A Poetic Response to Policy Layering, Intensification, and the De-Skilling of Teachers

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Abstract: *For several decades, the literature has documented ways in which teachers have been subject to declines in professional autonomy resulting from intensification. In Ontario, intensification has arisen from neo-liberal education reform mandating of multi-layered educational policy affecting teachers in their daily lesson planning. To make sense of the proliferation of policy, this project applied arts-based research. Teacher candidates collectively composed a poetic response that allowed them to reflect on how this shapes their work as incumbent professionals, underscoring the role of educational politics in intensification and de-skilling of teachers. Using the poem created by teacher candidates as data, this paper analyzes implicit implications that were given voice by the creative expression afforded by poetry.*

Keywords: education politics, education policy, arts-based research

Introduction

Historically, teachers have been responsible for negotiating many and often competing demands in the course of their work. For several decades, the literature has documented ways in which teachers have been subject to declines in professional autonomy resulting from intensification (Apple, 2008; Ball, 2003; Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Gitlin, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994; Honan, 1994), often arising out of large-scale education reform. Beginning in the 1990s, neo-liberal ideologies have driven education reforms in a variety of jurisdictions, most notably the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada (see, for example, Apple, 2005; Hill, 2003, Taylor, 2001; Wrigley, 2003). These reforms embody:

> a shift away from the more humanistic and egalitarian social democratic political ideology that had dominated most of the 1960s and 1970s to the more utilitarian political ideology [one] which signaled a return to market forces, individual responsibility and economic freedom (Carr and Hartnett, 1996, p. 20).

This ideological shift, Carr and Hartnett (1996) argue, changes what "educational problems" are recognized as needing change and legitimizes certain policy solutions. Often, these solutions contribute to intensification of teachers' work through accountability mandates and highly-prescriptive policy (Ball, 2003).

This paper explores policy layering as a product of neo-liberal reform in Ontario, Canada relates to intensification and the deskilling of teachers. The phenomenon is presented through a collective poetic response, with discussion of its implications in the broader context. The use of this arts-based research method illustrates ways in which preservice teachers experience the phenomenon of policy, and exposes problematic aspects of the structure and nature of education policy in the province of Ontario based on their perspectives.

Context: Education Reform in Ontario and Resulting Myopic Policy Layers

Educational reform has been a constant in Ontario since the beginning of the twentieth century (Gidney, 1999). Upon the election of a Progressive-Conservative government in 1996 and continuing to the present day, the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced a number of education policy initiatives under the auspices of improving increased accountability. Especially salient to this paper was the move to highly prescriptive, centralized policy.

These greater accountability measures in education were a direct result of the framing of education as a "business" in which parents and students were "consumers" (Snobelen, 1995, p. A29). "Customers," the newly-elected Minister of Education John Snobelen explained in 1995, were complaining about the current state of the education system, and changes had to be made to remedy those complaints. The Minister went on to call for increased accountability for teachers, whom he defined as "front-line service providers." In recognition of the fact that his plan would encounter resistance, he stated:

> Now, if front-line service providers are placed at the top of the organization chart, it isn't all happiness and roses. It means increased responsibility and increased accountability. And increased accountability means you cannot hide…Change is rarely well-received by the status quo. It tears at the heart of a fiction we call security (Snobelen, 1995, p. A29).

Note the language used by the Minister – "organizational chart", "front-line service providers", "you cannot hide", "the fiction we call security". These words indicate underlying values that prioritize business ideals (keeping the customer happy, surveillance of workers and alluding to job security as a fiction). This was part of a larger neoliberal discourse that permeated Ontario at the time, and continues to this day. The collective result of neo-liberal educational policy redefines the teaching profession:

> What is important to note is that the deskilling of teachers appears to go hand-in-hand with the increasing adoption of management type pedagogies. . . . The growing removal of curriculum development and analysis from the hands of teachers is related to the ways technocratic rationality [i.e., separation of political and moral issues from seemingly technical concerns] is used to redefine teachers' work. This type of rationality increasingly takes place within a social division of labor in which the thinking is removed from implementation and the model of the teacher becomes that of a technician or white collar clerk. (Giroux & McLaren, 1996, pp. 307-308)

