

Social Justiceⁱ and Whiteness in Education: Color-blind Policymaking and Racism

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Abstract

Few studies have been undertaken on the conceptualization of policy frameworks aiming to (re-)structure, oversee and promote (specifically) social justice in education. While there is much formal discussion on the need for social justice in education, the required action has not materialized, and notably absent is a strong, demonstrable commitment to accountability in this area. This paper examines the educational policymaking process from a critical vantage-point based on the author's experience in government working on social justice issues, exposing how White power and privilege undermine the myriad efforts, initiatives and policies aimed at addressing the social justice domain. When inequitable power relations characterize and shape the educational policymaking process, the implications for marginalized groups are significant. The paper questions the legitimacy of governments and their educational systems to focus on accountability and democracy if social justice is not an integral component of the decision-making processes and content framing public education.

INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary, digitally-monitored and results-based society in which just about everything is quantified, and the need to meet supposedly rigorous standards and a high level of accountabilityⁱⁱ is paramount, it is troubling that the "everything" alluded to herein contains one glaring, flagrant exemption: social justice. How do governments and educational decision-makers consistently avoid being held to account for social justice? Why do reforms routinely ignore or omit dealing with racism? Is this latent and less than stringent institutional response merely wilful

neglect, systemic dysfunctionality, a contrived, intricate web of inequitable power relations or rather the fomenting of ingrained racist interests? What is the role of Whites in sustaining and shaping racism? Given the crystallization of neo-liberal interests, what has happened in/to public education over the past fifteen yearsⁱⁱⁱ?

Trying to capture and define the essence of the problem can be more problematic than the problem itself. The willingness to acknowledge that there is a concern in our society in relation to racism has been a tremendous obstacle (Feagin, Vera and Batur, 2001). The next, logical step, if one is to concede that there is racism, concerning what to do about it, is even more difficult. Finding the right mix of factors, players and interests over the past fifteen years has been a struggle characterized by a tenacious, self-centered opposition, and a range of systemic barriers preventing any real, sustainable progress. This paper provides an analysis of the vacillating educational policymaking from 1990 through 2005 in Ontario, Canada, with a focus on the social justice domain, particularly in regard to race, racism, anti-racism and racialization. In particular, I will focus on the theme of Whiteness as a significant factor underpinning the lack of any meaningful response to racism in education. A primary feature of this analysis relies on my implication as an "insider" working on social justice policy in education in government.

AN INSIDER/OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVE

My vantage-point in this discussion is not that of a dispassionate on-looker^{iv}. To frame my analysis, I would like to highlight two components of my experiential identity^v that help contextualize and inform my perspective. First, I have been involved in social justice issues in education since the late 1980s. My involvement in various projects and academic research on anti-racism, with a particular focus on the Toronto Board of Education, led to a number of longstanding friendships and collaboration with activists in the area of social justice^{vi}. My doctoral thesis benefited significantly from these relationships, providing me with insight that would not have been possible from merely the formal channels. The Toronto Board of Education, as documented by McCaskell (2005), developed and built an infrastructure aimed at progressive change in the 1980s and 1990s, notwithstanding the significant challenges it faced throughout, and was a, relatively-speaking, safe-house for those wishing to explore the parameters of what equity in education looks like. Second, and perhaps

most significantly for the purposes of this paper, I worked as a Senior Policy Advisor in the Ontario Government, primarily in the Ministry of Education, for seventeen years. I undertook a range of tasks, including leading several anti-racism, diversity and equity-based initiatives, and being involved in curriculum, policy and research projects. Forming part of the institutional culture of the government, this public policy experience included attending meetings, discussions and activities in which race played a role, most often in an implicit, but systemic, way.

FOCUS

After providing a context for the period studied, I will briefly highlight some of my experiences, with a particular focus on the 1995 change of government, in relation to ideology, institutional culture and educational change through the three ruling governments in Ontario for the 1990-2005 period:

- a left-wing New Democratic (NDP) government [1990-1995];
- a right-wing Progressive Conservative (PC or Tory) government [1995-2003];
and
- a centrist Liberal government [2003-present].

I will centre my analysis on the following two domains, which are critical to understanding social justice in education: 1) the issue of the power and privilege accorded to Whites (Fine, Weis, Pruitt and Burns, 2004; Feagin and O'Brien, 2003), including examining the anti-racism myths underpinning Whiteness, the discourses of color-blindness, meritocracy and individual choice) Applebaum (2005); and 2) how is accountability constructed, and what is the effect for social justice in education (Fullan, 2005; Leithwood, 2001)?, and how does the neo-liberal frenzy around standards and high academic achievement affect marginalized groups (Hoover and Shook, 2003; Lipman, 2004)?

To frame this paper, I wish to make the assumption that *democracy* is not truly possible if there is an absence of a strong commitment toward social justice (Portelli and Solomon, 2001; Henry and Tator, 2005). Further, as evidenced in scores of research, the assumption is made that there are vast inequities in our society and in our education system, and that some groups--particularly First Nations, those of

African origin, and other racial minority groups as well as the poor--have been marginalized disproportionately compared to the White, European (and English-speaking) majority (Carr, 1996; Dei, 1996; Henry and Tator, 2005).

CONTEXT

In this section, I will elaborate on some of the issues, circumstances and trends framing government decision making processes.

As governments are pressed to respond to the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous society, it is noteworthy that few studies have been undertaken on the conceptualization of policy frameworks aiming to (re-)structure, oversee and promote (specifically) social justice in education. Despite the abundant rhetoric on building a system that is open, inclusive, democratic, and centered on the needs of all students, there has been little investigation on assessing the institutional culture, processes and outcomes of education systems in relation to social justice and transformational change. There are a number of moral, ethical, sociological and political arguments in favor of an inclusive, anti-racist education system, and there are also studies demonstrating that a focus on social justice is beneficial to the educational achievement of students (Collaboration for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2003).

The pendulum of educational reform swings through periods of time and changing governments, which complicates the conceptualization and delivery of social justice education. McLaren (2003) has questioned whether or not we can reasonably expect to have progressive and responsive governments focused on social justice within a capitalist environment, given the texture and culture of "democracy" as it presently exists in relation to elections, in which choices and options are limited (generally speaking, Republicans and Democrats in the US), along with the relatively small number who participate (especially if we are referring to those under twenty-five years of age^{vii}).

