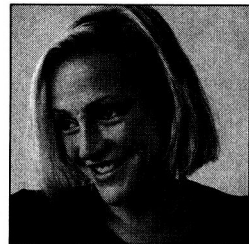


Laura Pinto

# Democratic possibilities for educational policy-making: a comparison of Ontario & Porto Alegre

## *Curriculum policy: An overview of formulation*

Large-scale, centralized education reform has occurred in a variety of jurisdictions in recent years. Such reforms usually include new approaches to funding, and major changes to policies governing school board organization, curriculum, student assessment, and teacher working conditions.



Educational reforms are shaped by the processes undertaken to develop them, and by the variety of individuals and groups involved in the process. While there is a great deal of research and coverage

concerning the outcomes and impacts of educational policies, the process of educational policy development and its relationship to democracy is rarely investigated. This article will touch on a variety of aspects of reform, with a primary focus on curriculum.

Werner (1991:107) posed the important question: who should have the right to determine curriculum goals and content? Since curriculum policy documents define (1) what is to be taught and (2) how it is to be taught, reflecting a certain set of values, defining priorities and legitimating what is worth learning, to answer Werner's question we must understand how such documents emerge. Like Werner, many theorists (see, for example, Michael Apple, Stephen Ball and others) contend that arrival at curriculum policy is the



**In Porto Alegre, pedagogical work is linked to the living context of the students.**

result of negotiations and trade-offs between those in positions of power. Research into the development of curriculum policy has tended to highlight struggles over value, feasibility, and politicization. Stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, schools, boards and the private sector have ideas about what the curriculum should include and exclude. Clearly, by including or emphasizing one thing, other things are left out. Whatever is included can privilege or advantage some individuals and groups, while disadvantaging others. It is through curriculum policy development that these sorts of decisions are made. The processes of policy development in Ontario and Porto Alegre show two very different approaches to negotiating these important curricular decisions.

### ***Different places, different contexts***

Ontario is the largest province in Canada, representing approximately one-third of the nation's population. In Canada, education policy is established at the provincial level. The advent of Ontario school reform (SR) in the 1990's brought about swift and significant changes to education and curriculum policy, both of which are the responsibility of the province. SR included a new approach to funding, and major changes to policies governing school board organization, curriculum, student assessment, and teacher working conditions. Features of new curriculum policy for grades K through 12 introduced between 1995 and 2000 included significant reduction in the number of secondary school courses offered, more prescriptive and comprehensive learning expectations for each course and subject area in K-12 education, and a standardized structure for assessment and for organization of expectations. Here, we will focus primarily on policy processes associated with secondary school curriculum policy.

SR was initiated by the Progressive Conservative government in power at the time, shortly after its landslide election under the platform of a "Common Sense Revolution" which defeated the relatively left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP) previously in power. The process of education reform was highly politicized, and drew a great deal of media attention relative to previous reform efforts.

Critics suggest that Ontario Minister of Education John Snobelen manufactured a "crisis in education" in 1995 to justify "contradictory and chaotic" reform through a series of hastily drawn up new policies. School reform was introduced less than three years after the Progressive Conservative government had come to power. Robertson (1998) quotes Minister Snobelen as saying "Power is the rate at which your intentions become reality." This statement characterizes the politicized environment of SR which was marked by centralized decision-making and the use of outsourcing to formulate curriculum policy.

Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande Do Sul in southern Brazil, has a population of 1.3 million. Public education in Brazil is simultaneously governed by federal, state and municipal governments. The municipality of Porto Alegre is responsible for early childhood and elementary education (Gandin & Apple 2003). Upon its election in 1989, the left-leaning Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) established "an elaborate and successful system of grass roots participation in municipal governance" (Koonings 2004:80), best known for its successful participatory budgeting process.<sup>2</sup> The approach used in Porto Alegre "stands apart from many other similar attempts to institute some version of civic governance" (Baiocchi 2001:43) because it devolves substantial power to citizen-participants in the process. In 1994 and 1995, the same time frame that Ontario commenced SR at the secondary school level, Porto Alegre applied this method of participatory policy-making to education.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Different educational purposes***

The way in which a jurisdiction defines educational purpose sheds light on its politics of education. How education is defined has a relationship to what is contained in curriculum policy. For example, if a state's primary educational purpose is labour force preparation, then one can expect to see an emphasis on vocationally-focused curriculum to achieve the state's goals.

