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Who's in Charge Here?

Curriculum Decision-making Power in Canada

From the perspective of his former position as Deputy Minister of Education in Manitoba, Lionel Orlikow writes of the influence senior bureaucrats have on curriculum policy, design, and content. He suggests that a case may be made for this power being excessive, leading to the exclusion of other stakeholders' interests and, therefore, to biased curriculum content.

Significant social questions, with what seems an ever accelerating rapidity, are being framed in ways that demand responses from the Canadian educational system. These include such needs as neighbourhood revitalization, community schools, basic literacy, ethnic identity, biculturalism and bilingualism, and the needs of Canadians for the future. The list can go on.

Much of the potential to respond to these needs rests upon provincial Departments of Education. These bodies possess the financial resources, staff, public visibility, and legislative authority to set the pace. In turn, much depends upon the senior departmental staff, who possess considerable clout provincially and nationally. Their record of responsiveness in the 1970's will bear examination, if we are to have an understanding of the distribution of curriculum decision-making power that will lead us into the 80's and beyond.

This paper does not pretend to follow any systematic research on the determinants of public policy. It draws upon experiences obtained by my work in five provinces (not Quebec) both as a former senior provincial public official and as an educational consultant who engaged in projects designed to make various educational systems (nationally, provincially, locally; in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary situations) more sensitive to the interests and needs of many Canadians now poorly served by publicly-supported systems. The perceptions of groups of Canadians who are marginal to the mainstream of our society are important to consider in critiquing public policy.

Policy formation - intellectual and institutional dimensions

Policy differences in education do exist among provinces, within provinces and over time. Policy analysis can involve the investigation of the causes or consequences of government policies and programs. A search for causes can refer to social, economic, technological, or political forces which are hypothesized to be determinants of public policy. A study of effects would collect information about courses, attendance, academic performance, and membership in occupations.

Making policy is both an intellectual activity and an institutional process. (Vickers, 1965) From the intellectual, potential new policies are imagined before they are subjected to the formative influence of the institutional process. The policymakers, in their control of the structure of the educational institutions and relations with the wider society, set the limits of these deliberations. Thus, a key role in both forms of policy development is played by senior educational administrators at the provincial level. The major battles over public policy are fought within large departments, well-hidden from public view. Within this arena, and bearing in mind the relative longevity of senior civil servants, one can understand that party and electoral influences are significantly limited because political office-holders lack the ability, resources, or time to implant distinctive policies. Ministers often become departmental spokesmen rather than the reverse. It is true that some major policy decisions -- for example fiscal grants and aid to private schools, to name two -- are made by Cabinet, but they do not overshadow the continuous press of senior staff. Contrary to public myth, these senior authorities are not inert, but creative. They produce many analyses on which policy decisions by cabinet ministers are based. These papers and discussions establish the boundaries of available policy options. Their information sources help to shape the awareness of problems, present and future. For example, ministerial or external proposals can be rejected as impracticable, ill-timed, or unsympathetic to overall goals. Of equal importance is the considerable discretionary powers that senior officials have over ongoing programs, such as interpretation and implementation of regulations, appointments to curriculum committees, and distribution of discretionary grants and services.

In short, senior civil servants can control the only authoritative body in a province charged with education. Developments during the past two decades obscure this power. Local control, participation, curriculum adaptation, are all important to a degree, but seldom lead to significant deviations from parameters established by departments of education. Indeed pressures in the late 1970's have "corrected" a temporary aberration of centralist control through a return to prescribed curricula and provincially administered examinations. (Hughes, 1980) I see a serious flaw in this system. Senior members of ministries of education in my experience seldom give sufficient weight to alternative positions on significant issues. More often than not, they are preoccupied with and advocates of particular positions. They have considerable discretion and authority to introduce their views, and do so frequently without the benefit of external scrutiny.

The ties that bind: an uncritical environment.

