Editorial:

Teachers as Fountainheads of Curriculum Making: Challenges and Possibilities

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Decades ago, Joseph Schwab (1983) was particularly concerned with the problematic implementation of large-scale curriculum, and challenged the disproportionate force of policy makers in the development of subject matter that was then imposed on teachers and learners. Schwab argued that teachers should play a significant role in curricular decision-making due to their role as implementers of curriculum and their understanding of the learners in their classrooms. Schwab encouraged curricular decisions based on four commonplaces of: teacher, learner, subject matter, and milieu.

Clandinin and Connelly, building on Schwab’s ideas, championed teachers as curriculum makers who actively work alongside students (Craig, 2011). They wrote that “teachers and students live out a curriculum [in which] an account of teachers’ and students’ lives over time is the curriculum, although intentionality, objectives, and curriculum materials do play a part (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p.365). For them, Craig continues, it is a “question of teacher knowledge” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) and teachers should be empowered to be curriculum makers to enhance the learning of students.

This volume of Brock Education explores various dimensions of curriculum, particularly the fountainhead roles teachers can play in improving the lives of learners. The authors of the five articles, while hopeful, point to the many challenges and pressures facing teachers as curriculum makers.

In “Chinese immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s school education: High interest but low action,” Lan Zhong and George Zhou explore an important dimension of the educational milieu: the involvement of Chinese immigrant parents in schools. Demographics, language, culture and social dynamics are highlighted in a study that involved 12 Chinese immigrant couples whose children attended elementary schools. As the title suggests, Chinese immigrants seem highly involved in their children’s schooling as it regards extra work and after school academic programs but less involved in co-curricular school-based activities. Reasons include: lack of time, language barriers and, unfamiliarity with the Canadian education system. The authors, who express concern about the ‘high interest but low action’ output of Chinese immigrant parents in this study, conclude that self-efficacy was a limitation for parents and that
culture plays a large part in this. This article is very useful as it offers insights into the present day realities of the parents’ role as well as the school’s role as it applies to parental school-based involvement in a diverse society. Teachers and policy makers need to better understand the dynamics within various school communities in order to make curricular decisions that serve students from diverse backgrounds.

In “Literacy text selections in secondary school classrooms: Exploring the practices of English teachers as agents of change,” Susan M. Holloway and Christopher J. Greig focus on the commonplace of subject matter. While secondary school English teachers in Ontario are given great latitude in the selection of literary works, the authors found that they often defaulted to status quo choices in order to avoid controversy. The authors draw attention to teachers acting as curriculum implementers—isolated and self-censoring—rather than as curriculum makers choosing subject matter that engages their students. They challenge teachers and policy-makers to create spaces in which teachers can feel empowered to use their professional knowledge to address the needs of students in a contemporary society.

In Lauren Segedin’s article, “The role of teacher empowerment and teacher accountability in school-university partnerships and action research,” the interplay between accountability and empowerment is observed more closely. Segedin puzzles over the ways in which a top-down project that encouraged action research in schools is both beneficial and problematic. In this project, secondary and elementary school teams of 36 teachers were led by a professor on ‘how to do’ action research on such topics as: literacy, student success, collaborative teacher lesson study, and character development. School district personnel acted as liaison persons to support the action research projects in eight schools. Segedin found that such projects offer teachers significant professional growth. At the same time, she found problematic the ways in which such projects can reduce teacher autonomy by holding them accountable to various stakeholders. This article is noteworthy for its currency on issues of school improvement and reform as they relate to teacher autonomy and decision making. It is not a simple answer but, as Segedin suggests, a complexity of issues that drive to the heart of what it means to be empowered as a curriculum maker in an era of accountability.

In “Embracing advocacy: How visible minority and dominant group beginning teachers take up issues of equity,” Naomi Norquay and Marian Robertson-Baghel report on a four-year research project that followed graduates of a teacher education program from teacher certification through their first three years of teaching. Their inquiry into participants’ narratives about advocacy efforts in both pre-service practicum placements and work as probationary teachers challenges the perception that the challenges of entering the profession discourage beginning teachers from engaging as change agents in equity work. The four graduates of a preservice teacher education program with an equity focus took significant steps towards creating equitable learning for marginalized students from the beginning of their careers. Unfortunately, they sometimes faced challenges due to inadequate support for such work in their schools. The authors argue that teacher education programs should be spaces in which new teachers can learn to build alliances and advocate for equity and justice in schools.

Arlene Grierson, Maria Cantalini-Williams, Taunya Wideman-Johnston, and Stephan Tedesco, in “Building scaffolds in the field: The benefits and challenges of teacher candidate peer mentorship,” explore how teacher candidates in a concurrent four year program mentored
novice first year concurrent education teacher candidates in their field placements. This innovative mentorship program was longitudinally researched and reports on how a collaborative inquiry-based learning model can benefit a reciprocal and relational mode of learning through practice and theory. Teacher candidates’ perceptions led to further insights on school board partnerships and the sustainability model for such supports. This alternative model for the teacher education practicum shows promise as a means of building strong theory-practice links and empowering teachers to work collaboratively as curriculum-makers.

This collection of articles drew our attention to the complexities faced by teachers in schools. As Craig (2011) suggests:

The ever-widening dissonance between teachers’ personal practical knowledge and others’ prescriptions has served to increase the pitch of the tensions, further contributing to the “contested classroom space” (Craig, 2009) and increasing the volatility of a globally shifting teacher education landscape (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009).

Understanding the tensions in the contested spaces of classrooms and schools is critical for teachers advocating for their students, as well as for teacher educators and policy-makers who seek to support teachers as curriculum makers and agents of change.

**References**


Chinese Immigrant Parents’ Involvement in Their Children’s School Education: High Interest but Low Action

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**Abstract**

Using interview as the primary data collection method, this qualitative study examined how Chinese immigrant parents are involved in their children’s school education and what factors shape the formats of their involvement. Twelve Chinese immigrant families participated in this study. Data analysis reveals that Chinese parents got involved in their children’s school education regardless of personal experiences. They expressed beliefs that parental involvement is beneficial to both the school and children. However, generally speaking, participants did not go to their children’s school without teachers’ invitation. Language barrier, lack of time and energy, and unfamiliarity with the Canadian school culture were stated as the main reasons that contributed to participants’ limited involvement in school activities. Particularly, new immigrants often feel intimidated to talk to teachers since they do not know what they can say and what not given their unfamiliarity with the Canadian school culture.

**Keywords:** School involvement, Chinese immigrant parents, culture

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Introduction

Over the last three decades, researchers have conducted studies of the impacts of parental involvement in children’s education (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Epstein, 1995; Taylor & Lopez, 2005; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). These studies have documented that effective parental involvement leads to students earning higher grades and test scores (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007), reducing the achievement gap between high and low performing students (Lee & Bowen, 2006), and increasing positive behaviour and emotional development of children (Sheldon & Epstein, 2001; Taub, 2008). Parents’ socio-demographic factors such as family income, occupational status, educational level, and relationships influence the ways they get involved in their children’s education (Coleman, 1998; Entwisle & Alexander, 1995; Perna, 2004). Among the array of parental involvement activities, some have high influences on students’ learning achievements, motivation, or school engagement, while the others has low impacts (Desforges, & Abouchaar, 2003; Ho & Willms,1996). Particularly, the type of parental involvement and the context of involvement can generate different impacts on students’ school achievement and behaviours (Jeynes, 2005a; McNeal, 1999; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992).

Within the past two decades, there has been a rapid growth of Chinese immigration in Canada. For example, from 2001 to 2006, there were over 466,940 Chinese changed their home residence from China to Canada. Chinese have become the second largest immigrant population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). Due to the Canadian immigrant policy, most recent Chinese immigrants were highly educated professionals and financially independent before they moved to Canada (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006). The study of how Chinese immigrant parents get involved in their children’s education in Canada becomes an important and timely research topic.

Research has suggested that parents from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds may view and interpret the meaning of parental school involvement differently (Jeynes, 2005b; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Mau, 1997). For instance, some cultures view it as rude for a parent to intrude into the life of the school and the parents from these cultures prefer to get involved in their children’s education at home (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998). In contrast, parents from other cultures may spend much time in their children’s school because their cultures encourage establishing a closer parent-school relationship (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Chinese usually see education as the most important means to acquire personal advancement, high social status, wealth, respect, etc. Particularly, they place great emphasis on academic achievement as a means to achieve such social mobility (Dyson, 2001; Li, 2001; Zhou, 2000). This value about education is carried into their new places of residence. They do not only actively re-educate themselves, but also hold high expectations of their children’s education. Kao (1995) indicates that Asian parents promote high levels of educational attainment for their children to compensate for the anticipated discrimination in the job market.

With high expectations of their children’s education, Chinese immigrants often get actively involved in their children’s schooling. It is well known that Chinese parents assign extra homework to their children and register them in many after-school programs (Li, 2001; Louie, 2001; Siu, 1994). However, less is known about how they are involved in the school-based activities. Studies of Latin American immigrants’ education involvement have shown that immigrant parents often get less involved in school-based activities and such less school involvement could be mistaken as lack of interest in their children’s academic work (Commins, 1992). We assume that this finding is applicable to Chinese immigrants as well, given some of
the common challenges shared by all immigrants, such as language inefficiency and cultural conflicts.

Over the last few years, we have been conducting a comprehensive study to examine how Chinese immigrant parents get involved in their children’s education, home-based and school based. The demographic, social, language and cultural factors were explored for an understanding of how these factors shape the ways of Chinese immigrant parents’ involvement. This paper only reports the findings regarding their school-based involvement. Findings are believed to be beneficial for the school administrators and teachers to develop better communication with immigrant parents.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study employs the sociocultural theory as its theoretical framework. Sociocultural theorists argue that human development is essentially social, deriving from human social relations and situated in interpersonal, socio-historical as well as sociocultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002; Wertsch & Kanner, 1992). A key feature of the sociocultural approach is an examination of human development that is based on not only the qualities that reside within an individual, but also the social interactions in broader social and cultural contexts.

Sociocultural contexts affect human development at an interpersonal level through face-to-face interactions and at a sociocultural level through participation in cultural activities. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) state that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated with regard to their historical contexts. Also, different social and cultural contexts create and reflect different outcomes in terms of human behaviour (Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch & Kanner, 1992).

This study explores the ways and perspectives of Chinese immigrants’ parental involvement in their children’s school education in Canada. Although the focus of study is not on the topic of human development from young age to adult, the process of immigrants’ adaption from one culture to another is assumed to share a similar process of growth. From a sociocultural perspective, this study involves examining parents’ perspectives and behaviours of school involvement in their immediate environment and their interaction with the larger environment as well.

Sociocultural theorists examine what kind of social practices provide the proper context for the development of the human mind and how human beings construct contexts (Li, 2001). The sociocultural theory is helpful in better understanding how Chinese immigrant parents construct their parental practices based on their previous experiences, original cultural values, a new cultural context, as well as how they pass on their cultural values through parenting.

Modifying the original model of parental involvement proposed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995 & 1997), Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) portray parental involvement in two terms: school-based and home-based. They explain parents’ involvement decisions from three psychological aspects: (a) parents’ motivational beliefs, (b) parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others, and (c) parents’ perceived life context. Parents’ motivational beliefs are defined as their self-constructed role and self-efficacy for getting involved in their children’s education. Parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others entail their perceptions of the general invitation for involvement from the school and the specific invitation from the teacher and children. Parents’ perceived life
context refers to their beliefs about whether they have the time, energy, skills and knowledge to get involved in children’s education.

Walker et al.’s model was developed largely from the studies of mainstream parents. Compared with these parents, immigrant parents have a unique social and cultural context. Chinese parents face various challenges due to the discontinuity they experienced in multiple areas, including language, cultural values, job availability, and different social and education systems. Their original cultural values, education backgrounds, financial resources, ability to cope with the challenges will exert influence on any one of the three psychological constructs and consequently impact their involvement in children’s education. Past studies have actually provided some evidence for this impact (Jeynes, 2003; Li, 2005; Siu, 1994; Sputa & Paulson, 1995). Regardless of socioeconomic level, Chinese American parents are more likely than European parents to spend time helping their children in their homes (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Li (2005) and Siu (1994) pointed out that Asian immigrants tend to be more involved in their children’s education outside school than in school.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the city of Windsor, Ontario, which is the fourth most ethnoculturally diverse city in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). With a relatively mild winter, the opportunities to commute to the United States, low costs of living, and the existence of a large Chinese community, Windsor has attracted an increasing number of Chinese immigrants. Since Chinese children have appeared on almost all school campuses in Windsor, the region becomes a significant location for the studies of Chinese parents’ school involvement.

The nature of this study is qualitative, using interview as the main data collection method. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define the qualitative research as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 17). Qualitative research is interested in the process and meaning of experience rather than outcome (Creswell, 2007). It attends to the rich descriptions that emerge from a participant’s cultural context and helps the researchers understand people and sociocultural contexts within which they live (Creswell, 2008). It also benefits researchers to gather in-depth data by asking questions and listening to participants’ descriptions in their own language and on their own terms in an authentic world (Patton, 2002).

Participants

Twelve Chinese immigrant couples participated in this study. They were selected on a voluntary basis. All participants are from mainland China and had at least one child attending elementary schools when the study took place. The rationale for selecting participants from Mainland China is because it has taken over Hong Kong and Taiwan as the largest single source of Chinese immigrants to Canada since 1997, and this trend has continued to today (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2002). The major reason we chose parents of elementary school age children was because research indicates that those at the high school level tend to get less involved in their children’s schooling or are not found to be as participatory (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Grotnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Simon, 2004). In addition, we selected participants from those Chinese couples who have at least one work income and intentionally excluded those families with no work income. The families without work income...
normally come to Canada with financial resources, which pull their adaptation process off the main track of most Chinese immigrants’ acculturation.

Data Collection

Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated that the researcher using qualitative interviewing is “not looking for principles that are true all the time and in all conditions, like laws of physics; rather the goal is understanding of specific circumstances how and why things actually happen in a complex world” (p. 38). Typically, the researcher develops a set of related questions geared toward discovering what people behave, think and feel, how they account for their experiences and actions, and what opportunities and obstacles they face (Berg, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Semi-structured interview was used to collect data in this study. A set of open-ended questions were developed to collect self-reported information about participants’ experiences with, perspectives of, and expectations about their involvement in children’s school education. Particularly, the challenges and confusions they have in their attempt to get involvement in school education were explored. In addition, demographic data were collected as well. This semi-structured interview provides enough room for participants to interpret questions asked and express their general views or opinions in more detail, and meanwhile allows the researchers to maintain some control over the flow of the topics (Berg, 2007).

Participants were interviewed in pairs. In other words, both parents from one family were interviewed together. Interview locations were chosen based on the convenience and comfort of the participants. Participants were informed that they could choose to be interviewed either in English or Mandarin. All participants chose Mandarin since it is the mother tongue of the participants and researchers. This assured an effective and accurate communication between the researchers and participants.

Most interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded. However, two couples felt uncomfortable to have their voices recorded. Each of their interviews took about two hours so that the researchers had time to note down their responses. Primary data analysis began “immediately after completing the first interview” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 77) so that the following interviews could be informed by what was learned from previous ones regarding what questions were asked and in what ways they were asked. The themes in early interviews could be clarified with more probing in later interviews.

Field notes were regularly taken during the research process to record the details about interviewees, interview time and location. Participants’ gestures and specific expressions that the tape recorders could not catch were noted down. These field notes served as a reminder for the researchers to recall what happened in the interview when transcribing and analyzing the interview recordings. Some information revealed from informal dialogues before or after the interview was recorded in field notes as well, which provides additional data beyond the tape recording.

Data Analysis

After each interview, the researchers listened and transcribed the recording if time permitted. Follow up phone calls were made within one week of the completion of the face-to-face interview to check if participants had any information they wanted to add or to ask them to
elaborate on some points they talked about during the interview. The interview notes of those two non-recorded interviews were compiled and sent to the participants to confirm the accuracy.

The final data analysis took a common procedure suggested by Creswell (2008). First, the researchers read the twelve interview manuscripts in their entirety several times to obtain a general sense of the data. Each manuscript was coded by marking the statements relevant to the study topic and grouping these statements in preliminary ways. Each statement was treated equally in this phase of the data analysis. Second, statements which were overlapping, repetitive, and vague were eliminated. The statements that remained were then re-coded as the invariant constituents. Third, the invariant constituents were clustered into thematic labels. In the process of data coding, a constant comparative analysis was used (Schwantdt, 2001). It involved taking one piece of data and comparing it with all others that might be similar or different in order to develop assumptions about the possible relationships among various pieces of data.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed in Mandarin. Certain parts of transcripts were translated into English later when these were used for quotations. The data analysis was cross checked by at least two researchers who are proficient in both English and Mandarin.

Findings

Participants’ Demographics

Table 1 presents the background information of the twelve participating families at the time of data collection. It includes parents’ education, occupation in China and Canada, years of residence in Canada, and their children’s information. Six of the twelve families had one child and the other six had two children. For the families with one child, one family had a son and five a daughter. Among the six families with two children, four families had one son and one daughter and two families had two sons. The majority of the families were highly educated professionals. Except for one mother who had a college diploma, the rest of the parents had received university degrees before they came to Canada. At the time of data collection, four parents had obtained a doctoral degree, eight a master’s degree, and two a bachelor degree from Canadian universities. One father was going to finish his master’s degree and two mothers a bachelor degree from Canadian universities. Seven parents did not pursue a Canadian degree. Seven families had resided in Canada for more than ten years and five families less than five years. For the convenience of reporting, we use FF1 referring to the father from family one, and MF1 the mother from family one. Such abbreviation goes through the 12 families.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Family 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Ph.D. *</td>
<td>Science Researcher</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineer</td>
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<td>Mother</td>
<td>B.Sc.</td>
<td>System Engineer</td>
<td>Home-maker</td>
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<td>Son</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
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<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
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Brock Education, 20(2), 4-24
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<tr>
<th>Family</th>
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<th>Mother Education</th>
<th>Son Education</th>
<th>Children’s Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B.Sc. Engineer &amp; Manager</td>
<td>B.Sc. (finishing) Accountant</td>
<td>Labour worker</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>M.D. Software engineer</td>
<td>B.Sc. (finishing) Software engineer</td>
<td>Technician</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Ph.D. Professor</td>
<td>M.D. (finishing) Professor</td>
<td>Electrical engineer</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mechanical engineer</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>College diploma Technician</td>
<td>Labour worker</td>
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<td>M.D. (finishing) Science researcher</td>
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<td>M.D. Medical doctor</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
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<td>Massage therapist</td>
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<td>M.D. Journalist</td>
<td>Computer Engineer</td>
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<td>Home-maker</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>B.Sc. Medical Doctor</td>
<td>Computer Engineer</td>
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<td>B.A. Interpreter</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
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<tr>
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<td>B.Sc. Computer Engineer</td>
<td>B.Sc. (finishing) Librarian</td>
<td>Mechanist</td>
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<td>Learning Commons Specialist</td>
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School-based Involvement

Responding to the question about their perspectives on school involvement, all participants expressed a belief that school involvement is positively associated with their children’s educational development. They listed the following potential benefits of parental involvement: (1) parents get information about their children’s academic performance and behaviours at school; (2) parents and teachers know the expectations of each other; (3) parents have a chance to meet other parents and share experience in educating their children. By gaining this information, they can provide better help to their children. For instance, when asked about the connection between parental involvement in school activities and their child’s development, MF12 said, “Through attending school activities, we know our child’s school performance and know what is going on in the school. Thus, we can offer better help for our child’s development.” MF9 stated, “I like to talk with other parents when I meet them in school. I talk to them about how they educate their children. I also get more information about the school by talking with them.” The types of school involvement participants reported included parent-teacher conference, fundraising, attending school performances, volunteering, and sitting on the parent council.

Parent-teacher conference. All participants reported that they attended parent-teacher meetings regardless of whether or not language was a barrier. MF5 stated that her English was not good, but she still attended the conference with her husband: “Although my English in not good, I like to go, sitting beside my husband. I want to know all the information about my daughter instead of staying home waiting for a report from my husband.” Some time, both parents went to the meeting together. Other times, only one parent had time to go to the meeting. For instance, MF9 said, “My husband and I tried to arrange the time to attend the parent-teacher conference together. However, most of the time, I attend this conference on my own since my husband is too busy.”

The number one topic that parents often asked about during the parent-teacher conference was their children’s academic achievement. For instance, MF8 responded, “I asked about my daughter’s academic performances in school, her weaknesses and strengths in each subject. I asked for teachers’ suggestions about how I can assist her at home.” Similarly, MF9 said:

I asked the teacher about my daughter’ academic achievement such as whether she likes to ask questions in class, whether she is actively involved in group work, what kind of things I can do to help my daughter’s academic development at home, and so on.

The academic emphasis was particularly strong for recently arrived families (F2, F3, F5, F8, and F10). For instance, MF2 has been in Canada for 4 years. She remarked, “I always ask my
daughter’s academics. Academic is the most important thing for school children.” MF3 has been in Canada for 4 years. She said:

I asked the teacher about whether my daughter could catch up with her peers in academics, and whether she had any language difficulty in school. When we moved to Canada, she had finished the grade 3 in China. My English is not good, so I am concerned about my daughter’s language proficiency.

Besides academic achievement, parents who arrived in Canada earlier also asked about their children’s social and moral behaviours such as whether their children follow the school rules, respect teachers, and get along well with other students. For instance, MF4, who had resided in Canada for 15 years, said, “In addition to asking my son’s performance in academics, I also ask whether my son respects teachers, whether he follows school rules, and whether he is getting along with other children.” These parents were found to be more concerned of school events as well. For instance, family 1 arrived in Canada over thirteen years prior to the study. FF1 said:

We also want to know what and when school events are going to take place, such as children’s show, swimming competition, and fundraising. When I get this information, I can arrange time and try to attend these activities, or my wife can take part in these activities according to her availability.

Family 6 has been in Canada for 14 years. MF6 said:

I am not concerned much about my son’s academics because the teacher always tells me that my son is doing very well. He always gets A’s. Beside academics, I also want to know what is happening or what is going on in the school so that I can manage to positively get involved in these activities. As well, I can give my child some instructions.

**Fundraising.** Parents actively supported their children to participate in different types of fundraising activities. Some parents encouraged their children to sell chocolates in the community for their schools. Others cooked food at home and let their children sell it to get money for the school. MF8, a home-maker, said, “I learnt from other parents how to bake cookies. My daughter brought cookies I made to school and sold them to her schoolmates. Then, she gave the money to the school.” FF7 said, “Sometimes, my daughter brings home book orders. I usually buy some for my daughter [so that the school can get some money from my order]. ”

Parents believed that fundraising contributes to the school and would like to take part in these activities when they were able to. FF9 remarked, “The public schools in China do not ask parents to raise fund to support school projects. However, since my child’s school here expects and encourages parents and children to raise fund and [I believe] it is good for the school, we do our best to support this activity.”

