POLICY APPROACHES TO ADDRESS DIVERSITY IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT Ontario is Canada's most populous province, home to its largest school district, and is undergoing significant demographic change. Ontario has also, for more than a decade, been the site of a high-profile system-wide reform movement reliant on centralized, Ministry-coordinated improvement policies with their corresponding resources, assessments, and sanctions. An examination of the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (EIE) provides an opportunity to consider both these trends: Ontario's schools are changing, warranting policymakers' response, and that response has been a set of guidelines developed centrally. Because part of what shapes educators' day to day work is provincial policy—rules, guidelines, and resources that reward teachers for focusing their efforts in certain ways—the purpose of this article is to explore how Ministry equity policy in the province of Ontario sets out to address classrooms' growing demographic diversity. This paper is not an evaluation of that policy. In fact, the article raises questions about the feasibility of assessing impact in the absence of clear reporting requirements. Instead of evaluation, this paper makes a contribution to the conversation about diversity in Canadian schools by raising questions about the policy logics behind a particular policy, and providing research-based questions to consider when assessing any claims of the strengths or weaknesses of policy approaches. The critical analysis connects the Ontario experience to the broader policy research literature, examining for example the ways that policies can both solve problems and cause new ones, and the ways that policies might change schools and schools might change policies.

All policies have built into them an implicit definition of the problem. What problem does the Strategy seek to solve? For the EIE to make a difference in Ontario education there need to be incentives or inducements associated with the policy that will change educators' behaviour. What are they? What logic is driving the policy? And in the absence of assessments or sanctions, just how effective can this Strategy be? At this moment of growing demographic diversity and rising expectations for schools the province of Ontario has articulated a vision of equity and inclusion in a policy strategy. This step is important for several reasons: it provides a signal, not only to educators, that fairness and opportunity matter, that educational stratification should not be considered to be neutral or inevitable, and that districts and schools have within their span of control the ability to take steps to make their work demonstrably more equitable. In short, it's hard to imagine that advocates concerned with equity would be happy if this policy didn't exist. Nevertheless, a signal is not the same as action. Statements of equity aspirations are laudable but are not a substitute for implementation of concrete and observable goals. In a province that has demonstrated so persuasively in the past ten years its ability to implement centralized mandates, the fact that this

policy so obviously decouples goals from inducements or assessments or sanctions should raise questions about just how serious the province is about seeing this policy take root.

RÉSUMÉ L'Ontario est la province la plus peuplée du Canada, qui possède le plus grand arrondissement scolaire subissant des changements démographiques majeurs. Depuis plus de dix ans, l'Ontario connaît une réforme très médiatisé touchant l'ensemble du système scolaire. Cette réforme découle de politiques centralisées et coordonnées par le ministère, qui engendrent des ressources, des évaluations et des sanctions. Un examen de la Stratégie en matière d'équité et d'inclusion scolaire (EIS) du ministère de l'Éducation montre que les écoles ontariennes subissent de profonds changements qui nécessitent une attention soutenue de la part des décideurs politiques mais que la réponse du ministère est restée au niveau de l'élaboration de lignes directrices centralisées.

Puisque le travail quotidien des enseignants est en partie façonné par les politiques provinciales – les règles, les lignes directrices et les ressources qui récompensent les enseignants lorsqu'ils orientent leurs efforts « dans le bon sens » – l'objectif de cet article est d'examiner comment la politique en matière d'équité de l'Ontario aborde la diversité croissante des salles de classe dans la province. Cet article ne propose pas une évaluation de cette politique. Il questionne plutôt la possibilité d'évaluer les effets de cette politique en l'absence de lignes directrices clairement établies. Cet article entend contribuer à la réflexion sur la diversité dans les écoles canadiennes en soulevant des questions quant à la logique sous-tendant l'élaboration de certaines politiques et en fournissant à la recherche un cadre de questionnement qui pourrait être appliqué dans l'évaluation des forces ou faiblesses d'une approche politique. Cette analyse critique relie l'expérience de l'Ontario aux travaux de recherches sur les politiques publiques, en examinant par exemple comment les politiques peuvent à la fois résoudre des problèmes et en créer de nouveaux, ou avoir une influence sur les écoles et vice versa.

