

# (Non)Construction of the Teacher: An Inquiry into Ontario's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*

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*In this paper we perform a critical discourse analysis on the policy document Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009). We examine the three core priorities the policy outlines: improve student achievement, reduce achievement gap and increase public confidence in public education. This document is approached from the context of new managerial educational reforms, to understand how the teacher is positioned within this policy. This policy, while laudable in intention, excludes the voice of the teacher. The policy offers much in the way of enhancing the students' experience yet says little about the role of the classroom teacher or how the policy might be translated and facilitated into schools/classrooms across the province.*

*Dans cet article, nous avons évalué, en employant une analyse critique du discours, le document de politique de l'Ontario Stratégie d'équité et d'éducation inclusive (2009). Nous examinons les trois priorités principales de la politique : améliorer le rendement des étudiants, réduire l'écart entre le rendement des élèves et accroître la confiance du public dans le système d'éducation publique. Nous étudions le document sous l'optique des nouvelles réformes en matière de gestion et d'éducation afin d'y comprendre la place des enseignants. Cette politique aux intentions louables exclut la voix de l'enseignant. Elle offre beaucoup aux élèves pour améliorer leur expérience mais évoque à peine le rôle de l'enseignant ou l'intégration des mesures dans les écoles de la province.*

## Introduction

In this paper, we examine educational policy documents that discuss the government's treatment of equity and inclusivity in schools. In particular, we analyze policy documents pertaining to this subject that have emerged in Ontario, as education is provincially managed in Canada. Three texts including the official policy and two related statements issued by the Ministry of Education comprise Ontario's *Equity and Inclusive Education Policy (Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools 2009* and its 2013 revision; *Realizing the promise of diversity: Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy, 2009a*; and *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation, 2009b*). These texts are examined with the understanding that they are contextually produced artifacts that speak to the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of education in Ontario; as well, they are telling of the ethical values and morals that the text writers engender

and hold true or take for granted about this particular society (understood as including the people in the province of Ontario).

Although others have analyzed Ontario's 2009 *Equity and Inclusive Education Policy* (see Segeren, 2011) and have made the claim that a more inclusive approach involving multiple stakeholders is necessary for the development of future policies in the area of equity and inclusivity to effectively shift the power authority away from politicians, a notion which we support, here we choose to draw attention to the near absence of teachers in the three core documents. It is with this frame that we perform a critical discourse analysis of the three documents whereby we treat them as a singular statement on what the provincial government has determined to be the purpose, goals and action areas of equity and inclusive education for Ontarian education stakeholders.

First we discuss the issue of student/schooling success as it is positioned in light of standardizing mechanisms in education. Then we provide a brief overview of the state of Ontario's education system before we engage in a critical discourse analysis of the policy documents and related political statements. We seek to perform here a type of policy analysis that examines the way particular stakeholders, namely teachers, are treated in the policy texts. This inquiry reveals certain latent assumptions that exist within the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (OEIES), assumptions, we argue, that are inscribed within the larger economic/managerial policy context of our time.

### **Accountability, Student Success and Economic/Managerial Restructuring**

Economic/managerial reforms in education, in similar fashion to how these reforms have emerged in other fields, have led to some salient features including a reliance on standardization. In education, standardized processes are materialized in a variety of areas including: law, (such as the age at which formal education for students is commenced or can be withdrawn); content, (grade and course curriculums), and assessment/evaluation (the practice of universal tests and progress reports). Standardization in the Ontario education curriculum has been extended in the areas of math and literacy where standardized tests measure student "ability" in these disciplines at particular stages in their schooling.

A basic assumption about standardization is that by standardizing key elements of curriculum and pedagogy, two goals are simultaneously achieved. Students are treated indiscriminately (and thus it is supposed fairly); and through standardization the educational system is simplified and thus rendered more efficient. What is problematically neglected in this basic logic is that the equal treatment of students does not constitute an equal chance of success for all students. Education policies that call for standardization, deregulation, efficiency, or accountability prompt public education stakeholders to think that these policy shifts are designed to help socially and economically disadvantaged students. In practice, these discourses have proven to rationalize the uneven educational achievement and further marginalize students of particular racial backgrounds, social class or ability (Portelli, 2011). Poor outcomes can also result for the teachers, administration, and entire schools where "underachieving students" attend (see Bascia, 1996). While it is the educational system that produces and reproduces the conditions of the "curricula, testing, conceptions and practice of leadership, and pedagogy" (Portelli, 2011, p. 8) it is the student who is positioned as the one who needs to adjust and learn to fit the dominant education system to be "successful".