In 2000, the Ontario Ministry of Education stated the following educational purpose on its web site:

*Ontario students receive the best education in Canada.  
Ontario's public education system will strive for excellence  
in the following ways:*

- *Students will have access to top quality education, characterized by high standards, clearly stated expectations and frequent, straightforward evaluation;*
- *Students will have the right to learn in a safe and respectful environment;*
- *The school system will prepare students for higher education, for entering the workforce and for assuming the responsibilities of citizenship;*
- *Teachers will have full opportunities to be the best qualified and the most highly skilled in Canada; and*
- *Parents will have a strong voice in the education of their children.*

Not surprisingly, the Ministry's mission statement, like its reach and mandate, is broad. It begins with an overarching commitment that "Ontario students receive the best education in Canada." It goes on to identify five ways in which this will be achieved. The presence of economic (i.e., workforce and higher education preparation) and ideological (i.e., citizenship) purposes reflects the views of Canadians as reported in the media (Smyth, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Given the historical context of policy development in Ontario, this was probably not a coincidence; the leadership was extremely cognizant of public opinion, and strived to align policy with the stated preferences of constituents, often relying on survey and research data.

By contrast, Gandin and Apple (2004) report that Porto Alegre's principal goal for education at the time of reform was a radical democratization in the municipal schools along three dimensions: democratization of management, democratization of access to the school, and democratization of access to knowledge. To that end, Porto Alegre articulated the following five principles which provide insight into educational purposes (Hatcher 2002):

- *Education as a right of all, with particular emphasis on the situation of those who throughout history have been denied this right.*
- *Popular participation as a method of management of public policy in the field of education, stimulating and guaranteeing the conditions for the collective construction of the education we want.*
- *Dialogue as an ethical-existential principle of a humanist and solidaristic project, which respects differences and the plurality of visions of the world, while also being critical and proactive in the face of social inequalities and injustice.*
- *Radicalisation of democracy as the strategic objective of a government of the left, committed to the interests of the majority, the popular classes, stimulating co-management of the public sphere as a step towards popular sovereignty and control over the state.*
- *Utopia as a motivating vision of the education and school we want and also of the project of socio-economic development which is both possible and necessary for the great majority of the excluded and the exploited in the capitalist system.*

Porto Alegre's principles suggest both political and emancipatory purposes of education. An explicit reference to the policy-making process is included, which refers to the participatory process and to a particular conception of democracy. As well, the principles refer to education's role in addressing exclusion and exploitation of marginalized groups. Overall, the notion of citizenship through participation and social transformation — rather than for workforce preparation or for subject-specific knowledge — is prominent.

While these two statements of purpose contain a few commonalities (e.g., in Ontario, there is a call for access to education, while in Porto Alegre it is stated as a right), there is a distinct difference in the tone of and educational intent implied by these statements. Ontario's official conception of education undoubtedly reflects traditional North American views on educational purpose — job

preparation, preparation for further education, and a small role in the “responsibilities of citizenship.” Porto Alegre views education as social transformation, and clearly emphasizes radical change.

