

# **Common Trends of Standardisation, Accountability, Devolution and Choice in the Educational Policies of England, U.K., California, U.S.A., and Ontario, Canada**

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## **Introduction**

Before the 80s, education reforms in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada dealt mainly with issues related to equity: greater access to secondary and post-secondary education, minority language, religious rights, and multiculturalism. In the late 80s and throughout the 90s, the focus of reforms shifted. On the one hand, reforms have been centralizing, through policies of curricula standardization, testing, school effectiveness, and accountability. On the other hand, reforms have been decentralizing, through policies of self-management and school choice. These trends are reaching global proportions and Anglophone democracies are borrowing reform models from each other (Davies and Guppy, 1997). Through a comparative analysis of educational reforms and trends in England, UK, California, USA, and Ontario, Canada striking similarities among the three systems emerge. The question arising from this comparison is: Which students are ultimately advantaged by these reforms and which ones are not?

## **Education Reform and Globalization Forces**

One of the main forces behind recent education policies in England, California, and Ontario is economic globalization. In a global economy, nations are pressured to improve their chances to compete on world markets, and this leads to a standardization of knowledge. As knowledge is distributed through formal education, school systems are converging across many developed nations (Davies and Guppy, 1997). Recent trends shared by policy-makers in England, California, and Ontario, as well as other states and provinces, include the following:

- 1) Educational innovations are sought to help find a competitive edge and restore the economy.
- 2) Policies are aimed at centralization of power such as standardized curriculum, testing, and central funding authority based on performance of institutions, and decentralization of responsibility from central administration to individual schools.
- 3) Knowledge is considered the key resource of the next century, and more emphasis is placed on distributing knowledge through education.
- 4) Efficient and skilled human capital is needed as increasingly specialized occupations are replacing low-skilled jobs.

One of the theories behind educational policies in England, California, and Ontario is economic rationalism, which holds that all public decisions, including those affecting education, are determined in relation to the issue of national economic growth (Berman, 1999). Economies are increasingly global and it is important for states to be more competitive through cutbacks in social expenditure, deregulation, and privatization (Schugurensky, 1999). As a result, these policies are renewing a trend to return to a time

when social welfare services, health care, and education were not accessible to all citizens.

Politicians in England, California, and Ontario have been urging for greater autonomy and accountability of schools, diversification of offer, and more parental choice. These approaches reflect the neoliberal theory, which opposes direct state intervention and supports free markets. To be coherent with this rationale, current policies lead to the "marketization" of public education systems. However, in the quest to achieve this marketization, "policies often have to be framed in ways which are both heavily interventionist and strongly centralist in nature" (Ball, 1993, p.154).

### **The Issue of Inequality**

It is very difficult to achieve high standards in education, and at the same time to accommodate the ever-growing diversity of the population. But public education is asked to do exactly that. Politicians want education to play two conflicting roles: to achieve excellence and efficiency, while ensuring social, gender, and racial egalitarianism (Paquette, 1992). Neo-Marxist opponents of standardization and centralization of education criticize these policies because they further vocationalize public schooling and heighten educational inequalities. They argue that the outcome will be overeducated workers in low-skilled jobs (Fuller & Rubinson, 1992).

For example, proponents of equality theories have traditionally disputed the issues of streaming (Ontario) and tracking (England) which characterize centralization trends in education. Goodlad (1984) writes that tracking according to ability levels or streaming in academic or vocational courses causes inequities, as students do not have access to the same knowledge and information. He argues that teachers instructing slow learners and students in vocational tracks separately from their peers emphasize lower levels of thinking. Goodlad recommends heterogeneous grouping of students, so that students may feel equitably treated and attain higher cognitive-domain goals.

Devolution and choice may also lead to inequalities. Research shows that parents are making choices on the basis of perceived social ideals, or based on factors of convenience and racism, rather than educational ideals or school achievement (Howe, 1997). Also, if schools are allowed to determine criteria for enrollment they are potentially perpetuating oligarchies. Although these policies of standardization, centralization, effectiveness, accountability, devolution, and choice may seem to be "great equalizers," the proponents of such policies are more concerned with global economic competitiveness than with educational equality and equity issues, as the case studies of England, California, and Ontario illustrate.