Some parents stated that participation in fundraising activities does not only benefit the school but also benefits children’s social skills. For instance, FF3 expressed his view on fundraising:

_Brock Education, 20(2), 4-24_
To get involved in school fundraising does not only benefit the school, but also the child. To raise fund, children are some time required to sell chocolates. We drive her and stand far away to watch and guard her. I watch her knocking at the doors and communicated with people either our friends or strangers to sell the chocolate. My daughter is very shy. This activity helps her develop social skills.

Attending children’s school performance. The majority of parents, ten out of the twelve families, remarked that they usually attended their children’s school performances like school concerts and sport meetings. FF1 narrated his experience of attending a Christmas celebration: “My wife and I attended his Christmas performance last year. While my son was singing and dancing with his peers on the stage, we were so proud of him. I recorded his fabulous performance into a video.” MF9 said, “My husband and I would go together to attend my daughter’s shows in school. If my husband is too busy, I will go to the show myself.”

Parents remarked that to attend children’s performance is a way to express how much they care and support their children. They believed that children will have a sense of success when they know that their parents are present in their performance, as MF11 stated:

A child needs support and encouragement from parents. When my husband and I took part in my daughter’s performance, my daughter was very happy and excited. She even drew a picture, which depicted a mother and father watching their daughter’s show in school. This picture was put up on her classroom wall by the teacher.

Fieldtrips. In terms of fieldtrips, two mothers (MF1 and MF8) and one father (FF12), who were homemakers, stated that sometimes they assisted the school teacher to monitor students in fieldtrips. MF8 said, “I don’t work, so I go to field trips. I feel good that I can do something for the school.” MF1 perceived that her English proficiency was not good enough to communicate with native English speakers, but she would like to volunteer herself as a fieldtrip assistant if there were some Chinese children in a fieldtrip. FF12 remarked, “Voluntary work makes me have a good sense that I could contribute to the school.”

Parent council. Among the 12 families, only two mothers (MF4 and MF12) reported that they were members of parent council. In regards of her understanding of parent council, MF4 remarked:

The parent council aims to involve parents into a school’s decision-making process. Through the parent council, parents can voice their opinions about school issues and contribute to the on-going school plans and events... By being a parent council member and attending its monthly meeting, I get to know what the school is going to do and provide my opinions for many school issues. It also broadens my knowledge and understanding of the Canadian school culture, which will eventually help me take more appropriate ways to raise my child.

In regards to her reasons for participating in the parent council, MF12 stated:
My son is a little bit slow in learning. So I pay close attention to what is happening in school. As an immigrant parent, I have realized that Canadian school system is different from China. I hope the school and parents can better understand each other and I want my voice to be heard.

For the rest of ten families, four knew the function of parent council but never joined it, another four had heard about it but were not sure of its exact function, and two had never heard about it. The researchers explained the function of parent council to the parents who had no knowledge about it during the interviews. When being asked whether they wanted to join in this organization, these ten families provided a negative response. They believed that it was the school’s responsibility to make decisions on school issues and parents should just follow the school’s decision rather than voice their own opinions. In this regard, FF1 stated, “I trust the school. As a parent, we try our best to support the decision the school makes.” MF10 said:

We are not familiar with the Canadian school system. In China, schools do not ask parents to engage in school governance. It is the school’s responsibility to make decisions and tell us what to do. What parents should do is to follow school decisions and to help our children at home.

Limitations for School Involvement

Although all participants got involved in some types of school-based activities, they remarked that they usually did not do so if they were not invited by school teachers. They provided several reasons for limited school involvement: lack of time, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the Canadian school system, and different cultural values.

The lack of time was the most commonly cited reason. Apparently, school activities took place during weekdays when many Chinese parents either were at work or attended university classes. At the time of this study, FF8 just found a position after years of searching for a job. He said:

It is very difficult to find a job now…there is a lot of pressure at work. As a minority here, I have to work very hard and perform much better than mainstream people so that I can keep my job. I really do not have time [for school involvement].

Being a university student, MF2 said, “I am very busy with my university courses. There are many reading and writing assignments. I do not have enough time to attend school activities except for the parent-teacher conference.” As a labour worker, MF5 expressed a similar point:

I do labour work for 10 hours each day. When I return home, I am exhausted but unfortunately have to do housework. I really have no energy to attend my daughter’s school events. If I ask for a leave from my work, I will lose money. As a new immigrant family, seven or eight dollars are important to my family. I need the time to earn a living.

Language barrier is another reason that prevented some Chinese immigrant parents from getting involved in school-based activities. MF1, a home-maker, talked about her intention to
volunteer in school field trip: “I have time, but my English is not good. I would volunteer only when I knew there were some Chinese children attending the field trip. So, I can offer help in my mother tongue.” This holds especially true for the recently arrived parents. FF2 has been in Canada for 4 years. He said, “My English is not good. My wife talks with the teacher during the parent-teacher conference. Although her English is not very good either, she is a university student after all. She is better than me.” MF5 has been in Canada for 3 years. She explained:

My English is not good. I do not completely understand what the teacher talks about during the parent-teacher conference. So, I just listen to my husband talking with the teacher. If my husband cannot go for the parent-teacher conference, I do not think I would like to go.

The unfamiliarity with the Canadian school system was reported as additional reason that blocked participants getting involved in school-based activities. As FF5 remarked:

In China, parents are not required to physically participate as volunteers, or as fundraisers. What parents do is to accompany the child doing homework, provide supplementary exercises, and buy whatever benefits the child’s learning. In Canada, the school system is different. I don’t go to school that often. I am not sure what I should say and do, and what I shouldn’t. I am afraid that I might get into trouble by saying or doing some things incorrectly.

MF3 echoed the similar concerns: “I do not often get involved in school activities although I would like to. I am not familiar with the Canadian school culture. I do not know how to do it in a proper way.” MF4, who is one of the two mothers attending school parent council meetings, provided a good explanation about parents’ lack of involvement in parent council:

I do not see other Chinese immigrant parents attending parent council meeting. They are not aware of their rights. This may be influenced by Chinese culture. China is a highly hierarchical country. In China, someone above you makes the decision. At work, you obey the boss. In school, you obey the teacher. Growing up in such a culture, Chinese parents become used to following the rules but not providing suggestions or expressing opinions.

Some parents (F2, F7, and F10) maintained that they trust teachers would take care of their children well so that they wouldn’t go to school if they were not invited. FF2 expressed, “I seldom go to school to talk with teachers without invitation. We Chinese highly respect and trust the teacher. I believe the teacher would take care of my daughter very well.” Parents (F7 and F10) also expressed that it was unnecessary to go to school often if their child was good at academics. FF10 commented:

We do not think we need to go to school that often. My daughter’s average score is over 90. She is doing very well in reading and math. You know, in China, only when a child makes trouble or is not good at academics, the teacher asks the parents to visit the school.
Discussion

All participating parents in this study got involved in some kinds of school-based activities. These activities included parent-teacher conferences, school fundraising, and attendance of children’s school performances. A few participants who were home makers sometimes volunteered for school fieldtrips. Two participants joined parent councils.

Participants acknowledged the importance of parental school involvement. They believed that their involvement in school activities would keep them updated about their children’s school performance, provide them opportunity to learn about the school and teachers’ requirements, and inform their ways of parenting at home. Although parents are not expected to participate in school fundraising activities nor volunteer in fieldtrips in China, some participants made an effort to take part in these school activities to familiar themselves with the Canadian school system as best as they can.

Chinese people highly value education since education is seen as a means for social mobility in the history and present of China (Li, 2001). This viewpoint of education does not go away after they move to Canada. This cultural inertia is actually reinforced and amplified by their immigrant life experience. As Table 1 indicates, a majority of participants had to receive re-education in Canadian post-secondary institutions to find a job in spite of their education background and work experiences in China. For example, the couple of Family 3 both have a bachelor’s degree in science and were software engineers in China before moving to Canada. After spending one year but failing to find a job in Canada, the husband had to obtain a Master’s degree in computer science from a Canadian university. At the time of being interviewed, he had just been offered a job as a computer technician in a private company. His wife was still a nursing student. Such experience may lead participants to believe that education is the best way to overcome barriers and compensate for anticipated discrimination in the job market as Kao (1995) reposted. Therefore, they usually have high expectations of their children’s education. This explains why all participants reported that children’s academic performance was the greatest concern at the teacher-parent conference.

Past studies (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006; Epstein, 1994; Fuligni, 1995; Muller, 1995) have documented that some mainstream parents tend to get actively involved in school activities even without schoolteachers’ invitation. They like to take part in school decision-making processes, governance, and advocacy. In a contrast, this study indicates that most Chinese participants do not actively get involved in school activities if they do not receive invitation from the school or teachers. The majority of participants reported no interest and action in getting involved in school decision-making processes and governance. This lack of involvement can find an explanation from the following aspects: socioeconomic status, language barrier, and cultural differences.

Socioeconomic Status

Studies have identified a correlation between parents’ Socioeconomic Status (SES) and their involvement (Benson & Martin, 2003; Inaba et al., 2005; Shumow & Harris, 2000). For instance, in a study exploring the correlation between parents’ school involvement and their work status and family income, Benson and Martin (2003) found that parents holding low SES participate less in the schools than their higher SES counterparts due to inflexible work schedules, the need to take more jobs, and/or tiredness from work. This applied to the Chinese immigrants as well. In
our study, a majority of participants who were most infrequent in school involvement were from low income and labour work families. Some of them had to have multiple jobs to support their families. They stated that when they returned home they were very tired and had no time and energy to participate in their children’s school activities although they wanted to.

**Language Barrier**

Besides the socioeconomic status, language barrier is another factor that has impact on parental school involvement. The real and perceived low English language proficiency hinders some parents from communicating with school and leads parents to be less involved in their children’s school activities. This finding is consistence with Mapp’s (2003) study which states parents who speak languages other than English may experience fewer opportunities to volunteer in the schools. It is also consistent with Constantino, Cui and Faltis’ (1995) study of the influence of the language barrier on Chinese parental involvement in schools. Their study indicates that the language barrier hinders Chinese immigrant parents from communicating with their children’s school teachers.

**Cultural Differences**

Epstein and Dauber (1991) state that white middle-class teachers may value and reward independence and assume that parents will involve themselves in the school activities of their children. But other cultures may view it as rude for parents to go to school without invitation. Thus, parents’ less involved in school cannot be universally understood as an indicator of less interest in their children’s education. In the Chinese culture, teachers and parents are expected to play different roles with respect to children’s education (Gu, 2008; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Parents are responsible for their children’s behaviours at home while teachers are expected to be responsible for student’s learning and behaviours at the school. Only when a child causes trouble such as a violation of school rules, or is in need of extra help in academic work, are parents contacted. If the students perform well in school, both the teacher and parents do not feel the need for parents to go to the school.

A Chinese proverb, *shi tu ru fu zi* (master and apprentice are similar to father and son), illustrate the Chinese teacher’s authority role in education. Teachers are not only considered as experts in education content, but have the power to discipline students. Therefore, there exists a hidden hierarchical relationship between teachers and parents in children’s education in China. In addition, the long history of feudalism in China together with Confucius’ philosophy on social structure has a profound influence on Chinese people’s respect for the authority (Bush & Qiang, 2002). Therefore, although Canadian school culture encourages a closer parent-school relationship nurtured by parents spending more time in school (Hill & Taylor, 2004), the majority of Chinese immigrant parents may not realize or grasp this opportunity. They tend to take a passive role in getting involved in school and allowed one-way communication to take place. In other words, Chinese immigrant parents tend to adapt and adjust themselves to meet the needs of the school rather than to voice their opinions regarding their children’s education. This is particularly true for new Chinese immigrants who are less familiar with the North American culture and school system. In this study, participants who live in Canada less than five years were not sure about what to say and whom to talk with. They were afraid that they may offend the teachers if they asked or said something inappropriate. They
choose to remain silent. *Chen muo shi jin* 沉默是金 (silence is gold) is actually a life philosophy of Chinese culture, which is tied with Confucius’ philosophy *zhong yong zhi dao* 中庸之道 (the middle way). It warns people that when you do not know the appropriate thing to say, do not say anything. This life doctrine guides many Chinese people’s behaviour in a social context.

**Conclusion and Implications**

In this study, all participants shared a belief that their school involvement would benefit their children’s education. In other words, they did see their roles in their children’s education as beneficial. However, some participants reported low self-efficacy for actively getting involved in school-based activities due to the language barrier. This finding supports the model of Walker et al. (2005) in regard to the significance of parents’ motivational beliefs. The main school-based activities that participants were involved in included attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering on field trips, fundraising, and attending school concerts and sports events. For these events, the parents often received invitations from schools or teachers. This finding supports Walker et al.’s model regarding the significance of parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others: schools, children, and teachers. As far as the factor of parent’s perceived life context described in this model, this study also provides evidence. In this study, the lack of time and energy were reported as among the major reasons that impeded Chinese immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s education, particularly for those participants who came to Canada lately. In addition, their inadequate knowledge about the English language and Canadian culture kept them from getting actively involved in many school-based activities. They felt intimidated to talk to teachers since they do not know what they can say and what not given their unfamiliarity with Canadian schools.

This study not only provides evidence to support the model of Walker et al. (2005), but also enriches this model with a cultural dimension. By exploring the perspectives and practices of a group of Chinese immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s school education, this study demonstrates that in addition to the three categories of factors portrayed in Walker et al.’s model, participants’ original cultural values play an important role in defying how they get involved in their children’s school education. The authoritative figure that teachers are entitled in the Chinese culture stops Chinese immigrant parents from actively voicing their views or concerns. Chinese parents’ emphasis on academics assures that their most significant concern during the teacher-parent conference is their children’s academic records.

The findings of this study have some practical implications for the school’s effort to involve immigrant parents. Since time is a challenge for many immigrant parents due to their work or study schedules. Teachers can use various methods to keep in touch with parents. Besides arranging face-to-face meetings, teachers can use emails, written notes, as well as phone calls to exchange information with parents on their children’s school performances, school events and activities, and listen to the parents’ concerns, suggestions, and expectations about their children’s education. In order to help new immigrant parents to resolve the language barrier, school can provide translators with a bilingual background (who know English as a second language). Schools could also create opportunities for parents to better understand the Canadian school system and its expectations for children and parents by hosting workshops with interpreters and distributing brochures in different languages. It will be a good idea as well for teachers to learn the essence of different cultural values in educating children so that they can be more effective and proactive in communicating with immigrant parents. Considering the cultural
barrier Chinese parents have for school involvement, school can organize information sessions to explicitly express its willingness to hear immigrant parents’ voices about the school’s curriculum and administration and as well to educate them about their rights to get involved.

All participants in this study are professional Chinese immigrant parents with strong education backgrounds. Therefore, this study cannot represent other Chinese immigrants who are less educated in Windsor, Canada. More research is necessary to cover the Chinese immigrants with less education although they only represent a very small portion of recent Chinese immigrants. Future study can also include school teachers and immigrant children, which will provide different perspectives on immigrants’ parental involvement in their children’s school education.
References


Literary Text Selections in Secondary School Classrooms: Exploring the Practices of English Teachers as Agents of Change

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine how Ontario secondary school English teachers make choices about which literature to teach in their courses. This will be done in order to more deeply understand why many secondary school teachers may or may not encourage students to read contemporary, social issue texts. This paper uses a critical sociology of schooling theoretical perspective to critique the study’s findings. We examine the relation between policies and practice, the issue of resources and structural barriers, and how decisions are made around literary text choices. Some themes that emerged out of the interviews focus on a range of views expressed about personal agency, literary canons, gender, sexual orientation, and racism as central issues that shape text selection. We conclude by arguing for the need for policy to support individual teachers to take risks in their professional ability to select and teach contemporary social issues texts to high school students in all disciplines.

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*Brock Education, 20(2), 25-42*
Introduction

Secondary school English teachers in Ontario have the freedom to make selections from a wide variety of possible texts to teach. The Ontario Ministry of Education’s English curriculum (2007a) does not impose an approved list of literature on teachers. So, in theory, teachers could be teaching a wider range of contemporary prose, which would enable students to move outside traditional boundaries and extend their intellectual opportunities. The purpose of this paper, then, is to detail the ways in which Ontario secondary school English teachers make choices about which literature to teach in their courses and why.

For this qualitative study, we interviewed ten English teachers, of whom two were currently in charge of their departments. We analyzed this data with Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum (2007a,b) and policy (2009) documents as well as with local school board policy documents. In Canada, education is a provincial concern. The province provides the broader policy, and school boards exercise some autonomy in terms of how they will implement the policy.

This paper examines the relation between policies and practice, the issue of resources and structural barriers, and how decisions are made around text choices. It draws upon themes that emerged out of the interviews, which focus on a range of views expressed about personal agency, literary canons, gender, homophobia, and racism as central issues that shape text selection. This paper concludes by arguing for the need for policy implementation that supports individual teachers to take risks in their professional ability to select and teach contemporary social issues texts to high school students in all disciplines.

Literature Review

While the study focuses on Ontario teachers, the findings have broader implications. Today, at a time when educators, school officials, and policymakers across North America are working with increasingly diverse student populations, situated in the context of globalization, it seems remarkable that little if any work has examined how teachers choose texts within the Canadian context from a critical perspective. This omission is significant as critical perspectives on text selection are of particular importance to today’s educators and policy makers. They help build a deeper understanding of the potential difficulties and consequences that arise when students are not provided with texts that are socially relevant, or how they might help our student population thrive when they are given access to diverse texts. Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky (2009, p. 16) posit that policy makers far too often ignore current research on literacy practices which focus on an ideological model, which views literacies as situated socio-political practices. Granted, the discipline of English is unique in secondary schools in that teachers choose literature without the same constraints as most content area teachers using sanctioned textbook lists, and the curriculum expectations are generalized. However, in any content area, there is latitude in teachers bringing in additional relevant materials. While this paper focuses on English teachers, the logistical, ethical, and conceptual decisions around which books are chosen in any school setting pertain to all educators.

In Canada, there are no research studies to our knowledge that focus on English teachers’ selection of literary works for the high school classroom. Peterson and Bainbridge (2002) conducted a qualitative study that examined elementary school teachers’ choices and their criteria for selecting Canadian literature for their students. They comment upon “the consistency
and strength of teachers’ unquestioned adherence to conventional practice” while also observing that literature selection decisions “shape students’ identities as readers and writers, emphasizing particular ways of being and thinking over others” (p. 1). Schell and Bonin (2001) in a quantitative study investigating the risk propensity and self-actualization of Ontario public librarians with regard to censorship behaviour found “librarians’ attitudes towards censorship and intellectual freedom seem not to parallel their rather restrictive behaviours when it comes to material selection” (p. 367). Herriman (2001) provides a rationale, which advocates for teachers to resist censorship. In this article, she points out that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (in the Constitution Act, 1982) guarantees freedom of expression. Canadian laws and educational policies are distinct in numerous ways from the United States, which further supports the argument that more work needs to be done to explore what underpins the decisions of Canadian teachers to work with specific texts.

**Conceptual Framework**

Grounded in John Dewey’s (1959) philosophy, which suggests that education can be a force for democratic practice (Shea, 1989), the theoretical support for our study comes from the broader theoretical framework of critical sociology of schooling (Apple, 1996; Freire, 1970, 1991; Giroux, 2002; Shor, 1994; Shor & Freire, 1987). This paper supports the key idea that schools are political sites of cultural and social reproduction embedded in systems of power relations, yet schools remain as contexts where there exists contestation, tensions, and struggles over curriculum and pedagogy (Giroux, 2002, p. 3). This paper seeks to illustrate, then, how English teachers negotiate among educational stakeholders such as students, colleagues, parents and the broader school community which texts to bring into their classrooms and examines the interplay between personal agency, self-regulation, pedagogical practices and the power networks in which they are situated.

We define censorship generally as limitations placed on freedom of expression and free access to information. More specifically, censorship functions to deny students in one class or an entire school system the right to read particular texts (Agee, 1999). The problem, as Agee notes, is that censorship has the power to deny students the opportunity to develop intellectually. Self-regulation, by contrast, should be understood as the mindset and everyday practices of individuals that shape their beliefs and actions in relation to their societal contexts. In Foucauldian terms, self-regulation implies individuals are completely subordinated to the larger social networks of society; individuals are not ascribed any personal agency (Foucault, 1977). This paper argues that while individuals internalize many hegemonic beliefs, they still have the power and agency to act and make decisions that will influence their own lives and that of others.

Not surprisingly, many of the educators in our study were dedicated professionals guided by a belief in the values of social equity and democratic practice. Yet, the problematic nature of power relations made working for social justice through text selection difficult at times. This is why an account of how teachers choose literary texts is important as it illustrates how complex and contested pedagogical practices like text selection are worked out at various levels – individual, institutional, and societal. In other words, choices for any teacher can take various forms, depending on the classroom, school, and broader community with whom a particular teacher is situated.
Methods

Site

Windsor lies in the most southern most part of Ontario, along the Great Lakes waterway that marks the border between Canada and the United States. Although currently experiencing an economic and population decline, Windsor remains Ontario’s fourth largest city and is well known as an industrial manufacturer. According to Statistics Canada (2002), close to 23 per cent of Windsor Essex County’s population were persons born outside Canada, reflecting the County’s increasing ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. The Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) where the participants teach, is a large organization with over 4 000 staff and 37 000 students (GECDSB 2008, March 19), and according to school board minutes, has 207 nations reflected in their school community (GECDSB 2006, October 4).

Participants

Participants were English teachers with varying levels of experience from two to thirty years teaching English. Reflecting the general teaching population found in Windsor and Essex County, all of our participants were white and middle class; six were female and four were male. Their age range was from late twenties to fifties. The circumstances of their teaching assignments included rural, urban and suburban contexts. All teachers had taught locally developed, applied, and academic English over the course of their careers. They all had experience teaching grade nine through grade twelve. One participant was on a long-term occasional position over the last four years; the others all held permanent positions. Pseudonyms used to refer to participants throughout this paper are: Felicity (long-term occasional), Nadia, Samantha, Flora, Mark, Wayne, Madeline, Kate as well as Greg and Bill (current Department Heads).

Data Collection

Drawing on critical theory articles, Ontario Ministry of Education documents (regarding inclusion and diversity as well as specific to the English discipline), and school board minutes, we read these sources before and after conducting the interviews to inform our reading of the data. Upon approval from both the university’s and school board’s review of ethics boards, the researchers advertised the study through posters placed in schools and via a list serve specific to English teachers in the public board. Interviews were conducted with 10 teachers from January to June 2010. The interviews were conducted in the researchers’ homes or cafes. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were then sent back to participants for their review and approval. They were given the option to edit and delete any part of the interview they did not want included. The finalized transcripts were reviewed several times and coded thematically.

