

Book Review

Curriculum Reform in Ontario: ‘Common Sense’ Policy Processes and Democratic Possibilities

Laura E. Pinto

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This book explores Ontario’s overhaul of the secondary school curriculum, as executed under Premier Harris. The reforms comprised part of a larger policy shift branded by Harris’ government as the *Common Sense Revolution*. In this case study, Laura Pinto analyses and critiques curriculum policy production using historical documents and interviews with policy actors, and particularly focuses on how closely the process succeeded or failed to reflect the ideals of a critical democracy.

Three key themes emerge: the importance of a critical-democratic framework (Chapters 1, 8, and 9), the difficulties associated with neoliberal and neoconservative methods of policymaking (Chapters 3, 4, and 7), and the impact of neoliberal and neoconservative approaches on power structures and civic engagement (Chapters 5 and 6). This investigation has useful applications for anyone involved in developing educational policy. Much of the discussion centres, not on the particularities of developing curriculum, but on the characteristics of and strategies for achieving a critical-democratic policy formulation process. Following a Preface, the book is divided into nine chapters. In the Preface, Pinto provides a brief overview of the book’s key points and organisational structure, as well as her methodology and rationale. The last section of the book includes a brief timeline of policy formulation events, which are usefully broken down into ten phases, notes from each chapter, a comprehensive list of references, and an index of key terms.

One of the most powerful aspects of this book is Pinto’s deft use of a critical-democratic framework to highlight some of the missteps of the Conservatives, and to present some of the policy-related issues that arise out of a neoliberal preoccupation with efficiency and speed. For Pinto, a critical democracy is characterised by personal agency: a lived set of democratic values that echo the work of John Dewey and Paolo Freire. She describes critical democracy as a framework that prioritises agonistic debate, time, inclusion of voices from marginalised groups, and a focus on issues of social justice. Pinto sets the stage for the analysis in the first two chapters, which nicely contrast the principles and values of critical democracy with those values embodied by a neoliberal and neoconservative approach.

In Chapter 1, she sets the backdrop for democracy that is entrenched in the process of curriculum formation, and not simply in the curriculum. The counterpoint to the critical-democratic process is found in Chapter 2, which traces the path of the *Common Sense Revolution* as it unfolded across Ontario in all areas of policy reform. In an organised, at-a-glance chart (p. 29-33), Pinto gives an overview of the promises made by the government, a list of how these

promises were detailed in the *Common Sense Revolution* document, and a corresponding list of actions taken to implement the reforms. Pinto paints a picture of an administration that, in one breath espoused neoliberal values, but in another became one of the most interventionist governments in the history of the province. She also notes that the *Common Sense Revolution* created some major setbacks for equity and social justice by denying the language of race, cutting social programs, and ignoring issues of marginalisation, including failing to act on the 1995 *Report of the Commission on Systemic Racism in Ontario's Criminal Justice System*, through a largely undemocratic policy process.

The theme of how a critical-democratic framework looks and how it might be employed in Ontario is discussed in Chapters 8 and 9. Pinto offers an analytic foil for Ontario's policy process using a case study of Porto Alegre, Brazil, where education reforms mimicked the participatory process employed in all municipal decisions. Pinto usefully sequences the decision-making model that was central to Porto Alegre's successful and wide-scale educational reforms. While she acknowledges the limitations and obstacles to critical democracy as enacted in Porto Alegre, Pinto effectively details an alternative that is so vastly different from the process described in her earlier chapters that one cannot help but accept that at the heart of policymaking is the fundamental expression of how one sees the world. That is, should the penultimate goal of policymaking be efficiency, speed, and accountability? Or should successful policymaking focus on diversity, inclusion, and a commitment to social justice as a means to successful democracies?

The ninth and final chapter of the book brings the discussion back to Ontario and lays the foundation for possible change in the future. Pinto offers practical, but somewhat vague, suggestions for Ontario's future policy frameworks. She calls for an inversion of the current governmental power and communication structure, from disseminators to facilitators. She also recommends more public arenas and more education about contemporary issues, so that public discourse can be deepened. Finally, she distinguishes between education *for* democracy and democracy *in* education, and asserts that both are crucial components of the critical-democratic ideal. It may have been useful, and more powerful, if Pinto had used this section to make recommendations specific to Ontario. If, for example the provincial government's power structure needs to be reconstituted, she might have detailed how voters in Ontario could galvanise such a change. Also, in her discussion of raising awareness of contemporary issues, she might have cited specific locations and communities where this discourse is most lacking, and described the sites particular to them that could be adapted for such a purpose.

Chapters 3, 4, and 7 will be useful to researchers who are looking to understand the second theme: how neoliberal trends have influenced public systems. In Chapter 3, Pinto describes how the Conservative government took up the Royal Commission on Learning's report, *For the Love of Learning*, in a push to align education with neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies: a focus on traditional values, and a preoccupation with accountability, standardisation, and centralised control. Pinto demonstrates that these themes emerged not only in curriculum policy formulation, but also in myriad reforms. Some examples include the introduction of a standardised testing model for literacy and math, presided over by the aptly named Education Quality and Accountability Office, the elimination of the Anti-Racism secretariat, a centralised finance structure for and reduction in the number of school boards, and the establishment of the Ontario College of Teachers to deal with disciplinary, certification, and licensing issues independent of the school boards and teacher federations. Pinto argues that the policy formulation process of the Harris government violated critical-democratic frameworks by claiming that education was in a state of crisis, by limiting public discussion of alternative

perspectives, and through the speedy creation of policy, despite lack of consensus among participants.