Global Managerial Educational Reforms (GMER), as they are discussed by Verger &

Altinyelken (2013) describe the international trend of education systems adopting corporate-like models that operate with paradoxical impacts for teachers and on the teaching profession. One such paradox being that teaching is made more prescriptive in a system of high-stakes testing and pressure to teach more mechanistically occurs in locations where the stakes are the highest (Bascia 1996; Thomas, 2005). The analysis by Verger & Altinyelken (2013) highlights the way these policy reforms can disconnect teaching from the learning process, thereby also impacting students' engagement with education. There is an abundance of research that suggests that teachers feel an overemphasis on standards and testing is devaluing their profession (see Apple, 2001; Bascia, 1996; Gerwitz, 2000; Thomas, 2005). We agree with Kuehn & Shaker (2010) who assert that a shift away from accountability rhetoric and practices in education are necessary to support an equitable and inclusive education. They say that, "those who want equality and the valuing of diversity must develop an alternative program to the accountability systems that continue to dominate the discourse of education evaluation" (p. 23).

Within neoliberal contexts crisis discourse is often used for political purposes to boost specific policy agendas and also to criticize the opposing parties' agendas. In writing on neoliberal ideology, Peck, Theodore, & Brenner (2009) argue that such crisis conditions are ultimately beneficial to the spread of neoliberalism, "not least because the tools of neoliberal governance were forged in, and for, precisely such conditions, [but] because the project of market rule has been periodically rejuvenated and restructured through crises" (p.110). The tendency for policy recycling based on a crisis rationale has been noted by Ball (1998) and Downs (1972) and featured in the educational policy documents we reviewed for this paper.

### **Development of Equity and Inclusive Education Policy in Ontario**

Ontario's public education and its educational governance underwent dramatic structural changes and ideological shifts in the last 20 years that placed the education system more in line with economic/managerial policy trends. The "Common Sense Revolution" (CSR) platform of reforms put forward by the Harris/Eves Progressive Conservative (PC) party, an ideologically right-leaning provincial political party, in Ontario in the late 1990s-early 2000s expanded economic/managerial policies in the education sector. While the CSR focused on rhetoric of "get more for less" (Basu, 2004, p. 425), the financial state of Ontario's education system presented a reality of a longstanding deficit, declining student enrollment and aging infrastructure all of which rendered CSR's claim impractical and unfeasible.

Many of the reforms that were initiated in education by the Progressive Conservative party were first articulated under Bob Rae's leadership of the New Democratic Party (NDP) from 1990-1995. Despite the fact that the PC and NDP were not ideologically aligned they made several similar changes to public education. Jaafer and Anderson (2007) note that both political parties expanded accountability measures, curriculum development, standardized testing, and new oversight in the area of teacher professionalism. Moreover, the Conservative government, under the leadership of Mike Harris, adopted several of the recommendations that emerged from a Royal Commission on Learning (RCOL) 1995 research report initiated by the NDP. It is not unusual practice for different political parties to engage in this type of policy borrowing. According to Bascia (1996), restructuring in education involves more fluid expressions between "conservative and progressive ideas" (p. 180).

In light of Ontario's education system being framed, and often praised, as being responsive to its highly diverse student population, it is interesting that a move toward increased

standardization has been so readily accepted. The movement toward standardization, although efficient at showing students ability to meet literacy and numeracy targets, sets up an educational system that follows an ideology of meritocracy. It seems counterproductive to expand on standard measures as an evaluative tool for student success in an education system where diversity and difference are heralded as defining features of a Canadian approach (as exemplified by the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (2014), developed in 1971 and formalized in the Canadian Charter of Rights and freedoms (1982) which was established as law in 1988). The development of an Antiracism Policy in Ontario held as an objective that boards create curricula that speak to the cultural and racial diversity of society and to ensure the affirmation of the racial and cultural identities of students through learning experiences at school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 14).