Data Analysis

The overarching research questions were:

1. Which factors influence teachers’ choices of literary texts for English classrooms?
2. How do teachers work within regimes of self-surveillance and how does this influence the way teachers negotiate and execute text selection practices?

3. How do teachers resist, negotiate and/or subvert various forms of external censorship?

We conducted face-to-face one-hour in-depth interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) to elicit the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and experiences of English teachers and department heads regarding literary text selection. This was done in order to investigate what motivated teachers’ decisions. To know what motivates any individual in their choices is complex. Thus qualitative interviews allow for an examination of the subtleties of the choices they make, and the power dynamics involved in all of life’s experiences (Dhunpath, 2000).

The research took a constructivist approach. Drawing upon grounded theory (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), the questions asked during the interview were purposefully broad to allow participants to take a lead in the direction of the discussion. As Creswell (2003) states, semi-structured interviews use an emerging methodology: “the questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation” (p. 8). Examples of some of the interview questions asked include:

1. What are your impressions of how teachers choose texts for their English courses in general?
2. What factors do you take into consideration when putting together the materials for your English courses?
3. Have you ever used strategies to circumvent or overcome potentially risky situations related to your choice of texts?

Grounded theory proposes that interview discussions, which allow for spontaneous questions and circling back to earlier points in the interview yield greater insight into the subject material. This is a preliminary study with a limited number of participants to hone the tools of the research process for a larger study that will take the research to a national level.

Findings

In this section, we present four distinct themes that emerged from the interviews. The themes are described in detail using quotations to highlight and substantiate findings. The themes that emerged are as follows: (a) the tensions between traditional literary canon’s influence on text selection and teachers as agents of change; (b) the role of gender in text selection; (c) sexual orientation and homophobia shaping literary choices; (d) race/ethnicity issues and implications for course design.

The Tensions between Traditional Literary Canon’s Influence on Text Selection and Teachers as Agents of Change

The term canon refers to a group of literary works that are traditionally considered the most important of a particular time or place, and are of such transcendent importance that everyone or nearly everyone should know them (Nicol, 2008; Shea, 1989). The traditional Western canon as found in schools overwhelmingly favours dead, white male authors (Greenbaum, 1994), and privileges American and British over Canadian writers. Twenty years ago, a survey conducted by
Applebee (1992) of the texts offered to students at Canadian high schools, including public, Catholic and independent schools, found that only marginal changes were made to the kind of texts students were exposed to over the years. The survey demonstrated that texts such as Of Mice and Men (Steinbeck, 1938), Lord of the Flies (Golding, 1960), To Kill a Mockingbird (Harper, 1960), and The Great Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 1970) dominated schools’ curricula. So, why have some texts remained?

Fast forward two decades, and despite efforts by some teachers to broaden the canon over the past few years with books such as Cormac McCarthy’s (2006) The Road, or, Eric Walters’ (2008) Sketches, few book-length works from alternative traditions seem to have found their way into Ontario classrooms. One contemporary novel that participants indicated being used in many secondary schools is Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999), which is a novel that explores the feelings of a raped teenage woman. Felicity (pseudonyms used throughout), when teaching Speak, had students “who don’t necessarily like to read, and were coming up to me and asking me and telling me that they couldn’t stop reading it.”

For many teachers interviewed in this study, the persistence of canonical texts was partly explained by the lack of available resources (for example, budgets, limited class sets of books, departmental dictates, lack of time and resources to explore other options). As department head, Bill notes: “money is the biggest issue that we face as English teachers when it comes to books.” Similarly, Samantha noted,

The choice of literature, a novel, in my class is decided by a totally unworthy method. We have a backroom which is filled with paperback books, many of which are at least 30 years old … I look for the least shabby, most up-to-date books, count them to see if there are enough, and if there are, that is the book we study.

When asked how texts were selected, all the participants’ first response was that the books in the backroom decided their choices. Nadia commented, “Whoever keeps resupplying those books keeps limiting my choice.”

Yet, for other teachers, there was recognition that school budgets are always in flux. Over time, there have been moments when there were ample resources. As Bill recalls, “there were times when I could spend … $4000 to $5000 on books!” Sometimes, the opportunity was simply not taken up as Felicity states:

And if there's money that year then the department head can propose for some novels to be purchased, and then maybe the principal might, or the principal might not. But I think that for some department heads, there are some status quo novels that are always taught.

It is also important to recognize that principals and department heads determine what is purchased, and thus play a powerful role in controlling teachers’ access to resources. Amongst the teachers interviewed, although some had a good rapport with their individual department heads, few could recall having a departmental discussion about which novels to teach. As Department Head, Greg seemed to expect teachers would come to him if they wanted a change rather than it being a departmental discussion. As he comments, “you would think with new teachers coming in constantly that you would get more and more requests for books that they don't have, but they don't.” Felicity expressed sentiments also felt by Bill and Madeline: “There needs to be a balance between what's traditional and what's current.”
Other teachers preferred to play it safe, although there was the ability to move beyond the
canon. Samantha noted, “I see teachers who teach books … that they probably studied in high
school.” For some, the idea that canonical texts offered teachers a degree of safety and comfort
also had the consequence of positioning new texts as ‘risky.’ Bill referred to a single complaint
that led to book banning:

It was a single student who found a sexual reference in the book to be offensive,
and her parents came in and made quite a stink about it such that the book was
banned from our school by our principal. It could not be taught in this school, and once
the principal left we started teaching it again. And it just demonstrates, as far as I'm
concerned, the degree to which a squeaky wheel [affects] school board politics.

For many teachers, a common thread in their ability to be agents of change came down to
administrative support. As Felicity observes,

It's the first year that I've been given the sufficient support and freedom where I
felt comfortable being able to take on something that was that controversial, and if
there's any type of backlash from parents or students, then I knew that I would be
supported….by the department head and administration.

Some of the teachers in this study successfully use contemporary, socially relevant texts. How? Similar to Mark, Nadia took the issue head on by devoting a unit to the independent study
of censored texts. She sent home a note prior to the unit articulating her rationale for focusing on
censorship. Nadia explained, “The kids pick the book, so it’s up to the parents to look at the book
and decide whether or not they want their child to read the book and sign a permission slip.”
Nadia and Felicity made use of small sets of text recently purchased through the board to do
literature circles. Kate observed, “We usually don't get a lot of parents coming in. But the ones I
have talked to have been fairly supportive of it even in by way of saying, ‘my son or daughter is
really interested in what you're doing.’” A strategy Bill, Felicity, and Greg employ to influence
students’ reading choices is informal discussion. As Greg puts it, “I’ll mention books in class,
casually, books that I would never dream of teaching in a high school setting. I mentioned
Andronicus (Shakespeare, 1994), which is very violent, and bloody. And kids will write it
down….and then they'll buy the book.”

Several teachers pointed out they felt students’ high level of engagement made the effort
(or risk) of using social issue texts worthwhile. Wayne commented that if students “are stealing
them [newly purchased novels] that says a lot about how much they loved them.” Nadia
reflected,

I change books all the time. I don’t think I have taught too many books over and over
again because I just feel that shuts down conversations. Because whether you think it or
not, I think you are looking for particular answers.

Mark said, “And the kids do get a little frustrated reading novels that are 30, 40 years old, and
don't seem to have any relevance in their lives.” The teachers felt social issue texts yielded better
class discussions.
Librarians were named as important allies in identifying, promoting, and purchasing socially relevant texts. Samantha gave recommendations to her librarian, rather than department head, knowing the librarian would buy enough copies of her suggested titles to allow her to use the books in literature circles. “I want them [students] to find relevant material that excites them and promotes discussion,” said Samantha. Felicity noted the librarian “is trying to change the library, and she's trying to focus more on the young adult novels.” When asked, ‘How do you pick relevant novels?’ Kate replied, “Actually, our librarian, she does readings with friends.... like, they have a weekly group, and they came across the book; and she had purchased it for our library.” The English teachers seemed to have regular communication with the librarians. Nadia said, “After Mr. [librarian] went there really hasn’t been an influx of books like there was when he was there because he was young and he has young kids himself.” Wayne stated,

Our librarian went through and got a whole bunch of teen fiction and nonfiction that dealt with different issues including homophobia, even trans-phobia, and anti-black issues and a whole bunch of different ones. We actually set it up as a diversity section. I personally think that’s a great way to start finding out what’s popular and what kids want. Set it up in the library. Have that section, and then you can track what kids seem to be interested in, and so that way you can possibly put it in your classroom.

Madeline says of the school librarian: “She has her own budget. She would order books from the library where students can sign out, but not class sets. She has often brought a book to my attention that I will read.” Teachers found librarians to be excellent supports for their ambitions to teach contemporary, socially relevant books.

The Role of Gender in Text Selection

Along with budget considerations, a largely discussed factor among the educators interviewed when it came to text selection was gender. In almost every case, teachers were more concerned with boys than girls. Nadia, for example, puts the point baldly: “what always concerns me are the boys, the girls don’t concern me. We are always concerned when looking for books, are the boys.” Samantha observes,

I look for books for the boys in an applied class. I would generally try to stay with adventure or with biographies, and things that I hope will really hook them because I don't think they are willing readers in that stream.

Mark suggested that, “the girls are pretty easy to satisfy in terms of novel selections. The guys, by and large, they can be a tough sell.” Likewise, Greg observes “most girls will just pick up any book; they're like fine with it.”

Several teachers indicated they were drawing upon research to inform their choices. In a professional development workshop, Kate recalled, “Boy Smarts [MacDonald, 2005] was the book that they were focusing on, and they were looking at.... how boys learn differently.” Greg also claimed, “They’ve done studies and test scores that show that boys do lag behind girls, that there is this stigma in boys’ literacy, and it's a problem.”
Nonetheless, despite the overall perception that girls will read anything, teachers’ testimony demonstrated that some girls had an unwillingness to read ‘boy books.’ For Felicity, the girls in her class did not welcome a particular ‘boy-book’:

I know a lot of my students could not connect with *Lord of the Flies*….A lot of them were repelled….And I have one particular student that refused to do the assignment.

Most of the participants’ views, if situated in the larger debate over gender-based reading practices in current educational research, reflect the notion that gender is an outcome of biology, or a manifestation of an inner essence, rather than viewing gender as a social construct.

**Sexual Orientation and Homophobia Shaping Literary Choices**

Some of the teachers such as Greg noted that high school students freely use as pejoratives words such as gay, fag and queer: “you can't go ten feet down the hallway without hearing the kids say the word gay … gay for being bad; and it's something that’s rampant.” Some teachers interviewed expressed anxiety over how some students would respond to literary texts that featured gay or lesbian characters. Greg further remarks:

When it comes to race, they can read a book about a black character; they're okay with that. But they're not okay if it’s a woman, and they're not okay with it being somebody who is homosexual. They're not okay with that.

Not all teachers, however, were reluctant to explicitly address issues of homophobia in the classroom through text selection. Madeline and Kate, both currently teaching in classrooms with students who have “learning or behaviour exceptionalities” used social issue texts that addressed a myriad of issues such as homophobia, racism, and sexism on a regular basis. As Kate commented, “I think it's great if we can build some life skills and coping skills into what we teach.” Both felt they had administrative support, even if their colleagues were “set in their ways.” Wayne noted that if texts do not reflect the reality of all of our students then they may not realize that “what they are going through, they are not alone.” Flora brought in novels such as *The Four Dorothys* (Ruditis, 2007) that featured gay and lesbian themes, which she thought would help address issues of social justice. Samantha noted,

I am taking my drama students to see a play, "Waking Up Blue [Rabideau, 2011].” It's being done for the anti-homophobic, Pride Day….and I know that there's a certain group of students who if they knew what it was about would immediately say, I'm not going … that those are the people I want to have going. So I'm just saying, it's about diversity.

Indicating awareness of potential repercussions, Bill commented,

But if we're doing a whole class study and there was a homosexual theme, I think you would have some serious problems….and we also have a large number of Islamic kids whose parents may or may not have a serious problem with it. But I know that there are students at the school here who would have a problem with it.
Bill, however, also contends if a novel can show both sides of an issue, then he feels he can effectively teach a class and resist parental pressures. He advocates for novels that deal with gay/lesbian themes being offered as an option in independent studies to avoid confrontation with community challenges.

Race/Ethnicity Issues and Implications for Course Design

Intertwined with concerns around gender and homophobia, issues of race and ethnicity were also raised as factors affecting course design. Bill recalls

A teacher had a parent call, whose daughter found the "N" word to be particularly offensive racially, and the only thing that saved us there was that the teacher was Black. And apparently when the parent came in, he did not know that the teacher was Black and was completely disarmed when he found out that she was. I mean, that could have gone farther and it could have resulted in that novel being suspended.

Larry and Wayne both commented that the only time their departments discussed changing a novel was in direct reaction to a novel being challenged. Larry states,

We had one controversy one year where….it hit the paper that it felt that it was racist….that became the initiative to change it and so we talked about possibilities of different novels to do. In these cases, the books were left for a year or two, and once the censorship issue died down or the people who had raised it left, the books came back into their teaching.

The participants’ experiences suggest that text selection remains in a limbo state unless there is a critical incident that brings about a reaction. Teachers used waiting tactics in these two scenarios above to outlast the resistance and return the challenged texts.

With regards to racial issues and administrative perspectives, Greg said, with Of Mice and Men, the principal said, ‘This is a big issue, we're going to get all kinds of complaints about it, let's just choose something else’; and that's what happened. So I think that it is important [to have] administrators who are also willing to push that agenda as well as the department head, and the teachers, because there is going to be resistance - absolutely.

Greg demonstrates an awareness of how the hierarchy in school systems affects teachers’ abilities to make sound pedagogical choices.

Teachers such as Mark and Samantha at times felt it is difficult to engage students in conversations about race. Samantha recalled,

I suppose I walked away from a fight, but at the same time ... I never think that this is a fair fight. Why not? Because my black students consider themselves ... experts on it ... and certainly as a teacher I do not consider myself racist. I'm a person who has made choices in my life that reflect diversity. I don't necessarily share those choices with them, but they are very fast to attack me and attack other teachers here on the theme of racism.
Yet Samantha was clearly committed to exploring racial issues nevertheless. She recently used Paul Kropp’s (2002) *Scarface*, a text that highlights challenges that may occur in Canadian schools for immigrant students. Situated in a school with a very high immigrant population, including many students from Southeast Asia, Samantha brought in the text because she thought it would connect with her Burmese students, who had themselves newly arrived in Canada, including some from refugee camps. Inspired when attending a reading by the author as part of a professional development workshop, Samantha said,

I’m using another book called *Of Beetles and Angels* [2001] by Mawi Asgedom, and it’s about a boy who is a refugee and leaves Eritrea. I believe, and ends up living in the United States and finally getting a full scholarship to Harvard…..I thought that would be good for some of my African students who expressed a desire to work on a harder book; but also I thought it would be inspirational for them.

Bill and Felicity remarked individual teachers make choices all the time – whether or not they are going to grapple with the more difficult issues – or skirt over them. Nadia said, “you can teach [a] book so that it’s completely inoffensive or you can bring the racial issues in it to the floor, and I teach it so it is contentious.” Greg also observed “the teacher sets the tone” for discussing sensitive topics.

Yet, there was also recognition amongst some of our participants of the danger when instituting change, that teachers may not be doing so for pedagogically sound reasons. Texts that showcase diversity in very contrived ways, at the expense of any literary merit were problematic. Greg said:

There was one text … the kid was half Japanese, half Hawaiian, his girlfriend was African American, and he had a green Mohawk … it just seemed like it was overtly trying to appeal to every ethnic group … I think it failed as a piece of literature.

In fact, Greenbaum (1994) cautions educators that token inclusions of works by “non-male, non-white, non-heterosexual voices,” serve mainly to reinforce the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘other’ which results from predominantly white male reading lists.

**Discussion**

Examining data from the Findings, the Discussion takes up some of the complexities of issues such as gender, sexual orientation, and race as well as what motivates teachers who want to be agents of social change. The data suggests that while many of the teachers interviewed in this study clearly worked from a social justice perspective, their choices in text selection were limited by budgetary concerns as well as self-regulatory, societal, and school pressures.

**Teachers as Agents of Change and Taking Risks in Text Selection**

The persistent preoccupation with selecting certain canonized texts for students evidences how systems of power work on an ongoing basis to narrowly shape some teachers’ choice of
classroom texts. When asked why teachers are not likely to introduce a new text to their English students, Wayne suggested that, “the fear is that people don’t want to be the first.”

Yet, quite a few of the teachers in our study did in fact at times take risks and saw the advantages in using contemporary, non-canonical texts. The role of the school librarian as strategically key to many English teachers wanting to be agents of social change was a surprise in the data. It shows teachers overcoming societal pressures, budget limitations, and administrative silence to push forward with the texts they believe will best serve their diverse students’ interests. The data suggests that several of the teachers had experienced success in using potentially controversial texts. Wayne voiced what several other participants also said, “the advantages [of using socially relevant texts] is the students are more engaged because they see themselves in the actual material.” More importantly, however, Wayne’s feeling of vulnerability in his text choices were significantly diminished when he felt supported by official policy: “I have ministry documents to support me, so I’m not scared.” Research by Freedman and Johnson (2001) demonstrated that many teachers’ fears of bringing in new texts grow out of the lack of support they receive from their administration and school board and the sense that they are “out there” by themselves (p. 357). Certainly, the participants in this study reflected this viewpoint.

Yagelski (2000) has written about the importance of “local literacies” if students are to become truly literate readers and writers. Students, Yagelski argues, need to read, write, and talk about important issues that are relevant and real to them and that have immediate meaning for them in their lives. Lesesne (2006) offers a broad array of book title suggestions and insight into youths’ interests to help teachers find appropriate literature. Despite recent provincial legislation that obligated them to do so, and a personal commitment to equity issues, the strategies named by teachers to bring same-sex literature into the classroom often involved informally letting students know about books, keeping those novels on independent reading lists, or making them available through the library. Perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects of self-regulatory practices that shape teachers’ text selections is the way controversial issues such as gay and lesbian representations in texts were enough at times to foreclose on choosing non-canonical texts, rather than any actual condemnation having occurred (Aslup, 2003; Agee, 1999). As Aslup (2003) argues, we can no longer waste the ethical opportunities literature provides in the face of social injustices.

It is not only which texts are selected but also how they are taught. For instance, even within a canonical text, if the main issues are marginalized or ignored, teaching the book could be more damaging than not since students will at some level recognize that crucial issues have been skirted, reinforcing feelings of fear that socially relevant topics are not up for discussion. As O’Sullivan (2008) observes:

Many classroom teachers carefully avoid bringing politics into the classroom. When teachers fail to bring public issues (e.g., politics) into the classroom in a nonpartisan and grade-appropriate way, they are undermining both their own capacity and that of their students to develop into critical pedagogues (p. 100).

The community pressures felt and experienced by the participants underscores how societal factions may influence pedagogical decisions. The fact that book challenges are as prevalent today as they were decades ago (Boyd & Bailey, 2009, p. 660) shows clearly that the problem of censorship and self-regulation remains persistent.
As a step in the right direction, the increasingly diverse population found in Windsor and Essex County schools contributed to the public school board’s decision to make a commitment to address issues of diversity. In the Director’s words, to “prepare children to live in the next century” (GECDSB 2005, May 14). This commitment was demonstrated when, in 2005, the GECDSB funded Ontario’s first school board diversity officer.

Perhaps cognizant of how diverse populations may hold conflicting beliefs, the local school board developed a policy:

Controversial issues include matters characterized by significant differences of opinion, usually generated from differing and underlying values, beliefs and interests, which produce social tension. Controversy arising from such differences is inherent in a pluralistic society. An important function of public education is to provide students with an understanding of how controversial issues are dealt with in a democracy (GECDSB 2010, May).

Still, despite the board’s policy, only some teachers interviewed selected texts that would allow students to engage in ‘controversial issues’ in order to develop a more democratic, critical consciousness. For the board to implement this policy vision, teachers need the resources, and just as importantly, they need to feel supported by their educational institution that to teach critical material is the work of all teachers, not just daring individuals.

Gender, Race, and Sexual Orientation as Deciding Variables in Text Selection

Feminist research (Skelton & Francis, 2009) into teachers’ attitudes has indicated that many teachers are influenced in their dealings with pupils by gender–specific preconceptions, or what Martino (2008) describes as essentialist understandings of gender. For Martino, essentialist understandings of gender suggest that there is a generally held view that ‘typical girls’ are compliant, easy to please, cooperative, conscientious workers in the classroom (Browne & France, 1986; Skelton 1989). In effect, many of the teachers from our research seem to view girls as ‘conformist plodders’ who showed a willingness to accept uncritically any text that was given to them. Much of this was based on an underlying assumption among our participants that the English curriculum has become too ‘feminized’ and this is hurting boys. Yet, as Weaver-Hightower (2003) notes:

The “feminine” nature of the English curriculum is debatable at best, for many of the authors covered in contemporary schooling … are still from the “dead White men” camp, and many of the themes are masculine and sexist and the protagonist male. If we accept this argument, then increasing the “fit” of the curriculum to boys’ concerns will only exacerbate existing inequality (pp. 486-487).

Despite the teachers’ best intentions, such attempts to bring more ‘boy-books’ as a way to engage boys in reading fails to recognize the way in which school texts have historically disproportionately represented males more often than females (Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, 1970; U’Ren, 1971.) The invisibility of female representations in school texts historically, suggests that educational publishers and educators, then and now (Weaver-
Hightower, 2003, p. 486), have all along been more concerned about the education of boys than girls. Perhaps most important, the privileging of boys’ interests over girls’ is problematic as it has the unintended effect of “confirming, reinforcing, and extending structures of masculine hegemony in education and more generally in society” (Ewing, 2006, p. 622). This is critical, as gender was a significant factor in how many teachers selected texts. Hegemony is reinforced through text selection – be it canonical or more contemporary texts if the underlying assumption is that boys need special texts geared to a certain kind of privileged masculinity. A number of the teachers interviewed indicated they had thought about the implications of praxis (theory put into practice) in their text selection. Yet, in terms of gender, their understanding of research was overwhelmingly influenced by a one-sided view currently promoted by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2004, 2009a).

For one teacher, the problem with the canon stemmed from how it functioned to support systems of power that sustained heterosexism: “the actual canon is so old, same-sex relationships or issues of homophobia are not in any of the books.” For this teacher, the force of heterosexism found within canonized texts was also linked to other systems of power, which maintained other discriminatory ideologies: “I believe To Kill a Mockingbird should not be taught. I’m tired of books that focus on white people saving poor black folk.” While this novel is often used by schools in Ontario and elsewhere as a way to address issues of racism, this teacher offers a critical perspective which highlights how To Kill a Mockingbird in fact functions to reproduce social inequities. Based on race the characters perpetuate the notion that racialized minorities can only be saved through the beneficence and generosity of white characters.