Who belongs to this elite? First, they are senior bureaucrats -- an inner group composed of members from Departments of Education. Usually their civil service careers are long. Second, their classroom experience happened some decades ago in a different era of teaching and learning. They also have moved up through the ranks and have had little, if any, field experience both outside their home province and in other occupations. Third, they are men. The odd female truly is a token. Male dominance also reflects a heavy preoccupation towards high schools to the detriment of elementary educational interests. Fourth, its membership is quite conservative in ideology. Security and stability are valued versus the risks of rocking the boat in an effort to do better. Few come from the inner-city, isolated centre, and a disproportionate few are from ethnic backgrounds. Fifth, they identify with the Anglophone majority. Although some non-Anglo-Saxon surnames are present, these individuals usually have been assimilated out of their minority culture. And finally, their expertise centres on bureaucratic survival politics. The graduate degrees of those who possess them usually are in education, a field with doubtful transfer into administrative practice or policy definition.

These gentlemen are not evil. Many came into education after the Second Great War when strong central authority was required -- to ensure "standards" in instruction when many teachers were poorly prepared, to offer technical assistance to the multitude of local units without support staff, to plan many facilities during a period of rapid expansion. Their actions took place within an environment of general consensus about where the system was heading.

This group has many opportunities to reinforce their common ideology. The Council of Ministers of Education holds frequent meetings in addition to its welter of working committees. Another arena of consolidation is the annual fall conference of the Canadian Education Association, where a broader range of the Canadian establishment in education congregate.

From my experience of the inner workings of this group they seek to

- 1) emphasize academic courses and programs preparatory for university entrance (physical education and music are frills)
- 2) homogenize the "foreigner", whether defined on cultural grounds, intellectual interests (the artistic), or alternative learning styles ("open" education)
- 3) standardize educational practice in schools through the centralization of decision-making powers.

These objectives can be supported in unique ways. Deputy Ministers of Education, in the mid-1970's, recommended to the Council of Ministers of Education that financial support of the Canada Studies

Foundation be withdrawn. This step seems bizarre and contrary to the aims of Canadian content in the curriculum, but their concern, I believe, lay in a simple question of power. Canada Studies Projects were conducted by nondepartmental groups in the provinces -- these projects were designed, and implemented, by people outside their direct control.

The ideology of the senior bureaucracy is reinforced by a relatively low level of on-going external competition and critical appraisal. The structure of the educational network in most provinces encourages close official ties with many local senior administrators. Unofficial ties are close, too. There is some movement from middle management in departments to superintendencies. Many rewards come to those in the field who do not antagonize the Department, such as appointments to provincial committees, inside information on new directions, and kinder consideration for requests for resources. In these days of uncertainty, many senior administrators cannot afford to antagonize the Department, particularly when the central agency checks minor budgeting items. Each province has a few local divisions that traditionally tilt against central policy on selected issues. While these school boards may have initiated unique programs of note, their influence remains minimal in the broader perspective.

Faculties of education are weak, too, in their ability to stimulate a dynamic intellectual environment of critical deliberation. A number still are growing past their teacher's college roots. Research and evaluation opportunities are still limited. In short, Canada cannot point to any professionalization of educational reform. (Benveniste, 1972) The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education represents perhaps the only significant attempt by a province to "tool up" in research and development in an arena external to the hub of power.

The only consistent national critical voice comes from the national and provincial teacher's organizations. Their professional development staff and teacher representatives consistently have pressed the Departments on a variety of fronts.

Trustees, both at the local level and in the provincial scene, usually accept the status quo in programming. (The recent reform majority in Toronto was a refreshing exception in its advocacy of alternative schools, neighbourhood participation, and multicultural programs). Senior department officials usually feel more comfortable with trustees than with teachers -- in part revealed by their greater willingness to attend trustees' conventions as opposed to those of teachers.

Narrow intellectual boundaries

The real source of innovations in public policy is new information, new ideas, new interpretations of old problems. This pressure is particularly necessary in education where many policy issues are complex, controversial, and often poorly understood. In short, this

interpretation of the policy process is one of a continuous learned evolution, in which the policymakers are consistently adjusting their interpretations of problems according to input from the external environment.

New frameworks of ideas and theories should move through a diversified power that shapes a range of possibilities. An overly narrow policymaking framework in Canada cuts off many options. This situation is captured by Keynes, who noted: "There is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult." (Quoted in Sharpe, 1975, p.19) The power of senior department officials contributes to and benefits from this elitist base.

