

Educational policy and the social justice dilemma

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In this chapter Paul Carr reveals a controversy at the heart of Canadian educational policy making. The unacknowledged power and privilege of 'whiteness' and the ways in which white people can define the agenda to support their own power, leads to marginalisation of minority groups and contributes to continuing racism in society. He critiques the complacency of public education in its attempts to inculcate social justice and democratic values in the absence of proper accountability and transparency. While these are recognised components of the educational reform agenda, there is nothing equivalent for social justice at the institutional level. The result is lack of accountability or transparency in decision making, policies, funding, resources and activities, and unsatisfactory outcomes with respect to social justice.

Introduction

Who determines what is a controversial issue, and how do we deal with such issues? Such questions, rightly the focus of this book, are themselves controversial. This chapter focuses on how controversial issues are manufactured, massaged and manipulated before they make it to the formal curriculum and policy level. Before teachers have the mandatory policies, directives, guidelines and course-content with which they are to educate and engage students, there is an entirely different, and problematic, process at play that leads to the conceptualisation and development of educational policy. This process, as mysterious as it is misunderstood, is pivotal in determining the shape and parameters of what takes place in the classroom. A particular concern involves the area of social justice: if the educational policy process has not fully internalized social justice considerations, could the curriculum then be caught in such a way as to address social justice concerns.

How do you teach controversial issues within a political environment pre-occupied with the notion of balance, discounting ideology, stressing the positive, and focusing on academic standards? Opfer (2005:ix) has pointed out that the 'myth of apolitical education is long dead even though there is a trend in the education field toward portraying itself as increasingly neutral and objective'. In my experience, a significant number of student teachers have strong reservations about teaching about and for democracy, for fear of being perceived as biased, or of indoctrinating students into a particular perspective. This raises the question of the critical role played by educational leadership to cultivate, support and act in the area of social justice in education for any tangible gains to be made at the classroom level.

The ample research on differentiated outcomes between racial and ethno-cultural groups requires us to consider how the educational system has failed to live up to its promise of providing a quality and equitable experience for all students. This situation necessitates a review of the formal and informal curriculum, and why, for example, some groups claim that it is too Euro-centric, and even racist. In relation to controversial issues, it is important to understand that not everyone comes to school with or from the same vantage-point, requiring that the pedagogy takes into consideration different experiences, cultures and learning styles.

This chapter explores notions of identity and power with relation to educational policy development, and delves into policy structures and processes. The notion of Whiteness (Fine *et al*, 2004; Dei *et al*, 2004), centred on the power and privilege accorded the white race, is significant in deconstructing how educational policy is developed. Does the educational policy process effectively encourage, cultivate and integrate a strong social justice component that can then be translated at the teaching level into the tools, resources and pedagogy which would enable students to address important and problematic matters in an appropriate and inclusive way? Underscoring this discussion is the conceptual, philosophical and applied notion of accountability. How do governments enforce and hold to account the teaching and learning of social justice in support of school activities and engagement? I conclude with a discussion around what can be done to ensure a more inclusive, sensitised and effective policy development process to provide a framework for educators to 'do' social justice work in education.

What is social justice, and why is it important?

How should social justice be conceptualised in contemporary times? Social justice involves a focus on the human condition, equity and difference, and thence on discrimination and other forms of oppression. Within the educational policy context, social justice is concerned with inclusion, representation, processes, content and outcomes from a critical perspective, seeking to contextualise, frame and promote debate and action around these issues. I use the term 'equity' — although there are

some nuanced interpretations — as a complement to social justice. Acknowledging the political nature of education is key to the concept of social justice; allowing for, and promoting the inclusion of marginalised voices is fundamental. Vincent (2003) focuses on identity in her definition of social justice, which necessarily requires an analysis of power and privilege, the role of society in constructing lived experience, and the intersections of the myriad components forming one's identity, which coalesce to (re-) define individual and collective experience.

The process of identifying and institutionalising controversial issues is clearly political, as are all decisions made within and about the education system. It is political in the sense that value-judgments are made about the merits of issues, the people presenting them, and the shape of the process to develop and implement policy. Whiteness is a critical concept because white people, in general, are ignorant or unaware of the power and privilege accorded to their skin colour. Colour blindness in societies that have been built on white racial supremacy must be re-considered at the philosophical, political, economic, social and educational levels (Dei *et al*, 2004).