If we want to take seriously the relationship between equity, social justice and text selection, we need teachers to interrogate their own understandings of gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity issues. Existing power structures are reproduced because they become a part of our collective thinking as a society. Literature, and the values and ethics represented in it, are never isolated. Text selection and reading practices need to be viewed critically taking into account historical, socio-political, and local contexts. This kind of critical stance may serve to defamiliarize ways of viewing current power relations in schools and communities as well as to problematize and critique hegemonic discourse.

Conclusion

Developing a critical consciousness in students who are preparing to live and work in the 21st century can only happen if the diversity of student populations in terms such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class see themselves in the materials educators choose to teach. The teachers are not alone in making these choices, although far too often they are left feeling isolated or that these are not even the kinds of discussions they can engage in with each other or in their local schools and communities. The silence serves to reproduce the status quo, where relations of power are left intact and function to work against the aims of equity and social justice. Ongoing conversations and professional development at the school board, school and departmental level, however, would help establish for teachers a collective space where they could openly discuss issues related to teaching potentially controversial topics in any discipline. Such discussions, Agee (1999) points out, are especially “powerful because they break the usual silence and allay the kind of fearful self-censorship that occurs when teachers are isolated and uncertain” (p. 68). Proactive strategies such as this are important as they help create a climate that encourages teachers to include more culturally diverse texts (Agee, 1999).
In sum, if we want to encourage teachers in any field to choose contemporary texts that have relevance for students’ lives, this practice has to be actively supported by administrators, teacher educators, professional development, resources, and an articulated protocol for dealing with the controversies that will inevitably occur between schools and particular segments of society.

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The Role of Teacher Empowerment and Teacher Accountability in School-University Partnerships and Action Research

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Abstract

Large-scale educational reform is occurring in Canada, the USA and the UK. Different strategies for change have resulted, including the school-university partnership and teacher-led action research. While this partnership and professional development method is perceived as a way to empower teachers it also appears to be riddled with issues of accountability. This study investigates the impact of participation in a school-university partnership, using action research as the professional development method for school improvement, on teaching professionals’ sense of accountability and empowerment. The findings from this study showed that these projects were organized from the top-down and teachers felt accountable to the government, their peers, their students, the School Board, the school community, and the project funding body. However, teachers also were found to be empowered as they experienced shared decision making, teacher autonomy, professional growth, and school change. This suggests that the relationship between accountability and empowerment is not a simple one.

Key words: action research, school-university partnership, teacher accountability, teacher empowerment

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Introduction

Large-scale educational reform, defined as systemic approaches to changing the way schools operate, is not a new phenomenon and it is not limited to any single country. In Canada, the USA and the UK, various professional development strategies for educational improvement have resulted from educational reform initiatives. Such professional development strategies have included the school-university partnership and teacher-led action research (Bartholomewa & Sandholtz, 2009; Gilles, Wilson & Elias, 2010; Kinsler, 2010; Levin & Rock, 2003; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000). While school-university partnerships and action research can be transformative and a method to empower teachers, they can also be a method of accountability and control. Accountability and empowerment are often discussed in literature written on school-university partnerships (Anderson, 2005; Bartholomewa & Sandholtz, 2009; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000) and action research (Gilles, Wilson & Elias, 2010; Kinsler, 2010; Levin & Rock, 2003; Rosaen & Schram, 1997). However, accountability and empowerment are rarely discussed together as simultaneous influences on these partnerships. This study investigates the impact of participation in a school-university partnership, using action research as the professional development method for school improvement, on teaching professionals’ sense of accountability and empowerment. The findings from this study showed that these projects were organized from the top-down and teachers felt accountable to the government, their peers, their students, the School Board, the school community, and the project funding body. However, teachers also were found to be empowered as they experienced shared decision making, teacher autonomy, professional growth, and school change. This suggests that the relationship between accountability and empowerment is not a simple one.

Background and Theoretical Framework

One university researcher, one School Board personnel and thirty-six elementary and secondary practitioners were a part of this school-university partnership. The university researcher was a professor at a mid-size university in Ontario. The School Board personnel and the thirty-six practitioners were employed by the Western School Board (WSB) located in Ontario, Canada. (Western School Board is a pseudonym). This partnership began when a School Board employee applied for and received an action-research grant from the Canadian Education Association, and asked a university professor who specializes in action research to join the project. These two stakeholders formed a school-university partnership in order to provide an opportunity for teachers and administrators to collaboratively work toward improving teacher practice and student achievement through action research. All action research projects in this school-university partnership aimed at improving student achievement, largely due to government policies and benchmarks. These action research projects provided a vehicle to empower teachers to create school change; however, they also held teachers accountable due to their focus on school improvement. A brief review of the literature on teacher accountability and teacher empowerment in school-university partnerships and action research helps to situate this study within the current literature on this topic.

For the past two decades, school-university partnerships have been perceived as a viable educational-reform strategy (Burton & Greher, 2007; Shen, Lu & Kretovics, 2004). Reports, including the American Tomorrow’s Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group (1986) and the British Schools Achieving Success White Paper (2001) have emphasized the role of school-
university collaboration and its potential for educational renewal (Shen, Lu & Kretovics, 2004). Both universities and schools have been seen as key contributors in educational change as they have much to gain by working together. Universities provide opportunities and instruction for teachers to take part in research that informs school improvement. They also provide support needed by teachers to make use of academic expertise, data, and resources. In return, schools provide access to field work and knowledge regarding the practicalities of teaching that is imperative to move research forward (Ciuffetelli Parker, Fazio, Volante, Cherubini, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Stephens & Boldt, 2004).

School-university partnerships consist of any number of forms and can range from, but are not limited to, a single university academic working with an individual school to several university academics working with an entire school district. These partnerships can range from a few months to several years in duration (Dembele & Schwille, 2007). They often consist of introductory workshops, a combination of formal and on-the-job training, and regular in-service meetings for all facilitators and evaluators (Burton & Greher, 2007). They also can include teacher directed action research. While all forms and types of involvement listed above can exist within a school-university partnership, it is important to note that each collaborative partnership has its own unique structure, while sharing a similar responsibility for maximizing student learning and achievement through exemplary practice and meaningful, professional growth (Burton & Greher, 2007).

Action research, similar to school-university partnerships, can also improve student learning through teachers’ professional growth. Action research, often defined as the “systemic, intentional inquiry by teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 5), is a professional development method that uses inquiry and reflection to promote change in a school (Rosaen & Schram, 1997). It opens communication among teachers and increases awareness and reflection of issues that affect learning and professionalism (Levin & Rock, 2003). It is also viewed as an empowerment method where teachers examine their own beliefs, and explore their own practice through critical reflection, and decision-making abilities that improve teaching and learning (Gilles, Wilson & Elias, 2010).

School-university partnerships and action research can be transformative, yet it would be inaccurate to say that this is the norm. Accountability has often been embedded in school-university partnerships and action research. Accountability is a concept in government that is often used synonymously with such concepts as responsibility, answerability, and blameworthiness for actions, decisions and policies. In particular, the way the school-university partnerships are organized, and the accountability and control that have often been perceived in this collaboration, can be problematic. For example, school-university partnerships are typically organized by university personnel in conference with School Board administration and it is much later before representative teachers from one or more school buildings may be involved (Bartholomewa & Sandholtz, 2009). In this situation, teachers may give their consent, but they are not empowered. In addition, accountability has been reported in school-university partnerships due to the reason they are formed (Anderson, 2005; Kinsler, 2010; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000). Teachers in school-university partnerships, like many other teachers in the profession, have felt multiple responsibilities to make progress by improving student outcomes. They have felt politically accountable for the range of services provided by the government and for the adherence to rules and to bureaucracy. They have reported feeling accountable to their peers and to their students to create successful student and school change. There is also the wider
community, including potential employers that demand an effective education service within the competitive global market (Anderson, 2005; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000).

Accountability is also often embedded in action research, as this professional development tool often aims to meet the criteria and benchmarks that come with standards-driven reforms, causing action research to become much more bureaucratic (Kinsler, 2010). Rather than action research advancing social justice and change, which was its original aim, more often than not educational action research is used as a technical tool to facilitate the use of particular teaching techniques and to implement government policies (Kinsler, 2010). This results in teachers being held responsible and accountable for student outcomes, which also often occurs in school-university partnerships.

While accountability has been used by reformers in school-university partnerships and action research projects, it has been increasingly recognized that in order for school reform to be successful, teachers need to be empowered. The two terms of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment, while often presented as counter-narratives within the literature, are rarely discussed together as simultaneous influences on these partnerships. Yet, within this study, both teacher accountability and teacher empowerment were investigated together and were found to be simultaneously present in this school-university partnership.

The concept of teacher empowerment has been discussed in different school management strategies for educational reform (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Ingersoll, 2007). Empowerment includes how individuals and/or communities create and share knowledge in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies. By being empowered, individuals not only manage and adapt to change, but contribute to change in their lives and their respective environments (UNESCO, 2000). Goyne, Padgett, Rowiki & Triplitt (1999) envision six dimensions to teacher empowerment and five of these dimensions directly relate to the aims found in this school-university partnership. They consist of shared decision making, teacher professional growth, teacher self-efficacy, teacher autonomy, and teacher impact.

First, shared decision making, which is often stressed in school-university partnerships, is perceived as leading to teacher empowerment because it incorporates the teachers’ voice in school decisions that typically has been mute (Ingersoll, 2007). Second, continued professional growth is perceived as empowering as teachers can develop their own self-images as knowledgeable individuals (Levitt, 2008; Ryan, 2005). Action research or a school-university partnership, for example, encourages teachers to be inquiry oriented, skilled, and reflective professionals who co-create a vision for school change. Third, when teachers believe their behaviours and performance can make a difference in the lives of students, they have self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Manning, 2007; Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2007). Teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy willingly undertake challenging tasks that may occur in the school change process (Enderline-Lampe, 2002). In this sense, teacher self-efficacy is believed to be a central component in school-university partnerships and action research. The fourth dimension of teacher empowerment is teacher autonomy. Without a significant degree of teacher autonomy, organizational control may deny teachers the very power and flexibility they need to create effective school change (Hargrove, Huber & Walker, 2004; Ingersoll, 2007; Kinsler, 2010). A school-university partnership and action research may combat this problem as it is based on the belief that teachers are equal partners in making school decisions. Fifth, when a teacher believes that s/he can affect or influence the life of school, they exhibit teacher impact. This could occur, for example, when a teacher believes that a student has achieved a level of success in school that he or she had previously not obtained. This dimension, in collaboration with the other four
dimensions of teacher empowerment, is often found in school-university partnerships and action research.

While school-university partnerships and action research can result in teacher empowerment, it is important to not overlook the fact that “the freer we are to make decisions about ourselves and the worlds around us, the greater our responsibility” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 15). In other words, while school-university partnerships hold possibilities for greater decision-making abilities and empowerment, accountability is often embedded within this position.

In summary, teacher accountability and teacher empowerment often occur in school-university partnerships and action research. Teacher accountability is perceived as controlling teachers work and holding teachers responsible for student outcomes. Teacher empowerment is perceived as teacher-led change in respective environments through shared decision making, teacher autonomy, professional growth, self-efficacy, and teacher impact. While these perspectives to professional development are typically dichotomous, this study illustrates that the relationship between accountability and empowerment may not be that simple. In fact, teacher empowerment and teacher accountability may be two positions that teachers simultaneously hold within school-university partnerships and action research.

Methods and Methodology

This school-university partnership consisted of one university professor, one School Board personnel and thirty-six voluntary elementary and secondary practitioners. The role of the university professor was to instruct the practitioners how to conduct action research and assist them through the process of inquiry described below. The role of the School Board personnel was to act as a liaison between the teachers and the university professor, and to produce a deliverable project (i.e., final report) to the funding body for this partnership. These two stakeholders jointly decided the schedule of events in order to achieve this aim. After this was complete, teachers were recruited to join the project. The role of the practitioners was to create an action research project targeting the needs of their school(s). There were seven action research projects, with two to seven participants in each group. Five secondary school teachers from four different schools worked together on a common project. Four elementary schools worked independently with a team of 6-7 teachers from individual schools. The two remaining teams consisted of 2-3 support teachers who each supported a variety of different elementary schools. Topics consisted of: discovering strategies to improve writing, reading and literacy levels, general student success, improving student achievement through collaborative teacher lesson study and team building, and improving student attitudes through character development.

Six half days were allotted for this partnership during the 2007-2008 school year. Three half days consisted of teaching the practitioners how to conduct action research. Two half days were for in-school professional growth to collect and analyze data. During this time, practitioners were also expected to write a two-page research report that articulated their research question, process and findings. The sixth and final half day meeting at the end of the school year was for all groups to come together, share their findings, and reflect on the process.

A total of 21 teachers participated in this study, with at least one person per action research project. Thirteen practitioners were interviewed and the participants were equally distributed among the different action research groups. All practitioners in this study were contacted via the WSB’s email and conferencing system. A letter of introduction was written and
emailed to all participants. Details of the study, a request to complete an on-line survey, and a request for any volunteers to be interviewed were included. The letter of information and a consent form was also attached to the email. The participants were asked to read the letter of information and had the opportunity to have their questions and/or concerns addressed via email.

The practitioners who participated in the semi-structured interviews were recruited with the same courtesies as those who participated in the survey (Appendix 1). Upon agreement, an interview strategy was arranged that was convenient to the participant. Interviews (Appendix 2) were conducted in person or via email communication. These practitioners were chosen from a larger pool of study participants in order to gain diverse sampling of teaching and personal backgrounds.

Quantitative and qualitative research methods constitute this study. The questions that were asked in the questionnaire were derived from literature written on school-university partnerships, teacher accountability and teacher empowerment. Questions were also derived from documents provided by the School Board. These documents provided a brief snapshot of each project which helped formulate the survey questions.

In the surveys, seven demographic/background questions and twenty-seven questions were posed on the themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment (Appendix 1). These questions arose from the research literature and the School Board documents. The questionnaire was administered to capture general trends, to suggest questions for the interview protocol, and to provide a wider understanding of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment in school-university partnerships.

Once the surveys were completed, the findings from both the surveys and the documents were analyzed and formed the interview protocol for the teachers. In all thirteen interviews, seven teacher/project background questions were asked and the remaining twenty-six questions were posed on both themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment (Appendix 2). These were asked to gain an understanding each person’s experience. Demographic questions were asked in order to gain a detailed picture of those who participated in this school-university partnership.

The data for this research project was analyzed in different manners. First, the surveys were analyzed using an Excel Spreadsheet that was configured from SurveyMonkey. Second, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded according to a priori and emergent codes, and analyzed using MAXqda2 computer software. The School Board documents were read and analyzed according to the themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment that arose from the literature. The survey and interview responses were also analyzed according to the themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment.

Survey participants were asked to submit their demographic information. Of those practitioners who participated, nineteen percent had taught for one-five years, thirty-three percent had taught for six-ten years, fourteen percent for eleven-fifteen years and thirty-three percent had taught for sixteen or more years. Seventy-six percent were female and twenty-four percent were male, which reflects the gender distribution in both this case study and in the teaching profession in North America (Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004; Rowden-Racette, 2005). Seventy-one percent of the survey participants indicated they were not classroom teachers, but rather were Administration or in teacher leadership/support positions, such as a Student Success Teacher (SSI), a Literacy Numeracy Support Teacher (LNST), Learning Support Teacher (LST), English as a Second Language Teacher (ESL) or Guidance (Table 1). Their experience in school-university partnerships was little to none, although many had some research experience or a
research interest. A few practitioners were encouraged to become involved in this partnership despite their hesitancy due to the perceived time commitment or their inexperience. Most volunteered or agreed to participate because they felt it would be an excellent professional growth opportunity. The practitioners who participated in this school-university partnership were teacher leaders who were largely pre-selected – seventy-five percent of the surveyed practitioners stated they were asked by their principal or by the School Board personnel to be involved in this school-university partnership.

Table 1
Survey Participants’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16+</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in the School</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administration (e.g. principal)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNST/Coach</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SST</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis/Results

According to the survey results from which they could choose more than one option, the teaching staff themselves believed that they were selected because they were enthusiastic about the project (50%), had an interest in improving school/student outcomes (78%) or were significantly involved in the school (61%). A few of the practitioners acknowledged that those participants who were selected for this school-university partnership could be considered a “top-notch teacher” (Participant 7). While there were some practitioners who felt that they were “pushed into it” (Participant 9; Participant 13) and felt unable to say no because “usually if your principal asks you to do something you usually have to say yes with a smile” (Participant 1), most participants saw their involvement in this school-university partnership as an opportunity for professional growth or an extension of their present position. In fact, all the interviewees and the survey participants stated that their involvement in the school-university partnership was either moderately (38%) to greatly (57%) enjoyed, on a five point scale.

Accountability expectations in school-university partnerships and action research, like all other aspects of teaching, can be extensive. As reported in the literature above, accountability to
the government’s bureaucracy and rules, to their peers and professional norms, and to their students are often felt by teachers (Anderson, 2005; Kinsler, 2010; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000). This school-university partnership was no different. All forms of accountability discussed earlier, and more, were perceived by the practitioners.

First, accountability to the government was felt by the teachers/administrators. This was illustrated within the documents that the practitioners submitted and were published by the School Board, and the interviews that were conducted in this study. While the practitioners may not have felt that they should be accountable to the government, as only twenty percent of the survey respondents indicated their project was to improve provincial results and thirty percent stated that these projects were created to improve student achievement, the interviews and documents proved otherwise. According to these two data sources, every action research project that occurred in this school-university partnership was tied to a government mandate to improve student success and student achievement. From improving “EQAO testing scores” (Participant 9) to “having that 85 percent graduation rate by the year 2010” (Participant 10), it is clear that government policies and benchmarks were indeed central to the project and the teachers/administrators strove to meet them.

Second, accountability to peers was felt by the practitioners. In fact, 100 percent of survey participants stated that they felt accountable to their peers, in choosing from a list of six items which they could choose as many answers as they wished. This included peers who were not participating in the school-university partnership as well as those who were. For example, Participant 4 stated that she felt accountable to “communicate the results and some of the strategies that were used within the school” and to peers who were not in the research project. She also felt accountable to these same people because she “volunteered for this role as taking part in this research”. Others, to a greater degree, felt accountability to peers within this project. For example, Participant 12 felt accountable for her peers “to have a positive experience in [the project]” and Participant 9 felt accountable to “keep data, keep records to present to the whole [group] because they are relying on me”. This may be because, as Participant 5 explained: “when you’re committed to a project where other people are in the same boat as you, you feel that you’re actually compelled to pull your own weight and every time you meet…your colleagues are depending on you to do your own piece”. For a great number of reasons, mostly due to the fact that they had committed to this project, teachers/administrators felt accountable to their peers both within and outside of this school-university partnership.

Third, accountability to students was felt by ninety percent of the survey participants. According to interview participants, accountability to students occurred because, as Participant 6 suggested: “we’re junkies as teachers, we want the best for our students and for ourselves and we never want to fail through the process”. Participant 1 suggested that the teachers/administrators “were doing it for [the students] and it would have been a wasted year for them if they didn’t get anything out of it”. Some practitioners felt accountable to the students because they felt it was in their job description (Participant 2; Participant 1), while others felt accountable to students to change their personal practice and to be a change agent now that they had useable data driven information (Participant 6; Participant 11). In fact, seventy-five percent of the survey participants stated that improving professional practice was the key reason for these projects to be created. In essence, by working on action research projects within a school-university partnership, these practitioners felt accountable to the students because, as Participant 8 stated, she felt it was her job “to engage and question [her] own practice and look at ways to improve practice, so we can better the students…which ultimately helps the school”. By not using these data and by not
finding a solution to the workable problem, these practitioners felt that they would be letting their students down and themselves down as practitioners.

Fourth, and not referenced in the literature, are teachers/administrators feeling accountable to the School Board. Within this study, this type of accountability was mentioned in two ways. Participant 13 felt accountable to use the professional growth time effectively so that there was not “any unaccountable time”. Participant 11 felt accountable to the School Board “to maintain a focus…dialogue at my school and as an entire group ensure that we were on the right track”. These practitioners felt accountable to maintain a professional focus and thoroughly use the professional time allotted to them in this school-university partnership.

Fifth, accountability to the school community and the community at large was felt. Only ten percent of the survey respondents acknowledged this, but within the interviews it was discussed more frequently. For example, Participant 6 felt that he was “accountable to our students and to our school [because] every school is different…so it is important for us to find our own school culture and work with what is best for our students”. Participant 11 felt accountable to be “more connected to the schools across the system” and Participant 5 felt accountable to the community because “our kids are living in a global economy where they are going to have to be competing against people from all around the world”.

Lastly, accountability to the grant funding body was felt by one practitioner. Participant 8 stated that she presented to the funding body and felt responsible for “talking and working with them at the table and giving them feedback so they could see what we were doing down at our Board, so they knew that their money was working”. She felt accountable to be able to articulate that the action research projects in this school-university partnership had been meaningful to create school change.

As one can understand, accountability felt by teachers/administrators in this school-university partnership is extensive. It includes accountability to the government, peers, students, the School Board, the community, and the grant funding body. However, with this accountability, empowerment also occurred, although perhaps not directly realized by the practitioners.

Within this study it is immediately apparent that the participants in this school-university partnership are attempting to evoke positive change for their students, peers, the School Board, the community, and even the grant funding body. By contrast, the teachers did not appear to be doing it for any other reason but to help others. They were not trying to empower themselves and many did not realize that they were in an empowering position until it was discussed in the interviews. Nevertheless, when comparing Goyne et al.’s (1999) five components of teacher empowerment to the attitudes and activities within this study, one can recognize the many ways the teachers were empowered.

Shared decision making and teacher autonomy, which are often emphasized in school-university partnerships and action research, are perceived as leading to teacher empowerment. This is because shared decision making and teacher autonomy incorporate the teachers’ voice in school decisions they normally have not been a part of (Goyne et al., 1999; Ingersoll, 2007). In this study, shared decision making and teacher autonomy both occurred. For example, in the survey, choosing from five options, one hundred percent of the participants stated that the team collaboratively chose the plan of action. Eighty-six percent of the participants felt that their individual opinion greatly mattered within their team, eighty-one percent felt that their feedback was greatly considered, and ninety percent felt that they had the ability to make their own decisions. This positive feeling of collaboration and shared decision making was also articulated.
in the interviews. There was a general consensus in the interviews that the projects were “absolutely collaborative” (Participant 8), which included everyone putting “their input in, like what needed to be included [in the report]” (Participant 7) to “decid[ing] on roles” and “shar[ing] certain aspects such as data analysis and collection and report writing” (Participant 12). Even in meetings, where an administrator predominately was the facilitator (which may suggest an authoritative position) the teachers felt part of the process. Teachers generally articulated that the administrators “asked first if it was a good time [for a meeting]” (Participant 1) or as Participant 4 stated, “we kind of decided as a group”.

