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ABSTRACT

Many countries around the world are engaged in large-scale, government-mandated education reform. To explicate the working of these reforms, a study of government-mandated reform in New Zealand, England, Canada, and the United States is described. The paper reports on some of the main issues that are emerging, including the finding that current reforms in these areas seem to embody a sharp break from what might be called the "post-war consensus" on education policy, both in terms of substance and in policy processes. Education policy is becoming more polarized and there are many fears about the negative consequences of current directions. The focus is on three areas in reform efforts: (1) the centralization of curriculum coupled with large-scale testing of students and evaluation of schools; (2) the decentralization of management responsibility from intermediate bodies to individual schools; and (3) the introduction of elements into a market system of education. The paper looks at the commonalities and differences in reform and the shift away from past practices. Public education is being reshaped but that the situation is diverse and that reform usually marks less of a change than rhetoric suggests. (Contains 30 references.) (RJM)

Reshaping Public Education

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Reshaping Public Education

Abstract

Many countries around the world are engaged in processes of large scale government-mandated reform of education. A number of commentators have remarked on the commonalities across these reform efforts, especially the extent to which reforms in various countries embody a common set of ideas about needed improvements, and have linked these issues to the larger phenomenon of globalization.

Our research project studies government-mandated reform in New Zealand, England, the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Manitoba, and the U S state of Minnesota. In each case we are looking at the origins and sources of reform, the politics of approval, the implementation strategies being used, and at available knowledge about the outcomes of reforms.

This paper reports on some of the main issues that are emerging from the study: Current reforms in these jurisdictions do seem to embody a sharp break from what might be called the 'post-war consensus' on education policy, both in terms of substance and in policy processes. Education policy is becoming more polarized and there are many fears about the negative consequences of current directions. In this sense, public education is being reshaped. At the same time, the situation is diverse and fragmented, what happens in fact is often less of a change than rhetoric suggests, and one should not overstate the degree of coherence in reform projects either within or across jurisdictions.

Reshaping Public Education [1]

The last decade has been characterized in many countries by large-scale reforms of public education systems. The term 'reform' can be used in a variety of ways. For purposes of this paper we use it to mean programs of educational change that are government-directed and initiated based on an overtly political analysis (that is, one driven by the political apparatus of government rather than by professional educators or bureaucrats), and justified on the basis of the wish for a substantial break from current practice.

In this paper we report on a multi-year study of education reform in four countries - Canada, the United States, England and New Zealand. In Canada we are focusing on provinces of Alberta and Manitoba - the former an early adopter of substantial changes and the latter having a comparatively modest program of reforms. In the United States we are using Minnesota as our initial site because it was an early adopter of several important reforms. [2] England (and Wales) and New Zealand are included because they are often used as exemplars of large-scale reform motivated by an ideological agenda.

Our project as a whole sets out to look at four aspects of reform in these settings:

1) Origins. Our focus here is on the sources of reforms as initially proposed by governments, the role of various actors and forces in originating reforms, and the assumptions about education and reform (explicit or implicit) contained in these proposals.

2) Approval. We are interested in what happened to reforms between their initial proposal and their actual passage into law or regulation in each jurisdiction, in the politics of the reforms, and in the factors that led to any changes between proposals and approval.

3) Implementation. We are giving attention to the steps taken to implement reforms, the choice of 'policy levers', and the model of implementation, if any, that informed the reform process in each setting.

4) Effects. Our interest here is on the available evidence as to the effects, intended or otherwise, of reforms, with particular attention to what may be known about how the reforms have affected student outcomes and learning processes in schools.

We are also focusing attention on three areas that have been important in many reform efforts: 1) centralization of curriculum coupled with large-scale testing of students and evaluation of schools; 2) decentralization of management responsibility from intermediate bodies to individual schools, and 3) introducing elements of a market system to education (such as school choice or charter schools). Other aspects of reform that have been important in some settings, such as changes in teacher training and development, are not taken up in our study.

Data sources for the study include: 1) analysis of original documents such as legislative debates, government policy documents, legislation, and position papers of non-governmental organizations, 2) careful review of the relevant scholarly literature, 3) interviews with key respondents in some of the jurisdictions, and 4) interaction with academic colleagues in the various countries involved.[3] To this point we have relied more extensively on primary sources in Manitoba and Alberta, and more on secondary sources in the other three jurisdictions.