The most visible point of contention and backlash, within the Ontario case, is in 1995, when the Conservative won the provincial election after five years of an NDP government. For progressive-minded people, the upheaval represented the end to a

broad range of equity policies as well as the concomitant introduction of a de facto war against teachers, underpinning the general assault on unions in favour of private choice and individual rights (Corson, 2001; Rezai-Rashti, 2003). The recipe for change prescribed by the Conservatives followed the neo-liberal model of a "back to basics" pedagogical approach, more influence for business in schools and the curriculum, the introduction of tax-incentives for parents to send their children to private schools, and a broad-brush embracing of testing at all levels, including a highly contested initiative labeled teacher testing. Complementing the Conservative mantra to "create a crisis in education", which was a strategy leaked inadvertently in the first week of their new government, hundreds of thousands of teachers, union-members, activists and the general public took to the streets in what was known as the "Days of Action" in opposition to the neo-liberal political agenda (McCaskell, 2005). Although many jurisdictions were following along a similar tight-rope, the Ontario government seemed to relish the tensions and turmoil that it was creating, focusing on an ideology that had never been as explicitly visible in the past. In sum, the neo-liberal, conservative focus on competition and employability has been a trend that has received wide attention and critique (Corson, 2001; Dei and Karumanchery, 2001).

Counter to the Conservative strategy to uplift the education system without focusing on citizenship, democracy, diversity and social justice, there is ample evidence that doing education with these important areas can have long-term negative consequences (Thompson, 2003). Any reforms, evaluations, research or initiatives emanating from legitimate sources must meet the challenge of equitable outcomes for all students (Carr, 1999; Fullan, 2005; Leithwood, 2001; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). This may not translate into entirely equal outcomes but it would infer taking into consideration the responsibility for the development and implementation of policies, programs and initiatives, including establishing standards and targets, and collecting data and undertaking research, to determine what the problem looks like, and, more importantly, how to provide an effective response to remedy it. Without data and research, how would one know if there is equity, and democracy, in education? At the same time, Lipman (2004) has documented how *No Child Left Behind* works to penalize marginalized groups through the collection of data that is, at best, questionable.

Politics cannot be disconnected from the (political) decision making process in education (Levin, 2005; McLaren, 2003). Ministers of Education^{viii} play a political role in developing educational policy. Their identities, experiences, contacts, networks and ideology are not neutral. They are able to define the parameters of debate, and may also determine who is invited to offer their opinion on various issues. Controlling the media, and the message, becomes an obsession, and a matter of high priority for governments. Therefore, controlling the language of public discourse is pivotal, and the Conservatives elected to banish the word "racism" from all policies, programs, initiatives, public pronouncements and institutional dealings.

In adopting this strategy in 1995, the Conservatives ensured that racism, and by extrapolation, racial minority issues, the contextualization of history and society, the development of the curriculum, discussion of (in-)equitable power relations, the role and representation of racial minority teachers, principals and parents as well as general access issues would all be diminished in some way or another (Corson, 2001; Rezai-Rashti, 2003). This is not to infer that no work whatsoever would be undertaken in the area of racism but rather to underscore that it 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 pertaining to social justice would not be viewed as fundamental to the institutional mission, especially in light of the numerous other priorities boards would have established for them by their chief funding-agency and policy-maker, in the form of the Ministry of Education. It is important to stress that there is no guarantee that the Ministry's plans will be followed and implemented to the letter; however, its power in shaping the agenda is substantial. Therefore, being able to introduce progressive ideas, to garner and sustain support, to ensure effective implementation, and to deter massive upheaval and dissent is a problematic and contested domain in the (politico-)educational realm (Fullan, 2005; Levin, 1994).

There is an important difference to be made about how the system functions, and how the system should function. One could also ask if the system is intended to function for social justice, for progressive change, and for democracy (Webster Brandon, 2003). If inequitable power relations are not fully acknowledged, how can there be anything but the maintenance of the system, the re-production of social relations and

knowledge (Bourdieu, 1970)? However, I wish to raise the specter that until conditions are favorable to enact broad, sweeping change, governmental authorities have enormous resources, legislative tools, and structural and organizational capabilities to shape and influence people, many of whom have no choice but to participate in the very system that they may be contesting vigorously. Further, it is critical that those in decision-making positions be held to account for social justice within a *democratic* society.

PLACING EQUITY AT THE CENTRE

What happens when a new government takes control? How does it shape the agenda, the players, and the infrastructure? How, and especially with whom, does it select to have "face-time" in order to discuss issues and proposals? How do diverse interests get on the agenda? How, if at all, is equity conceptualized by governments? More importantly, why should some promises or commitments be held up as a standard, and others that are never even broached or are discarded as meaningless or insignificant, not be considered as important?

Levin (2005), an academic and the current Deputy Minister of the Ontario Ministry of Education, summarizes the intricacies of government as follows:

Government is a very tough world, full of pressures, tensions, and contradictions. A new government begins with strong policy commitments, but the pressures of political influence and events are highly distracting. The work is complex and unrelenting, while expectations are so high they can rarely be met and scrutiny is extensive and unforgiving. In some ways it is an impossible task, made more difficult because often the people taking it on do not really know what they are getting into (p. 47).

The three governments profiled in the 1990-2005 period all brought with them a range of expectations, and a series of promises, which were to provide flavor and context for their roughly four-year mandates. The PC government kept its promise to cut taxes--although it is arguable what the impact was, given the increased federal taxes, user-fees, lost or reduced public services, and the privatization of other services--but did not keep its promise to introduce an "anti-discrimination education" program, as stipulated in its Common Sense Revolution platform. However, the media labeled the PC government as one that kept its promises, and the NDP government as one that

was generally perceived as reckless, out of control, and unable to faithfully do what it said it would do, in large part, because of a larger than expected deficit combined with a recession.

