

DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED POLICY DIALOGUES

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In 2008, People for Education, an Ontario-based parent-led organization, hosted eight policy dialogues with citizens about possibilities for the province's public schools. Policy dialogues are conversations about policy issues, ideas, processes, and outcomes where participants share their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. In small groups dialogue participants were asked to share their ideas about the ideal school of the future. Participants' ideas were recorded by a facilitator. Following each dialogue participants were asked to complete a short survey about their experience. Fifteen sets of facilitators' notes and 46 participant surveys were analyzed in this study. The data show that participants' ideal school emphasizes variety, flexibility, caring relationships, individualized programs, and community connections. Importantly, policy dialogues promote participants' cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement with education policy. Finally, policy dialogues enhance democracy in education by providing opportunities for critical examination of public policy by ordinary citizens who are viewed as important policy actors.

How can ordinary citizens enhance democracy in education? What roles should they play in education policy processes? While answers to these questions differ, there is a trend toward increasing citizen involvement in public policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Greater participation is encouraged by international organizations, governments, researchers, political theorists, nongovernmental organizations, and individual citizens. While motivations for

increasing citizen engagement in policy processes vary, many advocates cite transformative possibilities for democracy (Barber, 2003; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003; Peters & Abud, 2009; Putnam, 2000).

People for Education, a not-for-profit organization in Ontario, Canada, is similarly hopeful. This parent-led group advocates for public education and encourages citizens to become involved in education issues in their own community as part of its advocacy work (People for Education, n.d.-a). In 2008, People for Education initiated a series of dialogues with Ontario citizens about possibilities for the province's education system. This article describes the vision for Ontario's schools expressed by dialogue participants and shows how policy dialogues impact participants' engagement with public policy. Finally, the article demonstrates how community-based policy dialogues enhance democracy in education.

I begin by discussing traditional public policy processes and policy dialogues. Next, I present challenges to democracy in education and arguments in favour of engaging citizens in policy processes to counter these challenges. A review of the concept of engagement follows, and the benefits of engaging citizens in policy dialogues for strengthening democracy in education are discussed. Then, I describe People for Education's Schools at the Centre (SATC) policy dialogue initiative. I discuss the data analyzed for this article, describe dialogue participants' imagined schools, and present participants' reports of the effects of participating in the dialogues on their engagement with education policy. Finally, the contributions of the SATC dialogues for democracy in education are discussed. Findings from SATC participants self-reports suggests that policy dialogues not intended to directly influence policy decisions increase citizens' engagement with education policy and enhance democracy in education.

Policy, Policymakers, and Policy Dialogues

What is policy? Who makes it? While definitions and expectations vary, policy is typically constructed as a rational process of decision-making by elected officials and policy experts (Stone, 2002). Their decisions are codified for others to implement and evaluations of the degree and success of implementation follow. In this model, citizens may be invited to participate in government decision-making processes before final decisions are made or during evaluations.

To better recognize the agency of local actors in policy processes, Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) proposed a policy cycle comprised of three contexts. In the *context of influence*, groups with varying interests struggle to create and influence how policy issues are conceptualized. Definitions of policy problems are created and solutions developed. In the *context of text production*, decisions emerging from the context of influence are written into texts. Texts include media reports, speeches, web pages, videos, and documents produced by a range of organizations including governments. The *context of practice* is the arena the policy texts and individuals intend to affect. This article focuses on the context of influence and considers how citizens' participation in policy dialogues about education may influence policy texts and practices.

Policy dialogues involve individuals discussing a policy issue and can occur in face-to-face meetings, in asynchronous and synchronous online exchanges, and through texts (Davies, McCallie, Simonson, Lehr, & Duensing, 2009; Joshee & Johnson, 2005; Winton & Pollock, 2009). Deliberations are a kind of policy dialogue that requires citizens to arrive at a consensus and make a recommendation or decision. Deliberation models used by governments include citizen juries and citizen consensus groups. Governments also organize formal stakeholder

consultations and focus groups to learn the perspectives of citizens and inform policy decisions. Some governments engage citizens online (Eggers, 2005; Klinger, 2002; Peters & Abud, 2009).

