

The State of Equity in Canadian Education

**A provocation paper prepared for the
Canada-United States Colloquium on Achieving Equity Through Innovation
Toronto, October 27-28, 2010
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Equity in education has been a leading issue for many decades. In 1986 Norm Goble, then Secretary General of the World Conference of Organizations of the Teaching Profession spoke on the topic at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) in Toronto. He reported that, "...the Ministers of Education of the OECD countries, meeting 1978, adopted the radical vocabulary, declaring jointly that it was the mission of the public school 'to give power to the underserved groups in society'." (Goble, 1986) He went on to say "...we are witnessing in many of the industrialized countries, an attempt to modify or moderate the socio-economic effects of education, and to control the socio-political role of the schools." (p. 4) In other words, he labelled what was happening in education reform, right from its earliest days, as a challenge against equity.

I was fortunate to become a teacher at a time when there was a clear understanding within the system, or at least within the teachers in the system, that society owed all children the opportunity to maximize their potential through education; that we should try to meet the needs of all students. The Hall-Dennis Report of 1968 spoke of "the inalienable right of all Ontario children to the best education possible within the limits of their abilities" (p. 176). (Ontario, 1968) The Worth Report in 1972 in Alberta stressed the "worth and well-being of each person" (p.6) and said even more strongly, "Institutions for schooling have acted as selective agencies that tend to pass along the advantages enjoyed by the affluent to their children alone" (p. 299 (Worth, 1972)). Both of these provincial reports recognized as well the desire of segments of our population to resist sharing their privilege. Of course neither report was issued without detractors.

Equity is a complex and complicated issue. Creating equity does not mean treating everyone equally. Creating equity would appear to suggest providing all students with the resources necessary for an education of equal quality to any other education program in the Canadian system. The reality is that we do not now create equity in Canadian schools; indeed the circumstances of schools vary widely in major ways. And, in looking at the topic for this paper, I

have not even considered native education, Christian school education, virtual schools or home education. However, in this paper, I will offer an attempt to describe equity in the Canadian education system, as well as present how teacher organizations have contributed, and continue to contribute, to achieving equity in our education systems across the country.

It is still little more than a myth that all students have equal opportunity in education. Consider a private school in a large city where parents pay \$25,000 in tuition fees per year, contribute to fund raising activities, and support the children in accessing arts, culture, and sports activities at all levels. Such a school has few students with severe physical or mental handicaps, no serious discipline problem students, no children from underprivileged families. The students have access to technology, books, and reading resources, tutors, and parents who are well educated role models. Consider an upper middle class public school in the suburbs where again parents support school activities and work hard raising \$75,000 or more each year in extra 'discretionary funds' for the school. Students have ready access to technology, arts, culture and reading resources; parents are active in helping their children learn and again, are well educated role models. Then there is a public school in an inner city area where many parents face drug addiction challenges, unemployment, and poor living conditions; where many students are underfed, unfed or poorly fed; where many parents are uneducated and avoid the school, are weak role models and may or may not speak English. The school fund-raising tops out at \$5,000 per year which is needed to cover extraordinary expenses for the poorest students.

Equity for students in these schools means being compared with one another, being ranked as equals for external tests, being expected to produce comparable results without comparable resources.

Schools throughout Canada have been in a constant state of change. Often, because when people see classrooms with desks, they believe "School is the same as it was when I attended." In fact, there has been enormous change. But, some things have not changed. One is the satisfaction teachers get from their role. The 2006 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Survey showed that two thirds of Canadian teachers would go into teaching again and that 98% of them believed one of their important tasks was promoting the personal development of students. Another constant is public satisfaction with public schools. On the 2010 National Issues Poll conducted by Vector Research, 71% of public elementary school parents graded the schools in their community with an "A" or "B". Canadian teachers consider themselves a vital part of education decision-making. Teachers in Canada work long hours, stay on top of their game, contribute to the welfare of their schools, and seek to improve the lot of underprivileged groups.

Canadian teachers enjoy some of the best educational results in the world. And, it is the quality of Canadian teachers and their organizations that produces those results. Every developed country in the world has been undergoing massive change in education. Some countries, I could argue (but won't in this paper) have in fact destroyed some of the strength that existed previously in their systems. What Canadian governments have done differently than most is involve the teachers in educational decision-making and system reform. Our colleagues in the National Education Association from the U.S. have told us that not once during the Bush administration years was there consultation with them on reform. A parliamentary committee from the UK that visited Canada in 2008 met with officials at the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF). When our officials commented on the involvement of teachers in educational planning at high levels, they acknowledged that they had heard the same from the Ministry of Education in Ontario and indicated an intention to report on the value of involvement in their report. Of course there are ups and downs in that cooperation and involvement. Canadian provincial governments are, like all others, subject to the ideological pressures of society. Equity is a difficult thing to achieve. Still, at the national and provincial/territorial levels the standard would be one of a collaborative search for success.