Social justice, in its broadest sense, is the never-ending quest to strive to address and redress marginalisation, inequity and divisive action. Intention is important but it is also critical to consider effect, especially when deconstructing how, for example, racism manifests itself in a systemic, institutional way. Social justice education, therefore, concerns not only the delivery of curriculum but also the development of policies, curriculum and initiatives, as well as the whole range of activities framing decision making, and the nature of the institutional culture. Social justice is also directly linked to the philosophy and application of democracy and citizenship. How could democracy and citizenship exist without social justice? In effect, what education systems do (content) and how they do it (process) are as important as what is achieved (outcome).

The educational policy development process

What happens when a new government takes control? How, if at all, is social justice conceptualised by governments? How does government shape the agenda, the players, and the infrastructure? How, and especially with whom, does it make direct contact in order to discuss issues and proposals? How do diverse interests get on the agenda? What is the connection between policy development and implementation, and how are teachers involved in the process? Educational policy although crafted in different ways by different governments in different jurisdictions, ultimately involves a similar dynamic. Some political authority, usually in consultation with teachers and the community, determines what the issues will be, and then sets about developing policy on what will be taught, by whom, and how. The process is undoubtedly complex, involves many factors and stakeholders, but its shape and form are pivotal in relation to the outcome.

Politics and policy are inseparable, and the process employed to make decisions has serious implications for what takes place in the classroom. The link between educational policy implementation and policy development is, therefore, integral to understanding the educational experience of students and educators. A critical appreciation of the role and influence of how power is exercised can lead to a more constructive assessment of how policy needs to be re-shaped. For instance, if teachers feel that they were not consulted on a particular policy or reform, they may delay, alter or even block the full extent of the policy implementation. Plaut and Sharkey (2003:1-2) emphasise the necessity of solidifying the relationship between those developing policy and those charged with the implementation, stressing that 'policymakers, many of whom may never have taught, work as action executives... (and) define problems based in part on public opinion'. Achieving substantive, meaningful influence related to equity over the end-product is almost unattainable when decision-making processes are not inclusive and respectful of social justice considerations. Therefore, to introduce progressive ideas, to garner and sustain support, to ensure effective implementation, and to deter massive upheaval and dissent is critically important for there to be any movement in the area of equity Young and Levin (1999) emphasise the importance of ideology and national political tradition in studying educational reform in a comparative setting, thus reinforcing the notion that politics cannot be disconnected from the political decision-making process in education. Ministers or Secretaries of Education, following their party leaders, set the tone and establish policy for the educational sector. Their power is immense when one considers that in addition to the positioning and articulation of policies and resources they have the ability to define the language used in the educational sector. Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005:19) illustrate the manipulation of 'policy talk' through terms like 'world class standards', 'ghetto riots', 'strict accountability', 'welfare cheat', 'national security', 'paperwork' and 'red tape' which can sway emotions connected to issues such as school quality, race, poverty, the national budget, innovation, and equity policy. Such terms can be used to collect, condense, and shape opinions so forcefully that alternative views sound irrelevant and unsound.

The literature often speaks of values and choices that emerge in the policy process, involving trade-offs, negotiation and the quest for what is doable, something that may not necessarily be the optimal priority but palatable, given a range of circumstances. If the Government decides that the word 'racism' is no longer to be used, then the tremendous trickle-down rumble throughout the education system manifests itself in a plethora of non-actions. This is what happened in Ontario. The change of governments, from a left-leaning regime - the New Democratic Party (NDP), 1990-1995 - to a right-leaning government - the Progressive Conservative Party, 1995-2003, exemplifies the radical shift in ideas, policies

and resources. The transfer of power in 1995 has been considered a watershed moment in Canadian education (McCaskell, 2005). The NDP had an articulated, rhetorical commitment to the equity agenda, with visible policies, programmes and resources. Cabinet-level committees were established on antiracism, making equity a mandatory component of cabinet submissions. This meant that there would be environmental scans, research, studies, consultation and community input into the policy process, which would take into account the concerns and needs of racial minorities.

In effect, the Conservatives abolished the word 'racism' from the educational vernacular during their nine-year mandate. If these matters are not even considered during the policy development process, what chance is there that there will be a solid social justice foundation in the resultant policy? This is not to infer that no work whatsoever would be undertaken in the area of racism but rather to underscore that this area would not be the established, formal priority of school boards, principals and teachers, that it would not figure as prominently in boards' business and strategic plans, and that funding, training, resource documents and policies would not be viewed as fundamental to the institutional mission.