When working with the university professor practitioners also felt they were making shared decisions. For example, one participant thought that this school-university partnership was “a great way to support and work with teachers in a collaborative way. We all learned together [because we could] explore research questions that are of interest to those involved and grounded in student need” (Participant 12). Also, despite the fact that “again the university was being called in as the expert, so to speak” this partnership was felt to be “set up as a partnership, it was set up as a learning process [where] it was nice to actually have the university come and take us through action research, teach about action research, and then through that, we could identify a problem and work on it” (Participant 8). It was due to this “hands on approach” (Participant 8) to research and the “relationship building” (Participant 6) that these teachers/administrators experienced empowerment. They were empowered because they were able to conduct their own research and have “a say in what are the best practices. Rather than the researchers at the university doing all the research and then coming to the teachers…the teachers [were] a part of research” (Participant 7).

A third dimension of teacher empowerment, according to Goyne et al. (1999), is continued professional growth. Professional growth allows teachers to become inquiry oriented, skilled and reflective professionals. Continued professional growth was felt to occur within this school-university partnership by the majority of survey participants. For example, sixty-two percent of the survey participants stated that they greatly experienced improvements in the quality of teaching, eighty-one percent stated that this school-university partnership provided great opportunities to think/talk about their practice, and participants moderately (43%) to greatly (47%) enjoyed their profession more. The interviews also reflected this finding. For example, one participant stated: “I am more confident in my own teaching practice, my own assessment and everything else because I had to do it last year and refine it” (Participant 1). Participant 5 commented on the increase of reflection and dialoguing which was leading to an increase in skills. For example, she stated that the project was “a time for you to do some reflection and [through] that reflection, I think you come to an understanding of, you know you can do [something] that does positively impact students”. Participant 8 also saw this type of reflective, and what she called “purposeful, accountable talk” occurring. In her experience, people who had co-taught with her “want[ed] to dialogue about it on their time… [they] still want[ed] to continue that conversation about what happened in the classroom”. By engaging in on-going professional growth, such as the action research projects that occurred in this case study, practitioners were able to step out of their comfort zone, to learn new things, and try them out in front of others. It also brought people together through collaboration and dialoguing. This in turn allowed practitioners to empower each other, and through support, empower themselves.

A fourth dimension to teacher empowerment is a strong sense of self-efficacy, to willingly undertake challenging tasks, expend greater effort, and show increased persistence in the presence of obstacles. This dimension, like the ones mentioned above, was also felt to occur
in this school-university partnership. For example, almost all of the participants felt that this school-university partnership, on a five point scale, moderately (47%) to greatly (33%) allowed them to take risks as a teacher. In addition, Participant 1 felt a sense of empowerment due to self-efficacy because he felt he was allowed to “pretty much experiment in my classroom with different materials and different lesson delivery techniques to engage the boys in literacy and in reading in particular”. Alternatively, Participant 8 saw how self-efficacy empowered a “reluctant teacher” who she was working with. She felt that the teacher she was working with transformed from a woman who “was a little worried…and very stressed about [a coach] coming into her classroom with everyone and [how] she felt her class was being watched and that would reflect on her teaching abilities” to a teacher who was positive and enthusiastic because she could see “that it really did engage the kids”. Changing practice through self-efficacy can be a method to empower teachers.

Teacher impact is the fifth and final dimension of teacher empowerment in this study. Teacher impact refers to a teacher’s belief that s/he can affect or influence the life of school (Goyne et al, 1999). Within this school-university partnership, many teachers felt teacher impact for a great number of reasons, including: completing research, student improvement, attitude changes and changes in practice. For example, Participant 7 stated: “You know it does empower you to know that wow we did this research…it empowers you because you are seeing change. You know you are making that change in your school which is really wonderful”. Participant 2 felt that “the biggest thing was that end result… It just makes you feel good to see that those students are improving through what we are doing. It’s empowering right. It makes you feel good that you are helping them”.

Discussion

Looking at the evidence in this study, accountability and control were a part of the school-university partnership which used action research as the professional development method for school improvement. Within this partnership, the School Board and the university professor were authoritative figures who organized this collaboration from the top-down. Teachers were recruited last. In addition, the action research projects within this school-university partnership were created because the education system and/or teachers were still perceived as needing improvement. Help was still sought from the outside through a university professor. This in turn, as the literature suggests, caused teachers to feel a high degree of accountability - or multiple responsibilities for performance - to a great number of people and/or organizations. They felt accountable to the government, their peers, students, the School Board, the community, and the grant funding body to increase student outcomes. For example, Participant 9 and Participant 10 felt accountable to the government as these projects were formed to raise EQAO testing scores and the secondary school graduation rate. One hundred percent of survey participants stated that they felt accountable to their peers, and ninety percent of survey participants stated they felt accountable to their students. Participant 11, among others, felt accountable to the School Board to focus on the project and ensure it was completed, while Participant 5 felt accountable to the community because students will be living and competing in a global society. Accountability to the grant funding body was experienced by Participant 8 who felt responsible to give feedback and show them that their money was being used effectively.

While participants felt accountable to improve student outcomes within the action research projects they created in this school-university partnership, they simultaneously
experienced the characteristics of teacher empowerment as outlined by Goyne et al. (1999). For example, one hundred percent of the teachers stated in the survey that they experienced shared decision making and teacher autonomy when they collaboratively chose their research question and how they would carry out their research methodology. Over eighty percent of participants also experienced shared decision making and teacher autonomy when they felt that their individual opinion greatly mattered, that their feedback was greatly considered, and when they felt they had the ability to make their own decisions. Professional growth occurred as participants felt they had greatly improved the quality of their teaching and had great opportunities to think/talk about their practice which resulted in the participants enjoying their profession more. For example, Participant 5 felt that the action research projects gave teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice in order to positively impact students. Teacher efficacy was experienced, as this partnership allowed teachers to take risks, experiment in classrooms, and empower other teachers to take risks in their practice. Participant 1, for example, felt a sense of empowerment because he felt he was allowed to experiment in his classroom in order to discover which materials and lesson delivery techniques were most effective. Lastly, participants experienced teacher impact or the belief that s/he can affect or influence the life of school by completing their research, witnessing student improvement, attitude changes and changes in practice within themselves and other teachers. Participant 7, for instance, felt empowered to know that they conducted the action research and because of it, they were experiencing change.

With both accountability and empowerment simultaneously existing in this school-university partnership, it suggests that the relationship between accountability and empowerment is not a simple one. In this study, accountability and empowerment were not dichotomous positions. Teachers did feel accountable to be change agents in their school, but this sense of accountability was not negatively perceived as the research often indicates it to be. Instead, study participants felt that creating change was a natural outcome of their profession and of their action research projects. The teachers never implied that the School Board or the university professor put pressure on them to create significant change in their schools. It was these participants, these “top-notch teachers” who already had a great interest in school change before the project began, that felt they owed it to their students, their peers and themselves to make educational change occur. They all wanted to create positive school change and were excited when they witnessed that change.

Looking at the data now, it is unclear if teacher accountability led to teacher empowerment, if teacher empowerment led to teacher accountability or if the position of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment is continuously oscillating. This is a limitation of the study. Further research is recommended in order to understand the influences, parameters, and extent of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment in school-university partnerships and action research. Nevertheless, within this study, both accountability and empowerment were embedded within this school-university partnership, and teacher participants found this experience to be rewarding. The majority of the study participants felt that the quality of their teaching improved and they were enjoying their profession more. They did feel responsible to make changes in their schools because of these projects, but they also felt proud, excited, and empowered to witness the change they were helping to create.
Conclusion

Based on these findings, I believe that accountability and empowerment simultaneously exists in school-university partnerships and action research projects aimed at creating school improvement. Yes this partnership and professional development method can be riddled with accountability. Yes change is not easy, and yes these partnerships are often organized from the top-down. Nevertheless, school-university partnerships that use action research as a professional development method for school improvement are rooted in needs and front-line work of teachers. They enhance teacher collaboration and empower them to make changes in their school. They may not be perfect in conception or implementation; however, it is important to note that while school-university partnerships have been around for more than one hundred years, they are continually evolving and increasingly moving toward bottom-up, teacher-driven change (Ciuffetelli Parker, et al., 2008). As Fullan (1999) states: “We are still at the beginning of an intellectual burgeoning… [and] this revolution has barely touched schools”. It is true. School-university partnerships and action research are relatively new concepts in education and they are still evolving. We have yet to see their full potential. With greater understanding of the interworkings of such collaborations, and how the dual role of accountability and empowerment unfolds in action research projects and school-university partnerships, it appears that greater school change is indeed possible.
References


Appendix 1: School-University Partnership Survey

I: Teacher / Project Background Information

1. How long have you been in the teaching profession?
   □ 1-5 □ 6-10 □ 11-15 □ 16+

2. What is your gender?
   □ Male □ Female

3. What is your role in the school?
   □ Teacher
   □ Guidance / LST
   □ Department Head
   □ Other: ______________________________________________________________________

4. In which school-university (action research) project have you participated?
   ______________________________________________________________________________

5. How did you become involved in this project?
   □ You volunteered
   □ You were selected by your principal / school board
   □ Other: ______________________________________________________________________

6. If you volunteered and/or were selected, what factors do you feel led to this decision? (Please check all answers that apply.)
   □ You were enthusiastic about the project
   □ Years of Teaching Experience
   □ Interested in improving student outcomes
   □ Involvement in the school
   □ Other: ______________________________________________________________________

7. Why was your project created? (Please check all answers that apply.)
   □ to improve provincial test results
   □ to improve schools based on governmental policy (i.e. student success initiative)
   □ from institutional needs (what the school staff felt it needed)
   □ to maximize student learning and achievement
   □ to develop and implement of exemplary practice
   □ to engage in meaningful, ongoing professional development
   □ to educate effective teachers
   □ other: ______________________________________________________________________
II. Project Involvement

8. Who was involved in your action research project? (Please check all answers that apply.)

☐ colleagues from your school
☐ colleagues from other schools
☐ a university professor/researcher
☐ a school board member(s)
☐ a principal(s)
☐ Other: ______________________________________________________________________

9. Please explain your role in the action research project?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

10. How often did group members meet?

☐ once a week
☐ every other week
☐ month
☐ every other month
☐ other: _______________________________________________________________________

11. How long was the time commitment given to the project?

☐ 0-6 months
☐ 6-12 months
☐ 1-2 years
☐ other: _______________________________________________________________________

III. Project Formation

12. Did your project consist of any of the following: (Please check all answers that apply.)

☐ introductory workshops
☐ formal training
☐ on-the-job training
☐ regular in-service meetings for all facilitators and evaluators
☐ peer observation
☐ group discussion
☐ documentation / data collecting
☐ strategies to influence policy decisions
☐ other: _______________________________________________________________________

13. Each project had a specific plan of action, how was this plan chosen?

☐ the researcher suggested/chose the plan of action
☐ the school/school board administration suggested/chose the plan of action
☐ the team collaboratively chose the plan
☐ other: _______________________________________________________________________

Brock Education, 20(2), 43-64
14. Each project involved a professional researcher. Did you feel that the professional researcher provided: (Please check all answers that apply.)

☐ research that informed school improvement
☐ support to allow teachers to make use of academic expertise, data and resources
☐ an opportunity for teachers to contribute to national debate regarding student improvement
☐ other: ______________________________________________________________

IV. The Project

15. Did you feel that this partnership helped teachers to advocate for students?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

1  2  3  4  5

Did not advocate Strongly advocated

15.b. Please explain your answer

____________________________________________________________________________

16. Did you feel that your involvement in this project helped you to become a better teacher?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

1  2  3  4  5

No improvement Great improvement

16.b. Please explain your answer.

____________________________________________________________________________

17. Do you feel that this project: (Please check all answers that apply.)

☐ provided opportunities for you and other teachers to think and talk about their practice
☐ enabled you to take a political stance on issues of student improvement
☐ allowed you to take risks as a teacher
☐ had a high consensus of agreeable goals and values
☐ allowed teachers to have a voice and feel that their opinion mattered
☐ allowed you to experience improvements in the quality of your professional life
☐ allowed you to enjoy your profession more
☐ other: ______________________________________________________________

17.b. If you felt strongly affected by any of these answers, please indicate which item and your reasons for feeling so.

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
18. Did you feel that there were any struggles that arose from the project, such as: (Please check all answers that apply.)
- □ miscommunication between the professional researcher and the teachers
- □ miscommunication between teachers
- □ an unreasonable time commitment to attend meetings
- □ an unreasonable time commitment to prepare materials for this project
- □ added stress or pressure
- □ division between you and your colleagues because of your involvement in this project
- □ a false sense of collegiality and friendliness
- □ unequal opportunities for leadership
- □ individuals who exercised power to promote or protect their own interests
- □ feeling silenced and/or unsupported by colleagues, co-participants, or administration
- □ other: _______________________________________________________________________

18.b. If you felt strongly affected by any of the above struggles, please indicate which item and your reasons for feeling so.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

19. Did you feel that your opinions mattered in creating the project? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

1  2  3  4  5

□ □ □ □ □
did not matter greatly mattered

20. Did you feel that your feedback was taken seriously once the project was undertaken? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

1  2  3  4  5

□ □ □ □ □
not taken seriously taken very seriously

21. Did you feel this project put constraints on your teaching, including what should be taught, how it should be taught and how much time you could take to teach it? (Please rank your answer on the scale below)

1  2  3  4  5

□ □ □ □ □
many constraints great freedom

22. Did you feel that you had less autonomy (ability to make your own decisions) as a teacher because of your involvement in this project? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

1  2  3  4  5

□ □ □ □ □
no autonomy great autonomy
23. Did you feel that your involvement in this project made you accountable to finding a successful solution that met the aim of the study? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

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<td>strong accountability</td>
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24. At any time did you feel that your involvement in this project made you accountable to:
(please check all that apply)
- teachers working within your project
- the government and their policies to promote student success
- your students
- the students’ guardians
- the wider community, including potential employers for students

24.b. Please explain your answer.

________________________________________________________

V. Final Questions

25. Overall, would you say that your involvement in this project has been positive?

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<td>not positive</td>
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26. Have there been any outcomes or evidence of change because of this project?

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24.b. Please explain your answer.

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26. In your experience, do you believe that teachers working with professional researchers are the way to create successful school improvements and student learning?

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27. Are there any suggestions you can provide that you feel would make a partnership between teachers and professional researchers more successful?

________________________________________________________
Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you become involved in this action research project?
2. Did you feel pressured to be a part of this project in any way?
3. Have you ever been a part of a school-university partnership before? If so, can you compare this project to that one?
4. Most people who were chosen to be a part of these projects were already holding special positions (i.e. LNST, LST). Why do you think these people were chosen to be in the projects?
   a. Do you think they represent the typical teaching population?
   b. Do you think the people chosen made your project more successful, less successful or it would have made no difference if other teachers were carrying out the same project?
5. Were the approximate years of experience of the people in your group similar or did they vary?
   a. Do you think this had an impact on the project?
6. What were the reasons for this project to be created?
7. What were the intended outcomes?
8. Were the reasons for the project creation the same reason why you wanted to be involved or did you have additional hopes?
9. What was your role in the action research project?
10. How was your specific role chosen?
11. Did everyone have separate roles? If so, briefly explain what they were.
12. What was the role of the administrator?
13. What was the role of the university professor?
14. Did you find the training presented by the university professor helpful? Please explain.
15. Was the training for these projects extensive enough? Please explain.
16. Was writing the final paper collaborative or completed by one individual?
17. How often did group members meet?
18. Who decided that you should meet at this time?
19. Do you feel that these meetings were effective? Please explain.
20. Our project was less than a year in duration, who chose the length of time for the project?
21. Do you feel it was enough time to complete this project? Please explain.
22. In the survey most teachers stated that this project advocated for students either moderately to greatly. Can you tell me how you felt it advocated for students?
23. In the survey there was a strong sense that the students’ opinions needed to be heard and validated. Was this central to the project?
24. The only difficulty that seemed to be mentioned in the survey was stress. Did you feel added stress because of your involvement in this project? Please explain.
25. Were there any other problems that you felt occurred during this project? If so, please explain.
26. What types of opportunities did this project provide for you personally, if any?
27. Research shows that involvement in school reform projects, such as the one you participated in, often increase teacher empowerment, but also increase teacher accountability. How do you feel about this statement?
28. Please explain if there was any evidence of change that came from this project?
29. What types of change were you hoping for? School-wide change or change in personal practice?
30. Do you feel that school-university partnerships are a promising way of improving schools and student learning?
31. Is there any other aspect of this project that you feel is important that I haven’t asked about? If so, please add additional comments here.
Embracing Advocacy:
How Visible Minority and Dominant Group
Beginning Teachers Take Up Issues of Equity

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Abstract

This paper is from a four-year research project that followed graduates of a teacher education program from teacher certification through their first three years of teaching. It focuses on participants’ narratives about their advocacy efforts in both their pre-service practicum placements and their first year as probationary teachers. Our findings indicate that while dominant group white participants chose to advocate from a position of personal conviction (often based on new knowledge of equity issues), the visible minority participants were often summoned by others to advocate. The paper concludes with a discussion about how teacher education might better address advocacy issues, alongside the focus on equity issues.

Keywords: beginning teachers, teacher education, advocacy, social identity, diversity, equity, social justice

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Marian Robertson-Baghel completed her doctorate at York University in 2007. Her dissertation examined the context, text and potential consequences of the reconstruction of teaching and teacher education that occurred between 1987 and 1997. She is currently working as a volunteer with Project Read Bahamas while on leave from her position as a core resource teacher with the York Catholic District School Board. Her research interests include teacher education, critical policy studies and equity.

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Introduction

This paper examines data provided by four graduates of a one-year post-baccalaureate teacher education program about their engagements with equity issues through advocacy in their pre-service program practicum placements and in their first year of teaching. The four participated in a longitudinal study, which followed a cohort of nine of our graduates throughout their first three years of teaching and specifically focused on their experiences with equity issues in their nascent teaching careers. We were interested in determining the following: the success of our teacher education program in instilling knowledge about teaching for equity in our students and the ways in which that knowledge manifested in their beginning teaching careers. This paper focuses on participants’ narratives about and responses to what they saw as inequitable practices in their host schools (as teacher candidates) and in their first (probationary) teaching positions. Specifically we examine how they responded through acts of advocacy to these situations. Our engagement with the data has prompted us to ask: How do social identities figure in beginning teachers’ advocacy efforts?

Theoretical framework

Our analysis is drawn from the extensive literature on advocacy where it is often referred to as a characteristic of “role modelling” (Allen, 1994; Solomon, 1997; Haig-Brown, 1998; James, 2000; Zirkel, 2002). We use the term advocacy to mean acting or intervening on behalf of those with little or no power to act for themselves (Howard, 1999; Ratts and Hutchins, 2009). Teachers who advocate do so through the decisions they make about who and what populate the walls of their classrooms, through curriculum choices (Perry and Fraser, 1993; Grant and Gomez, 1996), and through the relationships they build with their students and their families (Delpit 1995; Quartz and the TEP Research Group, 2003). They participate in ongoing professional inquiry, educating themselves and their colleagues and peers about equity issues (Howard, 1999; Kelly and Brandes, 2001), and critiquing and challenging inequitable school policies and practices (Quartz et al., 2003).

Teachers who are advocates are also described as change agents (Kelly and Brandes, 2001), gate openers (Koermer and Hulsebosch, 1997), and role models (Solomon, 1997). Solomon’s (1997) definition of a “role model” describes the teacher who “intervenes in students’ lives, assuming the role of cultural broker, interceding on their behalf in a sometimes inhospitable learning environment, and authenticating their voices by moving (ethnic) cultural knowledge from the margins to the mainstream of the curriculum” (406). Allen (1994) delineates three qualities of advocates: the ethical, the nurturing, and the symbolic. Whereas some teachers may be summoned by their own moral convictions to be the ethical and/or the nurturing advocate, it is usually only visible minority teachers who are summoned by a particular attribute of their social identities to
be symbolic advocates. Symbolic advocates are seen to be in some way “representative” of the students for whom they are advocating (Allen, 1994; James, 2000).

Catapano (2006) suggests that advocacy requires, “the willingness to take risks, professional self-confidence and professional persistence” (87-88). She suggests that teachers who employ advocacy need to be able to look at a situation through multiple lenses, problem solve and take action to resolve conflicts through reflection and discussion. Given an already overcrowded curriculum and a host of other provincial mandates that put large demands on teachers (probationary teachers, in particular), we are aware of the demands that our summons to advocacy puts on novice teachers. We concur with Johnson, Oppenheim and Suh’s (2009) warning that these demands are potentially overwhelming.

Methodology

Participants

This article focuses on four teachers from our sample of nine: two teachers from visible (racial) minorities (Miriam and Renee), and two from the dominant white majority (Angela and Susan). (All names are pseudonyms.) These participants were chosen as they closely represented the larger sample, providing a cross-section of racial, cultural, and social class identities of the cohort of nine. The distinguishing feature of this smaller group was their stable employment (with probationary full-time contracts) during their first year of teaching, in comparison to the other participants. Miriam is Muslim, the Canadian-born daughter of middle class immigrants from India. Renee came to Canada from Trinidad as a small child with her family. She identified herself as Indo-Caribbean, working-class and Catholic. Angela self-identified as a working-class Catholic Franco-Ontarian whose family has been in Canada for many generations. Susan is of Irish-Catholic heritage and from a middle class family who has been in Canada for generations.

Data Sources

In this article, we focus on the data provided in program exit interviews and in focus group interviews that occurred at the end of their first year of teaching. Individual interviews at the end of the program provided an opportunity to gather rich detail from each participant about their experiences with the program and aspirations for the future. During their first year of teaching, participants provided copies of written assignments that they had completed during their pre-service teacher education. While we did keep in touch through emails and brief telephone calls, we opted not to visit the participants in their first year of teaching, as we had in some cases supervised their practicum, and did not wish to be seen in a similar evaluative role. Mindful of our position as their ‘teachers’
during their pre-service teacher education we were concerned that individual interviews had the potential to be seen as evaluative, rather than reflective. The focus group questions were designed such that participants could reflect on their first year of teaching with their peers, allowing the researchers to ‘take a back seat’.

Data Analysis

The initial coding of data occurred as it was gathered. This allowed the use of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Ongoing analysis of the data from exit interviews and copies of submitted assignments and, to a lesser extent information gathered through informal communication, were used to inform the questions that were asked during the focus group interviews at the end of their first year of teaching. Using these three research methods allowed for triangulation of the data. Data were sorted using open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Advocacy was a theme that emerged from the data itself, rather than a part of our research design. Indeed, in the early stages of our analysis we were initially disappointed when themes such as equity were not evident in the language participants used. With rereading and resorting of data, we realized that it was in the participants’ actions, rather than simply their language, that our former students displayed their commitments to equity.

