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Partnership Working and Collaborative Professionalism for Educational Improvement in Ontario, Canada

Abstract

This article discusses the approaches to education system reform developed and implemented in the province of Ontario, Canada, between 2003 and 2018. Two phases of the Ontario education reform strategies are discussed – an initial focus on working in partnership with priority goals for improving student achievement, followed by a shift to a new collaborative professionalism with a widening priority focus on equity and well-being. Finally, the article considers some lessons from these two phases of education reform in Ontario and current issues for educational change, particularly in light of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Keywords: education reform, partnership, professional collaboration, whole system reform, educational change

Partnerschaftliches Arbeiten und kollaborative Professionalität als Ansätze für Reformen des Schulsystems in Ontario, Kanada

Zusammenfassung

*Der Beitrag umreißt die Ansätze, die in den Jahren 2013 bis 2018 in der kanadischen Provinz Ontario im Rahmen von Reformen des Schulsystems entwickelt und implementiert wurden. Dabei werden zwei Phasen diskutiert: Anfänglich lag der Fokus auf einem partnerschaftlichen Arbeiten aller Akteure mit dem vorrangigen Ziel verbesserter Leistungen von Schüler*innen; darauf folgte ein Paradigmenwechsel hin zu einer neuen Form der „kollaborativen Professionalität“ mit größerer Priorität auf Bildungsgerechtigkeit und Wohlergehen. Abschließend werden aus diesen beiden Reformphasen sowie aus aktuellen Herausforderungen zu Veränderungen im Bildungssystem einige Schlussfolgerungen präsentiert – insbesondere vor dem Hintergrund der globalen COVID-19-Pandemie.*

Schlüsselwörter: Schulreform, Beteiligung, professionelle Zusammenarbeit, Bildungssystemreform, Bildungssystemwandel

1 Introduction

School education in Canada is the responsibility of ten provinces and three territories. This article focuses on the largest province – Ontario, which has approximately 40 percent of the total population of Canada. According to the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA), Ontario (and Canada overall) is a high performing education system with below-average inequities for students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds and for immigrant students (OECD, 2015). During the period from 2003 until 2018, the government of Ontario, in partnership with stakeholders throughout the education system, embarked on a series of whole system reform strategies to improve educational outcomes across Ontario's almost 5,000 schools, which are administered through 72 school boards and four school authorities, serving approximately two million students. Two phases of the Ontario system change strategies during 2003 to 2018 are discussed – an initial focus on working in partnership with priority goals to improve student achievement during 2003 to 2013, followed by a shift to a new collaborative professionalism with a widening priority focus on equity and well-being during 2014 to 2018.

2 Partnership Working to Improve Student Achievement (2003–2013)

Elected in 2003, a new government committed to making education their top priority. In the preceding years, the previous government had implemented substantial cuts to education funding and introduced mandatory testing for teachers linked to whether their official teacher certification would continue or not. There were hostile relationships between the government and the education profession, including extensive teacher strikes. Hence, the new government, led by a different political party, committed to establishing “peace and stability” in the education sector, including cancelling the controversial teacher tests and re-allocating the funding to teacher unions to use for professional learning opportunities.

Partnership working between the government, the education sector, and related stakeholders was established as the main approach to policy development and implementation. A Partnership Table was formally created, chaired by the Minister of Education and involving representatives of all relevant education stakeholder groups. The Ministry of Education described the purpose of the Partnership Table as:

“a practical forum designed to get broad and diverse insights from the education sector on provincial education policy early in the government's policy development process [...] Collaboration is needed to bring real, positive change to the education system and to achieve better results for students. Participants have the opportunity to contribute to the common public interest in publicly

funded education. In return, they agree to work toward consensus and, wherever possible, to raise issues first at the Table for all to examine and help address collectively” (quoted in Campbell et al., 2017, p. 105).

As well as the overarching Partnership Table, working groups and advisory groups were established by the Ministry to include key stakeholders for main education policy and strategy priorities and also to bring together representatives for specific communities, for example the *Minister’s Student Advisory Council* (MSAC) was composed of school-age students who met regularly directly with the Minister of Education.