Commonalities and differences in reform

A number of commentators have remarked on the commonalities across education reform efforts in several English-speaking industrialized countries. For example, Lawton (1992) presents rationales for reform that are held to apply across countries and Guthrie (1996) describes common reform elements across many countries. Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) note the extent to which policies advocating greater use of markets have been adopted, albeit in varying forms, in many countries, and a comparative literature has developed looking at reforms such as school choice and decentralization (e.g. Lingard, Knight & Porter, 1993; Whitty, 1997). Attention has focused on the possible links between education reform and the larger phenomenon often described as globalization -

generally associated with the increased internationalization of economies, financial structures and the flow of ideas (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Power & Whitty, 1997). Quite frequently these common elements are attributed to a growth in the world-wide influence of the political right, described variously as the New Right, neo-liberalism, or neo-conservatism.[4]

At the policy level there do indeed seem to be important commonalities in education reform. The official rhetoric of governments (and, importantly, their non-governmental allies such as think tanks and citizens' groups) in these settings tends to use some of the same language concerning the nature of the problem, its causes, and promising solutions. On the nature of problems one can identify, for example, the suggestion that too much money has been spent to too little effect, that there is a crisis in schooling around weak outcomes of students, and that economic prosperity is threatened by poor school results. In regard to causes, blame is often attributed to teachers using so-called 'progressive' teaching methods and to the excessive influence of professional groups such as unions and universities in the education system. Solutions typically involve more parent influence, stricter standards for students, tighter accountability through more testing, and a belief in some version of a market influence on the provision of schooling.

It also appears that the approach to reform in education has been relatively independent of the official political stripe of governments. The Labour government in New Zealand implemented reforms that were not dissimilar to those of the Conservative government in England. In both cases, key elements of these reforms were modified somewhat but not reversed by a new government of a very different political stripe. In Canada and the United States one finds reform programs introduced by parties of varying political stripes, with little indication that party identification is a key factor in shaping the program.

One reason for the declining importance of party affiliation may be growing political and policy links across nations. Politicians, civil servants and policy advisors all seem to have much more contact with people in other countries than used to be the case. Whether the vehicle is meetings such as the Davos World Economic Summit, international

publications such as The Economist, organizations such as the OECD or the World Bank, the growing number of international conferences and publications, or the rapidly proliferating use of the World Wide Web (which is an important research resource for this study), the exchange of ideas across boundaries is of great importance.

All of this does indeed suggest some sort of common phenomenon in education reform - what we have elsewhere (Levin, in press) called 'an epidemic of education policy'. Yet one can easily overstate the degree of similarity in reforms across jurisdictions. In fact, similar terms, such as choice or accountability, can be used to cover policies so divergent in practice that they may hardly be said to be the same thing (Levin, 1997). Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe point out (1995, p 4) that although the invocation of market solutions is in some ways an international phenomenon, there is considerable difference in "how governments have used the market form. This applies both [sic] to the extent of the use of the market form, the purposes it is intended to serve and the precise market mechanisms that governments put into place via legislation." An examination of the implementation of parent choice or of assessment practices across jurisdictions shows how different such policies look in practice whatever the rhetoric that may surround them (eg Hirsh, 1994; Macpherson, 1998). Local factors such as history, political culture, the nature of the political process, and accidental factors such as leadership can all play an important part in changing the nature of policies when they are implemented (Levin & Young, 1998a).

Similarly, the fear of some analysts that education is subject to a co-ordinated international and national effort to shift to 'the right' (e g Berliner and Biddle, 1995) is not always supported when one looks at the practice of reform in particular settings compared with some of their stated purposes (Levin & Young, 1998b). For example, Roger Douglas, architect of some of the New Zealand reforms, has now decried them as having had far less impact than he had hoped (Ricker, personal communication). To take another example, the adoption of charter schools in Alberta (and in several states in the US) has had far less impact than either proponents hoped or critics feared (Bosetti et al., 1998).

Looking beyond the English-speaking industrialized countries also changes the picture considerably. An OECD report on education reform and evaluation, for examples, stressed the degree to which continental European countries were far less drawn to reforms based on stricter assessment and accountability regimes (Kallen, 1996). These differences are particularly interesting because they serve to undermine the suggestion that current reforms are inevitable in the face of the forces of globalization and instead emphasize the ways in which language and culture mediate the flow of ideas across national boundaries and, in Canada's case, within those boundaries as well.

In sum, a look at education reform across state boundaries indicates that there are important elements both of commonality and diversity. Clearly there are links at the level of fundamental ideas, but these are less evident at the level of practice. Since most of our discussion in this paper is at an international level, the reader should keep in mind the caution that our generalizations will tend to hide important differences among states.