Discussion

Pre-service experiences (in class)

Students in our program had opportunities in all our courses to explore equity issues. We tried to infuse equity into our teaching, rather than treat it as an add-on to established curriculum. Appendix A lists the explicit components of each of our courses that focused on equity. In addition to course work, the students attended a daylong equity conference that featured hands-on workshops and guest speakers on such issues as poverty and homophobia. They also viewed films that addressed issues of identity and equity, and had access to a huge collection of multicultural children’s literature and teacher resources. In our program, teaching about equity was coupled with a summons to all our students to take on advocacy roles, echoing Guyton, Saxton and Wesche, (1996) in their assertion that all teachers must be “cultural mediators and not just cultural transmitters” (p. 647).

In the exit interviews participants’ responses to questions about the program’s emphasis on equity were favourable, although some held in balance their wish that the program had contained more emphasis on a “how to teach” type of instruction. Analysis of the exit interviews suggests that the program raised their awareness of a range of equity issues and their own social identities and locations.

Susan, one of the white participants in our study, felt that the program made her “a
more aware person” and a “less judgmental person”. She especially appreciated the
daylong equity conference where she attended a workshop given by the principal of a
racially and culturally diverse school that struggled with its relationship with its
community:

[The principal] was making a judgement of some of the parents in the school and
[was] feeling that what they were doing was inappropriate and then came to
realize, no, that this is part of who they are and part of their culture and part of
their relationship with the[ir] child[ren]. ... To me it’s almost one of the hazards of
the job because I just hear so many “ah, the parents this and that.” I hope that I
won’t get that jaded. I think a lot of our courses and discussions really helped us
maybe not go down that path.

Although Angela came into the program highly knowledgeable of equity issues as
they related to poverty and disability (she worked for several years as an educational
assistant with exceptional students), she, as a white person living in a predominantly
white community, had never directly engaged with a diverse population, in terms of
ethnicity and race:

I just didn’t have the experience. Anything I did see were like horror show types
of things that you see on television.... So I did have a very apprehensive, negative
attitude, I think. I tried to make an effort after we did that Diversity Profile. It
wasn’t so much that I had the wrong attitude, it was just that I didn’t have the life
experiences. So I made the point, often, with different people of different
nationalities in our classroom. ... I sort of thought: this is an area where I need to
grow, so I’d ask questions and I went out of my way to familiarize myself with
how they lived, where they came from.

Miri am’s initial response to the equity education she was receiving was to note:
“I guess I didn’t realize that people can be discriminated against in so many ways”.
Poverty was one area she felt she had no prior experience with and knew little about:

So when we started talking about poverty and using macaroni in art. I remember
[one professor] made a comment that there are some children who come to class
without any breakfast and there you are using macaroni.

Renee also gained awareness, but of a different sort: “I know one thing that [the
program’s emphasis on equity] did teach me was that it made me more aware of how
interested I was in it and how important it was to me”. She went on to note that she also
became aware of her “prejudices” about “rich kids” and her assumptions about their self-
sufficiency and wondered if her attitude came from growing up in a family that “didn’t have a lot of money”.

The program also brought their own identities to their attention. Susan noted:
I’ve never felt really marginalized. I think everyone has had situations where you’re the new one or maybe you don’t fit in, but I never [did]. In my experiences I always felt I was in. ... I always - even throughout my high school and university days - seemed to be around others like me. So I feel that I didn’t have a whole lot of experience dealing with other cultures and other socio-economic groups either.

Angela struggled with her attitude towards poverty from the standpoint of someone who had grown up poor:

So I struggle with that one because I feel there are ways out [of poverty]. Maybe not totally and some people choose not to. I see it in the schools, which will be a struggle not to judge people who are coming in with poverty issues. I’ve seen it, never have money for outings for the school and never have this and that when you want it. ... So I struggle with that today and I think because we came from a fairly low-income home and we all thrived to do something, it’s like everybody should. So I can see that it’s a problem because not everybody can and maybe not everyone will have the people to support them.

Miriam noted:

It was when I came to Teachers’ College and we did all these assignments and talking about our identity and reflected on where you’re coming from and that was when I started realizing that I was a minority. But I didn’t realize it before then.

Renee’s interest in equity issues faced challenges from some of her peers:

I heard people say, “Oh you think about it too much”, or “it’s too much of an issue with you.” But it is an issue! I’ve always grown up with it. It was in my face. It’s not like I could ignore it.

Just as Angela welcomed the opportunity to learn from her peers whom she deemed “different,” Miriam welcomed the opportunity to both learn about others and to teach them about herself:

I did have these pre-conceived notions of what “up North” [north of the Greater Toronto Area] is like. But it was really nice because then the people that I was
meeting that were coming from way up North ... it was a new experience too. I met some really good friends. They would ask me - it was really funny because they would hesitate to ask some questions. I would just say, ‘no! Just ask me anything you want to know about me.’ So they asked me about my hijab: “do you wear it all the time?”

What seems most obvious in these responses is how the participants’ learning seemed to be focused on what they had not directly experienced prior to beginning the program: Miriam learned about poverty; Renee learned about the learning needs of privileged children; Susan and Angela learned about cultural and racial diversity. They all signalled that this learning was important to becoming a teacher, and in so doing, acknowledged their own prejudices and ignorance. They all claimed to have grown, in terms of self-awareness and self-reassessment. What seems less obvious is the ways in which their engagements with difference varied depending on their current social identities. For Susan and Angela, their experiences in the program seemed to be about opening up and embracing new ideas. Miriam and Renee had the added component of navigating the ignorance and intolerance of other students in the program, as their social identities seemed to form a nexus with their new knowledge about equity issues in ways it didn’t for the dominant white group participants (Allen, 1994).

**Pre-service Experiences (in practicum placements)**

Their growing knowledge and awareness transferred to their practicum placements. Angela’s awareness of the Native community in her hometown was heightened by what she learned in the program. This awareness extended to her host school and what she observed:

So when we looked into this, about the diversity in our community, I said [to my group members], “you know, the Native population is there and I really hate the way the teachers treat the kids.” They’re blamed for everything in the school; for anything that is stolen. The [teachers are] rude in their attitudes towards the [Native students]. They wouldn’t talk to other kids the way they talk to these Native kids.

Similarly, Susan’s growing awareness produced a critique of the host teacher in her first practicum placement:

I saw instances where I probably felt that if the teacher of that classroom had been more aware or in tune, then maybe it would be a bit of a different atmosphere. ... I’m just thinking of a student who the teacher had told me that came from a home
where the mother was manic-depressive and the father was often not at home. So here was a student who really struggled socially with other students ... and that was just a non-issue for that teacher. So there didn’t seem to be much of taking that into account.

Both these examples demonstrate an important first step in recognizing the practicum as an arena for testing out their new knowledge about equity issues. In small but significant ways, they were challenging school practices (Quartz et al., 2003). However, they also point to the lack of real power that teacher candidates experience in their practicum placements (Solomon, 1997; Kelly and Brandes, 2001). We note the tentative language Susan used: “probably”, “maybe”, “there didn’t seem to be”, as if she were giving her host teacher the benefit of the doubt. Angela shared her critique of her host school only with her peers. Neither discussed their observations with their host teachers or other school personnel.

Susan did have one experience in her second practicum placement wherein her critique of the curriculum being used in the classroom led to some changes:

We were doing pioneers and I remember [our professor] having spoken about the whole issue of presenting pioneers’ way of living back then through just the one view that is often presented in books. That was, again, another example of my [consciousness] being heightened. Having the discussion and hearing [our professor’s] point of view, I did look further and dug a bit deeper and found examples of Black pioneers and their role in the history of pioneers in Ontario. I felt really supported by my host teacher in that.

We suggest that over the course of the year, Susan was gaining an ability to look at things through multiple lenses, to problem solve and take action (Catapano, 2006) in ways that resulted in her educating herself and her host teacher (Howard, 1999; Kelly and Brandes, 2001).

Renee noted that while her first practicum placement had a richly diverse student population, she “was the only brown person (of the teacher candidates) and there weren’t a lot of teachers who were [racial minorities]”. Renee took time to get to know many of the children at her host school, recognizing that her racial identity signified in important ways: “I connected to the kids right away, I think, because I was a minority. They took to me. ...They weren’t used to having teachers in that role”. Renee recognized her potential as a symbolic role model (Allen, 1994).

Miriam was summoned beyond critique to a spontaneous act of advocacy. In her practicum placement, there was one Muslim student in a class that was predominantly Christian. An incident involving this student pushed Miriam to advocate:
Halloween time came and ... everyone was going to dress up and have a big party. [The Muslim student] came up to me, he didn’t come up to the host teacher, and he said, “My dad said I can’t dress up tomorrow” and I looked at him and I said, “That’s fine. It’s okay, you don’t have to.”... He felt comfortable with talking to me as opposed to my host teacher. The next day came and it was fine ‘cause I wasn’t dressed up and he wasn’t dressed up. ... [I went to the host teacher and ...] I said he wouldn’t be dressing up and she said, “Okay! No problem. I understand”. That was it. No big deal and I knew if he had gone to her, it wouldn’t have been a big deal, but he chose to come to me.

Miriam’s response to the boy’s comment was low-key and matter-of-fact. As a Muslim, she understood the boy’s father’s objection his son’s participation in Halloween celebrations and she also understood the need to make this a ‘non-issue.’ She quietly empowered the boy to be who he was.

Angela and Susan used their newly acquired knowledge about equity as a lens through which to analyse their practicum placements. Their ethical standpoint led them to their critiques. Rene and Miriam found themselves identified by others in ways that summoned them to small acts of advocacy. These small acts suggest Solomon’s notion of the “cultural broker” (Solomon, 1997), the visible minority teacher who makes use of her own cultural or racial identity to connect with students: “Using strategically the politics of cultural identity (association with students’ cultural norms and traditions, language forms, and knowledge), they [the visible minority teachers] break down barriers that often exist between students of colour and dominant group teachers” (406). This was particularly true of Miriam, who was summoned, not only to an ethical and a nurturing response, but also to a symbolic one, as she advocated for the one Muslim student in her predominantly white host classroom.

All these examples point to the importance of supportive relationships in practicum settings (Solomon, 2000; Levine-Rasky, 1998). Generally speaking, host teachers were supportive of these teacher candidates’ efforts. Susan’s host teacher welcomed her efforts to broaden the pioneer unit. Miriam’s host teacher supported her handling of the “Halloween” incident. Diversity was welcome. Miriam’s and Renee’s minority status was regarded as a benefit. However, while their efforts were personally rewarding and meaningful, they did not change the status quo. This points to the lack of power teacher candidates have in their practicum placements and to the overall propensity in the teaching profession to maintain the status quo and not ‘rock the boat’ in their host classrooms (Menter, 1989; Levine-Rasky, 1998).

In-service Experiences

Upon finishing their first year of teaching, we brought the participants together for focus
group interviews to discuss their experiences as probationary teachers. To contextualize their narratives about their advocacy efforts we include here information about their schools. Angela returned to the school in which she had been an Educational Assistant, in her home community, to teach a combined grade five/six. Susan secured a position as a grade five teacher in a school, district school board and community with which she was unfamiliar. Renee was hired to teach grade one at a school adjacent to the one in which she had done a practicum placement, but approximately a one hour’s drive from her home. Miriam was hired to teach grade two in a school not far from where she lived. She was the only participant to speak about her hiring experience in terms of equity issues. Miriam learned when she was hired, that her principal was anxious to include in her staff teachers who were, “East Indian because of the population of East Indian students”. Hovering in the back of Miriam’s mind was the question: “Was I hired because of my teaching abilities ... or was I hired because I was wearing my hijab?”

In this first example, Susan reported that the immigrant Portuguese community in her school was marginalised by the administration. She had met with the principal about a Portuguese student she had “some academic concerns about”. The principal told her that the Portuguese community did not see education as important: “His opinion was that, they are hard-working people but education is not the priority. That the parents would mostly want their children just to finish high school and then get into a trade”. His sweeping statement stayed in Susan’s mind when she was called to a special meeting with the special education teachers and the three grade five teachers (of whom Susan was the least experienced). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss creating a modified gifted program for a select group of students:

So as they were leading this discussion around the table in terms of what they were looking for. ... These bells were going off in my head - [and I’m] thinking, why are they doing this? This doesn’t really make sense to me. I spoke up and I said, “Have there been complaints from parents? Why are we doing this?” “No. No complaints, we are just being proactive. ....” And I am thinking to myself, I know I am pretty confident [but] I am not confident with a lot of things being a first year teacher, but the one thing that I was pretty confident about was that I was challenging my students.

When Susan gave her list of students to the special education teacher this teacher suggested that Susan was being astute and explained that the principal had received complaints about the most experienced grade five teacher who was allowing his students to watch television. The principal’s solution was to provide a one-hour block of time for some kind of informal enrichment program. Susan saw this as unjust:

The more I thought about it, the more unhappy I was, because I have a class

*Brock Education, 20*(2), 65-84 74
where I’ve got a group of really high achieving students, who are all Anglo-Saxon, and I have got a group of students who are very low-achieving, some are ESL and they are mostly Portuguese students. So, here is this one hour of precious special ed. time not being given to the students who are going to need it. ... And instead, this time is being used by these parents who have taken the initiative to complain about a teacher, and that issue is not being addressed. If it were the Portuguese parents who were complaining, I don’t know if anything would have been done.

In this example, the most powerful person (the principal) redistributed scarce teaching resources to the most powerful (and vocal) families in the school - the middle-class, Anglo families. Susan recognized the unfairness of the situation, but was not able to openly challenge the principal’s decision as it went beyond her own classroom and involved colleagues. Her powerlessness was heightened by the fact that an even more powerful teacher, the head of the special education department, who agreed with Susan’s analysis was not prepared to challenge the principal either.

Angela advocated for a boy who had experienced a very disrupted education, having thus far been in several schools. The boy lived outside of the school catchment area and the principal wanted to get the student out of the school, using the boy’s lack of residency as the excuse to remove him. Angela provided this account of the situation:

His father is illiterate, his mother left when he was about two years old. He is a little ragamuffin, nobody has ever really taken time for him or helped him, and I just said, “How can we kick this kid out? He is settling down, he is getting along reasonably well”. But [the principal] hounded him for months and as I was speaking with the secretary, I said, “He is going to make him leave. He [the student] just has so much stuff to deal with, I can’t believe the principal is doing this”. And she said, “Especially when such and such a family are being driven in by their parents from out of town.” That father is a very high status lawyer in the town, and nothing is being said about hounding them. I just looked at [the principal] and I said, “How can you do this to this kid?” And he said, “Don’t look at me like that.” I don’t even know how I looked but I was ready almost to cry over it because I thought, this kid has had so many bangs in his life, but he is coming to school.

In the end, the principal allowed the boy to stay. What comes through in this excerpt is Angela’s indignation at the unfairness of the situation. What is unusual about this incident is Angela’s forthrightness in taking on her boss: the person who held the key to her permanent contract with the school board. One of the contributing factors to Angela’s actions may have been her previous long-term presence in the school as an educational advocate.

* Brock Education, 20(2), 65-84
assistant: she and her principal knew each other very well.

Miriam was approached by a senior colleague about a Muslim girl in her class:

A grade three teacher approached me in the school two weeks ago and she said “I have a student in my class and she comes to school wearing a hijab, she takes it off, hangs it on the coatrack and before going home she puts it back on.” ... She was concerned and she asked me to talk to [the student, thinking that] because I’m wearing hijab she might be able to relate better to me.

When advocacy takes on an identity politic, it does little to shift the status quo in relation to social power. We argue that in this incident, Miriam’s senior colleague evaded her responsibility and passed it onto Miriam, assuming that Miriam would understand the issues better and be a better advocate for the girl.

Given Miriam’s experiences of having to explain her religious practices during her pre-service teacher education and that she was aware that she had been hired, in part, because of her ethnocultural and religious background it is perhaps not surprising that Miriam agreed with her colleague’s request and spoke with the girl:

So she had [the student] come up to me in my classroom ... and we had a talk about it. I asked her what was the problem and she said some boys were making fun of her and that’s why she took it off. ... I said “do your parents know that you took it off?” she said “no”, and I said, “How would they feel if they knew?” and she said, “They would be very upset”. And I thought [about that] and then I said, “Okay Do you want to take it off?” And she said “... well...” and I said, “are you taking it off because you want to or just because the boys were making fun of you?” She said “because the boys are making fun of me” and I ... told her to give me the names of the boys so that I could go talk to them, because you know she is only in grade three and I can’t expect her to do a “stand-up-for-your-rights” type of thing. But I told her “this is who you are and if it is who you want to be then be proud of it and don’t take it off because then they win.”

The advocacy issues here are many: Miriam knows and respects different ways of being Muslim. She was careful to determine if this decision to remove her hijab was the girl’s choice - which would require another kind of intervention. She considered the parents’ wishes but did not present those wishes as an ultimatum. She encouraged the girl to be proud of who she chose to be. Later, she intervened on behalf of the female student by using an educative rather than a punitive approach with the boys. This incident illustrates the challenges present when visible minority teachers are summoned by senior colleagues to identity-based advocacy. Miriam runs the risk of becoming “a tireless nurturer” (Allen, 1994, p.192) of not only the Muslim students in her school, but also her
(senior) colleagues.

In her first year of teaching, at a school that was predominantly South Asian, Renee volunteered to help out with the school’s Black History assembly, working alongside another probationary visible minority teacher. Although Renee was teaching grade one, it was the grade seven and eight South Asian students who were involved in this assembly:

The Black History assembly went over very well. We did resource packages for all the teachers. The kids were really interested and we had morning announcements that the kids did. They were participating. They went and they spoke about different things every day. ... We got pretty good feedback from people who wanted to be involved, and most of them were Indian. It was so funny! We probably got over a dozen people [students] who wanted to participate, and they helped us out, and it was fairly well-done. Their participation was really good.

An outcome of this was that the students wanted to have an “Asian Week” to celebrate “Brown History”. Renee encouraged them: “They were joking at the time and we were like, ‘well, you know, maybe we can do something about it.’ But we left it like that.” Whereas the Black History assembly drew a dozen students, the Asian Week plans drew over 50 students “who really wanted to participate. ... Kids were bringing their friends. The room was packed! After that they were like piggy-backing us everywhere!” When the principal turned down the students’ request, “the kids came back to us [Renee and her colleague] just struck that this could have happened. They had such high hopes and I think that really let them down.”

This example suggests several things: firstly, like the Muslim student in Miriam’s practicum class (see above), students will choose their own advocates, those teachers whom they believe will best represent their interests (Allen, 1994; Haig-Brown, 1998). Secondly, like Miriam, Renee saw advocacy as a form of empowerment. She encouraged the students. She did not act on their behalf. Thirdly, Renee took on the Black History assembly because she wanted to learn and gain experience. She saw these opportunities as templates for future advocacy endeavours, such as a school celebration of Eid. Renee understood that advocacy requires education (Howard, 1999).

Both Miriam and Renee felt affirmed by parents who openly expressed their delight that their children had teachers who, in Renee’s words “the kids looked like”. Although parents, in these instances, did not explicitly summon them to advocate on behalf of their children or themselves, their unabashed approval suggests that they saw such advocacy as a possibility. Perhaps embedded in the parents’ responses were their own assumptions of how “alike” these teachers were. Miriam’s school community, although largely Muslim, was also an immigrant and working-class community, with
many iterations of Muslim identity present. Miriam is from a middle class family within which Islamic observance and tradition are quite varied. (For example, Miriam’s mother does not wear hijab.) Renee, although of South Asian heritage, was culturally and religiously different from the immigrant South Asian community in her school, which was mostly Punjabi and mostly Muslim: she was from the West Indies and grew up Catholic. These differences do not preclude advocacy, but they point to the limitations of seeing advocacy based only on identification and cultural transmission. Renee and Miriam’s advocacy was in part, based on points of connection, rather than on ‘matching’ social identities.

The dominant group teachers had very different experiences. They were not summoned to advocacy by administrators, colleagues, parents or students. Instead, they were summoned solely by their own convictions about what they believed was just and equitable. The impact of their social identities on their students and school community was not obvious to them. They did not operate from a place wherein their social identities consciously mattered.

Conclusion

While the data drawn from this small sample do not point to general trends, they do signal a range of experiences and responses beginning teachers had to issues of equity in classrooms and schools. The data presented here provides evidence that graduates of our program were able to identify equity issues. They chose to advocate on behalf of students to diminish the negative impact of inequitable practices routed in differential treatment of students based on their social identities. For example, Susan’s attempt to make her host teacher’s pioneer unit more inclusive and Miriam’s engagement with a Muslim student’s dilemma about Halloween indicate how participants grew in their awareness of equity and developed teaching skills to create a more equitable learning environment for students. Their actions suggest that these neophyte teachers understood that their students differed in terms of social location, and the implications for these differences translated into inequitable school practices to which they chose to respond through advocacy.

The impetus to advocate differed depending on social identities. For Susan and Angela, it was their growing knowledge of equity issues coupled with their personal convictions that seemed to spur their decisions to be advocates. For Renee and Miriam, added to this mix was also the summons from others who marked their social identities as important. Further to this, we believe that there was also a sense of teacher responsibility, wherein beginning teachers often take up their new roles individually and in isolation with a belief that “everything depends on the teacher” (Johnston and Carson, 2000). For the most part, their acts of advocacy were individual and independent of support or collaboration with others, thus highlighting the often “isolated and idiosyncratic process

*Brock Education, 20(2), 65-84*
of “becoming a teacher”” (Flores, 2006, p.2034).

The incidents explored here remind us that beginning teachers have very little power: they are probationary members of the teaching profession. They enter into a profession that has a tendency towards what Menter (1989) calls “stasis”: a preference for maintaining the status quo. Stasis is most likely to create a working environment that is bureaucratic rather than advocacy oriented (Cho et al., 2009). Our participants’ narratives illustrate the complexity of the decisions they had to make to advocate for their students in situations that involved colleagues with greater experience or school administrators who had significant institutional power over them. To borrow Kelly and Brandes’ (2001) term, our participants “shift[ed] out of neutral” to take a stand when the pressures on teachers were to entrench their neutrality.