Government-initiated policy dialogues may also be used to enhance the legitimacy, transparency and accountability of policy making or to promote acceptance of final decisions (Abelson et al., 2003). They may be motivated by officials' beliefs that more voices make better policy and/or that citizens' participation in policy processes can address civic deficits. Finally, some suggest that processes designed to involve citizens in policy decision making enable decision makers to share the blame for failed policies with the public (Abelson et al., 2003).

Policy dialogues are increasingly being used for purposes other than informing policy decisions (Davies et al., 2009). Science cafés, for example, are dialogue events held around the world to promote public engagement with science and to make science accountable (Davies et al., 2009). Davies et al. (2009) proposed that policy dialogues of this type are sites of individual learning through social processes that personally benefit participants. Individual learning through policy dialogues may empower participants to become further involved in the policy issue and may contribute to incremental changes in society (Davies et al., 2009).

Citizen engagement in public policy is necessary for democracy. Democracy is a contested concept, and I adopt a critical understanding of democracy in this article. This perspective sees democracy not only as a way to govern but as a way of life (Dewey, 1966). Critical democracy is committed to equity, diversity, social justice, reasoned choices, and public participation in making decisions that affect citizens' lives (Solomon & Portelli, 2001). Further, democracy as a way of life requires public policy to be subject to on-going critique by citizens so previous decisions can be reassessed in light of new information and experiences. Critique must include the processes of policymaking, the ends pursued in policy, and the outcomes of policy

decisions. As the influence of international organizations and provincial governments on Canadian schools increases and the number of school boards decreases, formal spaces for citizens to deliberate and critique education policy also decrease (Osborne, 2001; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

This situation is not unique to Canada. Federal and state policies in the United States have a large and growing influence on local schools and systems. Public opinion surveys and exit rates from traditional public schools suggest Americans' decreasing support for public education (Jacobson, 2009). There is also increased support for governance and privatization structures, such as vouchers and charter schools, which compromise the democratic purposes and outcomes of schools in a democracy (Glass, 2008; Jacobson, 2009). Jacobson (2009) attributed these changes to the failure of researchers and policymakers to listen to what citizens want from public education.

The erosion of democracy in education in Canada and the US is also evident in policies that are undermining commitments to equity, equality, diversity, and critical thinking such as character education (author), zero tolerance approaches to school discipline (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Daniel & Bondy, 2008), and high stakes testing (Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004; Westheimer, 2010). Smith et al. (2004) use Edelman's (1988) theory of political spectacle and the metaphor of a theatre to conceptualize contemporary policy in American education. In this theatre ordinary citizens are cast as audience members who passively watch policy actors (i.e., elite decision-makers) on stage. These actors use language strategically to suggest that policies resulting from undemocratic policy negotiations out of the audience's (citizens') view represent the interests of everyone, while they actually benefit very few and perpetuate the status quo (Smith et al., 2004).

Citizen engagement in education policy can help challenge political spectacles and other undemocratic aspects of education policy. Engagement can occur in many ways. Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini (2006) and Putnam (2000) distinguished between civic engagement and political engagement. Zukin et al. (2006) defined civic engagement as “participation aimed at the public good...usually through direct hands-on work in cooperation with others” (p. 51). Political engagement, on the other hand, refers to citizens’ efforts to influence selection of public officials or government policy, usually through voting (Zukin et al., 2006). These two engagements overlap and together make up two types of public engagement. Two other kinds of public engagement are cognitive engagement and public voice. Cognitive engagement involves “paying attention to politics and public affairs” (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 54). Public voice includes activities citizens engage in to give public expression to their views on public issues (Zukin et al., 2006). Examples of public voice include signing petitions, contacting an elected official, writing letters to the editor or in political blogs. Thus, there is an effort to make one’s views known publicly. A notable absence in Zukin et al.’s (2006) concept of public voice is dialogue between ordinary citizens. Indeed, citizens’ talk about public issues with other citizens is absent in all four components of their conception of public engagement. Grönlund, Strandberg, and Himmelroos (2009) *did* recognize talk as a kind of public participation and called it discursive participation.