The treatment of the OECD Report (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1976) which was critical of Canadian education underlines how the establishment was instrumental in stonewalling what might have proved a significant step in the development of the intellectual base for Canadian education -- its status, assessment, and alternative directions. A range of internal studies was commissioned (generously funded by the Federal Government). If any studies by external agencies or persons were commissioned, they did not appear to influence internal attitudes. Opportunities for a wide range of interest groups to meet the OECD examiners were restricted in time and in scope. The Council's senior advisers finally were aroused to critique the Report and to trivialize its content. No followup was proposed.

A low level federal visibility

The Federal government has entered education subjects since the 19th century. The two most significant changes in the school's curricula in the past 50 years -- vocational education in the 1960's, and French a decade later -- were promoted by lavish Federal dollar grants. But the Council of Ministers of Education devotes much of its time to safeguarding provincial interests from Federal initiatives, rather than to promoting interprovincial activities.

The absence of a vigorous and consistent Federal role erodes the strength of national nongovernmental organizations. The strongest, The Canadian Teacher's Federation, does produce comparative national studies, but its limited staff alone precludes any major role. Few university departments can make a claim to be providing some national perspective. Few scholars receive Federal government assistance to conduct studies that go beyond provincial boundaries.

Little policy-related research

Governmental research often tends to be in-house. Embarrassing and unsuitable topics are avoided. Annual Reports of Departments of Education are written in so general a fashion that information therein

obscures rather than illuminates.

Research at the school district level is spotty. A small minority possess research staffs. Even fewer are involved in substantive studies -- ones that go beyond head-counting. Solid research and development projects at the local level encouraged by the Province are few. Many projects labelled special or demonstration have limited generalizability, with little benefit to any but the actual participants.

Issueless elections

Education forms only a small part of provincial election platforms -- and even then, is obscured by other items. Recently opposition parties have ducked education as a major point of confrontation. There is a general feeling among many provincial politicians that education loses votes rather than attracts votes. Elections at the local level generally focus upon personalities. Once elected, a trustee usually stays in office until he or /she voluntarily withdraws. Some provinces still have trustees appointed rather than elected.

In short, a lack of variety of educational policy at the provincial and local level leaves the public no choice and erodes government accountability to the public.

Restricted participation

Interest group participation and consequent influence on policy formation remains selective. Generally those associated with francophone and native associations invoke the ire of senior officials. The provincial associations for learning disabilities are regarded as too aggressive, or unreasonable, in their demands. The universities may receive some deference. Some outside groups are regarded -- unions being one -- as being doctrinaire rather than interested in the educational well-being of children.

The limited participation base becomes compounded by the weak foundation at the school level. Home and school associations have a very small membership. Many school parental groups function at the sufferance of the school authorities -- most boards of trustees do not wish to share their power. A provincial attempt to promote school councils in 1977 in Manitoba was voided after a change in government.

The parliamentary process

The major occasion for debate on education occurs in Legislative debates on the Departmental estimates. The forum presents innumerable opportunities for an alert Minister either to obfuscate issues or to bury the Opposition in myriads of trivia. The Minister has a strength in information and the resources of departmental staff,

not available to the opposition.

Ministers usually have little time to review their senior bureaucrats adequately. They have many responsibilities - membership on various Cabinet committees, reception of many delegations, national meetings, perhaps another portfolio, as well as constituency business. Frequently Ministers do bring in a few personal staff, but these individuals, too, usually are short-term and consumed with partisan political activities.

Most politicians are clearly more interested in party policy development, which is not usually centrally concerned with education, than in ongoing administration. Certain issues, such as revised grants to schools, have high visibility and resolution at Cabinet. But it is within the considerable range of discretion about many matters under direct authority of a Minister where the power of the senior officials exercises its considerable authority. Senior staff provide the background for policy papers, interpret regulations, propose alternatives, and monitor developments outside the Department.