## ***Policy development processes***

Ontario’s secondary school curriculum policy development process can be summarized in ten steps:

1. Background research conducted by academics who competed for contracts.
2. Expert panels made up of the private sector, unions, interest groups, and colleges and universities conducted to gather stakeholder feedback. Individuals and groups were selected and invited by Ministry of Education staff.
3. Student symposium held to gather student feedback with approximately 100 students selected by the Ministry to participate.
4. Synthesis paper developed based on expert panel and student symposium results by Ministry of Education staff.
5. Requests for proposal (RFPs) distributed to solicit groups interested in writing curriculum policy posted on MERX system online. Successful bidders were selected by Ministry of Education staff. More complete accounts of the experience of individuals involved as bidders can be found in Fielding (2002) and O’Farrell (2001).
6. Course menus developed by Ministry of Education outlining the course titles and codes to be offered.
7. Curriculum policy documents written for each course identified in step #6 by successful bidders from step #5.
8. Feedback gathered from the private sector, unions, interest groups, and colleges and universities by the Ministry of Education on draft curriculum policy documents.
9. Validation of curriculum policy documents by Ministry of Education staff.
10. Release and implementation of curriculum policy documents through document distribution and a series of workshops delivered across the province to school board personnel and teachers with prescriptive instructions for enacting the curriculum policy.

At a very general level, two characteristics of Ontario's process stand out. First and most notably, the Ministry relied heavily on outsourcing for the majority of policy work given the tight timelines and lack of internal, bureaucratic capacity. Second, the Ministry incorporated extensive consultation in an attempt to represent the perspectives of many stakeholders. This attempt addresses one of the major principles that drives public policy – to ensure that diverse public needs are met by stakeholder involvement. On the surface, these aspects of Ontario's policy development process appear potentially democratic. But closer examination suggests inherent prob-



**Students engaged in a project on the history, the social function and the biodeversity of Parque Farropilha, the main park of Porto Alegre.**



lems. For instance, the Ministry appeared to incorporate a variety of perspectives through consultation. Though bureaucrats I have spoken to feel they engaged in meaningful stakeholder consultations that impacted policy, it appears that stakeholders do not necessarily feel that their views were heard or taken into account, based on published accounts by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF).<sup>4</sup> Certainly, this is a matter of perception – and it is very difficult to determine whose view is accurate.

Several other weaknesses became evident in my examination of this process, though I will only touch on them briefly here. First, the hurried nature of the process caused anxiety and frustration among both Ministry staff and policy writers. Second, several cases of inadequate output resulted in the Ministry having to re-develop policy. These result from several things: insufficient direction and monitoring, and a lack of policy expertise or experience on the part of contractors. Finally, a lukewarm reaction — as articulated by many stakeholders after its introduction, and acknowledged through the current efforts to revise curriculum policy — raises questions about the quality of the policy output.<sup>5</sup>

In Porto Alegre, the Workers' Party established the Citizen School (see the article by Azevedo and Schugurensky in this issue for details) using an approach to policy formulation that grew from the successful participatory budgeting process which relied heavily on citizenship participation. The participatory structure is a pyramid of three levels in which individuals and groups participate:

- Neighbourhood
- Regional (sixteen sectors into which the city is divided)
- Municipal

The education policy reforms that led to the creation of the Citizen School began in March 1994, and took approximately eighteen months to complete four phases of the centralized process. It is important to note that curriculum policy formulation was combined with other educational policy efforts.<sup>6</sup> Upon completion of the centralized policy, local enactment entailed specific curriculum development.

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Specific curricula in Porto Alegre are formulated at the school level through School Council deliberations, which involve input from parents, students, support staff, and teachers. To equip participants with the technical knowledge necessary to carry out this aspect of curriculum policy formulation, the Municipal Education Secretariat offered two supports: Municipal Meetings of the School Councils, and a permanent program of

continuing education for participants inside schools. School Councils are encouraged to follow ten steps, nicknamed "the Decalogue," in the construction of the curriculum (Gandin 2002: 140-141):