Zukin et al. (2006) suggested that the concepts of civic engagement, political engagement, public voice, and cognitive engagement are interrelated but distinct. An important difference between their conceptions of civic engagement and cognitive engagement is civic engagement’s emphasis on behaviour and cognitive engagement’s focus on attention. In their review of the concept of student engagement, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) argued

that engagement is a meta-concept made up of three others: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Cognitive engagement involves “thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60), whereas behavioural engagement involves taking some action. Thus, like Zukin et al. (2006), Fredricks et al. (2004) differentiated between behavioural and cognitive components of engagement, although they considered them part of the ‘meta’ construct of engagement. Unlike Zukin et al. (2006), Fredricks et al. (2004) recognized emotional engagement as a component of engagement. Emotional engagement refers to positive or negative feelings and reactions. These reactions are assumed to influence an individual’s willingness to invest himself/herself in a school and its work.

This study draws from Zukin et al. (2006), Fredricks, et al. (2004), and Grönlund et al. (2009) and views engagement as involving behavioural, emotional, and cognitive components. Behavioural engagement here includes political and civic engagement as well as discursive participation. Indeed, I am particularly interested in the effects of discursive participation in policy dialogues on other aspects of participants’ behavioural engagement, as well as cognitive and emotional engagement with education policy.

Policy dialogues between ordinary citizens have the potential to strengthen democracy in education. Research on policy deliberations finds that through engaging in dialogue participants hear alternate narratives and are introduced to a variety of perspectives (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Davies et al. (2009) reported similar findings from policy dialogues not intended to inform policy directly. Further, a positive experience in public deliberation inspires future involvement (Levine, Fung, & Gastil, 2005). Additional benefits of public deliberation include

public-seeing, political judgement, empathy, imagination, understanding, and affection between citizens (Barber, 2003).

Citizens who are knowledgeable about policy issues may raise questions about policy decisions and practices (Smith et al., 2004). They may join others with similar interests and concerns and apply pressure on decision-makers through direct action or policy texts. Ideas or texts may prompt responses that may not have otherwise occurred. Participating in policy dialogues may also affect participants' views of themselves as policy actors by introducing them to actions that others have taken at the local level and giving them ideas about what is possible by ordinary citizens. A belief in the potential of policy dialogues to indirectly impact education policy at the provincial level as well as their potential to promote action at the local level grounded the SATC policy dialogues organized by People for Education. This initiative and its impact on participants' engagement with education policy are discussed below.

Schools at the Centre Policy Dialogues

In 2008, People for Education initiated a series of policy dialogues about public education in Ontario. People for Education is a parent-led organization that aims to improve public education in Ontario, Canada. Its activities include: conducting an annual survey of public schools across the province to collect data on education resources and activities, providing support and information for parents, developing and disseminating research on education issues, liaising with governments and boards of education, hosting an online community forum, and encouraging citizens to become actively engaged in education in their communities (People for Education, n.d.-a). People for Education began as a part of the parent association in a Toronto school and has since grown into a provincial organization (People for Education, n.d.-a). The

organization is funded through charitable donations and grants from individuals and a range of public and private organizations (People for Education, n.d.-b).

People for Education is an important policy actor in Ontario's education policy field. The organization is described as "Ontario's foremost school watchdog" (Kalinwoski, 2006, October 5). The organization's perspective on education issues is sought by media, education stakeholder groups, and Ontario's Ministry of Education. Members of the organization sit on government advisory boards such as the Education Partnership Table of Ontario's Ministry of Education and play active roles in government-led consultations. Thus, People for Education aims to influence policy at both the local and provincial levels.