The media plays a pivotal role in defining the mandate of a government. In conjunction with the significance of communications, there is also the intricate working of government to shape, define, manipulate and coerce the media to regurgitate the message as prescribed. As Marshall McLuhan (1967) forecasted, the "medium is the message". Hernan and Chomsky (2002) provide an arsenal of analysis on the role of, what they consider to be, a "coercive and obedient media" in "manufacturing consent". Governments spend untold, unaccounted for millions (potentially billions) of dollars on advertising, polling and strategic advice. This is the public's money used to convince the public of the worthiness of a political party's viewpoint, quite separate from government representing 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^{ix} in relation to racial minorities in the media is well known (Tator and Henry, 2002).

In general, during its mandate, the Conservative government spent excessively large sums in the area of communications, and was also particularly effective at getting its message out. Everyone knew of the "student-focused funding" and "higher curriculum standards", two effective campaigns, which played on the good will, ignorance and political (il)literate of the public to reinforce the point that funding must not be wasted on "big (teacher) union bosses" (what an image!), and that expectations should be "high" (as opposed to low!). However, few people could articulate what this really meant, whether public education was becoming more effective, teachers were better prepared, educational outcomes were higher, and whether or not we had a higher level of social cohesion as a result. The complete elimination of social justice in education was not covered by the mainstream media, providing insightful commentary on the power and privilege of Whiteness at the societal level.

It is clear that that the NDP had an articulated rhetorical commitment to the equity agenda, with visible policies, programs and resources dedicated to employment equity legislation, the establishment of the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat, and a range of community and other initiatives. When a government stakes out a particular focus, there can be a number of trickle-down effects. For instance, cabinet-level committees were established on anti-racism, and equity became a mandatory component of cabinet submissions. In other words, before a policy proposal was to proceed to the highest decision-making levels, consideration had to be given to the equity domain. This, in turn, meant that there would be environmental scans, research, studies, consultation and community input in relation to social justice built into the policy process. What racial minority communities think about a particular issue would, therefore, be a key factor in determining the decision-making outcome. However, this is not a guarantee that other economic and political forces will not override social justice concerns, only that there is room to discuss such matters. 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?

Some have argued that the NDP had an agenda that was too vast, too unwieldy and too controversial. What is certain is that there was significant opposition to much of the NDP's equity agenda because of the declining economic situation, the perception that there would be winners and losers (with White males being the supposed losers), and, in education, it was considered a truism that there would be a de-emphasis on academic standards in order to accommodate marginalized groups (McCaskell, 2005). This was a paradigm shift from the previous model in which there was *de facto* acceptance of the notion of "merit"^x and achievement based purely on one's ability, detached from institutional structures containing systemic barriers. Bergeron (2003), using critical race theory, has argued that Whites need to learn to refrain from speaking for racial minorities, and, further, they should become involved in the common struggle with people of color^{xi}.

Although the NDP had a comparably more favorable equity agenda, it cannot be stated that everyone within the bureaucracy, especially those in decision-making positions, was in agreement with the way that racism, probably for the first time, had been so unabashedly formulated and presented. Most White people, despite the

mantra that Canada is a multicultural country, do not come into intimate, close contact with people of color. Many do, and many work and struggle with people of color but the vast majority, especially in the upper echelons, have not shared the same experience. This fact, aligned with the propensity to prioritize individualism over group experience, has led to "White solidarity and White silence" (Sleeter, 2000). Thompson (2003) has highlighted the difference between being a friend of someone of color, and understanding one's own implication in the power and privilege of being White. One need only look at the undisputed summit of the pyramid of economic, political and legislative power in Canadian and US society to understand that the wealthiest, and most influential, Canadians have traditionally been from White, European families. Their paths cross constantly, and sometimes in a proverbially incestuous way, at exclusive clubs, private schools, boards of governors of large multinational firms, elite fundraising gatherings, and, ultimately, cabinet tables. Demographic changes in Canada and elsewhere are having an impact on re-shaping this reality but it is proving to be an extremely slow process, and some studies have shown that the divide between rich and poor is increasing.

The PC government had no pretence about abolishing the entire equity infrastructure put in place by the NDP. Within the space of a few weeks of being elected on June 8, 1995, a very clear direction was outlined, and equity was not included on the list of priorities. This is the supposed prerogative of forming government but it was difficult, at a personal and professional level, to witness the way that the equity file was so effortlessly swatted aside. There was a visible "divide and conquer", "we won, you lost" spirit to the time. The issues did not go away, and neither did the same people who had experienced disadvantage and discrimination on June 7, 1995. By controlling the political agenda, the PC government was able to not mention the word racism publicly for eight years, thus ensuring that there would not be a single anti-racism initiative, all interdisciplinary efforts to address race-based concerns would be dismantled, any hopes of meeting with social justice groups would be unconditionally ruptured, and, in general, there would be no emphasis placed on social justice in education. Some might argue that, by focusing on the economy, creating employment and cutting taxes, this would be most beneficial to everyone, regardless of their origins. It would appear that the record is clear in demonstrating that the tax-cuts almost exclusively benefited the wealthier socio-economic classes, that job-creation

did not translate into well-paid, well-trained, long-term employment, and that an absence of focus on social justice could not conceivably address issues and problems that had taken centuries to create.

When the PC government spoke of the need to not acquiesce to the pressure of "special interests", meaning literally anti-racism and social justice groups, it certainly did not include the business sector as a "special interest". When the PC government signed, what was considered an untendered contract, with Anderson Consulting, for something in the area of \$35M to reduce the amount paid to welfare recipients, it came as a bit of a shock when the accountability-conscious, business-minded Conservatives were left paying their client several hundred million dollars for something that did not seem to be all that complicated. Several years later, it was revealed that the software-management product produced by Anderson could not impute a cost-of-living increase for welfare recipients^{xii}. The point here is that the NDP was labeled as a "tax-and spend" government, unable to keep its promises, whereas the Conservative regime was universally perceived, at the mainstream level and in the media, as a government that did what it said it would do.

The Liberal government was elected in 2003 with a large majority, some arguing that it was based on a challenge to the Tory excesses, and to restore a sense of decency to society. Most analysts who choose to examine the issue agree that, throughout the PC Government's reign, the lack of an equity focus led to greater divisions, more poverty and tension among, and in, the population. Visually, the Liberals looked and sounded slightly more like the Ontario population than the Conservatives, and they seemed to be open to more consensus and consultation than their predecessors. The war on/with/against teachers, which characterized the Tory government, was rejected by the Liberals. However, the Liberals were quick to be labeled a government unable to keep its promises after it introduced a healthcare premium in its first budget, essentially a tax, which could not be strictly differentiated from other spending. The justification that the Liberals were left with a \$6B deficit by the Tories when they took office, rather than the forecasted \$2B, did not garner them any sympathy. At the macro level, it is telling that governments are now principally evaluated on how much they can cut taxes and costs rather than building a society.