To provide a policy development example, a Working Table on Teacher Development was established in 2005 and involved membership from the Ministry of Education and from all teacher unions. In contrast to the previous government’s top down mandating of teacher policies, working together over a decade, the Working Table on Teacher Development co-developed a suite of new policies, including: a Building Futures program to provide an overview of Ontario education policies to trainee teachers; the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) for teachers in their first two years of a permanent contract; an Annual Learning Plan (ALP) and a linked Teacher Performance Appraisal process; and the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) for experienced teachers. By working collaboratively, both the Ministry and the teacher unions were able to co-develop and agree thorough reforms of teacher development policies.

Reflecting on the Working Table on Teacher Development and other partnership forums, a government official commented:

“[...] it wasn’t just a change in policy, but it was also change in how we do policy. This suite of programs was developed over a ten-year period and each program grew out of the work that we did collaboratively with our stakeholders. This work was done through a working table, which included the Teacher Federations, the Ontario College of Teachers, parent groups, student groups, and school boards all around the table working out these programs” (quoted in Campbell et al., 2017, p. 120).

Stakeholders also commented positively about the commitment to partnership working. For example, when asked about the Partnership Table and related working tables, a teacher union employee commented:

“[...] the fact that we are at the table with the Ministry regularly and with all the stakeholders, I think really says that we are valued for the work that we do. We may not always agree, but we can usually come up with some form of consensus or an agreement around how things might roll out. So I think that we are regarded as professionals [...] that makes a big difference. We are trusted with our professional development of our teachers [...] We are trusted to make

those professional judgements [...] Our voices even on things like curriculum changes, when new curriculum is being developed and rolled out, we are usually at the table and are allowed to voice our opinions and sometimes we are standing up pounding our chests and other times we are saying this is great. So to be able to have that freedom and ability to be trusted [...] makes a huge difference in teacher autonomy and self-worth” (quoted in Campbell et al., 2017, p. 106).

As indicated, the partnership mechanisms did not mean that everyone agreed all the time, but there was appreciation and respect for bringing stakeholders and the Ministry together to work collaboratively.

During this period, a substantial range of education policies were developed and implemented linked to three priority goals:

- 1) increased student achievement;
- 2) reduced gaps in student achievement;
- 3) increased public confidence in publicly funded education.

Two priority strategies were announced and implemented – a Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for elementary schools and a Student Success strategy for secondary schools (Campbell, 2020a; Glaze & Campbell, 2007; Zegarac & Franz, 2007). I have summarized the approach to whole system reform taken by Ontario during this time as involving:

- focus in *elementary school* strategy on transforming professional capacity to improve classroom teaching and learning;
- focus in *secondary/high school* strategy on transforming programs, pathways and support for students to succeed in high school, transition to post-secondary education and career.

K-12 focus on:

- whole system supports for all schools combined with intervention partnerships with schools at different performance levels;
- targeted supports and interventions for students and schools struggling to improve;
- support for professional collaboration, teams and collective capacity within schools and districts with focus on evidence about student learning;
- provision of a range of professional learning, development and resources for specific education priority areas and to foster teaching quality and leadership;
- facilitation of networks to share and support improved practices across schools and districts;

- development of culture, value and practice of using research, evaluation and data to inform, monitor and adapt strategies and practices;
- substantial resources and infrastructure for system capacity;
- creating an enabling policy environment and partnerships with the profession, stakeholders and public (Campbell, 2015, pp. 80–81).

Over a decade, significant improvements in educational outcomes were achieved. The education reform approach had included a focus on a small number of priority goals with linked strategies and resources, partnership working, attention to capacity building for educators, and use of evidence to monitor implementation and inform revisions to the strategies. However, after almost a decade of reform, there was also political, professional and public concern – and some fatigue – that there was a need for some more substantive changes in direction, including a need to revisit how the Ministry worked with the education profession, and concerns about student equity and well-being. In addition, following three successive electoral victories (2003, 2007, 2011), Dalton McGuinty – who was referred to as the “Education Premier” – stepped down as leader of the government in 2013 and was replaced as leader and Premier of Ontario by Kathleen Wynne – a former Minister of Education and school board trustee with deep insight into the education system. The stage was set for some changes in policy direction.