People for Education's SATC initiative brings citizens together to imagine and discuss possibilities for schools and their communities in the twenty-first century. Eight face-to-face dialogues were held in cities across Ontario between October 2008 and February 2010. The dialogues were organized by People for Education often in collaboration with other organizations (e.g., local social planning councils, the Ontario Student Trustees Association, the Emerging Leaders Network). Dialogue participants were invited by People for Education and/or the cooperating organizations.

Each dialogue began with participants introducing themselves and sharing their favourite memories of school. Participants then divided into small groups of 8 to 10 people, where a facilitator initiated the small-group dialogue. There were no designated education experts in the groups; instead, all participants participated in their role as citizens. The dialogue was guided by one main question: *What would the ideal school of the future be like?* The facilitator recorded the participants' ideas and questions. The small-group dialogue lasted approximately 45 minutes. The process ended with participants reconvening as a large group, and each participant then

shared his/her wish for public education. Participants were asked to complete a survey about their experience in the dialogue.

Fifteen sets of facilitators' notes generated from the first seven policy dialogue events and 46 participant surveys distributed at three policy dialogue events in April and May 2009 provide the data for this article. Each set of notes was organized by facilitators into seven categories. Data analysis was guided by the questions posed throughout the dialogues and on the survey. First, the dialogue notes of participants' ideas were read multiple times, and four categories were analyzed for this article: the imagined school's relationship with its community, the imagined school's model, the imagined school's connections beyond the local community, and success in the imagined school. Similar ideas were grouped into themes within these categories. Themes were subdivided when ideas were closely related but qualitatively different.

The survey responses were divided into three categories based on the concept of engagement adopted for the initiative and analysis: emotions (affective engagement), ideas (cognitive engagement), and ideas for action (behavioural engagement). Within each category, similar responses were grouped together into subcategories. Within these subcategories, similar feelings were grouped together. A similar process was used for the other categories.

Imagined Schools for Ontario

A central purpose of the SATC initiative is to bring citizens together to imagine possibilities for Ontario public schools. Dialogue participants were specifically asked to imagine and describe the ideal school of the future. Consensus was not an objective of the dialogues; instead, participants were encouraged to share their ideas and visions. Nevertheless, a number of

consistent ideas emerged in the data. These ideas are presented below through a description of the imagined school.

In the imagined school, variety, flexibility, inclusion, and relationships are important. First, the imagined school offers a wide variety of courses and co-curricular activities; there are courses offered in the arts, life skills, values, foreign languages, and world religion. All students see themselves in these courses, and research on brain development informs curriculum and other choices. Citizenship development, anti-bullying, sports, and the trades are emphasized. Students in the imagined school have individualized programs that enable them to learn at their own pace and are based on their interests. Students also develop more self-awareness about their values and how they learn best. There are many cooperative and experiential learning opportunities, one-on-one attention for students, as well as learning taking place in the community. A range of postsecondary school options are promoted and valued and a variety of well resourced extracurricular activities are open to everyone.

Rather than a single standard of success, success in the imagined school is determined individually and based on individuals' progress over time. Students set individual goals and work toward them throughout the year. The goals and determinants of success are much broader than academics in the imagined school. Growth and success in the areas of personal happiness, social well-being, physical health, communication skills, character, extra-curricular activities, confidence, and community service are also considered.

The imagined school is itself assessed and its success is determined according to a broad range of outcomes. Immediate outcomes include the unity of the students, school safety, relevance of what is learned to students' lives, students' access to mentors, graduates' belief they have multiple options, and the overall climate of the school. Long term measures of a school's

success include how happy students are five years after graduation and graduates' feelings about how prepared they were for life after school. In the imagined school many individuals would participate in assessment of students, schools, and teachers including students, parents, teachers, and community members.

Teachers are different in the imagined school. Teaching is not restricted to only university-educated individuals; instead, teachers come from the community and have a range of backgrounds. Teachers teach single credits thereby allowing more teachers with broader expertise to work with students. Teachers have diverse styles and respect the different learning styles of students. Ideally, teachers and students with complementary styles are matched.