The Liberals made a campaign promise during the 2003 election to introduce a character education program in every school. Like most platform and campaign promises, there was not enough reflection, analysis, details and consultation to understand what this really meant. Some three years into their mandate, it is unclear what the Liberals have in mind for this important area, one that has been neglected for a decade^{xiii}.

SOME OBSERVATIONS, AND RUMBLINGS, FROM THE INSIDE^{xiv}

What was the reaction to the change in governments from the inside? Do public servants sense the impending change, and greet it enthusiastically? Do public servants have an ideology? If they do, how is it manifested? Are "educrats", public servants in the educational sector, more in tune with their sector, the educational sector, or with the wishes of the governing party? In this section, I provide flesh to the theoretical Whiteness framework in the form of an analysis of experiences from the inside.

Public Servants and Ideology

Public servants are generally a reflection of mainstream society in that their personal ideologies will most likely not be radically different than those of the political trends of the majority. Having said that, a significant number, especially in the period leading up to the PC government but still somewhat today, are probably slightly more left of center than the population in general. After all, they have chosen, either willingly, as I did, or by default, to work in government because they did not wish to work in the private sector. Many want to make change, and to assist in a cause, whether it be women's rights, minority francophone rights, the rights of racial minorities or some other advocacy cause. Rezai-Rashti (2003) speaks of the commitment of "equity workers", and McCaskell (2005) has outlined the ideological motivation of a core of activists in the Toronto Board of Education in the 1980s and 1990s to make progressive change from the inside.

Many good people come into government, willing and prepared to work hard to see that change is realized. Many more understand, after seeing how the system works, that change, in government, is not always possible, especially if we are talking about progressive, social justice change. One colleague once recounted in a meeting--and,

although a little gruesome, sums up part of the dilemma--that there are two things that you don't want to see being made: "one is sausage, and the other is public policy". How and why decisions are made is not always rational, coherent and/or justifiable, and many a good public servant has left government more than a little discouraged because of this. My experience is that reference to ideology was systemically discouraged; there was a certain pride in feigning that public servants are "neutral", and that regardless of the orientation of the government, public servants were there to implement policies, not develop them.

The Formal Commitment to Social Justice

In 1995, with the abrupt and drastic end to the NDP regime, many of us in the equity area were left numb at the thought of the new government's mission to smash the anti-racism file. This had become more than another policy issue; it was, for those committed to the principle, a cause, a mission and a virtuous value worth fighting for. Morale was low, and suspicion over the end high. One of the shortcomings of the Ministry of Education's Anti-racism and Ethno-cultural Equity Education Branch was that almost all of the staff, the majority of whom were racial minorities, came from the school board sector, and they did not have experience in government, which represented a radically different institutional culture. The Branch was not seen to be an integral part of the Ministry but, rather, an outside entity, almost a "special interest group", and this fact disadvantaged it greatly.

The dynamic of White privilege is brought to the fore in this case, as these new arrivals to the Ministry were seen to be attempting to disrupt the conventional, accepted educational terrain. Not everyone in the Ministry was as welcoming to the newcomers, and there were a number of complaints from people saying they resented "being treated like a racist" at anti-racism training sessions. One incident sums up the imagery of the White educators collectively making the symbolic cross-sign with arms intersecting to ward off the demons: a colleague in the Anti-racism area attended a committee meeting of a variety of Ministry staff working on a document intended for middle-school children related to values, influences and peers, and was told the moment he entered the room that "this is not an anti-racist committee", to which he responded, without missing a beat, "oh, it must be a racist committee".

Knowing Your Place in Government

The PC Government brought in a visibly more neo-liberal economic model focused on "business plans", borrowed from Alberta^{xv}, the only jurisdiction that was truly considered for comparative purposes, and everything was, therefore, supposed to be measured and accountable. As I found out, equity was not one of the higher priorities. In a late-afternoon discussion about the context for, and analysis, of a few proposals we were developing in relation to school councils, parental involvement and at-risk students, I made the point that without focusing on the whole community, including marginalized, racial minority groups, and without gathering data to document and develop measures and outcomes for the whole system in an inclusive way, we could be causing and amplifying systemic barriers destined to enshrine the re-productive, non-progressive nature of schools.

The response by a senior official, in a slightly exasperated tone, was clear. While pointing to the door, the official stated: "You know where the door is; if you don't like it you don't have to stay". I inferred that public servants were not there to provide strategic advice, to consider the research, to caution government of the implications, and, especially, not to discuss social justice when it does not intersect with plans originally designed for the business world. Many public servants questioned why and how the business model should be transposed on public education, where, clearly, the bottom-line was never intended to be profit. Most disparaging with the business plans was the reality that there was no visible, credible, genuine follow-up on all of the goals, targets, measures and other barometers of success that took untold meetings and resources to generate. It goes without saying that no goals, targets, measures and other barometers of success were considered for the social justice domain.

Public Servant/Political Staff Relationships

One of the key tension-points for public servants is the relationship with political personnel, many of whom are parachuted into government with little experience of how government works, and, more importantly, are deeply suspicious of the dedication of the former to the latter's political agenda. Public servants do get excited about politics, are knowledgeable about the intricacies, idiosyncrasies and maneuvers

of political parties, and do become intertwined with their ministers and other key political representatives.

When the NDP was elected, there was literally cheering in the hallways, people were hoping for progressive change, and this was the first government to speak so boldly about a plan to do so. When the Conservatives were elected, there was a re-coiling and re-examination of everything they had said, hoping, in vain, that they would not seriously be as brazen as they said they would. Not everyone in government at the time supported the NDP's equity agenda but people generally understood that it had to do with addressing historical injustices. After all, although employment equity (commonly referred to as affirmative action in the US) was most predominantly associated with racial minorities, it also included workplace barrier-reduction provisions for women, persons with disabilities and Aboriginals.