1. Acknowledge and study the context of where the school is situated through participatory action research by the school collective, usually led by teachers.
2. Read and analyze research findings; select the statements that are significant and representative of the community's aspirations, interests, conceptions and cultures.
3. Define a "thematic complex" by determining the phenomenon that organizes the most significant information and research.
4. Elaborate principles of the knowledge areas within the thematic complex selected.
5. Collectively select and broaden a conceptual matrix for the curriculum.
6. Create a graphic representation of the complex.
7. Elaborate workplans in every knowledge area, cycle, and years inside cycle.
8. Circulate plans among participants and compose interdisciplinary strategies within and among cycles.
9. Evaluate and periodically re-plan through systematic meetings by cycles, years in the cycle, and area.
10. At the end of the cycle, problematize the lived thematic complex in order to find the focus of the next thematic complex.

Based on these brief overviews of the two policy processes, we see several contrasts.

- In Ontario, the development of curriculum policy occurred in isolation from other education policy initiatives. This was not the case in Porto Alegre, where education policy was developed as a whole, and curriculum was not separated from school management, evaluation, and cooperation.
- Ontario's curriculum policy process involved "policy elites" who were selected by the Ministry to participate in various stages of the process. Porto Alegre used a "bottom-up" participatory process that involved citizens and individuals in a participatory decision-making process.
- Writing teams who were successful in the bidding process created Ontario's curriculum policy centrally. The centrally-produced curriculum documents were "implemented" in a top-down fashion. By contrast, Porto Alegre developed criteria and organizers centrally (though using a participatory decision-making structure), and allowed elaboration of specifics at the school level using the established criteria.

***Porto Alegre views education as social transformation, and clearly emphasizes radical change.***

### ***Curriculum policy organization***

In Ontario, the centrally written curriculum is organized into strands, which are made up of highly-prescriptive learning expectations (between 80 and 130 per secondary school course). This curriculum is common for all students in Ontario, and follows traditional subject disciplines.<sup>7</sup> The subject disciplines focus on transmitting traditional subject knowledge, and each subject's curriculum was developed independently and concurrently. In fact, writers of one subject's curriculum policy did not view the work of other subject areas. While curriculum policy content was supposed to reflect stakeholder consultations, published accounts suggest that there is dispute as to whether the results of consultations were reflected in the curriculum.

## Curricular Thematic Complex Example

*Gandin & Apple, 2004*

One Porto Alegre school organized its thematic complex in the socio-historic area in order to examine questions directly linked to the interests and problems of the community. At the centre of the thematic complex was the issue of the community's standard of living. Three sub-themes were listed: rural exodus, social organization, and property. In the rural exodus sub-theme, the issues reflected the origin of the community — living now in a favela, but originally from the rural areas. This is a common story in the favelas where people who had nothing in the rural areas came to the cities only to find more exclusion. In these subthemes, the issues discussed were migration movements, overpopulation of the cities, an "unqualified" working force, and marginalization. In the sub-theme social organization, the issues are distributed in terms of temporal, political, spatial and socio-cultural relations. The issues, again, represent important questions in the organization of the community: the excessive and uncritical pragmatism of some in the associations, the connections with the neighborhood associations and the OP, and cultural issues such as religiosity, body expression, African origins, dance groups, and "samba schools." In the third sub-theme — property — the issues were literally linked to the situation of the families in the favela, living in illegal lots with no title, having to cope with the lack of infrastructure, and at the same time fighting for their rights as citizens.

This example shows the real transformation that is occurring in the curriculum of the schools in Porto Alegre. The students are not studying history or social and cultural studies through books that never address the real problems and interests they have. Through the thematic complexes, the students learn history by beginning with the historical experience of their families. They study important social and cultural content by focusing on and valorizing their own cultural manifestations. A real shift is occurring because the focus is not on the "core/official" knowledge organized around dominant class and race visions of the world, but on the real problems and interests of the students and the community. It is important to note that these students will ultimately still learn the history of Brazil and the world, "high" culture, etc., but this will be seen through different lenses. Their culture will not be forgotten in order for them to learn high-status culture. Rather, by understanding their situation and their culture and valuing it, these students will be able to simultaneously learn and will have the chance to transform their situation of exclusion.