Toute politique contient en son centre une définition implicite d'un problème qu'elle vise à résoudre. À quel problème la Stratégie EIS tente-t-elle de palier ? Pour que l'EIS produise un changement en enseignement en Ontario, certaines mesures incitatives ou certains avantages devraient lui être associés afin qu'elle puisse modifier des comportements chez les enseignants. Quelles sont ces mesures incitatives/avantages ? Quelle logique sous-tend cette politique ? Et en l'absence d'évaluations ou de sanctions, dans quelle mesure cette Stratégie peut-elle être efficace ? Dans une époque marquée par une diversité grandissante et une hausse des attentes du public envers les écoles, l'Ontario a certes développé une vision de l'équité et de l'inclusion dans sa stratégie politique, mais une simple vision est-elle suffisante ? Cette étape est importante car elle affirme et avertis tous les acteurs concernés que l'équité et l'égalité des chances sont des enjeux vitaux, que la stratification en éducation ne doit pas être considérée comme neutre ou inévitable, et que les conseils scolaires et les écoles ont la possibilité d'instaurer des mesures afin de rendre leur travail réellement plus équitable. Néanmoins, un avertissement n'est pas une action concrète. Faire des déclarations sur ses aspirations envers l'équité est un exercice louable, mais il ne se substitue pas à une mise en œuvre d'objectifs concrets et observables. Dans une province qui a démontré de manière convaincante au cours des dix dernières années sa capacité à mettre en œuvre des mandats centralisés, le fait que cette politique dissocie si manifestement ses objectifs de ses mesures incitatives, de ses évaluations et de ses sanctions devrait soulever certaines interrogations quant aux intentions de la province de voir réellement cette politique se concrétiser.

INTRODUCTION

The articles in this volume have, for the most part, chronicled the ways that educators working in schools have responded to the changing demographics in their classrooms. This article will take a more macro approach. Because part of what shapes educators' day to day work is provincial policy—rules, guidelines, and resources that reward teachers for focusing their efforts in certain ways—the purpose of this article is to examine how Ministry equity policy in the province of Ontario addresses classrooms' growing demographic diversity. This paper is not an evaluation of that policy but is instead a set of critical questions for readers to consider when assessing any claims about the benefits or drawbacks of Ministry of Education efforts to support equity and diversity in schools.

CONTEXT

Ontario is Canada's most populous province and home to its largest school district (the fourth largest in North America) the Toronto District School Board. There are 2.1 million stu-

dents in Ontario's 4891 schools. These schools are governed by 72 intermediary organizations (school districts/school boards) in four parallel systems: 31 English public school boards; 4 French public; 29 English Catholic school boards; and 8 French Catholic school boards. There are about 115, 000 classroom teachers and about $21 billion dollars in operating funding. The size of the education sector, the prominence of education debates in electoral politics in the province, and the concrete successes over the past few years (increased high school graduation rate, rising early literacy rates, class size reduction, and full day kindergarten policies implemented) attract a lot of attention worldwide. By the end of this academic year, the Ontario Ministry of Education will have hosted about 90 visiting delegations (Read, Huang, & Flessa, 2014).

Ontario has been the site of high profile educational policy changes for a generation. Although NDP, Conservative, and Liberal provincial governments are certainly not interchangeable, they have all demonstrated faith in macro-level systems approaches (like test-driven accountability) to affect what happens in schools (Jaafar & Anderson, 2007). Part of the logic here is that large scale change, something greater than a few pockets of excellence, requires a coordinated response from central government. That these impulses towards centralization exist simultaneous to pluralist demands to diversify the "one best system" (Fuller, 2003) means educators are faced with sometimes contradictory messages about how best to support equity. Should different schools in this large province all follow the same set of rules for equity and inclusion, or is local variation okay? If local variation is okay, who is ensuring (and how) whether these approaches are indeed equitable? An examination of provincial policy can show how policymakers have tried to respond to these different dilemmas.

WHAT IS POLICY FOR?

A technical rational understanding of policy is that it *a)* is meant to solve problems and *b)* is meant to make more likely positive outcomes and less likely negative ones. One of the great contradictions of policy, however, is that it also causes problems, has unintended negative consequences, and is a far more complicated intervention than a simple statement of instructions (Stone, 2002). In a system of compulsory schooling as vast as Ontario's there will always be cases of excellence on whatever measure you're looking for (academics, co-curriculars, community engagement). But one role of policy is to turn those cases from exceptions into the rule. Policy includes but isn't exactly the same as statutes or regulations. Educational policy isn't simply what provincial legislators decided and send to the schools to implement. Policy is also shaped by the decisions of what some social science authors have named "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1980), the people charged with implementing policy in the day to day operation of public organizations. Looking only at how policy is written will tell you more about intentions than it will about impact. As one scholar has put it, *"Everyone's thumbprints are on educational policies as they wend their way into classrooms"* (Cuban, 2004, p. 113). This scholar also wonders how much schools change policies (rather than the more traditional question of how much policies change schools).

So if school sites have such a strong influence on how policy is actually enacted, why look at the macro level at all? A look at the macro level policy provides a window into how policymakers (politicians, bureaucrats, and educators alike) are grappling with a Canada that looks so different from even a generation ago. Research on Canadian educational policies focused on racial or ethnic diversity has a comparatively short history. Only thirty years ago, for example, it was possible for two OISE researchers to conclude that *"research on the implementation of educational policies related to multiculturalism in Canada is virtually non-existent"* (Anderson & Fullan, 1985, p.17). It is no longer accurate to say that such research is nonexistent (see Joshee & Johnson, 2007 for example) but it is worth remembering that, compared to our neighbour to the south, educational policy focused on racial diversity is a newcomer.