Thus, members of this club may act in ways unaccountable to their political superiors or the public. Senior mandarins' control of Departmental finance and the preparation of the estimates give them extraordinary power. A local board of education with a particular problem might approach the Minister for financial assistance. He, in turn, consults the senior official as to what might be done. The mandarin may or may not find the dollars hidden within the labyrinth of grants available to school divisions and organizations. This depends on the orientation of the official and his disposition towards that school board. The Minister becomes dependent upon such apparent "fiscal wizardry." Local trustees outside the Department may or may not know who has the real power since this power remains known only to a few, as these bureaucratic decisions are made in the Minister's name.

Challenges to elite control?

The main agents of information for the Ministers of Education have been their senior bureaucrats. They are favoured in this role owing to the comparatively poor strength of competing sources in Canada at this time. Pluralism is weak. The problem does not necessarily arise out of a situation that one value position is better than any other. Rather, few policy options are actively considered. The one image of reality continuously comes through the elite. Perhaps their view of reality was satisfactory several decades ago. It is not the case now. Furthermore, their style is largely a reactive process. Aside from a primary interest in maintaining the status quo, they only can react to powerful external pressures. Those with little clout, the voiceless poor offering the prime example, receive no consideration.

A major challenge to the established order can come from

various social movements that permeate each province. It has been proposed that these "anti-structures" are signs "that the old order is being challenged, having lost its sacredness as it becomes irrelevant to people's needs". (Wilson, 1973, p.4) They are dissatisfied with the status quo.

In the 1970's, a number of groups were organized in the provinces to push demands on the educational decision-makers to alter the distribution of rewards in education. Although a few exceptions can be found, French as a first and a second language owes much of its advance to the continuing pressures of citizen groups. The efforts of a range of interest groups concerned with separate learning handicaps of children have won important concessions in funding, assessing, and programming. No educational plan from the Club anticipated these needs.

On other occasions, failure to receive attention has led groups to move out of the established patterns. Militants in native associations look to the establishment of separate native schools under their own control -- a pattern increasingly followed in Northern communities. The organization of the Socialist Teachers of Manitoba represents a spinoff from the established provincial teachers' association to deal with concerns ignored in established ways.

The right has its own share of social movements. The growth of private schools in various provinces indicates a rising dissatisfaction with public schools. These private schools attract both the economic elite and fundamentalist religious members. The Renaissance Association has run and elected candidates as school trustees as part of an overall campaign to censor "liberal" books, beef up student discipline, and introduce a particular type of moral education. The senior civil service in education has seldom attracted representatives of these groups, or top academics either. This has led, perhaps, to its isolation from the circumstances, attitudes, and life experiences of many groups affected by government in education. This suggests that this old guard has limited information (much less ideology) to contribute towards new ends and new means required by society's continued evolution.

It is interesting to note that the three New Democratic Governments elected during the 1970's each attempted to run around the educational elite on selected issues. Each lodged a separate group in the respective Department that possessed special reporting relationships to the Minister, as well as favoured status in budgets. British Columbia's attempt soon failed. An educational commissioner brought from outside the province, and reformers employed in a research-planning body in the Department of Education, all were dismissed by the Minister of the day. The Manitoba group had primary responsibility for various new programs of interest to the government -- Francophone and native education, inner-city schools, and innovative training projects. Many of the projects continued after the 1977 change in government, but not the staff. It took until near the end of the decade, but Saskatchewan too established its own

special projects group, one primarily devoted to the creation of urban native projects.

Summary

The popular concept of the neutral civil servant in the English tradition has little relevance to the Canadian experience. As Richard Crossman noted:

"The civil servants take a long view. They know that the boat-loads of politicians now anchored above them are certain to be changed within five years. They also know that any ideological crusade to carry out the mandate will be blunted by failure, electoral unpopularity and sheer exhaustion. So they are prepared to concede quite a lot under the first impact of an election victory. But when this is over, they resume their quiet defence of entrenched departmental positions and policies against political change." (Crossman, 1972, p.22)

This paper does not offer solutions. Its major objective has been to proffer my personal opinion that the course of Canadian education is unduly influenced by the power of a small elite who control provincial departments of education. This, I have said, is based on personal experience, not scholarly research. Nevertheless one hopes it might be sufficient to direct scholarly attention to the efficacy of policy derivation and implementation in Canadian education. The hypothesis that an elite club does control educational development in Canada should be examined, as well as the process of policy development.

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