Key education reform initiated in Ontario during the 1990s included the introduction high-stakes testing; secondary school reform (SSR) that included the elimination of the fifth year of high school, reduced the number of secondary school courses from 1400 to 200, enacted an outcomes-based curriculum with highly prescriptive policy documents and more standardized graduation requirements, cut to school district operating budgets with a new, provincially-centralized finance structure. In addition, teachers working conditions were changed: less preparation time, a longer school year, fewer professional development days, and changes to class size. Teacher regulation was also enhanced with the establishment of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). The election of a Liberal government in 2003 resulted in some policy changes to education – though the majority of these were superficial such that both intensification and further de-skilling continued with new education policy documents layered onto the previous ones.

Ontario's core curriculum policy consists of outcomes-based policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education, who acts autonomously to set education policy. For each secondary school course, teachers are provided between 70 and 130 student learning outcomes that they are accountable to assess. On its own, accounting for the core curriculum policy outcomes is a significant administrative undertaking. Since the election of the Liberal party government in 2003, the Ministry of Education has on numerous occasions released add-on curriculum policy documents that addressed timely issues without having to revise or re-issue core curriculum. Until now, these have remained undocumented in the scholarly literature. The following policy documents have been issued in response to various political issues:

- *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools* was released in 2010 to replace a number of previous policy documents (*Program Planning and Assessment*, 2000; *Guidelines for Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting*, 2003; *Guide to the Provincial Report Card, Grades 1–8*, 2000 and *Grades 9–12*, 1999). As its title implies, this policy governs all assessment, evaluation and reporting practice through highly prescriptive requirements.
- *Financial Literacy, Grades 4-8: Scope and Sequence of Expectations* and *Financial Literacy, Grades 9–12: Scope and Sequence of Expectations* released in 2011 in response to the *Report of the Working Group on Financial Literacy*.
- *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* released in 2009.
- *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow: A Policy Framework for Environmental Education in Ontario Schools* (2009) and its companion, *Ready, Set, Green! Tips, Techniques and Resources from Ontario Educators.*
- *Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting English Language Learners in Every Classroom,* released in 2006 in response to a political commitment to the environment.
- *Character Development Framework Document* and its companion *Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12* released in 2008 in response to emphasis on schools to provide character education.
- *Daily Physical Activity in Schools: Guide for School Boards* released in 2006 in response to political pressure to address issues of nutrition and childhood obesity.
- *Making Ontario Schools Healthier Places to Learn* released in 2004 in response to political pressure to address issues of nutrition and childhood obesity.
- *Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills* released in 2004 in response to reports of boys' under-performance on standardized literacy tests.

These policy documents are *not* considered part of the core curriculum, but exist as measures to address specific issues with the expectation that teachers will incorporate them into lesson planning and daily instructional activity. The degree to which schools, boards and teachers incorporate these documents into classrooms remains unknown, though research conducted with administrators suggests that at the school level, teachers are held to account on a variety of measures related to curriculum, where principals define "student performance based on Ministry prescribed standards, indicators, and targets for student academic learning outcomes as a dominant frame to define the agenda for student learning" (Anderson & Macri, 2009, p. 201). As such, the layering of both legislation and education policy contribute to intensification of teachers' labour processes through encroachment of technical control in the form of management systems and reductive and prescriptive curriculum (Apple, 2008).

Theoretical Framework: Policy Layering as Intensification

In a general sense, intensification refers to profound changes in the form of increases, either in time or in workload within a given job (Apple, 2008; Ball, 2003; Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). Intensification has two connections: more of the same work, or signification of different work tasks being added to the teacher's day, such as record-keeping and administration of curriculum (Easthope & Easthope, 2000). Intensification within schools is characterized by the following features (Hargreaves, 1994):

- a perceived lack of time;
- the creation of chronic and persistent work overload;
- replacing time spent caring for students with time meeting administrative demands;
- the enforced diversification of expertise; and
- the production of packaged curricula and packaged pedagogy.