The day after the PC government was elected, a female francophone colleague with whom I had worked for a few years chatted in French with another colleague at the elevator in our building. There was nothing unusual about this, as we worked in the French-language Education Branch, except that two maintenance workers on the floor approached her when she was alone to ask her what she was doing speaking French, although they used slightly less civil language to express themselves. As this had never happened before, the message was clear, a vote for the Tory government was a vote against diversity. This was confirmed a few days later when a friend from the Toronto Board of Education told me of an anti-racism training-session for staff he was giving, in which he was told quite bluntly by one of the participants "what's the point, you lost the election."

When the Liberals won, especially in the education sector, there was hope as well as the belief that relations with the education sector would improve. As a large number of staff in the Ministry come from school boards, this was considered an "opportunity" to repair what had gone wrong. Without the collaboration and support of teachers, it would be almost impossible to implement policies developed by Ministry of Education staff, which was one of the fundamental problems of the PC government. Despite all of the PC reforms, without the cooperative efforts of teachers, those charged chiefly with implementing the new curriculum and all of the other

initiatives, it would be extremely difficult to demonstrate any improvement in the system (Leithwood, Steinbach and Jantzi, 2002).

Many of the political staffers (each Minister has roughly 15 staff) come from the political hustings, and usually have some experience in getting the vote out. Others have some concrete political skills. Few others are knowledgeable of the sector in which they are placed. A rare individual might have an educational background. This can be a dangerous mix of ingredients when one considers the proposition that how you do something (the process) is almost as important as what you achieve (outcome). I re-call one rather, with the passage of time, comical incident with the newly-elected Conservative government in which the director, the manager and myself worked tirelessly on a file related to francophone school governance, seeking input and approvals, and undertaking further analysis and refinement to be able to present the entire file to the Minister's chief policy advisor by 4pm on this particular Thursday. As the federal government was awaiting the proposal, which represented, for the first time, that Ontario might be able to accord some semblance of a French-language education system to minority francophones, we were primed to advance the file. Upon arriving in the Minister's office to meet with James^{xvi}, we were told by the secretary: "Oh, he didn't tell you? He went to the Bahamas for the weekend with his girlfriend".

Social Justice Groups and the Government Agenda

Access to government is pivotal to be able to have input into the decision making process. With the downfall of the NDP, who had entertained a broad range of social justice consultation and stakeholder involvement, the stark reality of the new Conservative era was brought to light at a meeting of the new Equal Opportunity Office, the supposed replacement for the Ontario Anti-racism Secretariat. Again, the manipulation of the terminology is illustrative of the politicization of the social justice agenda. The Equal Opportunity Office was roundly criticized by the equity sector for being redundant, as no equal opportunity policies were made mandatory, but this did not receive much attention in the media, nor at the governmental level. I was dumbfounded to hear a senior official describe how the social justice groups were no longer an irritant because they simply did not exist on the government radar. The official claimed that, in a matter-of-fact way, "they (the social justice groups) were defeated". Clearly, the notion of democracy, accountability and the need to represent

and serve the population is a theoretical construct not fully ingrained in the ethos of government.

Government and Communications

In government, you spend much of your time trying to understand what the agenda is, reading through Throne Speeches, budgets, policy platforms, speeches from the Premier and Minister, and other signals, often disseminated in the media. You send up "trial balloons", as they are referred to, hoping that you have hit the mark. Often, you struggle for months, and then there is an implosion of activity because something has transpired in the public eye. It has always intrigued me as to why so much energy is put into media pronouncements. It is as though government is structured around the daily press-clippings, which are neatly presented every morning for Ministry staff, divided up nicely between print, television, radio and other formats according to elementary, secondary, postsecondary and other issues.

Every morning, there is a Ministry-wide checklist of required notes from Issues Management, essentially a wing of the Communications Branch and the Minister's Office, on what is in the media. An opposition critic may have stated this, a stakeholder that, or a report may have found that government policy is out of step, and in every case, if it make the headlines, there will be a flurry of activity among public servants to document and support government policy. When you factor in the daily Question Period, when the Legislative Assembly is sitting, to the list, you are then compiling literally telephone-book-size binders of briefing/issue/house/position/status/decision notes to defend and prepare the Minister. The point is that government is not nearly as focused on academic and scientific research as it is on the daily media scrum. The implications for educational policymaking are as evident as they are far-reaching. The average public servant ends up concluding that the one and only task is to support the government, which ultimately means avoiding presenting alternative viewpoints if they even mildly conflict with the government agenda.

Government Inaction and Sabotage

That old leitmotif about studies and reports gathering dust could not be truer for the area social justice in educational policymaking. A substantial amount of promising social justice work was simply left unfinished or sent to the archives when the Conservatives took power. One example of this was a document produced by Ministry staff on preventing hate-crime activities that was destined for school principals. The document was a practical guide providing direction on what to do to detect, prevent and deal with hate-crime activities on school grounds, including information on graffiti, music, dress and other signs that common-place bullying and violence may have an uglier and more deep-seated underbelly than originally thought. The document, completed under the NDP's reign, was never released by the Conservatives^{xvii}, who chose not to distribute it, due to ideological issues and, most likely, because it was produced by the NDP. It does not happen often but the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) included half of the draft, unpublished document in their membership-magazine, complementing the Ministry for its work, and demanding that the document be released so that educators could counteract hate crimes in schools (McCaskell, 2005). The political reality of trying to embarrass the government into some equity-based action ultimately failed as the mainstream media did not pick up on the story. Several other documents, including a Teacher's Guide for Anti-racism in the Classroom, a resource on Equity in Learning Materials, which sought to assist educators in selecting, developing, evaluating and using resources in the curriculum, a curriculum guideline on Afro-Canadian Studies, and a resource-document on Aboriginal Anti-racism Education, were also left to be archived, irrespective of the void left by not distributing these resources. In the absence of formal guidelines, the system is able to vacillate with the ebb and flow of daily concerns without focusing on the larger portrait, and, in this regard, social justice was an unfortunate casualty.