### **Educational Reforms in England in the 80s and 90s**

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) of the Thatcher government introduced policies that were centralizing on the one hand, and decentralizing on the other. Centralization occurred with the introduction of a national examination system and of a compulsory National Curriculum (NC) for state schools. Decentralization occurred through the creation of a new open enrollment system, the local management of schools (LMS) policy, and grant-maintained (GM) schools that were allowed to 'opt-out' of Local Education Authorities (LEAs).

*The national curriculum and standard assessment tests*

Part of the 1988 ERA was the implementation of a national curriculum for students aged five to sixteen. The national curriculum aimed to: (1) raise standards, making sure all children have a broad and balanced education up to the age of 16; (2) ensure that schools in all parts of the country are following the same courses; (3) specify what students must study and what they are expected to know at different ages. The national curriculum was designed with detailed targets to be achieved. Each of the ten foundation subjects was broken down into three categories of knowledge, skills, and understanding. Each category had ten levels of attainment (Silvernail, 1996).

A 'baseline assessment' for students aged four and five, and Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) at ages seven, 11 and 16, were introduced to check whether students were meeting these standards. Some subjects, like math, are tiered according to different abilities. New testing is being introduced as part of the 'package of A-level reforms.' The latest, proposed by the education minister Baroness Blackstone, is the introduction of a 'world-class' test for the brightest sixth-formers. Two more tests in all major 'academic' A-level subjects might be introduced for nine and thirteen years old students as well (Cassidy, 1999).

National standards have been established, but not every student is given the opportunity to meet them. One of the strongest criticisms is that the nature of the national curriculum has forced teachers, especially at the primary level, to narrow down their teaching content. By giving a priority to the subjects tested with SATs (Campbell & Neill, 1992), "the assessed curriculum" becomes "the taught curriculum" (Silvernail, 1996, p. 51). For example, the English curriculum has been described as restrictive and prescriptive, leaving teachers little, if any, freedom to adapt what is being taught for specific groups of students. Regarding the history curriculum, teachers in urban schools with a higher percentage of ethnic minority children, face difficulties in adapting the predominantly British curriculum to the needs of a diverse student body. By making changes to the curriculum and approaching certain topics from a more multicultural viewpoint, teachers risk excluding some material covered by the tests.

The new policy has also been criticized for the many perceived inequalities created in the areas of streaming and standardized testing. The reintroduction of streaming, i.e. dividing students by ability, does not allow all students to receive the same level of education. Due to the ten levels of attainment, and the fact that SATs have different levels of questions, many schools have differentiated teaching according to difficulty level and student ability. Furthermore, opponents of the several forms of secondary examinations criticize their social bias in favour of white upper and middle class students, and the exclusion of working-class and racial minority students (Lindsay, 1990).

Despite the large influx of immigrant children, not enough emphasis is put on the language needs of these children. For example, all testing is done in English. While Asian students tend to make better progress than do white students, ethnic minority students leave school with lower average attainments in examinations (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996). This, in turn, leads to further discrimination, as test results are also used to

measure school accountability. In order to keep school's standards high, students who under-perform are either expelled from the school or exempted from taking the national assessments. Although in principle the NC and SATs were designed to ensure educational equity for all children, this has not occurred due to the reintroduction of streaming and the shift in the purpose of the tests. Education reforms aimed at separating the more able students from the less able ones and introducing tests as assessment tools for teachers' and schools' performance do not constitute equitable treatments.

*Grant maintained schools and open enrollment*

Decentralization policies were implemented through the creation of a new open enrollment system, the local management of schools (LMS) policy, and grant-maintained (GM) schools. Initially, GM schools were existing public schools that opted out of their LEAs after a parental ballot. Currently, an independent governing body runs GM schools and funds are received directly from the central government. GM schools have gained increased power in relation to admissions, finance, and staffing. Only about two percent of primary schools have achieved grant-maintained status, versus 16 percent of secondary schools. Some argue that these are mostly academically selective and single-sex schools and as a result often carry "a considerable social and educational cachet" (Whitty et al., 1998, p.19).

Other maintained schools were given more autonomy through the local management of schools (LMS) policy. This policy has considerably affected the funding formula for schools, which changed to the following; at least 85 percent of LEAs' budget is handed down to schools and 80 percent of each school's budget is determined on a per-student basis. Some are critical of this funding formula as it gives LEAs little room to provide for disadvantaged schools and students (Whitty et al., 1998).