In Ontario education, some commonly used policy language is that of strategies and frameworks. There is, for example, an Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework and Ontario Leadership Framework. There is a subsequent Ontario Leadership Strategy and an Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. Frameworks are more general than strategies and both are highly aspirational; they signal to schools or districts what the Ministry's priorities are, but do not necessarily have the "teeth" or potential sanctions that Ministry Policy/Program Memoranda might have. Primary Class Size reduction policy had inducements for schools to implement a 20-student cap in grades 1-3, and financial sanctions for not doing so. There are no such sanctions associated with the FNMI Policy Framework or the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.

WHAT "PROBLEM" IS THE EIE STRATEGY INTENDING TO SOLVE?

All policies have built into them an implicit definition of the problem. In this section I highlight a few aspects of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009) to shed light on how Ontario policymakers have articulated the "problem." This is a particularly interesting case because the system the strategy criticizes, for its lack of equitable outcomes, the system requiring the new equity strategy, is the very system the Ministry has always managed.

In the 2009 document introducing the policy then-Minister of Education (now Premier) Kathleen Wynne: states,

> *"Student achievement will improve when barriers to inclusion are identified and removed and when all students are respected and see themselves reflected in their learning and in their environment."*

The problem to be solved is student achievement that is hampered by a lack of inclusion.

Later, the document itself frames the question of diversity in this way:

> *We believe that Ontario's diversity can be one of its greatest assets. To realize the promise of diversity, we must ensure that we respect and value the full range of our differences. Equitable, inclusive education is also central to creating a cohesive society and a strong economy that will secure Ontario's future prosperity* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009, p.5).

So here the problem to be solved is an economic one: if difference is not attended to, less cohesion will result, which will lead to a weaker economy.

An examination of the equity framework begs the question: is the more important problem the fact that students from diverse backgrounds lack fair access to opportunity? Or, from the perspective of the policy, does it matter most that Ontario loses economically if diversity isn't embraced? In whose interest should changes to the day-to-day work in schools be made?

Diversity ("recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys, and students with special education needs are just some of the groups that may be at risk of lower achievement") Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p.5)) is associated with low achievement, low achievement stands in the way of social cohesion and economic growth. Equity policy can address all of these by making students feel included.

Another assumption expressed by the Strategy is that

> *"Our schools should be places where students not only learn about diversity but experience it."* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p.15).

By way of comparison, the First Nations Metis and Inuit [FNMI] Education Policy Framework likewise states a goal similar to the diversity strategy regarding who it is for:

> *"FNMI students in Ontario will have the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to successfully complete their elementary and secondary education in order to pursue postsecondary education or training and/or enter the workforce... All students in Ontario will have the knowledge and appreciation of contemporary and traditional FNMI traditions, cultures, and perspectives."* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

At another place the EIE document says that the goal should be to:

> *"identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to student achievement and celebrate diversity and respect for all in our schools."*

One question worth asking here is the extent to which student achievement goals and diversity celebration goals work together or are potentially in conflict. Given a great deal of evidence from a range of studies from across the globe that indicate that test-driven accountability seems to narrow, not broaden, what public schools offer, particularly to less advantaged students (Levin, 2012) there is reason to look twice at assertions that Ministry achievement goals and equity goals have equal pull on teachers' time and effort.

One final question about the problem definition implicit in the Strategy: Is the problem "difference" or is it "hierarchy"? If the problem is difference, then work emphasizing integration and intercultural understanding should take priority. However, if the problem is hierarchy—some students get better or worse education simply because of the socioeconomic categories they were born into—then a different set of interventions are required. These interventions would have to be redistributive. And it is an open question whether the people of Ontario have an appetite for one approach more than another.

WHAT POLICY LEVERS OR POLICY LOGICS ARE AT WORK IN THE EIE?

For the EIE to make a difference in Ontario education there need to be incentives or inducements associated with the policy that will change educators' behaviour. What are they?

There is language in the 2009 document stating that educators must *"identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to student achievement and celebrate diversity and respect for all in our schools"* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009, p.2). This is an interesting dilemma in Ontario because of the controversies associated with collection of demographic data related to educational results. A tiny minority of school boards in Ontario do what all school districts in the United States are required to do, namely to collect and analyze a range of educational data based on race, proficiency with the language of instruction, or family's income level. What American educators take for granted is perceived by some Ontario educators as contributing to rather than addressing the problem of inequality.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission notes:

> *It is a common misperception that the Code prohibits the collection and analysis of data identifying people based on race and other Code grounds. Many individuals, organizations and institutions mistakenly believe that collecting this data is automatically antithetical to human rights... The OHRC's position [is] that data collection and analysis should be undertaken where an organization or institution has or ought to have reason to believe that discrimination, systemic barriers or the perpetuation of historical disadvantage may potentially exist* (OHRC 2009, pp.42-43).