Implications

Our research engaged beginning teachers at two significant moments in their teaching careers: upon completion of their teacher education and at the end of their first year teaching. Our findings thereby have implications on two fronts: teacher education and teacher induction. What can we take away from these beginning teachers’ experiences that would enhance teacher education and also improve the odds for beginning teachers to remain advocates for issues of equity? The important work we do to make teacher candidates aware of equity issues needs to be balanced with attention to the messy and myriad details of advocacy work. We can no longer simply admonish them to be advocates (Rice, 2009). Incorporating course material and assignments specifically related to advocacy work gives teacher candidates opportunity and permission to act as advocates. This might be in the form of an inquiry project, such as those advocated by Merino and Holmes (2006) and Kelly and Brandes (2010), wherein teacher candidates examine their advocacy efforts “as a point for inquiry, and not as a personal teaching [success or] failure” (Merino and Holmes, p. 12). Under the guidance of informed teacher educators (Zozakiewicz, 2010), teacher candidates learn that advocacy is an important and necessary basic teaching skill, not simply a matter of personal choice.

In terms of teacher induction, in a climate that largely sees mentoring as a way of ensuring that beginning teachers align themselves with government initiatives and mandates (Cho et al., 2009), positioning advocacy as a basic teaching competency would certainly require strong advocates (yes!) within the field. Research has indicated that advocacy must not and cannot be done alone (Athanases and De Oliveira, 2008; Kelly and Brandes, 2010). Teachers, especially beginning probationary teachers require knowledgeable allies for this work.

Our study adds to an emerging body of research that challenges the often taken for granted assumption that beginning teachers are so overwhelmed with fitting into current practice that they cannot or will not be change agents (Athanases and De Oliveira, 2008;
Johnson, Oppenheim & Suh, 2009 and; Kelly and Brandes, 2010). Rather, when novice teachers graduate from preservice teacher education programs that see equity as integral to teaching, rather than as an add-on, they are able to take steps to create more equitable learning for marginalized students (Kelly and Brandes, 2010). We recognized that, like the new teachers in Athanases and De Oliveira’s (2008) study, attempts at advocacy will not always be successful, especially for beginning teachers. Although each participant experienced some success, Susan and Renee backed off when they were faced with inadequate administrative or collegial support. It is important that we teach our students that spaces for advocacy frequently present themselves in the ordinary moments of teaching and in conversations with a colleague, secretary or a student. Catapano (2006) suggests that “[t]eachers must be allowed to start small, within their own world, and then they will develop the confidence to move their advocacy outside the classroom” (p. 89).

In this age of ‘pre-wrapped’ provincially mandated curriculum, report cards, testing and preselected learning materials, our participants advocated with a small ‘a.’ It was their responses in the everyday work of teaching, informed by their new and evolving pedagogy, rather than ministry mandated policy that shaped their actions. This research reinforces the position that teachers need to, and are able to, see teaching as a pedagogical activity rather than teaching as curriculum delivery. We need to teach teacher candidates to recognize when they are summoned by others to advocate. We need to give them permission to choose to advocate and to be cognizant of the standpoint from which they do so. We recognize the importance of exploring the intricacies of building professional relationships as well as networking and community building skills, so that as beginning teachers they can form alliances that will make their advocacy endeavours less risky and more effective.

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References


Brock Education, 20(2), 65-84


Appendix A

Naomi Norquay’s social foundations course included:

- an assignment on family immigration histories
- a school community assignment that required students to interview community members and organizations in the vicinity of their host schools about their community work
- a weekly observation in their host classrooms of the interplay between various social identities and schooling
- two written reviews of books that addressed issues related to social equity, advocacy and schooling.

Marian Robertson-Baghel’s language and literacy instruction course included:

- a diversity profile assignment (a self evaluation of awareness)
- a personal narrative response to *Lights for Gita* (Gilmore, 1994) (a story about a young Indian immigrant’s struggle with the meaning of Diwali in a Canadian context)
- and an in-depth exploration of children’s literature that concerned “migration, location and dislocation.”
- an assignment utilizing Enid Lee’s ‘Identity Petal’ (Lee, 1985), in which students explored their own social identity in relation to the social identities represented in their host classrooms and the social identities that are privileged in Canadian society at large
- an emphasis on learn
Building Scaffolds in the Field: The Benefits and Challenges of Teacher Candidate Peer Mentorship

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Abstract

This paper details the perspectives of teacher candidates who participated in a paired practicum peer mentorship program. A total of 227 dyads of novice first year and mentor second or third year concurrent education students took part in a program that was developed with the intent of providing scaffolding through opportunities to engage in reciprocal learning. Of the 454 potential study participants, 166 elected to complete anonymous electronic post-program surveys documenting their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of this field experience model. Findings indicated that the majority perceived the practicum peer mentorship program to provide increased support through reciprocal learning and collegial collaboration, which enhanced their confidence and professional growth. Challenges included adjusting to the paradigm shift of paired practicum experiences, which necessitates deviating from perceptions of teaching as independent practice and developing contextual supports in collaboration with school board partners. The findings and implications may provide direction for teacher educators seeking to implement paired practicum experiences in attempts to scaffold candidates’ growth and promote their enculturation into collaborative communities of professional practice.

Keywords: paired practicum, field experience, peer mentorship, reciprocal learning, collaborative practice

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Introduction

Becoming a teacher is a complex journey that is fraught with the complexities of concurrently developing knowledge for practice, which is empirically evidenced, and knowledge of practice derived from experience in the classroom context (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). While the value of field experiences is well established, a persistent problem in teacher education is providing support as candidates endeavour to make sense of the knowledge of practice derived through their practicum placements, by relating it to the theoretical knowledge developed through coursework (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Long & Steward, 2004; Loughran, 2006; Mueller & Skamp, 2003). Research has documented that paired practicum experiences (i.e., dyads of candidates placed in the same classroom) can increase support for teacher candidates (Bullough, Young, Birrel, Clark, Egan, Erickson, Frankovich, Brunetti, & Welling, 2003; Bullough, Young, Erickson, Birrell, Clark, & Egan, 2002; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman, & Stevens, 2009; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). However, relatively little research has explored paired practicums, with most studies focused on the experiences of small sample populations. The study described herein sought to document the experiences of a larger participant pool and extend insights gleaned through investigations of paired practicum participants at the same stage of program completion, by documenting the benefits and challenges of paired practicum mentorship between novice and more experienced teacher candidates.

In this paper we profile the experiences of participants in a practicum peer mentorship program that attempted to provide support by placing each novice first year concurrent education candidate in the same practicum setting as a mentor second or third year teacher candidate. We first provide an overview of the literature related to the paradigm shift to collaborative practice, teacher mentorship programs, and the complexities of field experiences. Next follows our methodology, which includes descriptions of the context and participants, as well as our data collection and analysis methods. In presenting our findings we highlight participants’ perceptions of this program, which reveal that this reciprocal learning mentorship model holds significant promise for scaffolding candidates’ growth through collaborative practice. Challenges include adjusting to the paradigm shift of paired practicum experiences, which necessitates deviating from perceptions of teaching as independent practice. Facilitating this shift requires contextual supports and ongoing collaboration with school board partners.

Background Literature

From the perspective of many teacher candidates, “good teaching looks easy” (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010 p. 19). Accordingly, teacher education programs must enhance candidates’ understandings of pedagogical complexity through coursework and field experiences (Loughran, 2006). There is little doubt that field experiences are an integral component of teacher education (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Loughran, 2006). Nonetheless, integrating university course-based and field-based programming, while responding to the evolving context of educational practice, brings forth many challenges (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2009; Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Long & Stuart, 2004).
The Paradigm Shift to Collaborative Practice

Although teaching was once perceived to be autonomous practice, concomitant with increased understandings that students socially construct knowledge, the importance of teachers engaging in collaborative practice has been acknowledged widely (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). This paradigm shift has affected teacher practitioners’ professional learning opportunities and promoted an emphasis on collaborative inquiry-based learning and classroom-based peer coaching, which includes co-planning and co-teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Fullan et al., 2006; Knight, 2009). However, some teachers are resistant to making their private pedagogical thoughts and actions public during collaborative professional learning, which has been attributed in part, to long-held perceptions of teaching as independent practice (Fullan et al., 2006; Knight, 2009). The shift to expectations of collaborative practice affects teacher candidates who enter their profession as insiders who have gained considerable understandings of teaching through their biographical experiences as students (Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992).

Teacher candidates begin their professional preparation programs after thousands of hours in their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, p. 62). The understandings and beliefs derived through their experiences as students can be particularly problematic, as candidates have spent many years observing teaching but they were not privy to teachers’ pedagogical decision-making or the theory that undergirds their practices (Loughran, 2006). This can provoke candidates to enact past practices they have witnessed rather than practices that are currently advocated, and underestimate the complexity of teaching (Loughran, 2006). While familiarity with the classroom context promotes high initial self-efficacy, discovering how thinking and acting like a teacher is much more difficult than it appears can quickly diminish teacher candidates’ confidence (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Loughran, 2006).

Teacher Mentorship Programs

Through familiarizing a novice with their role under the guidance of someone who is more experienced, mentorship programs have been shown to enhance the confidence and competence of teachers and transform a culture of isolation to one of collaboration (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; DePaul, 2000; Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Fullan et al., 2006; Rowley, 1999; Sullivan, 1999). Consequently, in-service mentorship programs are advocated widely, with mentorship between pre-service and in-service teachers perceived to be conventional wisdom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; DePaul, 2000; Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Long & Stuart, 2004; Loughran, 2006; Mueller & Skamp, 2003; Sullivan, 1999).

Various models of mentorship programs for pre-service and beginning teachers have become prominent internationally (Hoban, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). In attempts to identify the salient features of effective programs, Hoban and colleagues (2009) completed a review of 170 studies that represented the international research literature focused on mentoring pre-service, probationary, and recently qualified teachers. Their review documented that mentoring had been shown to increase the confidence, professional growth, self-reflection, and problem-solving abilities of novices and their mentors. Additionally, it fostered enhanced collegial collaboration and lead to a consolidation of mentors’ professional identities. Drawbacks to mentoring identified included the potential for increased stress. Whereas, some mentors experienced stress as a function of increased workloads attributed to meeting the needs of a novice, in lieu of feeling supported, some novices felt stress as a function of being bullied by
their mentor and/or discouraged from using innovative practices.

Hoban and colleagues (2009) concluded conditions for successful programs included the development of effective procedures for pairing and selection of mentors, contextual supports for mentoring, and the preparation of mentors through exposure to mentoring strategies. Effective mentorship was found to be dependent in part, on the will of the novice to be mentored and the skill of their assigned mentor. Questions raised included the potential benefits of separating the mentorship of pre-service candidates by an associate teacher from the assessment of their teaching competence. Additionally, Hoban and colleagues (2009) cautioned that traditional apprenticeship mentorship held the potential to reinforce long-standing transmission-oriented teaching, rather than encourage candidates to implement constructivist-oriented methods.

In order to challenge the status quo and promote collaborative inquiry and practice, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2009) advocated the development of reciprocal learning mentorship models. In contrast to apprenticeship models wherein the mentor is assumed to be the more knowledgeable other, within a reciprocal learning model novices and mentors adopt an inquiry stance, engage in collaborative reflection, and co-construct new understandings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009). Reciprocal learning mentorship programs are founded on principles of interdependence, mutual respect, and acknowledgment that novice and mentor participants will learn from and with one another, through critical inquiry focused on socially constructing knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Concomitant with traditional apprenticeship mentorship between pre-service and experienced teachers has been an expectation that this model will prepare candidates for autonomous classroom practice (Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009). However, preparation for independent practice is inconsistent with the current emphasis on reflective collaborative practice (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2009; Fullan et al., 2006; Knight, 2009). Moreover, Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) asserted that to prepare future teachers for sustained commitment to collegial collaboration, pre-service field experiences must go beyond developing candidates’ collaborative and reflective abilities, and also promote reciprocity. That is, candidates should be provided with field experiences that explicitly foster interdependence and promote candidates’ commitment to the belief that they “have an important role in providing personal and professional support to each other (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008, p. 1808).”

Field Experience Dilemmas

Promoting field-based reciprocity between candidates can be difficult, as most commonly their practicums are completed individually in classrooms under the supervision of hosting associate teachers and university faculty supervisors, who share mentoring and evaluating responsibilities (Foster, Wimmer, Winter & Snart, 2010). While this model continues to be prevalent, significant dilemmas have been identified in perpetuating this “norm” (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Long & Stuart, 2004; Loughran, 2006). Moreover, the field lacks sufficient empirical evidence of the effectiveness of alternative practicum models (Foster et al., 2010).

A persistent problem with many field experience models is the potential disconnect between understandings derived through coursework and the practical knowledge candidates develop through their classroom experiences (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1999, Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Loughran, 2006). In part, this has been attributed to the fact that university faculty often have little involvement in candidates’ field-based experiences (Foster et al., 2010). Thus, the relation between candidates’ coursework and field experiences may not be examined (Long & Stuart, 2004). Furthermore, teachers’ pedagogical decision-making may not be analyzed or
understood (Loughran, 2006). Assuming that this will occur in the field is problematic, as associate teachers are focused primarily on providing learning opportunities for their students, which may render it difficult for them to devote attention to articulating their pedagogical reasoning in attempts to scaffold the growth of teacher candidates (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010).

Moreover, lack of communication and collaboration between universities and their school-based partners may create situations where there is little understanding of the practices advocated and implemented in one setting and the other (Foster et al., 2010). Indeed, lack of communication can result in candidates receiving “mixed messages” particularly if they have insufficient support in the field during educational paradigm shifts (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Reconceptualising teacher education as a process of enculturation into supportive learning communities has led to the creation of programs where dyads of candidates take part in shared practicum experiences (Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Goodnough et al., 2009; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). Investigations have documented that paired practicum participants perceived this model to enhance collegial collaboration, support, and learning for both candidates (Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Goodnough et al., 2009). While potential drawbacks included candidate compatibility, competition, lack of freedom to innovate, and/or enhanced dependency, researchers concluded they were outweighed by the benefits of paired practicum experiences (Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Goodnough et al., 2009; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005).

The study described herein investigated the perceptions of participants in a paired practicum peer mentorship program. Although previous research had investigated the experiences of paired practicum participants at the same stage of program completion (Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Goodnough et al., 2009; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005), it appeared that little if any research had investigated a reciprocal learning model of paired practicum mentorship between novice and more experienced teacher candidates.

Methodology

This longitudinal study consists of three phases, with this paper focused primarily on the second. The first phase (October 2007-April 2008) investigated the experiences of 17 dyads of teacher candidates who participated in the pilot project. The second phase (January 2009-April 2009), described herein, investigated candidates’ perceptions of the first year of full implementation of the peer mentorship program. Data collection is in progress for the third phase (January 2010-April 2010) investigating the second year of full implementation.

Context

This study took place within a 4-year concurrent education program offered at a small regional campus of an Ontario Faculty of Education. The regional campus serves a total population of approximately 700 teacher candidates in years one to four, with between 140 and 230 in each program year. The practicum component of this program was developed in part, based on the belief of the founding director that early and ongoing immersion in the field would enhance the development of effective teaching skills. Consequently, the program includes a placement in the same classroom each Monday (excluding exam periods) from late October through March, for a total of 15 single days followed by one full week in April, for a total of 20 days per annum. This practicum structure was implemented for years one though three, with fourth year candidates
participating in two four-week block placements.

**Peer Mentorship Program Development**

The practicum peer mentorship program was developed within the theoretical framework of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1986) by the current program director and faculty. Specifically, it sought to provide scaffolding through opportunities for first year candidates to be provided with the support and assistance of a second or third year candidate who was perceived to be a more experienced other within the novice’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986). The mentorship program also drew on Bandura’s (1986) theory of observational learning and sought to enhance candidates’ self-perceptions of competence by providing vicarious experiences watching teaching modelled by a peer. The saliency of vicarious experiences is related directly to how closely the observer identifies with the skills and context of the individual observed (Bandura, 1986). Consequently, we believed that observing one another teach in the same classroom held the potential to positively impact the efficacy of both candidates.

The peer mentorship program was intended to foster collaboration and engagement in reciprocal learning, as well as provide a vehicle for upper year candidates to share understandings acquired throughout the program with year one candidates. In part, the suggested activities were based on the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) that provides for mentoring of first year teachers by experienced Ontario teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). While the NTIP program notes the importance of tailoring mentoring activities to participants’ needs, recommended experiences include classroom observations, co-planning, professional dialogue, and shared professional development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

In keeping with many of the suggested NTIP experiences, the recommended practicum peer mentorship activities included classroom observations, collaborative planning, team teaching, and professional dialogue. Mentors were expected to become familiar with the strengths and needs of their novice and model professionalism in planning, implementing, and assessing student learning. Novices were expected to initially ask questions, set goals, observe carefully, and engage in collaborative reflection, with their involvement in co-planning and co-teaching increasing gradually throughout the duration of the practicum. Dyads placed in the same classroom were expected to meet for thirty minutes per practicum day to review lessons, co-plan, share observations, and reflect on new learning, with their associate teachers participating in these meetings whenever possible. Importantly, candidates were expected to be non-evaluative with one another. In keeping with our past practices, associate teachers and university faculty advisers shared responsibilities for the assessment and evaluation of candidates’ teaching.

**Pilot Mentorship Program**

In the year prior to the study described herein, a pilot project was implemented with seventeen pairings of novice first year and mentor third year candidates placed in the same practicum classrooms. All pairings were located in the same school, where the program was developed collaboratively with the pilot site principal who requested that all seventeen staff members participate as associate teachers, as she perceived that hosting the mentorship program held the potential to affect student achievement positively. Analysis of the perceptions of teacher candidates and associate teachers gathered through focus group sessions revealed the strengths of the pilot program to be the abundant opportunities for reciprocal learning, which were perceived.
to foster the growth of both participating candidates. Challenges included associate teachers’ lack of clarity with respect to the differentiated expectations of novice and mentor candidates, in addition to mentors’ perceptions of the additional time and effort required to assist the novice. Overall, the benefits of the pilot program were perceived to outweigh the challenges. Consequently a paired practicum peer mentorship program was implemented with all novice candidates during the 2008-2009 academic year.

Full Implementation of Practicum Peer Mentorship

As there were 227 first-year and 140 third-year candidates, full implementation necessitated the development of pairings between first-year candidates and either a second-year candidate (with 4 weeks practicum experience), or a third-year candidate (with 8 weeks practicum experience). Wherever possible, novices and mentors were placed in the same classroom with the same associate teacher. In order to differentiate roles and responsibilities, mentors began their practicum in October with novices commencing at the beginning of the second term in January. This change from the pilot program was intended to clearly delineate for associate teachers the roles of mentors and novices, as well as provide mentors with opportunities to develop understandings of the classroom context in preparation for later supporting the novice.

In order to provide consistent information with respect to expectations, all participating teacher candidates took part in pre-program workshops that reviewed the rationale for the peer mentorship program, the importance of professionalism, and the expectations of reciprocal learning. Consistent with the pilot program, intended mentoring experiences included classroom observations, collaborative planning, co-teaching, and professional dialogue. Additionally, it was recommended that Curriculum Methods course instructors include an increased emphasis on mentorship and collaborative practice, with particular attention to strategies for reciprocal learning through co-planning and co-teaching.

The practicum handbook provided to all teacher candidates and associate teachers was revised to include an overview of the peer mentorship program together with expectations of novice and mentor candidates. In attempts to build school board partners’ understandings, the rationale for the mentorship program was explained in correspondence soliciting associate teachers willing to host two teacher candidates.

Participants

A total of 454 teacher candidates were involved in the peer mentorship program. All 227 first-year candidates were allocated a mentor, primarily on the basis of requests for practicum placements in the same geographic area or school board. The mentor group was comprised of 117 third-year candidates and 110 second-year candidates. A total of 211 pairings were placed as dyads in the same classrooms. Due to geographical constraints or lack of associate teachers in some locations who were willing to host two candidates, 16 novices were not assigned mentors in the same classrooms. In these instances, novices were assigned mentors placed in another classroom in the same school or in a different school in close geographic proximity.

Approximately one third of the 454 potential participants elected to take part in this study, which was presented as an opportunity to provide feedback that would be used to improve the peer mentorship program. The 166 respondents included 70 year-one candidates, 40 year-two candidates, and 44 year-three candidates, who were placed in the same classroom as their partner. Of the 32 candidates who were not placed in the same classroom as their mentorship
partner, respondents included six year-one novices, and six year-two or year-three mentors.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data were gathered through responses to electronic surveys completed anonymously at the conclusion of the mentorship program. Participants were asked to use a five-point Likert ordinal scale to rate the frequency with which they engaged in each of the intended activities with their mentorship partner. They also used a five-point Likert ordinal scale to rate their perceptions of how prepared they were for their role in the program, as well as how beneficial the mentorship program was for novices, mentors, and associate teachers.

Additionally, to solicit participants’ perceptions of the factors that affected their peer mentorship experiences, the survey included the following four open-ended questions:

1. Comment on the effectiveness of the strategies used to prepare you for your role in the mentorship program.
2. Please describe the strengths of the Concurrent B.Ed. mentorship program.
3. Please describe any aspects of the Concurrent B.Ed. mentorship program that require improvement and suggest alternative changes.
4. Do you have any additional comments about the Concurrent B.Ed. mentorship program that you would like to make?

In April 2009, an invitation was emailed to all potential participants who were asked to complete the survey within a two-week time period, with a reminder inviting them to do so sent one week later. Anonymity was assured, with all responses returned to a research assistant who signed a confidentiality agreement. In clustering responses, the research assistant stripped these data of any identifying information (e.g., names of associate teachers). The responses of all cases where the mentor and novice were not placed in the same classroom were clustered for analyses.

While descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, participants’ anecdotal responses were analyzed through coding and categorizing of key idea units as described by Creswell (2002). The idea units were next collapsed into categorical clusters and themes representing participants’ perceptions. Two researchers independently reviewed the qualitative data, prior to meeting to present their interpretations and negotiate a shared understanding. Following this process the key overall finding was that this program fostered collaborative practice, with two broad themes representing the impact of doing so. The most prominent theme was the increased support peer mentorship provided for teacher candidates, with the second theme the complexities of responding to the paradigm shift of shared practicum experiences.

In presenting our findings we include the mean Likert ordinal response to each survey question, together with supportive quotes that illustrate the themes identified through analysis of participants’ anecdotal responses. This research design and format of presentation contextualizes the saliency of participants’ responses, while also giving voice to their perceptions of the factors that affected the quantitative results (Gay & Airasian, 2003).

Findings

Analysis of the survey responses revealed that the peer mentorship program achieved the objective of fostering collaborative practice amongst candidates in the practicum setting. Indeed, most participants who were placed in the same classroom setting frequently engaged in the
recommended mentorship activities. These included collaborative planning, teaching, and reflection, as well as engaging in dialogue about how to respond to the expectations of their associate teacher and those of this teacher education program (e.g., lesson template use). Table 1 outlines the mean frequency with which candidates reported taking part in these activities.