The equity and inclusive education policy that is addressed in this paper developed from the above mentioned 1993 Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119: *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Development and Implementation* (hereafter discussed as the Antiracism policy). The Antiracism policy was regarded as not comprehensive enough in scope and implementation (Seregen, 2011). It was in response to this criticism that the Ontario Liberal Party developed the policy statement *Reach Every Student* (2008) in an effort to further develop and elaborate their equitable and inclusive education policy.

Structural changes in Ontario's public education system since the 1990s have had direct impacts on the area of governance, finance, and curriculum (Basu, 2004; Sattler, 2012). For example, 129 school boards were amalgamated into just 72 (Jaafer & Anderson, 2007) and during the same period six municipalities were amalgamated in 1998 which joined six local school boards to form the largest school board in Canada named the Toronto District School Board (Basu, 2004). In addition, School Board Trustee positions were downgraded from receiving a \$20,000 annual honorarium to volunteer roles where the trustee received a maximum of \$5000 annually (Sattler, 2012). Curriculum standards were introduced in the 1970s in Canada and since they were revised in the 1980s and 1990s these core curriculum have become "centralized [and] outcomes-based" (Jaafer & Anderson, 2007, p. 212).

This movement toward more centralized education decision-making changed the ability for stakeholders to demonstrate local decision-making. Mitchell (2003) argues that a procedural democracy relies on "a decentralized system for egalitarian decision-making and greater inclusiveness" (p. 395). As a reform process, centralization is generally considered to adversely affect equity and inclusiveness because centralization promotes a singular standard (often standardized testing) purported to function as an equalizer but that often instead functions to magnify the unequal conditions of students. Despite this, centralization is a cardinal property of contemporary economic/managerial reforms because it facilitates and promotes managerial interventions and fosters a (public) perception of accountability. Furthermore, while such centralized control is intended to streamline decision-making and simplify reform, it also tends to sever authoritative decision making from the realities and exigencies of diverse and distinctive contexts and from the wealth of situated experience and knowledge of agents "on the ground."

In this movement towards centralization, Basu (2004) highlights the introduction of non-governmental regulatory bodies during phases of initiating economic/managerial policies into education to monitor the efficiency and accountability initiatives/standards set by the government. These are called quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations (QUANGOS). These organizations and in some occasions, private corporations, reduce the role of local school

boards and school trustees and earn public support because they are identified by the government as neutral stakeholders. One such example is the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) that was established in 1996 based on recommendations from the Royal Commission on Learning (1995) which monitors the standardized tests across the province in different levels and areas of education (Basu, 2004).

The EQAO organization writes and evaluates tests in reading, writing and mathematics that are intended to observe students' grasp of expectations outlined in the Ontario curriculum. On the one hand, the test score data that is collected and disseminated to the public is intended to

provide accountability and a gauge of quality in Ontario's publicly funded education system. By providing this important evidence about learning, EQAO acts as a catalyst for increasing the success of Ontario students. The objective and reliable results from EQAO's tests complement the information obtained from classroom and other assessments to provide students, parents, teachers and administrators with a clear and comprehensive picture of student achievement and a basis for targeted improvement planning at the individual, school, school board and provincial levels" (EQAO Website).

While on the other hand, these purportedly objective tests place students, teachers and school administration in real situations of competition to demonstrate through test scores their level of achievement. Furthermore, schools with high test scores are often rewarded with high student enrollment while schools that rank lower on standardized tests experience penalties associated with poor performance ranging from staff layoffs to school closures.

It is with the above mentioned shifts and schooling reconfigurations that we take seriously the questions Portelli (2011) raises in relation to equity and inclusivity. He asks:

Even though policy documents make reference to it, do we take equity seriously in our actions? Are we aware of the differences between sameness (or equality) and equity, which focuses on acknowledging and fulfilling different needs? Are we aware that standardization can in fact reproduce inequities? Can we really understand differences if we do not understand the contexts from which they arise? Can we fulfill the different needs of students if we do not understand and appreciate cultures, beliefs, and values that differ from the dominant neo-liberal ways of thinking and being in the world? (p. 9)

With this set of critical questions in mind we move into an examination of the equity and inclusive education documents using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method guiding our inquiry.