A range of ideas were suggested for the imagined school's design. Smaller schools and sustainable buildings were proposed. The imagined school's buildings include a kitchen, library, gym, auditorium, green space for play and learning, spaces to reflect, social services, meeting spaces, child care centres, and community centres. Furthermore, buildings promote and reflect commitments to inclusion through open, connected classrooms and corridors and pictures of kids in halls. They are also fully accessible and there is full inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms. French and other languages as well as diverse cultures are recognized and celebrated. In addition, SATC participants have ideas for changes to the school system itself. They envision a nurse, librarian, and physical and health education teachers at every school. The school year is longer, and resources are shared between schools. There is greater communication and coordination between schools and trustees, schools and government and between government ministries.

Participants imagine schools of the future as centred on relationships and caring. The atmosphere is friendly, humane, and empathetic. Teachers care about students and are more

mentors than teachers. Students are recognized as valuable, contributing, and respected, and they feel like they belong. Older children mentor younger ones in mixed elementary and secondary schools. The schools provide food and ensure safety so kids can learn. Parents with children in the schools have voice and influence and are comfortable bringing their concerns to teachers. Further, connections between schools and their local communities are encouraged through student volunteers in the community organized by a volunteer/outreach coordinator in each school.

The imagined school described by dialogue participants differs in many ways from contemporary schools. Participants' vision of greater variety in the curriculum, course offerings, and school programs, for example, suggests dissatisfaction with the province's standardized curriculum. The vision may also be affected by the absence of physical and health education teachers, librarians, music teachers, or other art specialists in many Ontario schools (People for Education, 2010). In addition, a recent survey of public opinions about education in Ontario shows that most respondents believe the authority to determine curriculum should be at the local, not the provincial, level, and 41% think the province has too much control over local schools (Hart & Livingstone, 2009). SATC dialogue participants' concerns about standardization are also evident in their vision of individualized educational programs that allow students to work at their own pace and discover their values and learning styles. Concerns about standardization are shared by critical researchers in Canada and elsewhere (Portelli & Vibert, 2002).

The emphasis placed on caring and relationships in the imagined school supports the Community, Culture and Caring component of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success/Learning to 18 initiative. This initiative is designed to increase high school completion rates through a variety of strategies, including an emphasis on developing school cultures of

community and caring (Ungerleider, 2008). The fact that participants imagine these relationships suggests that the policy has not yet achieved its desired outcome in this area. New strategies and investments may be required. At the same time, however, the dialogue suggests there is support for this initiative from participants.

There is similar support for the concept of schools as community hubs advocated by Ontario's Special Advisor on Early Learning (Pascal, 2009) and Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy (Government of Ontario, 2008). SATC dialogue participants' visions for Ontario schools see them as much more than sites of formal education for children aged 4-18. Instead, they are places where everyone has a reason to go, not only parents of children attending school. These schools have fitness facilities, a community centre, public library, community services, parenting classes, childcare, programs for seniors, and a pool. Some participants even envision a theatre or businesses in the school. Broadening the use and purposes of school buildings would make it easier for community members to share their talents, skills, and knowledge with teachers and students. It would also help school staff and principals see themselves as community members. Relatedly, SATC participants envision students, staff, and teachers in the imagined school as active in the school's community. Students might volunteer or do cooperative learning placements in the community and teachers and principals may sit on boards of community organizations. Schools also address community issues and needs such as safety, racism, poverty, and business needs. Finally, students see themselves as impacting the world and living in global community.

Policy Dialogues & Engagement

In addition to learning what Ontario citizens envision for public education, the SATC initiative aims to understand if, and if so, how, participating in a community-based policy dialogue affects participants' engagement with education policy. Engagement has three interrelated components: emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioural engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Participating in the SATC dialogues promoted participants' cognitive engagement by generating new ideas about ways that schools can be related to their communities and about actions that participants can take alone or with others. Participants' reported that the dialogues stimulated ideas for immediate individual actions they could take, suggesting that the SATC policy dialogues support and promote participants' views of themselves as policy actors. In traditional, rational conceptions of policy, policy is understood as the purview of elected representatives or powerful elites; the SATC policy dialogues challenge that conception.