Table 1
Engagement in Collaborative Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Same Class Placement</th>
<th>Different Class Placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEd Program Expectations</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Teacher Expectations</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Lesson Planning</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Teaching</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Reflection</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Items rated on 5-point scale (1=never, 2=seldom, 3=sometimes, 4=usually, 5=consistently)

In engaging in these collaborative learning experiences, participants uncovered the strengths and challenges associated with implementing this peer mentorship program. Two key themes identified were the increased support this program provided for teacher candidates and the complexities of the paradigm shift to shared practicum experiences. The latter theme was further subdivided into several subthemes including the need to foster perceptions of teaching as collaborative practice, the importance of contextual supports, and the tensions negotiated by mentors as a function of the revised program expectations. The two themes are presented next.

**Support for Teacher Candidates**

Candidates rated their perceptions of how beneficial practicum peer mentorship was for novices, mentors, and associate teachers (Table 2). Not surprisingly, candidates’ responses revealed perceptions that this program was most beneficial for novices placed in the same classroom as their mentor. Interestingly, the program was also perceived to be of moderate benefit to novices who were not placed in the same setting as their mentor partner.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Participant</th>
<th>Same Class Placement</th>
<th>Different Class Placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novices</td>
<td>n = 70</td>
<td>n = 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Teachers</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Items rated on a 5-point scale (1=not at all, 2=minimally, 3=moderately, 4=very, 5=highly)

Consistent with the quantitative results, the most salient theme identified through analysis of participants’ anecdotal responses was the support this program provided, particularly for novice candidates. An overwhelming majority (i.e., eighty-five percent) of novice respondents were extremely positive about participating in this program and identified its strength as the abundant support provided through collegial collaboration, which fostered increased confidence.

*You have someone to rely on when you are stuck. Together you stand strong to figure things out and come up with ideas.* (Novice)

*There is someone there to help you come up with ideas and to teach with you. It allows us to have more confidence in ourselves as teacher candidates.* (Novice)

*Helps the novice generate lesson plans, gain resources, gain knowledge and understanding of team teaching. Helpful for both the novice and mentor in discussing different ideas and experimenting with them. Without my mentor I would have been lost on the first few days!* (Novice)

Importantly, one third of respondents reported greater ease adopting an inquiry stance with their mentorship partner, than with their associate teacher. This increased willingness to seek answers to questions about expectations and the needs of students in their classrooms was perceived to clarify expectations, enhance understandings, and foster professional confidence.

*The mentorship program allows for first year students to interact with another student teacher about the classroom they are in. It isn’t always easy to talk about everything regarding the class with your associate teacher. I was less stressed out going into an unfamiliar environment when there was another student there with me. She gave me a lot of guidance as to how to deal with certain students.* (Novice)
I believe that the mentorship program is beneficial as it gives the first year student the opportunity to feel more comfortable to ask more questions, and to see exactly what is expected of them in practicum. (Novice)

Enables both students to ask questions without feeling silly or stupid. (Year 3 Mentor)

The vast majority of mentor respondents (i.e., eighty percent) echoed the novices’ perceptions of the benefits of enhanced collaboration and reciprocal learning. While many noted that novices derived the greatest benefit from the program, fifty percent of mentor respondents highlighted how mentoring enabled them to consolidate their learning and articulate their teaching beliefs, which led to a stronger sense of their professional identity as a teacher.

As a mentor it got me to think more about what I was doing because I had to explain some of the strategies I used. Commenting on my novice’s strategies also got me to think critically. (Year 3 Mentor)

This program gave both of us great experience. I had the chance to take the lead and explain teaching to someone who had no experience. This helped me to further understand my own role. It kept me on task and working hard because I had to be a role model for someone. It definitely taught me the importance of teamwork. (Year 2 Mentor)

The biggest strength of the program was that I learned about who I was as a teacher. Sharing my different beliefs on classroom management and what it means to be a teacher really helped me grow. (Year 3 Mentor)

Importantly, over the duration of the program novices and mentors appeared to increase their perceptions of the benefits of the program.

The idea at first seemed horrible, but things turned out pretty well. I think that more opportunities for team teaching help the mentor and the novice. (Year 3 Mentor)

At the beginning I was unsure about the mentorship program. However, after a couple of months into the program I felt it is to everyone’s benefit. Knowing another fellow student who was in my position last year was going to be in the classroom with me, made me less stressed and my transition to the class was smoother. I also had the support of someone to ask questions without disrupting the teacher in front of the class. Team teaching in the beginning was also important and fun. My mentor was a great support and helped me through lesson plans and answered any of my questions. I highly recommend this program. (Novice)

As a function of their positive experiences, fifteen percent of novice respondents expressed excitement at the prospect of transitioning to the role of mentors and providing support to a novice. Importantly, these expressions of interest were unprompted, as the survey did not solicit candidates’ attitudes towards future participation in the peer mentorship program.

I can’t wait for next year to become a mentor and help a first year student through
everything I just went through. (Novice)

Being in first year I was not scared and it didn’t force me to be a leader. Now, I feel that I am ready to be a leader! (Novice)

This is a great idea! I’m excited to be a mentor next year! (Novice)

I loved my time in placement this year and can not wait for next year! I really enjoyed the mentorship program and would love to be a part of it again! (Novice)

In sum, the mentorship program was perceived to be beneficial by the majority of participants, who appeared to value the support they derived through the collaborative learning it fostered.

**Complexities of the Paradigm Shift**

Nonetheless, altering the concurrent education program expectations to engagement in shared rather than individual practicum experiences was a paradigm shift that appeared to bring forth challenges for teacher candidates, associate teachers, and faculty members. These included the complexities of fostering perceptions of teaching as collaborative rather than individual practice; developing contextual supports for teacher candidates and associate teachers; and, the tensions experienced by mentors who after engaging in individual field experiences for one or two years, were asked to share their field placements and collaborate to support their partner’s professional growth. Not surprisingly, these complexities brought forth many dilemmas.

**Teaching as Collaborative Practice**

One third of participants’ responses revealed that candidates and/or associate teachers appeared to hold perceptions of “teaching” as independent, rather than collaborative practice. In some instances this appeared to provoke associate teachers to discourage candidates from engaging in co-planning and co-teaching. In other instances candidates’ perceptions of teaching as individually facilitating student learning, seemed to promote competition for “teaching time” rather than shared responsibility for co-teaching.

Associate teachers need to be more aware of the expectations. My novice and I very rarely got to co-plan or co-teach any lessons. (Year 2 Mentor)

I felt that I was not given enough time for my own lessons. (Novice)

Mentors should be aware that their novice should be co-teaching with them. I never co-taught with my mentor because she felt it was unnecessary. (Novice)

Neither gets as much experience as if they were on their own in the classroom. The novice and the mentor are continually battling for teaching time. (Year 3 Mentor)

Additionally, in lieu of experiencing freedom to innovate, some novices perceived their contributions to co-planning to be undervalued by their mentor partner. More positively, this was perceived to decrease as novices gained experience in the classroom context.
I found that my mentor was a very dedicated and over achieving individual, which is great. However with team teaching I sometimes felt that my ideas were vetoed because my mentor felt her idea was better or maybe it was because she really felt my contribution would just not work the way she saw the lesson. However this happened less and less as the year went on. (Novice)

**Development of Contextual Supports**

A significant challenge of this model was securing paired field placements for all candidates. Lack of availability in some locations necessitated placing 16 novices in different classrooms than their mentors. As this was unanticipated, there were no contextual supports developed to facilitate mentorship between candidates in different settings. Not surprising, these anomalous models were not perceived as positively. Respondents reiteratively stated that mentorship partners should be placed in the same classroom.

The problem that I have with this program was that my mentor was placed in a different school. She did not attempt to contact me or aid me in any way. It was not very helpful to me at all. Mentors should be in the same class as the first year student. (Novice)

My mentee was in the other classroom and although I did enjoy her presence and working with her I found it difficult to assist her as I would have if she was placed with me and I could see her actually teach. (Year 2 Mentor)

In rating their perceptions of their preparation for their respective novice or mentor roles (Table 3), most participants indicated they were moderately or very well prepared.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Self-Perceptions of Preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Same Class Placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for Mentorship</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Items rated on a 5-point scale (1=not at all, 2=minimally, 3=moderately, 4=very, 5=highly)

However, analysis of participants’ anecdotal comments revealed that the methods intended to prepare candidates for paired practicums were not always implemented. For instance, it was recommended that Curriculum Methods courses include an explicit focus on reciprocal learning through co-planning and co-teaching strategies. While some year two candidates reflected...
positively on these experiences, others reported that these support mechanisms were not in place.

*I was very prepared to go into a classroom after all the workshops and class experience I gained. It made my transition much easier and less stressful. In the classroom situation I used many methods and strategies pointed out by the experienced and helpful prof.* (Year 2 Mentor)

*We did not discuss mentoring in our methods class so the presentation was the first time we were provided with an opportunity to learn our role.* (Year 2 Mentor)

*I don’t believe we were really told what we were supposed to do until one week before. I did not feel prepared at all and I know that my novice had no idea what he was supposed to be doing.* (Year 2 Mentor)

Additionally, it appeared that many of our board partners were unprepared for the practicum program change and that it was ineffective to provide information about the peer mentorship program to school boards through written correspondence and to associate teachers through the practicum handbook. Forty percent of respondents recommended enhancing associate teachers’ understandings of the goals of the mentorship program, particularly the expectations of novice and mentor candidates.

*Associate teachers need to understand the very purpose of the mentorship program, because my associate definitely did not understand at all.* (Year 2 Mentor)

*Associate teachers need to be better informed on some things.* (Novice)

*Having all the associate teachers understand the meaning of a novice and a mentor and how much each student teacher is supposed to be teaching in a day.* (Novice)

**Tensions Negotiated by Mentors as a Function of Revised Expectations**

Most mentors took part in their first field placements without peer support. In some instances, they appeared to view the introduction of the peer mentorship program negatively or perceive it as inequitable.

*I believe it would have been an awesome experience if my mentor “liked” it, rather she did not like it.* (Novice)

*Training the competition creates animosity.* (Year 2 Mentor)

*I feel first year would benefit a lot more from the old style of the program, where they have their own class and set expectations.* (Year 2 Mentor)

In part, mentors’ perceptions of inequity were promoted by the adoption of anecdotal progress reports for novices that detailed their overall strengths and growth areas, in lieu of the past practice of evaluating their competence by rating their performance (i.e., inadequate, satisfactory, proficient, exemplary) in many areas. This change in the assessment of novices’
practicum experiences was implemented at the same time as the mentorship program. Fifteen percent of the year-two respondents shared perceptions that the status quo should have been maintained, with novices experiencing the same formal evaluations used previously.

*I think the year one’s should have to be evaluated so that they understand what it feels like and are more prepared to deal with it later.* (Year 2 Mentor)

*There should be specific guidelines for the first years about what they are supposed to do and some sort of follow-up to ensure they have done it, such as formal evaluations for first years.* (Year 2 Mentor)

We are very appreciative of our teacher candidates’ willingness to share their perceptions of participating in this program. Their insights have enhanced our understandings of the complexities of this change and have provided direction for refinement of this program.

**Discussion**

We acknowledge the unique context of this concurrent education program, particularly the opportunity to have a designated day of the week throughout the academic term allocated as a practicum day for all first, second, and third year candidates. Nonetheless, the findings of this investigation provide important sights for the field of teacher education about the benefits and complexities of implementing practicum peer mentorship. These insights may be particularly relevant to those developing or refining concurrent education programs and/or two-year consecutive Bachelor of Education programs.

Consistent with the findings of others (Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Goodnough et al., 2009; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005), the experiences of participants in this program support the implementation of paired practicum teaching, despite the potential challenges of candidate compatibility, competition, and freedom to innovate. Our findings document how, analogous to the experiences of participants in other mentorship programs (Hoban et al., 2009), practicum peer mentorship can foster candidates’ self-confidence and professional growth. Importantly, engaging in mentorship activities with a partner within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986) who was not responsible for evaluating their teaching competence, appeared to foster interdependence and increase candidates’ willingness to adopt the inquiry stance requisite to collaborative professional learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Significantly, this program promoted collaborative field-based learning between candidates (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Collaborative educational practice is advocated widely (Bullough et al., 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Fullan et al., 2006). However, developing productive collaborative learning communities requires time and ongoing attention to promoting reciprocity (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Fullan et al., 2006; Knight, 2009). We hope that the positive experiences of many participants in this program, particularly those who were novices, will help to lay the foundation for continued collaborative practice within and beyond this concurrent education program. Indeed novice participants’ spontaneous expressions of interest in becoming mentor candidates provide reason for optimism that there is the potential for this to occur (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Educational paradigm shifts are complex, with those involving the creation of collaborative learning communities necessitating the development of strong support systems (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Additionally, requisite to the
implementation of effective mentorship programs are the development of contextual supports (Hoban et al., 2009). Regrettably, in some instances it appeared that the support systems developed for the practicum peer mentorship program were inadequate and/or ineffective.

The pilot mentorship program was developed collaboratively with our board partner in one school site. On the basis of perceptions of the effectiveness of the pilot, we moved quickly to full implementation without involving many of our partner boards in the decision-making process. In doing so, we did not acknowledge the importance of collaboration in the development of innovative field practicum models (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010). Not surprisingly, addressing the intent of the implementation of practicum peer mentorship through the provision of written material to our school board partners appeared to be insufficient. Program changes that involve paradigm shifts in the expectations of teacher candidates require close collaboration and communication with school board administrators and associate teachers (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Indeed the ongoing effectiveness of this program is in part, contingent upon the understandings and support of our field-based partners. We hope that in revising our communication methods and engaging our board partners in collaboratively refining this program, we will be able to create stronger partnerships and enhance associate teachers’ willingness to promote collaborative practice and host dyads of candidates.

In addition to fostering enhanced field-based support for this program, we need to create support structures for anomalous mentorship pairings. Given that our candidates are able to request their practicum location from a selection of 13 partner school boards (in part, to develop contacts for future employment), it is possible that demographic constraints will continue to necessitate some mentorship pairings where candidates are not placed in the same classroom. Consequently, we need to create opportunities for these candidates to engage in reciprocal learning through spending time in one another’s field placement settings. We concur with Hoban and colleagues’ (2009) assertion that attention to the creation of compatible mentorship pairings would be ideal. However, we recognize that this may be difficult in this context where candidates self-select the geographic location of their practicum, and are in the early stages of developing their professional identities.

As we embarked on full implementation of this program, we acknowledged the importance of explicitly connecting candidates’ field experiences with their coursework (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Long & Stuart, 2004). Therefore, we advocated that Curriculum Methods courses focus on mentorship and collaborative practice, with particular attention to strategies for reciprocal learning. However, not all candidates perceived their course experiences to have provided this support. As such, we need to strengthen the emphasis on reciprocal learning throughout candidates’ coursework experiences in our program. Additional supports for mentorship participants, such as workshops focused specifically on collaborative practice, with attention to strategies for co-planning and co-teaching, may also be warranted.

Through examining our participants’ perspectives, we have learned that we may have unintentionally provided them with “mixed messages” about their roles and responsibilities. Our intent in differentiating between the roles of mentor and novice candidates was to be responsive to the pilot program participants’ recommendations. However, clearly demarcating the differentiated roles of candidates may have fostered perceptions of this peer mentorship program as an apprenticeship, rather than a reciprocal learning model (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Hoban et al., 2009). This highlights the importance of explicitly promoting teacher candidates’ and associate teachers’ increased understandings of the expectations for reciprocal learning and peer scaffolding through collaborative practice. In fostering these understandings, it may be beneficial to outline how this model differs from traditional apprenticeship mentorship.
We also acknowledge that the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) may have contributed to the reluctance of some candidates to engage in collaborative practice. Moreover, our teacher education practices may have reinforced rather than disrupted this perception, as candidates were told about reciprocal learning through co-teaching and co-planning, yet these practices are not modelled by many instructors in our program. We concur with Loughran (2006) that modelling the practices we advocate and articulating our pedagogical decision-making as we do so, may enhance candidates’ abilities to follow suit.

Importantly, this study revealed that most novices adopted positive perceptions of practicum peer mentorship and that many appeared to feel responsible for supporting future novices, thereby exhibiting the reciprocity requisite to sustained commitment to collaborative practice (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). As these candidates assume the roles of mentors, we are cautiously optimistic that some of the tensions encountered by candidates who had not benefitted from this program as novices, will be diminished, if not eradicated. In order to delineate whether this occurs, our longitudinal study seeks to capture the perceptions of 2009 novice participants, as they transition to the role of mentors in 2010.

Teacher education programs are imperfect and incomplete (Loughran, 2006). This model of teacher candidate practicum peer mentorship was no exception. Yet, consistent with the assertions of others (Bullough et al., 2003; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Goodnough et al., 2009; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005), the results of this study reveal that the benefits of paired practicums outweigh the drawbacks. Our findings document that despite the complexities of practicum mentorship between candidates, it holds the promise to prepare future educators as collaborative practitioners. Data collection is ongoing as we continue to glean participants’ perceptions and use these insights to refine this reciprocal learning model of practicum peer mentorship.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Teacher education is complex, multifaceted, and lays the foundation for educational practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Loughran, 2006). In this era where the importance of teacher collaboration is recognized widely (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Fullan et al., 2006; Gardiner & Robinson, 2009; Knight, 2009), supporting candidates’ abilities to engage in collaborative rather than autonomous practice holds the potential to better prepare them for their future challenges as members of the teaching profession (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). To this end, the findings of this study may provide direction for teacher educators interested in enhancing collegial collaboration amongst candidates through the development of opportunities for peer scaffolding and reciprocal learning in the practicum setting.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the Practicum Officer Deanne Osborne and the Practicum Office staff throughout implementation of all phases of the practicum peer mentorship program.

*Brock Education, 20*(2), 85-103
References


Diane Ravitch created quite a national stir when this book came out last year in the United States. Here was a highly respected historian of American education publically recanting her previous advocacy of two main ideas shaping educational reform today: 1) the adoption of free market business practices to make schools more competitive, and 2) the use of standardized testing as the main assessment tool of student learning. Not only have these reforms failed to produce better schools, Ravitch argues, but as her title makes clear, they are actually threatening the education of a whole generation of young people. She hopes her book will contribute to a renaissance in the American public school system, just as Jane Jacob’s The Death and Life of Great American Cities helped to spark urban renewal. She hopes it is not too late.

Although she is not a fan of John Dewey (she is often categorized as an essentialist), Ravitch unwittingly espouses pragmatism when she defends her about-face: “...my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality....It is a mark of a sentient human being to learn from experience, to pay close attention to how theories work out when put into practice” (p. 2). Using her skills as an historian, she tells the story of American education in the past two decades. We learn how the market-based reforms that came to full flower in New York City after 9/11 and subsequently spread throughout the United States had their roots in one
school district that had imported Balanced Literacy from Australia and New Zealand in 1987. She shows how (in her view) the carefully reasoned recommendations of a commissioned report (*A Nation at Risk*) morphed into the crude and unrealistic mandates of a federal law (*No Child Left Behind*); how Barak Obama has quickly fallen into step with the direction set by George W. Bush to measure basic skills and punish those schools that fail to measure up; and how the private capital of billionaires such as Bill Gates is underwriting the proliferation of charter schools at the expense of public schools.

What can Canadian educators take from Ravitch? First of all, this book affirms once again how inextricably tied we are to the Americans. I did not know that “Balanced Literacy”, the new buzz word in Ontario schools, came to us via the States from Australia and New Zealand over twenty years ago. Ravitch likes to expose the vacuousness of educational jargon, and Balanced Literacy is not spared:

When I met with the former director of curriculum and instruction [in San Diego], she wanted me to know how valuable she found Balanced Literacy. She said, “You won’t believe this, but we had fourth graders who didn’t know the difference between point of view and perspective. So we had to stop and teach it to them.” I wrote that down and said nothing. I did not want to admit that I didn’t know the difference between point of view and perspective either. I began to understand what teachers had been telling me about the district’s demand that everyone mouth the same jargon. (p. 64)

Second, Ravitch gives us a cautionary tale about the perils of putting too much emphasis on standardized testing. True, some of Ravitch’s criticisms of standardized tests do not apply to Ontario: in contrast to most American tests that narrowly assess basic skills and use multiple choice questions throughout, the Education Quality and Accountability Office tests are linked to the expectations of the Ontario Curriculum and include opportunities for students to write their
own answers. Nevertheless, her deeper critique hold true for us as well: by focussing on literacy and numeracy, high stakes testing pushes teachers to “rob Peter to pay Paul.” If test scores need to be improved, more instructional time will be devoted to language arts and mathematics at the expense of subjects that are not tested, such as physical education or visual arts. An official from the EQAO told me recently that there were no plans to extend testing to other subjects areas. Imagine what would happen if the EQAO decided to implement province-wide testing of physical fitness in Grades 3, 6, and 10. Considering the startling increase of childhood obesity, is not such a test more necessary and more urgent than boosting literacy scores?

Albert Einstein is reported to have quipped, “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” In Dewey’s original laboratory school, testing as conventionally understood did not exist. Students tested their ideas out in concrete situations. The test of practice was the one that really counted, but not in the sense of grades or report cards. Moreover, teachers worth their salt know that it is often the most valuable learning experiences that are the most difficult to define, measure, or quantify. They are immeasurable. In fact, the attempt to evaluate or assess them may well destroy them. Ravitch’s favourite English teacher, Ruby Ratliff, exemplified education in this sense. But she wonders whether there would be a place for such a teacher in today’s high school:

Would any school recognize her ability to inspire her students to love literature? Would she get a bonus for expecting her students to use good grammar, accurate spelling, and good syntax?... I don’t think so.... But under any imaginable compensation scheme, her greatness as a teacher–her ability to inspire students and to change their lives–would go unrewarded because it is not in demand and cannot be measured. And let’s face it: She would be stifled not only by the data mania of her supervisors, but by the jargon, the indifference to classical literature, and the hostility to her manner of teaching that now prevail in our schools. (p.194)

Brock Education, Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 2011, 104-107
Finally and most importantly, this book forces a reader to re-consider, or perhaps to consider for the first time, the main purpose of education. For Ravitch, the essentials of education are curriculum and teaching, not testing or accountability. In her view, the curriculum must be explicitly and coherently grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and taught by teachers who are “well educated, not just well trained” (p. 13). As an historian, Ravitch naturally espouses the teaching of history which she finds woefully lacking in most states. One of the exceptions is Massachusetts where students are required to learn world history in tandem with American history. This causes me to question why the Ontario Curriculum does not require students to learn any world history: Is this not necessary in a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent on a global scale?

In 240 pages, Diane Ravitch brings the reader up to speed on the current state of American education. She convincingly demonstrates that the spheres of business and education are qualitatively distinct and that a school run as a business will likely destroy the joy of learning. Aimed at a general audience, it is clearly written and well researched with 30 pages of end notes. Whether or not one agrees with Ravitch’s educational philosophy, her book is stimulating, informative, and thought-provoking. When an educationalist of her stature changes her mind, one must take notice.