## **Critical Analysis of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy**

### **Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method of Policy Analysis**

A central premise of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is that we exist in worlds that are saturated with discursive, semiotic and textual meanings. The basic premise of CDA is that language not only acts as a descriptive tool, but more importantly a tool that constitutes and sustains particular ways of thinking, acting and living (Saarinen, 2008). In this sense, the analysis of text and social discourses (which can be codified in several different formats, whether text, media, or other types of social expression) is not only the analysis of particular

statements but rather their positioning within a larger system of social meaning (and historical context) which renders them in their proper light as expressions of a particular viewpoint, often laden with particular values and in the interest of particular groups. For this reason Thomas (2005) describes CDA as a “tool for critical social science” (p. 47) because given the discursive, textual, and semiotic nature of everyday life, the struggle over meanings and expressions is not merely a struggle over words alone but rather over the power to constitute, legitimize and sustain particular social arrangements (and the material advantages that such discourses and social arrangements confer upon the privileged at the expense of the disadvantaged). In this light, CDA is a tool that helps clarify the types of taken for granted assumptions that lie behind seemingly benign (or even explicitly positive) statements, texts and discourses.

Policies are meaningful constructions that are generated within political contexts that are animated by particular agendas. As such, CDA is an optimal tool in order to ascertain what McNeil & Coppola (2006) call both the “official” and “unofficial stories” enshrined in policy documents.

### **Applying critical discourse analysis to Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education policy**

In this paper we conduct a critical discourse analysis of the three central policy documents which comprise Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (OEIES) with a particular attention to how teachers are positioned therein. The first document, *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009a), formally recognized the need for equity policies to supplement the three core priorities that were established in previous policy statements. The second document, *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (2009b), sought to provide guidelines for school boards in the development, implementation and monitoring of equity policies. Finally the third document, *Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119: Developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario Schools* (2013), is the official policy statement (the latest revision of a 2009 version) which mandates the development, implementation and monitoring of equity and inclusive education policy for “all publicly funded school boards” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3).

These three policy documents comprise the basic policy framework for the equity and inclusive education strategy and their analysis will constitute the majority of the next sections. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013), “[t]hese three documents should be used together when boards are reviewing and/or developing and implementing their equity and inclusive education policy” (p. 4) and as such this analysis will approach them in the same way, not as discrete statements but as a unified whole. Indeed, given how they are composed (where they generally repeat the content of one another) it would become redundant to do otherwise.

Given the rhetorical and discursive dimension of the policy documents articulated above, this CDA began principally with an effort to situate and elaborate the strategic and rhetorical context within which the OEIES, and its treatment of teachers, might be more critically perceived. In that light, we began our CDA of the OEIES with an analysis of the central contextualizing document: *Reach Every Student* (2008). Our analysis of that document focused on establishing both the “official” and “unofficial” stories (McNeil & Coppola, 2006) that served as the rationale as well as the justificatory context for the OEIES policy framework.

In light of this contextualizing, in the main CDA of the OEIES we began by explicitly

searching and cataloging for any mention of teachers throughout the core OEIES documents. As will be addressed in the upcoming analysis, we were quite surprised at just how absent teachers were from the policy framework. Following this we sought then to relate the ways in which teachers were treated in the core OEIES documents to the broader context that we identified in our contextualizing reading of *Reach Every Student* (2008) as well as to the broader literature on the status of teachers in the context of economic/managerial reforms within educational policy in Canadian education and abroad. The upcoming sections offer a basic overview and analysis of the significant finding: that teachers are almost completely absent from the OEIES.

It is important to note that key aspects of the CDA described in this paper are informed by Thomas' (2005) study which addresses the removal of teachers from Australian educational policies over a 10 year period. While informed by Thomas' work, this paper differs in that our focus remains more closely concerned with one particular policy framework (the OEIES) and the status of the teacher in the more localized Ontario educational context. Nevertheless, both this article as well as Thomas' are complementary as they detail similar processes that are part of the broader global economic/managerial reforms addressed in part one of this piece.