My concern in this paper is the proliferation of policy texts as regulatory mechanisms that increase state control over teachers (Honan, 1994), while reducing autonomy in a way that de-skills the profession. If, as Honan (1994, p. 271) postulated, policy texts "'write' the teacher," then attention to their scope and content is necessary to understand how they shape individuals and their work. Adhering to layered policy involves agreeing to the completion of equally lengthy and complex tasks while also complying with the regulation of the completion of them. When coupled with the "accountability vaccum" (Horsley, 2009, p. 6), they privilege certain classroom activity, while detracting from teachers' autonomy to make choices and serve the needs of students.

Methods: Arts-Based Research

Arts-based research is the systematic use of artistic processes or artistic expression to examine experiences (McNiff, 2008). The arts as research methods allow researchers and participants to "open doors" and "put up mirrors" because artistic expression alters conventional frameworks for re-imagination (Rolling, 2010, p. 111). Policy is rarely conceived of in terms of art – though as my research will illustrate, using policy as the basis for an artistic work sheds light on unique aspects of its impact. Poetry offers the opportunity to disrupt taken-for-granteds and allows us to see things differently with an eye to change (Kinsella, 2006; Luce-Kapler, 2003), and thus was an ideal medium to engage teachers in this cognitive task.

As a teacher-educator, I challenge myself to identify ways for my class to think reflectively and critically about legislation and policy, and how it affects their work. For this project, I facilitated a collaborative artistic process in a teaching methods course at an Ontario university.

In Ontario, teachers are expected to incorporate a proliferation of policy documents and legislative mandates in their course, lesson and unit planning. Teacher candidates in a consecutive teacher education program were preparing to embark on unit and lesson planning in the course, having completed a semester of study on the social and political foundations of education, and educational law and policy. This arts-based research was a means for those individuals to reflect on their prior and current knowledge about policy, and express (through artistic means) their response to the application of policy in their lesson planning.

The collaborative enactment of this poem allowed me, as well as the teacher candidates, to reflect on the policy dimensions of teaching practice while exercising creativity and artistic expression. In order to encourage students' reflection on the vast policy and legislative requirements, I began with a class reading of the Mother Goose classic poem, "This is the house that Jack built" (Golden Books, 2008). Upon completing it, I asked the class to consider how the poem might relate to lesson and unit planning. They quickly identified a connection to the numerous and layered policy documents about which they were aware. Using chart paper to capture their ideas, we constructed a poem as a class, with teacher candidates contributing their knowledge. The class chose to follow the rhythm and style of the Mother Goose poem, and also chose to maintain Jack as the central character, despite some debate about it centred around inclusion. I organized their contributions, created a document, and redistributed their poem the following week for revision and discussion.

For the purpose of analysis, the poem was treated as the data source. Data were analyzed inductively to identify patterns, themes, and categories emerging out of the data rather than being imposed on them (Patton, 1990). As a class, we revisited the poem a number of times throughout the semester as we honed lesson planning and teaching methods. I made note of the insights raised by students, and proceeded to connect them to relevant literature, discussed in the sections that follow. The element of collaboration, along with an interpretative approach to analysis, reflect arts-based research practices that respect the artistic expression of the makers (Rolling, 2010).

Data Source: Collaborative Poetic Response to Policy Layers

The resulting poem created by the class appears below.