3 Collaborative Professionalism and Priorities for Equity and Well-Being (2014–2018)

An important part of the changing approach to education system reform in Ontario was concern about working relationships between the Ministry and the education sector. As discussed above, a Partnership Table and a range of working tables and advisory groups had been established and were considered to be positive by those involved. However, over time, education stakeholders raised concerns that the approach to partnership working had shifted from genuine co-creation and co-development from the outset of policy ideas to becoming a process where stakeholders were brought in at a later stage in the policy development with consultation meetings that were about information sharing pre- and/or during implementation. There were also concerns about ensuring respectful partnership working throughout the education system, including relationships between formal leaders in school boards and schools, and education staff. During collective bargaining concerning education workers’ contracts, the need to develop new ways of working between management and employees was identified, as well as issues of initiative overload and increased workload. New contract agreements involving the Ministry, school boards, and education unions included a clause to address working relationship matters and initiative overload.

Consequently, the Ministry of Education established an Initiatives Table with all stakeholder members with the goal of bringing new initiatives to that table for discussion, co-development and agreement (or not) prior to any further initiatives being developed and implemented. Through the Initiatives Table, a process to co-develop principles for ways of working was undertaken over several months. The resulting Policy and Program Memorandum (PPM 159) established the concept of “Collaborative Professionalism”, which was defined as: it

- “• values all voices and is consistent with our shared responsibility to transform culture and provide equitable access to learning for all;
- takes place in and fosters a trusting environment that promotes professional learning;
- involves sharing ideas to achieve a common vision of learning, development and success for all;
- supports and recognizes formal and informal leadership and learning;
- includes opportunities for collaboration at provincial, district and school levels;
- leverages exemplary practices through the communication and sharing of ideas to achieve a common vision” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 2).

In practice, collaborative professionalism was specified as including:

- “• professional learning that supports and enables the conditions for student achievement and student and staff well-being;
- recognition of and building on the strengths of all individuals to support professional growth;
- leadership practices that value the expertise and inclusion of all voices, perspectives and roles;
- a commitment to building professional capacity at all levels;
- professional practice informed by research, evidence and knowledge arising from the strengths, needs and interests of students and education professionals;
- a trusting environment where school, school board, union leaders and the ministry create the necessary conditions, including consideration of time and resources, that enable teams to learn with, and from, each other;
- an environment that can enhance and influence professional judgement, as defined in *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools*, in supporting effective assessment, instruction, evaluation and reporting of student achievement;
- an understanding that collaborative professionalism is not intended to increase workload” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a, pp. 2–3; emphasis in original).

Through Collaborative Professionalism, the intent was to engage all education professionals in a shared vision and common purpose to develop a coherent system-wide

approach to educational change using evidence and professional expertise to inform developments and to shift away from multiple discrete initiatives that were being experienced as top-down from government to the education sector.

Alongside shifts in working relationships for the education sector, this period also involved revisions to Ontario's education priorities. Shortly after the 2013 election, the new Premier of Ontario with a new Minister of Education initiated a large-scale public consultation to co-develop a renewed vision for Ontario education. The resulting vision, *Achieving Excellence*, was launched in 2014 with four priority goals:

- “• **Achieving Excellence:** Children and students of all ages will achieve high levels of academic performance, acquire valuable skills and demonstrate good citizenship. Educators will be supported in learning continuously and will be recognized as among the best in the world.
- **Ensuring Equity:** All children and students will be inspired to reach their full potential, with access to rich learning experiences that begin at birth and continue into adulthood.
- **Promoting Well-Being:** All children and students will develop enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills to make positive choices.
- **Enhancing Public Confidence:** Ontarians will continue to have confidence in a publicly funded education system that helps develop new generations of confident, capable and caring citizens” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

While the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and Student Success Strategy continued to be refined to support improved student achievement and high school graduation, two major new priorities were student well-being and equity. In 2016, an extensive province-wide consultation was conducted to gather views, ideas, and suggestions for the proposed student well-being strategy. The resulting strategy had four components: first, a focus on positive mental health for all students; second, a Safe and Accepting Schools policy “to provide safe, inclusive and accepting learning environments” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 1), including prevention of bullying; third, a Healthy Schools policy with a focus on supporting students to have healthy, active habits; and, fourth, a priority focus on equity and inclusive education. A new Equity Action Plan was announced in 2017 with a further four components: first, a focus on school and classroom practices, including “culturally relevant and inclusive teaching and curriculum, reforming Grade 9 pathways, collection and analyses of suspensions, expulsions, and exclusions data, and approaches to engage parents” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 19); second, attention to leadership, governance and human resources practices was also part of the plan, including equity-based training for educators and goals to increase diversity in recruitment and promotion decisions; third, improving data collection and reporting procedures including voluntary identity-based student data; and, fourth, a commitment to organizational cultural

change within the Ministry of Education, including attention to training and hiring decisions. In combination, the well-being strategy and the equity action plan broadened the previous education agenda.