### **Reach Every Student: The Context of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy**

Before delving directly into our analysis of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (OEIES), we need to address, more specifically, the context in which the OEIES was developed and the rationale for its development. As previously mentioned, OEIES was developed in light of criticisms and scholarship that pointed to the ongoing problems of exclusion and racism that persisted in Ontario schooling (Dei, 2003) despite previous efforts to address these issues (namely in the Ontario Ministry of Education 1993 document *Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity*, PPM No. 119 (1993)) (Segeren, 2011). According to Segeren (2011), in order to properly understand the current form of the OEIES, and whose values it ultimately represents, one must look not only at the specific groups of stakeholders that informed its development (including AMENO, People for Education, and Egale Canada) but also at the prominent discourses that shaped its emergence (notably the discourses on multiculturalism, safe schools, and academic excellence).

The most relevant resource for understanding the implicit logic of the OEIES is the 2008 policy document *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* in which the Ontario Ministry of Education articulates the three "core priorities" that have since been placed at the front and center of all of their initiatives in an effort to "create the best publicly funded education system in the world..." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p. 5). These priorities are, 1. High levels of student achievement, 2. Reduced gaps in student achievement, and 3. Increased public confidence in public education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). The reason for its importance is that these three priorities serve, in the OEIES, not only as the starting point, but more importantly as the justification for adopting equity and inclusive education policy in Ontario. For instance, the Ministry argues that "[a]n equitable, inclusive education system is fundamental to achieving these core priorities" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p. 5); or elsewhere, in describing the emergence of the OEIES they explain that "[i]n 2008, the Minister of Education called for the creation of an equity and inclusive education strategy for Ontario schools *that will continue to advance our three core priorities...*" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 10, our emphasis). Thus, there is an implicit

instrumental rationale that positions equity and inclusive education policy as a means of achieving these three core priorities.

In that light, what is most relevant for our analysis is that the three core priorities articulated in *Reach Every Student* (2008) (and reiterated in the OEIES) are clearly articulated in competitive international terms. In this document student achievement is framed entirely in terms of literacy and numeracy where it is argued that “[a]dvanced numeracy and literacy knowledge and skills are the keys to successful lives for students and a prosperous society. As research clearly shows, growth in a country’s economic and educational competitiveness is directly linked to a strong emphasis on literacy in the early years of school” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 6). It is difficult to miss the market logic that underlies the use of literacy and numeracy in this document. Literacy and numeracy are treated as strategic tools defined in terms of their ability to promote the “country’s economic and educational competitiveness.” Indeed, one may note how, for the student, the value of literacy and numeracy are not framed in terms of growth or well-being but rather in the strategic terms of success. Students are enterprising subjects who, with such skills, are more advantageously positioned in the competitive educational (and employment) market. In that sense, the core priority of “high student achievement” is more specifically understood here as “high achievement in literacy and numeracy on international standardized tests”. This notion of achievement is further reinforced when one understands that the third core priority (increased public confidence in public education) is itself predicated upon rankings in international standardized tests such as PISA (where it is believed that improved ranking will increase public confidence in public education. See *Reach Every Student*, 2008, p. 10).

Significantly, this standardized notion of achievement is consistent with particular movements in education and policy articulated from a managerial perspective. Furthermore, such standardized definitions of student success often contribute to the de-professionalization of teachers who, under the pressure to increase achievement are often forced to adopt methods and practices that are imposed in an effort to achieve greater competitiveness as opposed to improved educational experiences for both students and teachers. While the language of this document is progressive, the logic of improvement contained therein is of a particular kind, privileging a particular (institutional) vision of educational improvement identified in terms of improved educational competitiveness and economic status. This logic is especially relevant to note given that the OEIES is consistently framed in large part as a means of realizing these core priorities. As we will address later, there appears to be an inconsistency between the standardizing impetus contained in *Reach Every Student* (2008), and identified as a goal of the OEIES, and the effort to develop equitable and inclusive policies in Ontario education.