This is the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is the template made by the Ministry that structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is design-down planning
Embedded in the template made by the Ministry
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is curriculum policy document, all tattered and torn
Laden with learning expectations, some forlorn
That begins the process of design-down planning
Embedded in the template made by the Ministry
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is the assessment from Growing Success
That hails from the learning expectations
That started the process of design-down planning
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy

Designed to tackle discrimination, embrace diversity and improve overall achievement gaps
Layered over the curriculum policy document, all tattered and torn
Laden with learning expectations, some forlorn
That begins the process of design-down planning
Embedded in the template made by the Ministry
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12
Applied to teaching and learning in all Ontario schools
Layered atop the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy
And over the curriculum policy document, all tattered and torn
Laden with learning expectations, some forlorn
That begins the process of design-down planning
Embedded in the template made by the Ministry
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches and its companion Me Read: No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills
That anchored the lesson
Layered atop Finding Ground, Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy
And over the curriculum policy document, all tattered and torn
Laden with learning expectations, some forlorn
That begins the process of design-down planning
Embedded in the template made by the Ministry
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow: A Policy Framework for Environmental Education in Ontario Schools ironically printed on paper,
Combined with Financial Literacy, Grades 4-12,
That shaped the instruction
Layered atop Think Literacy, Finding Ground, Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy
And over the curriculum policy document, all tattered and torn
Laden with learning expectations, some forlorn
That begins the process of design-down planning
Embedded in the template made by the Ministry
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

This is the Education Act, RSO 1990 and the Ontario College of Teachers Act, SO 1996
That outline Jack's duties and responsibilities as a member of the teaching profession
That commit him to Growing Success, Financial Literacy, Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow, Think Literacy, Finding Ground, Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy
That he layers over the curriculum policy document, all tattered and torn
Laden with learning expectations, some forlorn
That begins Jack's process of design-down planning
Embedded in the template made by the Ministry
That structures the lesson plan that Jack wrote.

Discussion: Problematizing Layered Prescription

The poetic response illustrates how Ontario teachers are subject to myopic layers of prescriptive policy in their daily work. When the myriad of policy documents are coupled with neo-liberal accountability structures, intensification occurs. Giving teachers pre-specified and prescriptive "legitimate" curriculum, and mandating its adoption through accountability measures is a control apparatus of the state (Apple, 2008). As a class, we revisited the poem a number of times throughout the semester as we honed lesson planning and teaching methods. The poem was an overt reminder of professional intensification, a concept I introduced to the group. Our conversations tended to focus on two areas: workload, and regulation versus autonomy. In the paragraphs that follow, I touch on the key themes we discussed, and ground them in the literature.

The poetic response created by the class is highlights aspects of increased workload arising directly from intensification. On the one hand, this work comes in the form of teachers' attempts to become informed as new policy appears in the province. As Skerrett (2010) suggested, "community of practice and a learning community has taken on heightened importance as increasing curriculum standardisation and high stakes assessments further narrow the historically fragile opportunities for deep and collaborative teacher learning" (p. 648). In essence, teachers are expected to keep abreast of new policy, learn about it, and apply it despite an environment with less time allotted for professional development. Teachers, thus, struggle to manage to learn more with less time. Skerrett found that the brief meeting time provided to teachers was largely taken up by administrative details, leaving little time for teachers to consider various "new" policy layers for which they were responsible. Skerrett's findings reflect the concerns voiced by teacher candidates in thinking about the policy responsibilities the Ministry of Education emphasizes.

On the other hand, teachers also must incorporate more (and sometimes contradictory) policy into their day-to-day work, leaving teachers "exhausted with having to cope with so much all at once" (Majhanovich, 2002, p. 166). Similarly, Simon, Robin, Forgette-Giroux, Charland, Noonan and Duncan (2010) documented teachers' navigations though contradictions within Ontario's *Growing Success* policy document. This research reflected my students' experiences in that policy creates dilemmas in assessment and reporting faced by teachers as they attempt to make sense of the mandates. Parkinson and Stooke (2012) looked at the ways in which teachers "juggled the complex requirements of the language curriculum with other curriculum requirements" (p. 60), and my students described similar dilemmas in addressing the multitude (and sometimes conflicting) mandates across the various policy documents. Together, these data – while each small in scale – along with the experiences of teacher candidates in my class point to Ontario teachers' struggles to learn about *and* enact layered policy in their classrooms, supporting other jurisdictional research on intensification.