In their analysis of the "roots of youth violence" in Ontario McMurtry & Curling (2008) note the importance of (and resistance to) collection of data according to race. They state:

> *"It is hard to think of another domain where it would be controversial to seek evidence of a problem and, where a problem is found, go on to seek evidence of how best to address it and whether the efforts made to do so are bearing fruit"* (p. 240).

The EIE is a mix of centralized and decentralized approaches to educational change. It comes from the Ministry and mandates that districts establish Equity and Inclusive Education Policy and Guidelines. This means that there will be 72 different approaches. With 72 different jurisdictions approaching this broadly written aspiration policy there will be a range of context-driven approaches. My guess is that boards will pick a small set of equity goals that are aligned with their pre-existing preferences and not necessarily with the areas of greatest need. If equity work were easy, it would not require such struggle to enact. My other guess is that progressive educators, who resist centralized policies when it pertains to curriculum mandates or requirements for testing, might view the decentralization of this approach with skepticism. Are there no non-negotiables? Are there no requirements that the Ministry can place on all school boards? How about a requirement to collect and analyze race- and income-based data, a tool which the policy seems to require?

Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 119 (April 22, 2013) states:

> *"school boards are now required to develop and implement an equity and inclusive education policy... gender identity and gender expression are dimensions of diversity..."* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2013 p. 3).

It also states that:

> *"All publicly funded school boards are required to develop, implement, and monitor an equity and inclusive education policy that includes a religious accommodation guideline..."*

It is an open question what the connection here would be between compliance with the Ministry's requirements and commitment to equity goals.

The PPM identifies 8 "areas of focus," begging the question of whether an educator or a school can in fact focus on 8 things at once. Are they all equally important? The 8 areas of focus are:

- Board policies, programs, guidelines, practices
- Shared and committed leadership
- School-community relationships
- Inclusive curriculum and assessment practices
- Religious accommodation
- School climate and prevention of discrimination and harassment
- Professional Learning
- Accountability and Transparency

In order to encourage boards to work on these 8 areas, are there rewards or sanctions for implementation? The closest the PPM comes to this topic is to say,

> *"The Ministry expects boards to demonstrate continuous improvement, so that progress is evident."*

WHAT ARE THE DILEMMAS OF ASSESSMENT?

There are several dilemmas associated with assessing this policy. As with any policy, there are questions about what counts as evidence of implementation? For example, if a school were work to make sure that students from diverse backgrounds felt included and reflected in the school's work but these same students did not show increased scores on, say, math, would the policy be rated a success or a failure? Or the alternative: could students who have been drilled in basic literacy and numeracy find themselves with higher scores but estranged from the larger mission of inclusion or social cohesion?

Is equity and inclusion a process, an approach to organizing school time, or is it an outcome?

Another question is: how should educators understand evidence that contradicts the prevailing (negative) narrative about visible minority educational attainment? National surveys from Stats Canada suggest that visible minority

first generation immigrant students show better academic outcomes in high school than native born whites (Krahn & Taylor, 2007). To what extent are educators inquiring into the patterns of success or marginalization in their schools, and to what extent are they working from assumptions that might not fit?

CONCLUSIONS

In this brief article I have tried to look closely at the language used in policy documents to talk about the "problem" of diversity. As my OISE colleague Reva Joshee has noted in her groundbreaking work, how policy is understood and enacted on the ground derives from many sources, not just the authoritative policy texts of the sort I have examined here (Joshee 2007; Joshee & Sinfield 2013). Educators receive many messages about the value of diversity in schools, and a close look at these policy texts shows how government has constructed the issue.

At this moment of growing demographic diversity and rising expectations for schools the province of Ontario has articulated a vision of equity and inclusion in a policy strategy. This step is important for several reasons: it provides a signal, not only to educators, that fairness and opportunity matter, that educational stratification should not be considered to be neutral or inevitable, and that districts and schools have within their span of control the ability to take steps to make their work demonstrably more equitable. In short, it's hard to imagine that advocates concerned with equity would be happy if this policy didn't exist. Nevertheless, a signal is not the same as action. Statements of equity aspirations are laudable but are not a substitute for implementation of concrete and observable goals. In a province that has demonstrated so persuasively in the past ten years its ability to implement centralized mandates, the fact that this policy so obviously decouples goals from inducements or assessments or sanctions should raise questions about just how serious the province is about seeing this policy take root.

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