In many ways, the shift in approach from 2014 onwards was not a full break from the initial focus on partnership working, capacity building, and use of evidence to support student achievement and success. However, as has been raised as a criticism of Whole System Reform, a prolonged focus on narrow measurable performance targets can result in (unintended) consequences for not supporting a broad range of student outcomes and also for not enabling professional judgement and distributed leadership in the day-to-day work of educators (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). At the same time, broadening the scope of reforms can also bring about challenges of initiative overload and workload intensification for educators requiring careful balance of priorities to attend to both students' needs and educators' professional lives.

Conclusions

The concept of Whole System Reform developed from the late 1990s onwards as entire education systems attempted to improve educational outcomes for students (Fullan, 2009, 2010, 2018). In Ontario, both the 'how' and 'what' of Whole System Reform have changed over time. In the first phase of education system reform (2003–2013), there was a tight focus on priority goals with linked measures of improvement combined with a commitment to partnership working throughout the education system. Improvements in the majority of targeted outcomes did occur, for example as measured in provincial assessments by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (see Table 1). However, the initial pace and scale of change became challenging to sustain over a long time. There were concerns about unintended consequences for educators' work, and for students' well-being and equity. There was also a perception that partnership working was not as strong as it had previously been and that initiatives were coming too fast and too top-down. In re-committing to appropriate partnership between the government and education stakeholders, and collaboration locally within the education system, an Initiative Table brought everyone back together to co-create the plan going forward for ways of working and for design and roll out of initiatives. A clear lesson is that genuine collaboration between and among governments, education partners, and relevant stakeholders is required to co-develop joint priorities, shared understanding, and appropriate strategies and practices through respectful partnership working that values all involved.

Tab. 1: Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) Results for Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Provincial Standard in Annual Provincial Assessments

EQAO Assessment	2003 Provincial Results	2018 Provincial Results	Percentage Point Change Comparing 2018 to 2003
Grade 3 Reading	50 %	75 %	+25
Grade 3 Writing	55 %	72 %	+17
Grade 3 Math	57 %	61 %	+4
Grade 6 Reading	56 %	82 %	+26
Grade 6 Writing	54 %	80 %	+26
Grade 6 Mathematics	53 %	49 %	-4
Grade 9 Mathematics (Academic)	66 %	84 %	+18
Grade 9 Mathematics (Applied)	21 %	45 %	+24
Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (1 st time pass)	77 %	79 %	+2

Note: Provincial Standard is achieving 70 percent or higher in test.

Source: EQAO (<https://www.eqao.com/en>)

Another lesson from Ontario is that respectful partnership working is fragile and requires the dedicated commitment and support of all involved to cultivate and sustain positive relationships. In 2018, following another election, a different political party gained power as a majority government. This new government has implemented cuts in education funding and engaged in a protracted collective bargaining process resulting in disputes and strikes by teachers and support workers in 2019. These conflicts persisted into 2020. However, following the announcement of the global pandemic in March 2020, and the rapid closure of schools in Ontario, the education professional associations agreed to focus on the immediate need to support students and the education professional associations shift to emergency response remote learning. During the pandemic, decisions have been made by the government, largely without substantial consultation with the education sector. Educators and support staff are leading the day-to-day work to ensure health and safety for students and to provide high-quality continued learning, but they do not feel they are being engaged with or listened to by policy-makers. International evidence is now clear that it is education systems where there has been genuine partnership between government, health experts, and education stakeholders that have navigated through changing schooling and learning approaches more smoothly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Campbell, 2020b; Campbell, Baumann, Kidder, Amato & Daniel, 2020). Similarly, at the local

level, professional collaboration and professional networks have become even more important in supporting educators to innovate, change and sustain teaching and learning in these challenging times.

As I have expressed previously, the purpose of education is the betterment of humanity (Campbell, 2018). This emphasis on humanity needs to include valuing, supporting and developing people, and needs to apply to the people who work in education as well as the students they serve (Campbell, 2020c). Genuine partnership working between governments and education systems, and beneficial collaboration within and among the education sector and stakeholders, are essential. This is even more true now as we respond to the current global pandemic and move forward from this crisis to longer-term improvement of the education system.

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