A substantive shift

Even with this limitation, the current spate of reform in education does, in our view, represent a significant shift from past practice in several important ways.

A general observation is that education reform has occurred in an atmosphere dominated by a sense of fear and crisis rather than one of hopefulness as was the case thirty years ago. As part of this atmosphere, proposals for change in education have been made amidst a general attack on the overall role of the public sector or the state. Education was at one time seen as a vehicle for public activity to ameliorate social problems, but as the role of the public sector has been curtailed in many countries, strategies for reform have been cast in terms consistent with the minimalist state. From the outset, then, a set of strategies that might make fundamental use of the state are ruled out.

Economic considerations have always been powerful in shaping the debate on education. In past, proponents of building the education system argued often that more education was to be valued because it yielded broad economic benefits both to individuals and to societies. The emphasis on economic outcomes continues today, but the tone is

quite different, being cast primarily within a competitive framework in which we are racing to maintain our position vis a vis other nations. The statements in government reports and policy documents focus on fears of some kind of decline and eclipse. The supposed impact of globalization is often called into play here, acting, in Edelman's (1964) term, as a 'condensation symbol' intended to arouse emotions. Of course global economic change does have important implications for education, but the policy discussion of these is usually very general, and sheds more heat than light.

At the same time, education reform is generally only very weakly linked to other areas of social policy. In the last couple of years in Canada, those involved in health policy have rediscovered the importance of education and employment, so that an increasing number of policy discussions in health overtly tackle such issues as education reform and local economic development (National Forum on Health, 1998). In education, however, the same links in reverse are not often made. For example, though educators are highly aware of the impact of poverty on their ability to be successful with children, schools and school systems give relatively little attention to effective responses to this challenge, and government attention to poverty as an educational issue is quite muted (Levin, 1995).

Another critical implication of the changing role of the state is that education reform is occurring with little or no additional spending - and sometimes simultaneously with cuts in funding. During most of the postwar period educational spending grew substantially, so school systems now face a double shock - first in trying to manage with static or declining resources, and second in trying to make major changes without additional funding.

At the same time, the politics of education are changing in important ways (Levin & Riffel, 1997). Public trust in all major institutions, including schools, has declined significantly in countries such as Canada and the United States (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Livingstone, 1995). A corollary of declining trust is less willingness to give professionals as much control over education policy and practice as used to be the case. (One could argue, of course, that this development should be welcomed as an outcome of a more educated and more assertive population.) The quiet dominance in education policy of the

main stakeholder groups - teachers, government ministries, elected local authorities, school administrators - has been replaced by much more overt, confrontational politics, sometimes linked to unwillingness to look for or even accept compromise (Cody et al., 1993).

In the face of these changes, a limited set of policy proposals has tended to dominate discussion. Changes in governance, and particularly the creation or strengthening of local school governing bodies, have been one favourite strategy, accompanied in many cases by a diminution in the role and authority of intermediate bodies such as school districts. Almost every jurisdiction has had new legislation on school councils, although these range in different places from being true governing bodies to remaining advisory groups with quite limited functions. At the same time, central governments have taken on increased authority over a number of key matters such as curriculum, assessment of students, and evaluation of schools. Many jurisdictions have increased the prescriptiveness of curricula, and have tried to make curricula more demanding, especially in the areas that some reformers see as having particular economic value, such as science and mathematics.

In the area of assessment, all the jurisdictions we studied have increased significantly the amount of system-wide testing of students and generally built quite large bureaucratic apparatuses to administer their testing programs. As importantly, testing is now largely designed as an accountability mechanism for schools. In most settings the results of such tests are made public as a way of increasing the pressure on schools to improve their performance. In England and New Zealand an inspection process has also been created that results in public reports on the quality of schools.

These proposed solutions to the supposed problems of education often embody contradictory elements. Some arise from a modernizing, managerial project, in which the focus is on contracts, outcomes, and accountability mechanisms such as testing. Another modernist analysis leads to an emphasis on critical thinking and group work skills that are supposedly required in the new economy. Other prescriptions are based on the belief that the solution to the problems of education lies in the adoption of market models emphasizing consumer choice, competition, and survival of the fittest. And others still

embody the idea of a restoration of a golden age of civility, deference, and supposed public agreement on means and ends. In many settings equity issues pose a particularly difficult challenge; many of the proposed reforms are seen to have negative consequences for social equity, yet governments (with the possible exception of England) appear to be unwilling to make an outright political attack on equity. The result is often an uneasy compromise between policies that may inhibit equity, such as school choice, and others that are designed to foster it, such as efforts to recruit girls into science and mathematics.

