommended that:

> *"The Minister of Education, through his new Deputy Minister, establish a strong monitoring mechanism to follow-up the implementation of multi-cultural and anti-racism policies in the School Boards of Ontario.*
>
> *The Parliamentary Assistant to the Premier, Ms Zanana Akande, continue to pursue, with unrelenting tenacity, the revisions of curriculum at every level of education , so that it reflects the profound multicultural changes in Ontario society. She might also pursue, as a logical accompanying reform vital to minority students, the elimination of streaming in the school system." (p. 25)*

In 1993, over 20 years ago, the Ministry came out with its *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation.*

In terms of Staff Development, it tried to ensure that:

> *"Staff are able to identify manifestations of systemic and individual racism;*
>
> *Staff are committed to eliminating racism;*
>
> *Staff are able to deal effectively and confidently with systemic and individual racism. For example:*
>
> *-Teachers are able to identify and deal with racial and ethnocultural bias in the curriculum and assessment of students.*
>
> *-Principals effectively manage a multicultural, antiracist instructional program and all aspects of a culturally and racially diverse school." (p. 20)*

From the 1993 Ministry Guideline above came strong school board policy documents such as the *Interim Policy and Procedure on Racial and Ethnoculutral Mistreatment*, Toronto Board of Education, 1994.

PHASE 3: THE HARRIS YEARS

In 1995, a right-wing reactionary Conservative government led by Mike Harris was elected in Ontario. It stayed in power until 2002. For 7 long years all progressive policies were attacked and destroyed. All mention of equity and anti-racism was removed from Ontario Ministry of Education talk and practice. The Anti-Racism Secretariat at the Ministry was disbanded.

The forced school board amalgamations ended equity policies and funded work at the school board level and it was up to individual schools and teachers to continue the work somewhat subversively. In 2002, the Tories were defeated and a liberal government was elected and very slowly change started to happen.

The Harris years were largely 7 lost years for education and educational equity in particular. And those 7 years had serious consequences. The cuts to education and social services impacted youth success and wellbeing in general and especially for racialized and marginalized students. Five years after the end of the Harris government, Jordan Manners, a young Black high school student was murdered in his school on May 23, 2007. Many people have said and written about how his murder is directly or indirectly linked to the fallout of the serious Harris government social and educational cuts. This speaks of how those cuts served as the fodder for the increase in gang violence and murdered youth that followed.

PHASE 4: THE TDSB AND A LIBERAL PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT IN POWER

Following the murder of Jordan Manners, the first TDSB student to be murdered in a school, the TDSB engaged a panel of experts to examine issues connected to school safety in very broad terms which held numerous consultations and reported back to the Board with many important recommen-

dations in January 2008 at a cost of over one million dollars. The recommendations of the Panel include many repeats of recommendations from many years before.

In *The School Community Safety Advisory Panel Report: The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety*, January 2008 (commonly known as the Falconer Report),

> *"... the Panel recommends that the TDSB develop an inclusive curriculum that will allow students to examine their own cultural and historical experiences and the experiences of living in their communities. Specifically, the TDSB should explore ways to incorporate African-centred perspectives and other forms of cultural knowledge in the education of youth." (pp. 42-43)*

The Roots of Youth Violence Report, a provincial report also following the murder of Jordan Manners recommended in recommendation 16 that:

> *"The province must remove the barriers and disincentives to education that exist for many children and youth... by:*
>
> *- Ensuring that teachers and administrators better reflect the neighbourhoods they serve*
>
> *- Developing and providing a curriculum that is racially and culturally inclusive*
>
> *- Better connecting schools to families and communities" (p. 37)*

And again in 2008 the *Toronto District Urban Diversity Strategy* the TDSB calls for: Actions to Improve Equity and Inclusive Schools

> • All staff have training that is school-based and focused on equity and inclusive school practices that contribute in measurable ways to student achievement
>
> • Ensure all policies and practices are fair, inclusive, and contribute to assisting all students to high levels of achievement
>
> • Continue to collect and monitor staff demographics to ensure staff diversity that is reflective of the student population

The TDSB Achievement Gap Task Force was set up, held consultations and reported its findings in May 2010.

Among its key recommendations:

> • Prepare guidelines and methodologies to assist schools to use a demographic framework for planning, implementation, review and reporting on student achievement initiatives
>
> • Provide training in culturally responsive instruction and leadership for all staff
>
> • Provide training in antiracist training for TDSB staff at all levels.
>
> • Require schools to adopt strategies for encouraging and supporting the full engagement of all racialized and marginalized students into the activities of the school

Once again, most things had been recommended many times and many years before.

In 2009 the Ontario Ministry of Education came out with the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. This strategy is an attempt, the first since before Mike Harris' time to encourage and support equity work from the Ministry of Education. Boards across the province are supposed to be working on the implementation of this strategy.

> *"... To improve outcomes for students at risk, all partners must work to identify and remove barriers and must actively seek to create the conditions needed for student success. In an increasingly diverse Ontario, that means ensuring that all of our students are engaged, included, and respected, and that they see themselves reflected in their learning environment." (p. 5)*

I believe the Ministry of Education has realized that the Strategy, which was to be fully implemented by 2012, is not yet nearly complete and that there needs to be accountability linked to implementation.

And now 30 years later, how have graduation rates improved for marginalized and racialized students?

Dropout/Pushout Rate by Region of Birth: 2000-2005

> • 40% of English-speaking Caribbean students
>
> • 37% of Central and South American students
>
> • 32% of East African students
>
> • 29% of Southeast Asian students
>
> • 21% TDSB average

The TDSB Grade 9 Cohort Study: A Five-Year Analysis, 2000-2005. (TDSB 2006)

Here we are some 30 years later and not much has changed

and in some ways we are even further behind than we were in the 70's and 80's. Students, based on race and class and other identity factors, are still being racialized and marginalized in our schools and are not provided with a school environment that can lead to success, however one defines success.

So 30 years later, the battle for equitable schools continues and must continue if we are to ever truly develop an educational system that can serve as a vehicle for social justice.

And the positive note in all of this is that there are and always have been activist teachers working in schools everyday who do understand that an equity frame and lens to teaching is the essential ingredient to ensuring success for all students. They do not allow their students to become *"Lost in Translation"*.

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