By contrast, in Porto Alegre, thematic complexes were used instead of traditional subject disciplines to organize the curriculum. Interdisciplinary curriculum areas (social expression, biological, chemical and physical sciences, socio-historic, and logic-mathematical) were used to bring thematic complexes to life.

## ***Analysis and implications***

Comparing the processes undertaken by Ontario and Porto Alegre reveals two very different approaches to curriculum policy development. The differences begin with how each jurisdiction conceptualizes educational purpose. Whereas Ontario relied on inclusion of “policy elites” and a highly centralized, “top-down,” and politicized decision-making process, Porto Alegre reveals a more democratic alternative which broadly involved citizens in all phases of development. In Ontario, the result was highly-prescriptive curriculum policy that was unilaterally enacted across the province, without accommodation of local needs and priorities. Porto Alegre’s process involved a more bottom-up approach which required school-level decision-making about curriculum organization, content and priorities within centrally-established guidelines. In order to equip participants with the knowledge and skills to participate, an education (or capacity-building) component was built in through Municipal Meetings of the School Councils and continuing education programs.

Porto Alegre’s political practice actually involves citizens – not elites selected by governments – and as such arguably results in a “thicker” conception of democracy.

Most importantly, Porto Alegre has demonstrated that a truly participatory public policy process in education is possible. This Brazilian experience of participatory democracy provides us with a vision of an alternative way of formulating education policy. Beyond creating more active citizens, Porto Alegre’s curriculum policy process actually mobilized the population and put curricular decisions into the hands of the people. As Hatcher (2002) points out, the process connects “pedagogy and politics, the classroom and the wider society, social change and individual change.”

The 2004 defeat of the Workers' Party in Porto Alegre leaves this process in jeopardy. Only time will tell if this kind of education policy process continues. The challenging question left for Canadians is: What political-educational strategies can help us democratize education?

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The participatory budget process has operated successfully in Porto Alegre, receiving worldwide attention over the past decade. The Workers' Party was re-elected three times, and in 1998 took control of Rio Grande do Sul, with a population of 10 million, launching a similar process there. However, in 2004, the Workers' Party was defeated by the Popular Socialist Party.

<sup>2</sup> The Introduction of school councils and a restructuring of the Municipal Education Secretariat took place in 1993 as a prelude to this policy. There were revisions to the process upon the election of a new municipal government in 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the national poll reported by Smyth indicated that 33% of Canadians believe the purpose of education should be to help students prepare for work, 23% believe the main function is to promote citizenship and only 17% feel the most important purpose is to encourage intellectual growth.

<sup>4</sup> For example, OSSTF described the consultations as limited: "the forced question and answer response format is manipulative in the extreme." OECTA reported that the decisions made did not reflect the outcomes of consultations.

<sup>5</sup> At the present time, the Ontario Ministry of Education is currently undergoing a curriculum revision process called "Sustaining Quality Curriculum." This involves comprehensive review of curriculum policy documents, several subjects per year. The revision process differs somewhat from the curriculum development process, however it does rely on "policy elites" and excludes feedback from interested stakeholders not identified by the Ministry. At the time of publication, only a new mathematics curriculum policy has been introduced. Additional subject areas will follow in the coming years.

<sup>6</sup> The four broad "thematic axes" addressed in the policy process were: management of the school, curriculum, principles for living together, and evaluation.

<sup>7</sup> Subject disciplines at the secondary level are: English, Mathematics, Canadian and World Studies, Classical and International Languages, French as a Second Language, Guidance and Career Education, Health and Physical Education, Native Languages, Native Studies, the Arts, Business Studies, Science, Social Sciences and Humanities, and Technological Education. The subject areas for elementary school are The Arts, French, Health and Physical Education, Language, Mathematics, Science and Technology, and Social Studies.

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