### **Main goals and areas of focus of the OEIES**

While these core priorities animate all of the work being done by the Ontario Ministry of Education, within the OEIES, they are supplemented by three “main goals” and eight “areas of focus,” all of which are meant to secure the implementation of equity and inclusive policy and support the three core priorities. The main goals of the OEIES are: 1. Shared and committed leadership, 2. Equity and inclusive education policy and practices, and 3. Accountability and transparency. In an effort to achieve these goals, the eight “areas of focus” (or arenas of action) where the OEIES is to be applied are: 1. Board policies, programs, guidelines, and practices; 2. Shared and committed leadership; 3. School-community relationships; 4. Inclusive curriculum

and assessment practices; 5. Religious accommodation; 6. School climate and the prevention of discrimination and harassment; 7. Professional learning; 8. Accountability and transparency (*Reach Every Student*, 2008). Problematically, the relationships among the priorities, goals, and areas of focus expressed in the OEIES remain somewhat ambiguous especially given some the redundancy of the categories. Such ambiguity, however, according to Segeren (2011) is not unexpected since “[p]olicy documents... are often produced to be intentionally vague” (p. 8) and such is the case for OEIES.

Having addressed what we consider to be the crucial contextualizing document of the OEIES (*Reach Every Student*, 2008), in the upcoming sections we will address some of the more specific findings that emerged from our analysis of the OEIES. Essentially, in light of our focus on the status of the teacher in the OEIES, two main themes stand out as particularly relevant. First is the manner in which the OEIES frames equity and inclusive education in terms of student achievement and accountability, and second is the relative absence of the teacher, their positionality, and their experiences from the OEIES. Both of these themes, we argue, are most clearly understood in light of the strategic perspective presented in the *Reach Every Student* document (2008) and within that light they can be understood as complementary.

## **Findings**

### **Equity and Inclusiveness within a context of Achievement and Accountability**

In light of the priorities, goals, and areas of focus articulated above, one central property of the OEIES stands out rather clearly: that the Ministry treats equity and inclusion as a means of improving student achievement and in doing so strengthening Ontario's competitiveness both economically and globally (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b). Equity and inclusive education policy is here being justified not in terms of the student and for improving quality of student life, but in terms of the core priorities and the effort to create the best publicly funded education system in the world. This subtle instrumentalist view on equity and inclusive education policy is equally clear in the title of the document: *Realizing the Promise of Diversity* (2009a), where diversity is conceived of as an asset that can serve the broader goals and agenda of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

This vision of equity is first notable in the introductory comments of Ontario's Education Minister Kathleen Wynne. Wynne frames the imperative for equity and inclusion in Ontario education in terms of “student achievement and student success” in order to “help students develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, and caring citizens who can contribute to a strong economy and cohesive society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 2). The relationship between equity, achievement and economic/educational competitiveness serves as the basic, although latent, justificatory rationale regarding the imperative for equity and inclusive education in Ontario. Equity, rather than being valued as necessary in itself, is consistently rationalized as a means of achieving the three core priorities of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The importance of student achievement is not what we are problematizing here; high achievement is an important feature of education that serves both the individual and society. However, when high student achievement, *defined in terms of standardized testing*, is placed as the rationale and intent of equity and inclusive policies, we must ask whether real equity and inclusiveness can thrive in such conditions. The danger of positioning equity and inclusive

policy as a means of improving student achievement is that achievement (defined narrowly) continues to dominate the practices and the implementation process. Such conditions are not inherently conducive to the development of equity and inclusiveness in education. What may be a more equitable approach is to question the narrow definition of achievement that continues to animate educational reform today.

The latent strategic view of equity and inclusiveness in these documents, and the nature of their “priorities” and “goals,” conveys a particular conception of the policy process that is rooted in the language of new managerial and neoliberal conceptions of educational change. Framing equity and inclusive education in terms of “student achievement,” “leadership,” and “accountability” positions equity and inclusive education as primarily a managerial problem to be addressed in a top-down fashion. While addressing one important aspect of equity and inclusion (the institutional), it omits the practical and experiential conditions of equity and inclusion in everyday schools. This point brings us to the troubling omission of these documents.