Thwarting a Progressive Response in Both Official Languages

My involvement in anti-racism and equity projects included leading the analysis of school board anti-racism policies, coordinating two resource-document committees, and producing a training-video for teachers and a resource-guide with practical activities for educators, primarily within the French-language education side. Minority

(White) francophones felt that the main issue was one of primarily linguistic and cultural assimilation. In general, there appeared to be less comprehension of the anti-racism problematic there than in the majority English-language sector.

This is an under-exploited area, and racial minority francophones have spent the last fifteen years attempting to have their voices heard. The definition of the term "Franco-Ontarian" proved to be almost too much for the Ministry of Education's French-language Education Branch. Almost all of the personnel in that area, all White, were part of the minority Franco-Ontarian community, and many had been involved in a generations-long struggle seeking to have legitimate control of their schools. The ability to introduce the race issue was, therefore, extremely limited. This was my job, and as an anglophone^{xviii} in a francophone milieu, I was told quite directly by one colleague during a presentation I made: "We are discriminated against too, based on our accent". At another presentation to a French-language advisory group to the Minister, I was told that "the problem is not the same in the francophone community". I took note that the three racial minority francophones at that meeting did not concur with this position, and throughout my tenure inside and outside of government I found that racial minorities, based solely on their racial origin, identity and experience, believed that racism did exist, and, moreover, that it is necessary to do something about it. Some of my research has focused on different perceptions of race between racial minority and White teachers (Carr and Klassen, 1997), illustrating how lived experience can shape reality and racialized ideas.

Leading the analysis of French-language school board^{xix} anti-racism plans toward the end of the NDP mandate was a particularly enjoyable, and nerve-racking, task. One of the six education officers on the committee was a racial minority. Each board was required to produce a rather extensive report outlining how it would plan for and meet the expectations outlined in the Ministry's anti-racism policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993). We set aside an entire week to pour over the stacks of paper before us, providing ratings, scores, commentaries and analysis for each report. We all knew one another, and we established a cordial environment, sharing lunches and breaks, and also socializing in the evening a couple of times. The five White francophones were long-time educators who knew one another, and were extremely familiar with those from whom the reports had been received. The francophone population in

Ontario is relatively small, and those in senior education positions would most definitely share many of the same experiences, networks and values.

As we systematically examined the policies, some appeared to be well thought-out, and others were clearly a little more haphazard. However, we were determined to provide as much leeway as possible in order to not discourage those who had put significant effort into these first reports. At the same time, we did not wish to endorse something that was clearly unacceptable. We ultimately landed on a report that was, at least in my opinion, and, in a less vocal way, that of the one racial minority educator at the table, extremely flawed, containing racist overtones, which could lead to a serious marginalization of minorities, and was, according to our established criteria, less than satisfactory. I stated the obvious: "We're going to have to talk to the superintendent in charge. This is not in line with our standards, and it (the plan they presented) could be potentially dangerous". The education officer responsible for the area from which the report was filed re-coiled, and then made it clear that nothing could be done: "I know the superintendent personally, and I could never say this to him". The implication was clear: there are networks, and we (meaning the people evaluating the reports) might one day be up for a superintendent's position in that board, or perhaps it is simply a social thing and the person may run into them at the local curling club or wherever. The complementary variables of Whiteness and systemic racism coalesce here to achieve the result of sustained marginalization.

Government and the Curriculum

Governments have the power to shape ideas, on the one hand, and reject them, on the other. A good example is the way the Ontario curriculum was re-written under the PC government. This was a massive undertaking, involving tens of millions of dollars, hundreds of teachers and curriculum writers, and an army of communications folks to get the message out. The message from above, from the Premier's Office, was clear: the new curriculum should be focused uniquely on high standards. In all of the preparations for this vast, sweeping re-making of formal school knowledge^{xx}, the word on the inclusion of equity was equally clear. It should not be a central focus, not even a distant one, and, moreover, no efforts would be made to seek it out. Of course, this caused infinite problems for educators who considered it central to learning, especially those in the social sciences (Fielding, 2002).

Some colleagues working directly in this area felt a sense of shame that Ontario, the province long considered one of the most progressive, would turn so radically to a business-model approach. What made matters worse was the involvement of business groups in the writing of the curriculum, people whose main interest in this regard was on employability, essentially preparing students for the workplace and being competitive. This focus, in isolation of equity, democracy and citizenship, would seem to provide an extremely hollow shell for developing the human spirit. When the Liberals took power, they started to review systematically the curriculum policy documents, and the equity area, although not accorded the place it owned in the early 1990s with the NDP, was to be re-considered.

Documenting and Abolishing Difference

On and off for the past fifteen years, the issue of academic under-achievement for Black youths has reared its proverbially ugly head. The Ontario Royal Commission on Learning (1995) even went so far as to suggest that there was systemic racism in education, that data should be collected, and that Black-focused schools should be considered. With the new PC Government bristling to erase equity gains, the issue of collecting data based on racial lines no longer existed. Although this is a highly charged political area, and there are methodological and scientific issues related to the gathering of data on racial lines, there are many reasons why it should be done, most pressing of which is the need to determine the scope and depth of the problem.

In abolishing the employment equity legislation immediately after their election, the Conservatives made it illegal to collect data based on race. In what could be considered only as a surreal experience, I accompanied a colleague in the soon-to-be defunct Anti-racism and Ethno-cultural Equity Branch to an early evening meeting with the leaders of the teachers' federations to discuss the impending changes. After a few pleasantries and some conjecturing about the rapidly changing political climate, my colleague laid the issue bare: "As you know, the employment equity legislation is going to be revoked, and under the new Act, you will not be allowed to collect or maintain data based on racial origin". The five union representatives on the other side of the table grinned, chuckled and collectively shook their heads, then one of them summed up the general feeling quite nicely: "Let me get this right. We spent five years resisting, and trying to be convinced, and fighting the government against the

employment equity legislation, and now we're in a position to make some gains, and we understand why we're doing it, and you're telling us to destroy all of the data". Just for the record, despite the fact that there are no data to prove it, it seemed as though there was a rather drastic and immediate Whitening of the senior levels in the Ministry of Education once the Tories reclaimed power.