Contributing factors to the education policy process

Resisting change and rupturing progressive work

Introducing social justice-based change requires a sustained effort, focused on working with all sectors to ensure that marginalised groups are not further disadvantaged, and also that all people, regardless of racial or geographic origins, understand the importance of the initiative. Too many simultaneous, competing initiatives, or not enough visible direct support, can lead to rejection of a policy. If teachers are not considered key players in the development and implementation process, the end result will most likely be unsuccessful, since many of the political advisors, as opposed to permanent public servants, come from the political arena and usually have limited educational experience. This is because the way policy is developed (the process) is almost as important as what is achieved (outcome).

Shaping the policy message

The media play a pivotal role in defining the mandate of a government. Hernan and Chomsky (2002) provide an arsenal of analysis on the role of what they call 'coercive and obedient media' in 'manufacturing consent'. Governments spend untold funds on advertising, polling and strategic advice. This is public money, often used to convince the public of the worthiness of a political party's viewpoint, quite separate from the government representing the interests of the people. The question of who is in the media, who controls it, who has access to it, and what images, articles, themes and concepts are most predominant, as well as the emphasis accorded to specific issues, is particularly germane in

evaluating the presence and status of social justice within a government's mandate. The issue of bias, misrepresentation and omission in relation to racial minorities in the media is well known. What generally drives the government agenda is not the latest scientific research, nor the *bone fide* needs of the students; political agendas are generally painstakingly crafted to weed out dissenting, and minority, voices.

Controlling the agenda

Once in government, the human and financial resources available to control public debate are almost limitless. Layers of experienced, professional staff – known as public servants or bureaucrats – are dedicated to carrying out the mandate of the government of the day, but are not generally invited to critique the direction of government policy. Increasingly, they are considered the implementers of policy, distanced from the development of policy, which, in Canada, is often the exclusive domain of unelected officials. To suggest proposals that diverge from the official business plan is not encouraged, and those consulted are positioned to build the case in favour of the government platform, which, almost systemically, does not include equity-seeking groups and interests. The expression in Canada that 'the report is gathering dust' is a well-known reminder of the waste of public funds expended on research that uncovers incompatible policy directions. In sum, access to government is pivotal in order to be able to have input into the decision making process.

Developing curriculum and educational policy

There is a conceptual and ideological basis to the drafting of documents, policies and activities which serves as a concrete platform for interaction between teachers and students. What to teach, how, when and to whom, combined with the issue of the process and results, is critical for democracy to flourish. Westheimer (2006:5) questions the orientation of civic education in the United States post 9/11, where he underscores that 'dissent, rather than being an essential component of democratic deliberation, is seen as a threat to patriotism'. In this view 'politics' is something unseemly and best left to mud-slinging candidates for public office: being political is tantamount to devaluing the public good for personal or party gains.' Indeed, service-learning is political, and charity tends to be the most politically acceptable form of involving students in the community, as opposed to social justice work. With an increasingly ethnically diverse population, students clearly need exposure to, and experience with, genuine diversity and social justice. If the policy development process does not cater to the needs and concerns of teachers and students in providing the resources, tools, structure and support, then the effectiveness of the actual curriculum and related service learning may be limited.

White complicity and privilege

Rezai-Rashti (2003) speaks of the commitment of 'equity workers', those who are personally and professionally engaged in the social justice agenda, as exemplified by those on the Toronto Board of Education in the 1980s and 1990s who sought to bring about progressive change from within. Although governments often attempt to appropriate social justice causes, it is extremely difficult to survive as an 'equity worker', constantly challenging the institutional power while at the same time representing the formal government party-line to those demanding change on the outside. Social justice must not be considered uniquely the responsibility of equity workers and advocates; it is a matter of societal interest and importance. Those with decision-making power as well as others who may have some influence also need to be part of promoting social justice. They need to reconcile their own involvement in the way power is shaped, and also consider the true extent of the institutional framework that has predominantly benefited whites.

Building an accountability framework

There is an important distinction to be made between how educational systems actually function, and how they ought to function. One might ask if the system is intended to function for social justice, progressive change and democracy. If inequitable power relations are not fully acknowledged, how can there be anything but the maintenance of the system, the reproduction of social relations and knowledge? Disenfranchised individuals and groups deserve a more equitable, responsive and culturally-sensitive learning experience. Governments enacting legislation and policy intended to better society should be held to account for social justice, in addition to high academic standards. Sunderman (2006) argues that the accountability requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act* have the practical effect of further marginalising lower socio-economic groups as well as racially diverse schools.