### **Excluding the teacher from inclusive policies**

In her CDA on the status of teachers in Australian educational policies, Thomas (2005), drawing on the work of Fairclough, explains that,

Absences and omissions are significant in a critical discourse analysis of texts, including policy documents, as omissions often result in ambiguity in meaning when the presuppositions underlying the text are not made explicit, resulting in guesses and assumptions based on commonsense. (p. 53)

Our CDA found that teachers are almost entirely absent from the OEIES. This general omission is one of the OEIES’s prominent and baffling features. The OEIES documents fail to include the positionality and experiences of teachers in any satisfactory or consistent manner. There are only a handful of statements regarding the role of “teachers and staff” in supporting students that appear in the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009a) on page 14 and in the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013) on page 4. There are also minor references to teacher training that appears in the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013) on page 7. Indeed, this absence is rendered even more clearly when the section on professional learning (the shortest of all eight areas of focus and the section which one would assume would pertain more specifically to teachers) only makes mention of the school board's duty to provide training opportunities “for teachers (including guidance counselors), support staff, administrators, and trustees” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 7). Such is equally the case in the section focusing on the implementation of the OEIES which fails to mention teachers even once. This is a troubling omission that causes one to ask, who indeed will implement the OEIES?

Ultimately, in the official policy statement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) teachers are only mentioned five times, and only once are they suggested as consultants in the development of policy (along with every other educational partner). This is how their involvement is framed:

boards are expected to consult widely with students, parents, principals, teachers and other staff, school councils, their Special Education Advisory Committee, their Parent Involvement Committee and other committees (e.g., Diversity Committee; First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Advisory

Committee), federations and unions, service organizations, and community partners. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 4)

Granted that teachers are here mentioned as potential consultants, but in light of the fact that this is the only statement of its kind in the *Policy/program memorandum* no. 119 (2013), and that they are simply being mentioned along with all potential consultants, it is necessary to read it more as a token statement than as an act of inclusion. This is particularly likely in light of the evidence in educational policy research which finds that the general culture of contemporary educational policy tends towards the exclusion of teachers from policy process by default (Thomas, 2005; Bascia, 1996).

This general absence is all the more perplexing in light of the Ministry's claim that "[l]eadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 17). This paradoxical treatment of the teacher (as both central to the educational process and yet absent from the discussion in any real way) constitutes, according to Verger and Altinyelken (2013), one of the main paradoxes of what they call the Global Managerial Educational Reforms (GMERs) where they argue that "GMERs continuously stress the importance of teachers and emphasise the key role they play in education quality, but simultaneously disempower them in several ways," including "a) by not sufficiently taking into account their preferences in policy processes, b) by treating teachers as homogeneous assets to be managed rather than as agents of change, and c) by undermining their autonomy in front of the state and students' families" (p. 8).

Most notably, in the OEIES, the teacher, while not often explicitly reflected in the policy, figures prominently when statements regarding the need to approach a diverse student body on its own terms are given:

The Ministry of Education acknowledges and values the diversity in our schools. Every student is a unique individual and learns in different ways. Training and resources focusing on differentiated instruction ... are just a few of the ways in which the ministry is helping educators enhance learning by taking account of students' particular learning styles and circumstances. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 14)

This statement brings to light a dimension of the OEIES that requires deeper discussion. The effort to advance equity and inclusive policies in education is ultimately an effort to diversify the types of experiences and modes of instruction that are open to a diverse and complex body of students with diverse needs, capacities and realities in schools today. This is a central premise of the OEIES which references the need to serve students as distinct individuals throughout all three documents. And yet to speak about diversified instruction, and encountering students as unique and distinct, without addressing, in a more coherent fashion, the important values and experiences of those who engage with students on a daily basis, and who will ultimately be tasked with putting the policy into practice, is to leave a vital inconsistency at the heart of the OEIES. While they are not represented in this document, teachers are called upon to interact with "every student [as] a unique individual [who] learns in different ways." As a result, although teachers are not positioned in the OEIES as empowered agents, they are implicitly invoked as those tasked with the realization of the main goals of the OEIES. This is a prime example of how absences and omissions in policy documents (as highlighted above by Thomas (2005)), can sustain ambiguities that are ultimately disempowering to teachers. Furthermore, it

is crucial to note the taken for granted perspective that this document takes toward teachers within the policy process. By highlighting the agency of institutions (such as the government, the school board, and the schools), this document diminishes the agency and personal discretion of teachers while simultaneously increasing their responsibilities in the process.