Re-starting the Cycle a Decade Later

The Liberals have staked out a new ground since seizing power but have not provided much content to complement the visibly more welcoming tone they have set to confirm that social divisions will no longer explicitly rule the day. The promise to implement "character education" has been virtually unexplored publicly, except for the occasional letter to the editor pleading for more character in our students, more discipline, and some, although it is doubtful if this is the intention, even applaud the government for trying to restore religion in education. Some have speculated that character education is potentially value-laden with "feel-good" concepts (respect, tolerance, etc.) that appeal to the Conservative ethos without articulating any change in the structure of the system. Others are skeptical about character education being closely associated with such programs in the US, which have a different cultural and religious orientation than the core of citizenship education long favored in Canada.

The values-focus of character education leads to questions about whose values, how do you ensure that these values are appropriately articulated and reinforced, whether teachers are well-positioned to teach values, the choppy crossroads between ideological/religious/cultural and other values as opposed to the values espoused by a dominant elite, and how do you critique the values of leaders and others who do not support or conform to the selected values espoused by the school. For example, we are all in favor of respect and tolerance but what does that mean in relation to homosexuality and inequitable power relations? While it is unclear how systemic issues within a given institutional framework, such as poverty and racism, would be addressed, character education may appeal to some teachers and the mainstream community, who understand it as a clear, unambiguous concept aimed at positive outcomes. Whiteness is pivotal in this instance because the social justice problematic is not questioned by leaders and decision makers, who either do not see it as an issue or, rather, have the privilege to omit it from their list of priorities.

DISCUSSION

While undertaking my doctoral thesis I interviewed a senior education official of racial minority origin who made me reflect about White privilege with the comment, "How would you like it if you were the only White with eleven Blacks around the boardroom-table, and every time you spoke the others would smile and whisper to each other that this is the White perspective?". Another way of saying this might be the First Nations proverb "Never judge a man until you've walked a mile in his moccasins". The privilege to discuss what you wish to discuss is enormous, and, in general, this has not been internalized as a useful concept in the institution profiled in this paper. The term Whiteness itself is virtually unknown in mainstream education-circles, and, as has been illustrated herein, most White people have the privilege to negate the articulation of White complicity in racism (Thompson, 2003).

It is not that people truly believe, for example, that it is ironic that three times the number of Black youths drop out in the Toronto Board of Education compared to White youths (Ontario, Royal Commission on Learning, 2005); distressingly, it is more that the question is not even asked, which is a perfect illustration of how White power and privilege operate. Thompson (2003) frames the issue in terms of accepting the concreteness of White involvement, getting past the notion that a good effort has been made:

To pursue social justice, we have to decenter whiteness from programs for social change. Among other things, this means relinquishing our cherished notions of morality: how we understand fairness, how we understand what it means to be a good person, how we understand what it means to be generous or sympathetic or tolerant or a good listener. When we are challenged for our whiteness, our tendency is to fall back on our goodness, fairness, intelligence, rationality, sensitivity, and democratic inclusiveness, all of which are caught up with our whiteness. "How can you call me (me, of all people!) a racist?" (pp.16-17).

I was somewhat surprised, and frustrated, by the reaction of some educators with whom I was working, who openly refused to entertain anti-racism training, curricula, resources or policies because "all of our kids are White," as if this precluded them from understanding the human condition, how they interacted with and benefited from racism, the reality that there were probably First Nations people in their schools who would go unnoticed, and, moreover, that rampant diversity already existed in their

midst at the cultural, socio-economic, religious, and family levels, not to mention that they would certainly, one day, interact with a diverse world. As mentioned earlier, if you do not have an anti-racist organization or curriculum, do you then, logically, have a racist organization or curriculum? Webster Brandon (2003:31) questions the way that "deficit thinking" is produced and re-produced, unchallenged, and the impact that this will have in reinforcing "assimilation into the dominant culture".

A critical realization from this review of how government functions in support of Whiteness resides in the infinite number of subtleties and nuances framing the discourse. Despite the numerous efforts, resources and pronouncements in support of social justice at the formal, institutional level, the results appear to be extremely mitigated, and the impact is rarely sustained. Aldous Bergeron (2003), in her research on critical race theory, questions the legitimacy of arguments hinged on neutrality, merit and colorblindness, which are consistently used to dilute social justice initiatives, and, importantly, to avoid any discussion of Whiteness.

The power of language, and the language of power, have been used to convince broad sectors of society of the high level of "democracy" and "accountability" in education (Hoover and Shook, 2003). Henry and Tator (2005) have skillfully argued that there is a *de facto* democratic racism at play since all of the key forces, including the courts, the legislature, big business, the media, and others, have agreed with one another that racism is not what people of color say it is. McLaren (2003:268-269) has illustrated how right-wing politicians in the US have invoked the name of Martin Luther King to eliminate affirmative action programs, bastardizing the legacy of the civil rights leader. Daniels (1997) has produced a masterful examination of White supremacist discourse, which ultimately argues that elements of extremist thoughts, concepts and ideology can be commonly found in mainstream organizations and government.

Within the context of the institutional analysis on the Ontario context, it is noteworthy that the rationale for eliminating employment equity and anti-racism in 1995 was that these policies did not respect the merit principle. The question raised by many activists was "merit by whose standards?". It is telling that the elite White sector never questioned discrimination in employment and education against racial minorities when there was clearly a quota (or outright exclusive bias) for Whites in positions of authority for centuries. Marx and Pennington (2003) raise an issue that troubles and

confounds many Whites, concerning the perceived paradoxical relationship between goodness and anti-racism:

Thus, naming racism within themselves (White pre-service teachers) was at first cause for great concern. This is the point where guilt, fear, and even trauma came into the picture. Because they viewed goodness and racism as a dichotomy, their first glimpse of their racism led them to the conclusion that they must be horrible people. It seemed that, in coming to terms with their own racism, our students/participants necessarily had to make the connection that they could still be good be people and still be racist.... Moreover, despite their altruistic hearts and their efforts to "hide" their racism, it is still possible for their racism to hurt the children they teach (p.105).