Canada's teachers have a commitment to quality education. From the earliest years of association in teacher organizations, they insisted on having the improvement of educational quality and the improvement of teacher quality in their objectives. They have lobbied for constant improvement. That is why Canada now has a highly trained teacher work force. The 2006 Statistics Canada census (2006 Census Special Interest Profiles, 2006) shows that only 5% do not have a university degree and over 20% have more than a Bachelor level program. Many of those without the degree have significant university education including all the relevant education courses. In addition, teachers throughout Canada participate actively in ongoing professional development. In a survey conducted in June 2010, 39% of the teacher respondents told CTF that they intended to attend sessions this summer. Fully 69% indicated planned professional reading. (CTF Teacher Survey June 7 -14 , 2010) Canada's teachers are up to date. Canada's teachers have a commitment to social justice as part of public education. The newest program launched at the 2010 Annual General Meeting of the Canadian Teachers' Federation is *Imagineaction*, a program dedicated to supporting critical thinking and active social justice through student involvement in their communities. Teachers not only want to temper the over-emphasis from testing and market based ideology, but also to make education real, meaningful and powerful for students. (www.imagine-action.ca) (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2010)

Canada's teachers have a commitment to planning, preparing and offering high quality programs. That commitment is visible in the long hours they work and their financial contributions to their classrooms. The 2005 CTF survey of Canadian Teachers (Economic and Member Services Bulletin, October, 2005) showed a teacher's average work week of 55.6 hours.

Surveys done by other groups have confirmed this level of intense work. A CTF Teacher Survey conducted February 22nd to Mar 1st 2010 showed that last year teachers contributed an average of \$453 in non-reimbursed expenses to their schools. (Teacher Survey on School Financial Support by Teachers and Communities, 2010)

Canada's teachers have a commitment to quality teacher education. Across the country it is common to find teacher organization representatives making presentations within university programs, sitting on faculty councils and university committees (including Dean Selection committees) and part of University Boards of Governors. In many cases there is also direct involvement by teacher organizations in the practicum programs for teachers in training. The teacher organizations see it as an important part of their work to make sure that University programs are grounded in the field.

Canada's teachers have a commitment to high standards of professional ethics and conduct. Virtually all have an approved Code of Professional Conduct. The Alberta Code says, for example, that "*The teacher acts in a manner which maintains the honour and dignity of the profession*". (Code of Professional Conduct)

Governments have been less willing to allow teachers to have a say in questions of competence but that is changing. The Alberta Teachers' Association now says on its web site, "*Incompetent professional practice refers to the inability of a teacher to consistently meet the requirements of the Teaching Quality Standard as approved by the Government of Alberta. The Association is responsible for overseeing the professional practice of teachers employed by school boards in Alberta.*" (www.teachers.ab.ca, *Upholding Professional Standards, 2010*)

Other countries in the world have strong teacher organizations that are invited by their governments to work in collaborative ways. These include the Scandinavian countries that do exceptionally well at international testing, notably Finland. They have high levels of post-secondary participation. They have a high level of school completion rates. They have high standards of living. They are also considered safe, desirable countries in which to live. They have successful market economies without allowing the market to control their education systems. We can learn from working with them.

Can we learn from the United States? One thing we can learn is the commitment to research although it is important to note that that research has not been the foundation for some recent educational reforms and does not show that the reform initiatives are ones that improve education the most or even at all (Ravitch, 2010). Sadly, the most damaging aspect of the initiatives being transported to Canada from U.S. could be the seemingly cavalier destruction of strong relationships and the apparent shift from the valuing of teachers to disrespect.

Can the U.S. learn from Canada – undoubtedly. Canada has consistently applied higher certification standards of teachers across the country, something that is not the case in most American jurisdictions. Recent federal government initiatives, such as Race to the Top, which applies a competitive approach for scarce dollars on schools, are not helpful in addressing the equity issue. Where, for example, is the equity for those students whose schools don't "win"?

Canadian teachers continue to believe in equity in education. Generally speaking Canadian teachers' organizations have an abiding interest in equity and social justice as reflected in their policies, programs, and decision-making structures. These initiatives address a range of overlapping issues – child poverty, gender equity, anti-racism, homophobia/heterosexism, Aboriginal education, human rights, and violence prevention. Some of this work was highlighted at the CTF "Education for Social Justice" conference held in 2007. While many of the stated goals of education appear to respect the concept of equity, the funding processes, the allocation of resources, and the accountability measures for students and for teachers do not respect the concept. Privileged parents continue to send their children to privileged public schools. An over-emphasis on testing within education departments and in their use by ideologically driven groups in society does not respect the concept of equity. It is a blatant example of inequity to test students who do not enjoy an equitable basis to begin with, yet these very same students will bear the brunt of "name and shame" from the rankings. Importing reforms based on market ideology, not solid research does not respect the concept. Teachers continue to work hard for equity in education. Society can do better.