Participants' reported that they gleaned new ideas; this supports Davies et al.'s (2009) assertion that policy dialogues are sites of learning. Not only did SATC participants report that they learned more about how schools may be related to their communities, but they also reported that dialogues stimulated interest in learning about other aspects of education. As citizens become more knowledgeable about possibilities for education they are better able to question current practices and alternatives. Asking critical questions helps counter anti-democratic and symbolic policies that claim to promote the public's interest but provide tangible benefits to few and ultimately promote the status quo (Smith et al., 2004).

Almost every respondent reported at least one emotion invoked by dialogue. Many reported multiple emotions and most were positive. The most common feelings reported were

“hopeful,” “encouraged,” and “excited.” A few participants explicitly stated they felt engaged. Participants also reported feeling valued and important. One said, “[I feel] important as a human being, parent, and future Canadian citizen, but as a world citizen as well.” Another stated, “I was happy to be part of something important.” It was noted by a few that they were happy to know others share their concerns. One participant stated, “[I feel] like I wasn’t a lone voice.” Others mentioned that they were pleased to hear a variety of perspectives. Feelings of being overwhelmed and frustrated were also reported but always in combination with positive feelings. For example, one respondent stated, “[I feel] cautiously optimistic though somewhat overwhelmed by tasks at hand.” These reports of positive emotions associated with participating in the SATC policy dialogue are the same as those noted by many participants in deliberative processes intended to influence policy (Levine et al., 2005).

These responses suggest that participating in the dialogues affected participants’ emotional and cognitive engagement with education. While many participants noted they gleaned new ideas for action from the dialogues, it is not possible to determine whether these actions did in fact take place. This remains an area for future research. However, simply by talking about education participants engage with education policy (Delli Carpini, et al., 2004), and thus the dialogues in and of themselves enable behavioural aspects of policy engagement.

Research on the impact of the SATC policy dialogue contributes to the limited research base focused on the effects of public participation for participants (Abelson & Guavin, 2006). This study’s findings suggest that participating in community-based policy dialogues positively affects cognitive and affective aspects of engagement. Behavioural effects are also suggested by SATC dialogue participants, but future research is needed to confirm this possibility. This study contributes to the undertheorized and under-researched field of policy dialogues that are not

intended to directly influence policy decisions (Davies et al., 2009). It shows that the process of engaging in policy dialogue without expectations of directly impacting policy produces similar outcomes for participants as deliberative processes in which participants are expected to arrive at a consensus about a decision or recommendation. Participants in both kinds of policy dialogues are exposed to new ideas and find the processes fulfilling and deeply satisfying (Davies et al., 2009; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Levine et al., 2005).

Community-based Policy Dialogues and Democracy in Education

An important goal of the SATC initiative is to strengthen Ontario's democracy through greater citizen engagement in public policy. Strong democracies require citizens to be involved in discussing and evaluating policy processes, decisions, and outcomes on an on-going basis. Doing so enables diverse experiences and perspectives to become widely known and thus they offer counter narratives to policy truths constructed in dominant policy discourses. These counter stories can challenge political spectacles that appear to serve the public interest but actually benefit society's most powerful citizens (Smith et al., 2004). Community-based policy dialogues offer a space for student, teacher, parent, and community stories to be shared, and education policies reconsidered in light of the new information. Alternatives can be proposed, created and debated. Research on the outcomes of deliberative processes finds that "given the opportunity, ordinary people have frequently proven themselves to be capable of generating impressive outcomes across a wide variety of political contexts and policy issues" (Levine et al., 2005, p. 273). Participants in the SATC policy dialogues had many ideas for public education. Many of their ideas are supported by educational research and reflect other public opinion polls (Hart & Livingstone, 2009). Thus, community-based policy dialogues offer an alternate means of

capturing public sentiment and generating policy ideas that also promote democracy in the process.