In addition to these discussions about workload, regulation and autonomy was a topic of discussion in response to the poem. In its current form, the proliferation of policy layers act as a form of Taylorism (Apple, 2008), de-skilling teachers-as-workers by eliminating autonomy (Ball, 2003), and separating conception from execution. In his research, Gitlin (2001) observed how the intensity of teachers' work related to accountability resulted in the inability for teachers to step back from their classroom practices and consider broader educational issues or look at

these practices in a more holistic sense. Similarly, Apple (2008, p. 206) quoted a teacher faced with this type of situation: I just want to get this done. I don't have time to be creative or imaginative." Ball (2003) offered similar teacher quotations, "What happened to my creativity? ...What happened to the fun in teaching and learning?" (p. 216).

In addition to the lack of professional autonomy and creativity, Honin (1994) observed that when teachers' work moves from teaching to regulation, the teacher becomes regulatory tool for the state. Policies are enforced under the guise of more effective teaching (in Ontario, the term "student success" is used), but in reality the policies do nothing more than provide a way to further govern the population and regulate individuals (Honan, 1994). Teachers become managers and discipline specialists rather than public intellectuals engaged in the caring work of learning with children (Helfenbein, 2008). As Majhanovich pointed out, "there is little room for modification or innovation, and teachers feel that their professionalism and expertise have been seriously diluted" (Majhanovich, 2002, p. 166). The results of an Ontario report on reasons for teacher attrition (Clark & Antonelli, 2009) highlighted the enormous effects of intensification. While the reasons for teacher attrition in the province are varied and complex, workload was an important factor. As one teacher in the study commented,

> I could have continued to teach but the job is becoming more and more demanding and stressful. I feel that teachers are constantly being told they're not doing enough, not doing it correctly and they must go along with the next new initiative which always means many more hours of meetings, workshops, "coaching" sessions and record keeping (Clark & Antonelli, 2009, p. 44).

The discussion thus far has focused on the assumption that teachers, in fact, comply with the policy mandates. Teacher candidates offered a range of observations from their field experiences – from attitudes of compliance to attitudes of resistance among their supervising teachers. Certainly, teacher agency, subversion and resistance have been shown to lead to different interpretations of "official" policy (Berkhout & Weilmans, 1999; Honan, 1994; Levinson, Sutton & Winstead 2009; Raab, 1994; Wood, 2004). Moreover, Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010) eloquently argued that, in fact, teachers' classroom performance is strengthened when they have professional autonomy to interpret and resist policy and dominant paradigms. Yet, Gitlin (2001) found that teachers underutilized their autonomy by precisely following mandated curriculum policy, textbooks, and prepackaged curricula, which limited their ability to act on and even transform pedagogical relations, forms of legitimate knowledge, and cultural canons. Teachers in his research adopted a batch-processing orientation to students that constrained the way student needs could be incorporated into the curriculum (Gitlin, 2011).

Conclusion

Engaging in the process of expressing intensification in an artistic form allowed a group of teacher candidates to reflect on how policy shapes their work, underscoring the political aspect of teaching. As Gitlin (2001) observed, "for too long now, the working conditions of teachers have been overlooked because it is assumed that teaching is a calling, a profession where one would work and overcome school-related obstacles regardless of their nature" (p. 254). This paper called attention to the proliferation of policy and regulation facing Ontario teachers, and unpacked the implications of the layered policy environment with respect to intensification and deskilling of the profession. It was the first to document the level of policy

layering in the province, and offers a historical snapshot of a unique policy moment in the province.

This paper raised a number of issues warranting further investigation. First and foremost, to what extent do practicing teachers and teacher candidates accept or resist the proliferation of policy documents in Ontario and elsewhere? Little empirical evidence exists to describe how they exercise autonomy. Further exploration of these crucial issues is necessary to understand how intensification takes shape in classrooms, and the degree to which teachers accept or resist layered education policy in an era of increased accountability. Second, various forms of analysis of policy text content would offer a perspective on the nature of the mandates, and how they might be subject to multiple interpretations. Finally, investigation into teachers' and school administrators' perceptions of the policy scope might offer insight into areas of overlap, and how educators prioritize competing and varied curriculum mandates.

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