Accountability hinges, in large part, on leadership. As Fullan (2005) suggests, it is critical to develop targets and measures in order to strategically position and advance an educational system. It is imperative that leaders understand and are capable of connecting and working with social justice. Accountability will not be meaningful if education leaders cannot immerse themselves in the institutional culture of their school-systems in such a way as to reverse passive resistance and intransigent behaviours and processes that do not facilitate transformation.

How can educators and stakeholders ensure that there will be a greater level of accountability in education in relation to social justice? A number of areas can be probed by stakeholders – including parents, students, community groups, educators, and others – to seek some documented, demonstrable connections between the rhetoric of accountability and the reality of a progressive, well-rounded education, premised on the notion

of political literacy and social justice. In particular, stakeholders should demand that governments provide reports, plans, targets, standards and funding for the following, with a specific focus on social justice: strategic policy and leadership; policy development and decision making processes; inclusion and representation; curriculum, including extra-curricular and service-learning components; community involvement; training; communications; funding; data-collection and analysis; and accountability mechanisms including evaluation, monitoring and review.

Social justice could become the organising principal in planning and developing measures, targets and standards, in support of how resources are allocated and policies evaluated at school, school board and Ministry of Education levels. Progress can be made in achieving accountability if the same rigour, discipline, intensity and resources are consecrated for social justice aims as are dedicated to raising educational standards. Educational systems can make progress if they establish goals and measures for literacy; the same could be done for social justice, with obvious benefits for the entire education system. The conceptualisation and implementation of such an accountability system need not be bogged down in complex institutional manoeuvrings; committed, strategic action on a sustained basis can have a positive effect on improving educational opportunities, processes and outcomes.

A First Nations proverb states that one should 'never judge a person until you have walked two moons in their moccasins'. The privilege to discuss what you wish, and how, is enormous. This basic premise of inequitable power relations has not generally been the focus in the field of educational policy development. The term Whiteness is virtually unknown in mainstream education circles, and, as suggested in this chapter, most white people have the privilege of negating white complicity in racism. It is not just that people find it acceptable, for example, that three times the number of black compared with white youths drop out in the Toronto Board of Education (Ontario, Royal Commission on Learning, 2005). More distressingly, it is rather that questions about why this happens are not even asked at the educational policy level. This illustrates how white power, assumptions and privilege operate. Thompson (2003) frames the issue in terms of accepting the concreteness of white involvement, and getting past the notion that a good effort necessarily means that racism is non-existent. We need to question the way that deficit thinking is produced and reproduced, and the impact that this has in reinforcing assimilation into the dominant culture. Do those who are developing policy strive to address social justice concerns in a manner that facilitates constructive and meaningful engagement in democracy? Outside of the formal written policies and curriculum, how does the educational institutional culture respond to, and support, the diverse needs of a multicultural society?

The power of language has been used to convince broad sectors of society of the high level of democracy and accountability in education. Arguably there is *de facto* democratic racism at play since all of the key forces – including the courts, the legislature, big business, and the media – have virtually achieved consensus that racism is not what people of colour say it is. Right-wing politicians in the United States have invoked the name of Martin Luther King to eliminate affirmative action programs, bastardising the legacy of the civil rights leader. Similarly, in-depth examination of white supremacist discourse indicates that elements of extremist thoughts, concepts and ideology can be commonly found in mainstream organisations and government.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that some form of a social justice framework at the institutional level is necessary because of the clear lack of accountability for decision making, policies, funding, resources, activities and outcomes. The notion that public education is currently striving to inculcate social justice and democratic values must also be critically examined. Whereas accountability and transparency have become essential components of the educational reform agenda for the past decade for a host of indicators, no such comprehensive set of standards, guidelines and measures exists in relation to social justice education. For there to be a vibrant, fruitful social justice program in education, it would be necessary to acknowledge and reconcile the multi-faceted problematic of Whiteness as it is engaged in, and forms a major part of, racism and marginalisation in society. Connecting the educational policy process with what takes place in the classroom is key to increasing the quality of the educational experience. Effectively dealing with controversial issues in the classroom, with the hope of enhancing political literacy, requires de-constructing the controversy behind the conceptualisation of the educational policy content, which ultimately filters down through lesson plans, textbooks, teaching approaches, school culture and the public mindset toward education.

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