Another key point in this journey pertains to the intersectionality of identity in relation to Whiteness (Daniels, 1997; Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik, 2004). As identity is socially constructed, being White means different things in different contexts. Coalitions and solidarity are possible but the over-arching political framework sustaining inequitable power relations cannot negate the salience of White identity. The political and economic backdrop to North American society, with its push toward consumerism, individualism and "freedom of choice", works to constrain even modest efforts at realigning power structures. To change a law requires resources, contacts, influence and time, most of which is in short supply to fully argue the merits of social justice in education. Those who take it on are often maligned and marginalized, and are rarely welcomed at the decision making table by those in power.

It is clear 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. Moreover, the notion that the current regime of public education is striving to inculcate democratic values must also be critically examined. Whereas accountability and transparency have become essential components to the educational reform agenda for the past decade for a host of indicators, no such comprehensive set of standards, guidelines and measures in relation to social justice education exists. Fullan (2005) has highlighted how important it is to establish targets, and to measure results in order to improve outcomes. For there to be a vibrant, evolutionary, 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 marginalization in society.

Notes

i Social justice, for the purposes of this paper, is considered to include a focus on the human condition, discrimination, equity, racism, and other forms of oppression and difference, and, within the educational policy context, is concerned with inclusion, representation, processes, content and outcomes from a critical perspective, seeking to contextualize, frame and promote debate and action around these issues. The term "equity", although there are some nuanced interpretations, is used as a complement to social justice herein. Vincent (2003) focuses on identity in her definition of social justice, and this is also a significant component of how social justice is formulated in the paper. Although I examine primarily the issue of race in my analysis on Whiteness, it is implicit that race is socially constructed, and, therefore, that we must consider the intersectionality of identity, including gender, class, sexual orientation and other markers of identity.

ii See Essex, 2005, for a review of the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* legislation in the US.

iii I am not suggesting that racism was necessarily more effectively addressed before 1990, rather that the Conservative approach characterizing the issue over the past fifteen years has been quite destructive at several levels. As I document in this paper, in Ontario the government virtually abolished discussion of racism for eight years. The focus on standards throughout North America has had the effect of pushing "identity" concerns and systemic forms of social justice analysis off the table.

iv As McLaren (2003) noted in his work on Toronto schools through the publication of *Life in Schools*, the lived experience itself must be re-examined in a critical manner in order to shed new light on questions of difference, marginalization and power struggles. The anecdotes I describe about how social justice issues were conceptualized in education by government may not mean much individually but together, along with a critical analysis, they can provide insight into the intricacies and impact of how White power and privilege operates.

v While I firmly believe that our identities are socially constructed, I also believe that our society gives status to, and discriminates, on the basis of physical, religious, ideological and other markers of identity. Therefore, in order to contextualize my identity, notwithstanding the myriad factors which have shaped and continue to form who I am, I am (among other things) a White male of European, middle-class origin, who has strongly-felt concerns about social justice.

vi At the community level, I have been involved in a number of social justice activities, initiatives and movements, all of which shape and texture my analysis of the real-life experiences of diverse groups and identities. In particular, I was a member of the City of Toronto

vii Cook (2004) and Patterson (2003) have provided analyses on voter turn-out among youth in Canada and the US respectively, and have found that participation-rates for these groups is only a fraction of that for older citizens. Further, the number of eligible voters in both countries who vote is only slightly more than fifty percent, a stinging indictment for those claiming that governments elected in this way somehow have a mandate to govern. In reality, the largest block of votes resides in those who do not vote.

viii Although the nomenclature may change, I argue that the conditions are largely similar for US Secretaries of Education and their equivalents within other contexts.

ix Chomsky once said that it was pointless to have a balanced discussion, meaning a one-minute blurb for each side in a media-clip, when the general public has already heard the point your adversary wishes to make five thousand times.

x One comment that was made to me during my doctoral research that particularly rings true in relation to employment equity and merit is that “White males have had an employment equity program for the last four hundred years so why not us (racial minorities)?”. In other words, when there was obvious discrimination in favor of Whites in the labor market, no one spoke of the merit principle not working.

xi The term people of “color” is inadequate at several levels but, given the social construction of identity, it is used to categorize those who are not White.

xii It may be too ironic to point out but perhaps the Anderson folks had never envisaged the possibility of any increase to the welfare calculations, and, therefore, it did not occur to them that such an eventuality could take place.

xiii It is worth pointing out that the initiative has not yet been rolled out, and, more importantly, I am somewhat constrained as to what I can say on the content of it, due to work as the Coordinator of the project for a two-year period. However, I do not suspect that my knowledge at this point has much relevance on any eventual policy as all of our work was contained to a small group within the Ministry. What is key, in this regard, is that the government did not advance a progressive stance in relation to equity; it was more focused on any number of other “commitments”, and was on the record stating that it would do something in relation to character education before the next election. The debate between character education and citizenship education is an interesting one that speaks to the philosophical and ideological underpinning of identity, equity and civic engagement in education. It does not appear that character education is intended to address social justice and anti-racism concerns.

xiv I do not pretend to hold key decisionmaker status, and do not wish for my comments and analysis to be construed as having been at the Cabinet-table or within the most senior levels. However, my interactions within the Ontario Public Service afforded me an unconventional and privileged vantage-point from which to observe, analyze and participate in the development of social justice policy in education circles in the province.

xv For the new Conservative government in Ontario, Alberta, a province that has only known Conservative governments for generations, was esteemed to be the lead player in cutting costs, and also in aligning its policies in an ideological way destined to highlight less government, individual effort, and social Conservative values. Comparisons with other jurisdictions were increasingly discouraged. Internationally, there seemed to be interest primarily in the US, with some attention paid to Great Britain and Australia.

xvi A pseudonym.

xvii Although I did not hear this directly, I was told that one of the problems with the document, according to staff in the Minister's Office, was that it was unfair to point to White supremacist groups but not Black supremacist groups.

xviii I use this terminology simplistically here since identity is socially constructed, and for minority francophones I am considered an "anglophone". Perhaps, this is part of the power and privilege of a majority-person to be able to critique the socio-linguistics of identity but I do feel that the notion of an "anglophone" is laded with cultural connotations that do not necessarily relate to the vast majority of those considered anglophones, including racial minority, non-Christian, non-English-speaking immigrants.

ix There are now twelve French-language school boards but at the time of the review mentioned here there were some 73 French-language sections, essentially parts of English-language boards, and two French-language boards.

xx Here, I make a distinction between formal and informal curricula.

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