To realize the potential of face-to-face policy dialogues in democratizing education policy it is essential that diverse individuals participate and that all those who wish to participate can do so. This is difficult to achieve and often does not occur. Instead, participants in deliberative processes are typically better-off in terms of education, income, and status (Levine et al., 2005). This is also the case in policy negotiations between interest groups in formal policy processes: those groups with more money, knowledge of politics, and access to policymakers are better able to influence policy decisions (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2008). While demographic data about SATC participants' was not collected, all the participants were invited by an organization with whom they were previously affiliated. Further, the dialogues occurred only in English or French and childcare was not provided. Thus, there were inevitably many perspectives absent from the dialogues. Nevertheless, community groups may be able to access and involve groups of citizens that would be less likely to be involved in government-initiated dialogues such as new immigrants, homeless citizens, low income citizens, undocumented residents, or those who speak languages other than English or French.

An important follow-up to community-based policy dialogues is sharing the ideas and perspectives of participants. This is where People for Education and similar organizations can play an important role in enhancing democracy. People for Education sits at many formal decision-making tables in Ontario, and it has the attention of media and researchers. Thus, its members can relate the stories shared and ideas generated in their dialogues to wider and more influential audiences than the stories and ideas would have had otherwise. Findings from the

SATC dialogues frame People for Education's 2010 Annual Report and have also been shared at local, national, and international meetings.

While it is important to make policy ideas and participants' perspectives known to formal policymakers and the broader public, their potential impact does not depend upon the extent to which they are formally or explicitly shared. Doing so, and even differentiating between policy dialogues that are and are not designed to influence policy, assumes a traditional model of policymaking in which policy ideas and decisions are believed to result from rational and linear processes. In this model, citizen influence on policy exists only through formal channels of consultation. This assumption is challenged by those who argue that it is impossible to know exactly where policy ideas originate. Instead, different ideas and discourses circulate in a policy's context of influence. These discourses are shaped by policies, events, organizations, media, policy entrepreneurs, and other factors within and beyond a particular policy field. Official policy decisions, like those made by government officials, are influenced by the discourses and activities in the context of influence in part by how they affect what decisions are politically viable (Young et al., 2008). Ideas for education policies and schools of the future generated by community-based policy dialogues become part of education's context of influence and thus may impact official policies in unrecognized ways.

In addition, research on deliberative processes and policy dialogues not intended to influence policy (e.g., Davies, et al., 2009) focuses on government decisions and adopts a narrow understanding of policymakers as politicians and other government elites. In education, policy decisions are continually made by principals, teachers and students as they go about their work (Ozga, 2000). Rather than simply implementers of others' policy decisions, actors at all levels of the education system make and remake policy in light of their local contexts, beliefs, knowledge,

experience, and needs (Ball, 1994; Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Bowe et al., 1992). Thus, policy dialogues without connections to decision makers in government may nevertheless influence policy decisions in other locations made by a range of policy actors. Parents, teachers, community members or any others participating in policy dialogues may learn about a successful initiative elsewhere or come up with a new idea through the dialogue that they then decide to try in their own classroom or community. Indeed, many SATC participants reported that through participating in the dialogue they learned a new idea that they could implement in their own school or community. Thus, community-based dialogues may influence policy decisions and actors and produce various outcomes that are not recognized by traditional conceptions of policy.

People for Education's SATC policy dialogues brought ordinary citizens together to imagine and discuss possibilities for public schools in Ontario, and in so doing promoted participants' engagement with education policy and enhanced democracy in education. Public policy dialogues enabled critical examination of official policy decisions, goals, processes, and outcomes; they provided spaces for alternate policy discourses to be shared and generated. Finally, policy dialogues hosted by non-governmental organizations and ordinary citizens challenged traditional notions of policy processes as the domain of elected officials and policy elites by constructing ordinary citizens/participants as policy actors whose ideas, perspectives, and experiences are integral components of democratic life.

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