In Chapter 4, Pinto explores the drawbacks of the hidden privatization of policy formulation during the *Common Sense Revolution*, including the outsourcing of background research and policy texts. She effectively illustrates how the principles of New Public Management (NPM) were implemented in favour of, and in detriment to, critical-democratic approaches to organisational decision-making. Some of the impacts of the NPM preoccupation with speed and efficiency are illustrated through primary research with various policy actors, who described themselves as “hired guns” (p. 66) who had little say on how the curriculum was shaped.

In Chapter 7, Pinto finds that the perceived outcomes of the policy reform were in keeping with the neoliberal and neoconservative agenda of the Conservatives. These outcomes ranged from the rigid curriculum delineated in the new documents, the fragmentation between elementary and secondary curricula, and the intentional exclusion of values and affective components of learning, to the focus on employability. She also suggests that moving from three levels of course streaming to two levels had a detrimental impact on those students most “at-risk” (The Auditor General of Ontario as cited in Pinto, 2012, p. 148) while being of modest benefit to university-bound students. Her final critique of the outcomes echoes the division between pedagogic philosophies and the dismissal of social justice as a viable educational goal, in favour of workplace and employment outcomes.

The third theme emerges in Chapters 5 and 6, where Pinto discusses power relations and citizen (dis)engagement. To begin, Pinto indicates that Mouffe’s (2000, p.104) conception of democracy as a “vibrant clash of democratic political positions” is ideal. It is a process that requires time and an arena for debate, and, by its very nature, propounds a broad, transparent, shared, and dynamic power structure. This is in direct contrast to the hierachal, opaque, and inconsistent power structures that emerged during the secondary school reform process under Harris. Once again, Pinto employs the testimony of policy actors to substantiate her findings. The policy actors indicate that, while they knew centres of power existed, they did not always know who the decision-makers were. The opacity of the power structure often gave way to inconsistency (e.g., policy writers for subjects that were “under the radar” (p. 93) often felt they had more freedom) and suppression (e.g., writers were told to be a “potted plant” (p. 95) in the room, not speaking unless spoken to). This fuelled rumours, conspiracy theories, and, of course, subversion.

In exploring how the absence of critical-democratic frameworks for the selection and consultation phases of policy development led to citizen disengagement, Pinto (in Chapter 6) discusses the lack of transparency embedded in the policy formulation process and the use of authoritarian tools to manage discourse. She critiques the consultation process by noting that although the sheer volume of participants was impressive, the absence of heterogeneity and the lack of purposeful inclusion of members from marginalised groups meant that the representation of diverse voices was rather thin. Interestingly, at the conclusion of Chapter 6, Pinto notes that there was one benefit that the policy actors identified: a new knowledge of the political decision-making process and a new understanding of the issues. While these were not realised to their fullest capacity during the secondary school policy development process, this becomes an important point in strengthening the argument for broad and varied inclusion in a critical-democratic process, as is discussed in Chapter 8.

One of the appeals of Pinto’s work is her honest positionality. In the Preface, she makes transparent her position as a policy insider. She is a former teacher who wrote curricula for two

international business courses and developed a subsequent interest in unpacking the “black box” (p. xii) of policy formulation. She admits to possessing just enough insider access into the process to bring anecdotal evidence and salience to her findings. For example, in Chapter 4, she explicitly states that the authoritarian approach to policy formulation meant that she worked without any holistic understanding of the curriculum or the process. I believe that the inclusion of this first person perspective, which might be construed as biased in other circles, adds resonance to Pinto’s findings because it echoes the themes present in the interviews she later conducts with other policy actors.

An aspect of Pinto’s analysis that can be critiqued is her failure to analyse the relationship between the media and politicians. In Chapter 2, Pinto briefly alludes to the media’s role in propagating Premier Harris’ message by widely broadcasting reports of a “crisis” (p. 46) in education and by failing to provide adequate coverage of opposing voices. This relationship between the Harris government and the media presents an interesting aspect of policy formulation but receives very limited attention. She briefly returns to the issue in Chapter 4, when she discusses how the government used hortatory tools that controlled the discussion about education. In her concluding statements, she invites the media to cover a broader range of voices but fails to address how these corporately owned media conglomerates could be enticed to publish news that is not in keeping with their political leanings. That the media plays a central role in public acceptance of policy reform and in propagating certain political messages is well documented (Adams, 2003; McCombs, 2004, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Parker, 2011), as is the relationship between the media and the development of democratic practices (Derrida & Caputo, 1997; Kellner, 2000), and Pinto’s decision to skim over this aspect of the issue weakens her argument and, subsequently, her recommendations.

Overall, I suggest that this case study provides a useful historic context for understanding Ontario’s education policy processes. It has global applications for policymakers and for educators, particularly in environments that have been trending toward neoliberal ideologies. The lessons from this study can be helpful for academics, certainly, but can also be equally vital for generating conversations about the purposes and processes of education. This might be a useful text for a class exploring power, politics, and policy development. In particular, I would recommend Chapter 8 as a reading that offers insight into how to proceed in a variety of settings with the difficult work of reforming education *for* democracy and democracy *in* education.

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