The fact that the elements of reform programs are quite inconsistent with each other has not stopped government from trying to implement elements of all of them in various reform programs. The disagreements among various factions of the English Conservative Party, for example, have been well documented (Jones, 1989; Lawton, 1994), yet the Tory government was able to implement a relatively coherent set of policies over a long period of time. Similarly, the Lange Labour Government in New Zealand was able to speak simultaneously of reforms based on contract and agency theory but with strong concern for issues of equity. Contradictions in ideas that may be a problem for political theorists present no such difficulties for political actors, who are often used to living in a world of contradictions and compromises.

A feature of reform programs has been the emphasis on a limited set of levers, primarily involving changes in governance, finance, curriculum, and accountability measures such as inspection and testing of student achievement. Given our knowledge about the weak links between these superstructural issues and the actual experience of students in classrooms (Cohen, 1992; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991), there is reason to be pessimistic about the real impact of reforms on learning. On the other hand, learning is hard to affect directly, so the focus of governments on that which can be changed is understandable.

Our research also suggests that governments have given surprisingly little attention to implementation strategies, appearing to believe in many cases that changes in governance and the incentives unleashed by choice and competition will in themselves

result in the desired changes in educational practice. As a growing literature on choice in England and Wales indicates (see Glatter, Woods and Bagley, 1997), this assumption is quite suspect, and there is every reason to believe that the outcomes of policies will be, in many cases, quite different from what governments had hoped for - possibly for both good and ill. One reason, of course, for the relative neglect of implementation is the unwillingness of governments to spend more money on professional development of teachers. In most of the settings we studied, as well, the government department of education was dramatically cut in size while the reforms were being implemented, thus taking away an important part of the support system for change.

Less easy to understand is the relative lack of attention to the efficacy of reforms, and to creating a process of real learning about their nature and impact. In the health sector, reform, though intensely political, also makes important use of research evidence. In fact, 'evidence-based decision-making' is a new catchword in health policy. In education, on the contrary, expenditures on educational research remain very low internationally (Guthrie, 1996), the research that is done tends to have limited credibility and is poorly linked to policy-making (Halpin, 1998), and the forums for learning in detail about other states' experiences are neither well developed nor well used.[5] All of this is more consistent with an analysis that gives greater priority in shaping reforms to local context than to international forces (which is not to dismiss the latter as unimportant).

There can be a tendency in doing analytic work to overstate pattern and understate elements of randomness. In statistical terms, the focus is on variance explained, not on the often large element of error that is not accounted for. Nonetheless, this thumbnail sketch certainly suggests that the changes occurring in education policy in English-speaking countries represent significant shifts from past practice and embody substantial new ways of thinking about problems and solutions, piecemeal and incoherent as these may seem.

We have been for the last decade or more in a new era of education policy making. Without doubt the changes being proposed contain dangers. Destruction, as Heinrich Böll so beautifully illustrates in his novel *Billiards at Half Past Nine*, is so much quicker and easier than construction. At the same time, the future always has multiple possibilities that are created largely by human action, and everything indicates that, as Dror (1986, p. 168) puts it, there is at any given moment "...a high objective probability of low-probability events occurring frequently. In subjective terms, surprise dominates."

In the face of these developments what those of us interested in education need to do is to look carefully and with an open mind at the evidence about what is happening in education around the world, and to try to work within the possibilities that exist to support the values that we believe matter most. The combination of value commitment and open-mindedness is, of course, a particularly difficult one to sustain yet it seems particularly critical in our present situation.

NOTES

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2. Differences in the constitutional structure of states are an important issue largely unexamined here. New Zealand is a unitary state. Britain is largely unitary, but Scotland has important differences from England and Wales. The United States is federal, with the federal government playing an important role in education and with many local districts more important than state governments in some states. Canada is a federal state in which provinces are very powerful educationally but the federal government has only a minor

role. Much more could be said about the importance of these differences.

3. We note here two features of the project that we regard as innovative: 1) extensive use of the World Wide Web as a source of data (for example Hansards of various jurisdictions are available on the Web, as are many government policy documents), and 2) an ongoing dialogue with colleagues in the various jurisdictions, being carried on largely by e-mail, in which we compare our ideas, findings and data sources with those expert in each setting.

4. For more on the ways in which these labels are used and the differences in views which they might represent, see Levin and Young, 1997.

5. The status and limitations of research in education have themselves been the subject of a considerable literature and we do not explore those issues fully here.

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