Let us take a look at equity through the funding process. Provincial and territorial funding formulas most often "equalize" the funding through numbers/enrolment formulas, without taking into consideration socio-economic areas of a Board, geographic challenges and numbers of special needs students, including physical and cognitive needs, English second language needs, immigrant and aboriginal students' needs. Some Boards may allocate specific funding for needs such as these, while many would have to use monies that were for general funds. As long as differences and challenges in Boards across the country exist, funding formulas will have to be enhanced and altered to truly meet the diverse needs that public education presents.

Most Boards have made some adjustments; some Boards have made considerable adjustments; few Boards have made all the necessary adjustments to address the equity issue. No Boards, however, have been able to make sufficient adjustments to meet all the needs. While some may argue that this would be an impossible task, since new challenges are continuously presenting themselves, we must continue to strive to recognize the changes and to meet the needs as they evolve.

There are several examples of equity driven initiatives. In the Halifax Regional School Board, for example, inner city schools are allocated additional teachers well above the funding formula in order to keep class sizes lower than the standard and, at times, to avoid “split” or multi-grade classes. Here, it is recognized that exceptional measures must be taken to meet such diverse needs. The funding for this, however, was made available through a “special” or supplemental tax that was collected through the municipality and not through provincial funding, thus another example of inequity across Boards, since not all Boards have an added municipal education tax. Through collective bargaining, in that same Board, an article allows for the hiring of “equity teachers”, meaning teachers of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, in order to have further diversity in the teaching staff.

CTF and its member organization, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, have done a considerable amount of work in terms of conducting research and raising awareness of the links between poverty and schooling. The production of resources such as educational video and accompanying booklet featuring the stories of Ontarians affected by poverty, distributed to every elementary school in the province; the opportunities created for professional learning on poverty issues and the impact of poverty; the holding of symposia on poverty and education; and the commission of a literature review on poverty and schools all support the quest for equity in our classrooms.

CTF and many of its member organizations are involved in the Dignity for All Campaign for a Poverty-Free Canada – www.dignityforall.ca. In fact, poverty has been a CTF priority for the past two years. In September 2009 and October 2010 we presented to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, Pre-Budget Consultations on poverty. We continue to hold true to the belief, supported by research, that there is a direct relationship between poverty and how children fare in schools. Our brief, entitled *Taking Action against Poverty*, contains several recommendations that could have a positive impact on inequitable educational opportunities linked to family socio-economic status and ensure that all children are better provided for. The pressing need to improve Aboriginal education in public schools was the focus of a major CTF study (conducted by Verna St. Denis at the University of Saskatchewan) exploring the professional knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) teachers. This study was a collaborative effort involving the participation of Aboriginal teachers from many of our member organizations.

The Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation (STF) is holding a workshop designed to support educators who wish to deepen their understanding of Aboriginal knowledge and culture and the implications for their work in the classroom – in “Aboriginal Awareness: Preparing to Integrate Aboriginal Content & Perspectives into Teaching & Learning”, Nov. 1, 2010.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS) is holding a conference on inclusive education in April 2011 called "Encompassing Kids: Inclusive, Appropriate, Special – Infinite Expectations, Infinite Possibilities". MTS has also made funds available as Equity and Social Justice Initiative Grants, to support teacher-initiated Equity and Social Justice projects in 2010-2011. These projects may take the form of action research study groups or activities and events. The Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) provides grants like MTS to schools to promote diversity, equity and human rights, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) puts on a Leadership training program that allow "teacher advocates and activists to gain skills and experiences leading social and economic justice changes".

Accountability measures also present challenges of equity in our schools. It has become increasingly alarming to teachers and teacher organizations the emphasis that Boards and governments put on standardized test results. Right-wing think tank market institutes publish the test scores and rank schools based on these scores; this has resulted in casting unfair judgment on our schools by the public, as the use of one tool is insufficient to evaluate either a student or a school. While teacher organizations believe first and foremost in teacher authenticated assessments and evaluations, it is recognized that standardized tests are one form of testing, albeit a very small piece of a much larger and more complicated picture to evaluate student learning.

Teachers and teacher organizations continue to advocate and negotiate through the collective bargaining process as well as through partnerships for equity based on fairer funding formulas, teacher professional development, increased resources for the classrooms, and smaller class sizes, to name a few.

I opened this paper with a citation from Norm Goble. I close it by pointing out that in 1977 in a publication written for UNESCO with James Porter, he said, "The cycle of education and training is only part of a much larger cycle" (Goble N. R., 1977) (p.192). We live in a society in which a market driven economy increasingly informs the policies of decision makers. The market is not about equity but teachers still are. We will continue to work for equity for all children even if it means standing in the way of market driven ideology in teaching. After all, the objective is not to equalize everyone, but to give each student the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. When that happens, true equity will be achieved.

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