It is not that the tone of this document treats teachers unfairly. However, by omitting the teacher from the discussion altogether, while employing concepts and terms that are clearly inscribed within a policy perspective that has consistently diminished the status and agency of teachers (Thomas, 2005; Verger & Altinyelken, 2013), this document runs a serious risk of further marginalizing teachers. Thereby teachers' unique and invaluable positional knowledge and experience also become marginalized throughout the process of development and implementation. Furthermore, the exclusion of teachers' voices also potentially compromises the long-term realization of the purported goals of the OEIES.

### **Discussion**

What stands out in these documents is that teachers are not treated as participants in driving changes to educational policy. The push for a student-centered approach to inclusion has also led to the nearly complete omission of equity and inclusion from the standpoint of teachers. This omission or back-grounding of teachers from the policy documents is significant because according to Fairclough (cited in Thomas, 2005), absences of a social group from textual artifacts is a means of their exclusion from the discourse.

These policy documents help reinforce a conception of educational change that sees improvements to education as being reliant on top-down measurable objectives. For example, the eight "areas of focus" outlined in the OEIES, contribute to a construction of the process of educational improvement as being dependent upon the top-down delineation of specific criteria which educational protagonists are expected to address. Most of these focus areas are important to fostering a sound educational environment, but what has remained absent, as a result of this top down delineation, is that the perspectives of the central educational stakeholders (teachers and students) are not given due prominence in the policy process. Such is the case for this and other educational policy documents that have been examined here.

The OEIES seeks to promote equitable and inclusive educational practices and should, for that reason, be praised. However, in execution, its problematic exclusion of the teacher remains one of its weak points. This exclusion can be explained most effectively by understanding the OEIES as an artifact of a particular reform culture that has consistently treated the process of policy development and implementation from a managerial perspective, reliant upon standardized and efficient measures, rather than from the perspective of those actors with the positional knowledge and experience to address issues such as equity and inclusion in a more situated and grounded manner. To point to this is not to condemn the OEIES but rather is simply an attempt to draw attention to a particular facet of the policy that remains inconsistent with the values that it seeks to uphold. The challenges that we highlight in this policy are not inherent to the policy itself but are characteristic of a broader reform culture that is entrenched not in mere documents but rather at every level of thinking in educational practice and governance. As such, to address them we must think not only about the specific policy questions relevant to our schools today, but also the taken for granted logic that we employ in our thinking about educational improvement and how particular conceptions of educational change are inscribed within far more complex, and troubling, social and historical processes.

## Conclusion

In this document we performed a critical discourse analysis of the OEIES with a particular focus on the status of the teacher in that important policy. In our analysis two interrelated themes stand out. First, the implicit and questionable logic that frames equity and inclusive policies in terms of student achievement, and second, the omission of the teacher, in any real manner, from the policy itself. We argue that these two themes are essentially tied to the same policy perspective which places economic/managerial conceptions at the center of educational improvement. As a result, policies such as the OEIES are questionably framed by the logic of economic and educational competitiveness (of which high student achievement is the central concept), and the central educational professionals (teachers) are treated (whether implicitly or explicitly) as external to the policy process or, more ominously, as objects of intervention tasked with following directives and, despite their importance, diminished in their agency and capacities. This tendency is central to the standardizing movements characteristic of economic/managerial policy perspectives because the primary emphasis is not on quality as it is experienced by those involved (teachers and students), but on ease of management and competitiveness. This propels the refinement of ever deepening regimes of accountability and which serve to deprofessionalize and diminish teachers in the process.

In the context of educational policy in Ontario, we argue that inclusion must be brought to bear on an even higher plane of the process of policy development and practice. To speak of inclusive education while, in that same discussion, excluding the diversity of experiences and agency of the central agents in the educational realm itself is indicative of a policy perspective that lacks the inclusive and equitable vision that it seeks to foster.

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