Open enrollment allows parents to choose and allows schools to attract as many pupils as possible, up to their capacity. As funding is per--pupil, open enrollment has created a 'quasi-market' where schools compete to attract students if they want to keep operating. The most sought-after students are the academically able ones as they stay in the system longer and thus bring in more funding, whereas the least sought after are those with special education needs and lower SES (socio-economic status) students. This 'cream-skimming' "poses the biggest threat to equity" (Whitty et al., 1998, p. 116).

**Education Reforms in California, USA in the 80s and 90s**

In 1994, the Improving America's Schools Act was passed by the Clinton Administration and Congress, and thus began the transformation of the role of the Federal government in education. Two further acts have followed: the Goals 2000 Educate America Act, and the Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999 (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The reasoning behind this legislation is that the quality decline of American education is due to the low expectations and low standards set by the US education systems. The Federal government's new role is to help states establish a standard system of curricula and assessments so that all children can reach high academic standards. Schools are held accountable for the improvement of all students. For example, school districts need to publicly identify the lowest-performing schools and help these schools to improve. If there is no satisfactory improvement in student performance within three

years of the initial identification, the district has to take one of the following corrective actions: (1) reconstitute the school with new staff, or (2) close the school and re-open it with new staff or as a charter school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

After the America's School Act, more and more emphasis has been placed on standards, achievement, and assessment as clearly stated in the California State Board of Education Mission and Goals Statement (California Department of Education, 1998). In 1998, the STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) program began, and every spring, California's students in grades two through eleven take the SAT-9 (Stanford Achievement Test, Version 9), a norm-referenced, commercially produced, multiple-choice test. In addition, a high school exit examination in language arts and mathematics has been developed in accordance with the statewide academically rigorous content standards adopted by the State Board of Education (California Department of Education, 1999b).

Students who are learning English and who have been in California for up to 12 months can take a test in their original language. However, the only approved test is for Spanish-speaking students. Despite this provision, many students do not perform well because of their limited ability in English. California is one of the states with the highest number of limited-English-proficient population, together with New York, Texas, and Florida. Nearly 25 percent of California's students do not know English well, compared to 1.8 percent of the national average. Furthermore, approximately 2.7 million (47%) of the state's 5.7 million students come from low-income backgrounds. 35 percent of these disadvantaged students are tested yearly, and they consistently score below their more advantaged classmates (California Department of Education, 1999a). Poverty is an indicator of potential academic risk, although this does not mean that poverty causes low academic achievement. What it means is that often students with low SES, usually attend schools where the quality of education is lower, due to lower academic standards, lower expectations and less qualified teachers (California Department of Education, 1999c).

### **Grouping and tracking**

The majority of California's high schools rely on systems of grouping students by ability or tracking in different streams, such as academic and vocational. However, there is evidence demonstrating how these practices can create within-school segregation that discriminates against Black and Hispanic students. A case study of two school systems, in California and in Illinois, shows that "racially imbalanced tracked classes have borne little resemblance to homogeneous ability groups, even though they have been labelled and treated as such by schools" (Oakes, 1995, p. 685). The study demonstrates how these grouping practices can result in a cycle of restricted opportunities and diminished outcomes for such students. Thus, these practices can lead to inequality.

### *Funding*

In California, like in most American states, funding is decentralized and a system of per pupil funding is strongly influenced by property values. Differences in per-pupil funding between wealthy suburban districts and low-income inner-city districts can be several thousand dollars per year. This difference translates into fewer resources and less services, such as special education. Although California's per-capita income is fairly

high (only 11 states are higher), in the 1996-'97 school year, the per-pupil expenditure in this state was \$5,327, well below the U.S. average of \$6,335. In fact, California ranked 41st at the national level, and ranked last among the other nine most industrialised states.

The situation worsens if we look at public school expenditures against personal income to compare school finance effort with academic capacity. In 1994-'95, California ranked 48th, spending \$33 for K-12 schools for every \$1,000 in personal income, versus a national average of \$40, while Alaska ranked first with \$73 (Educational Data Partnership, 1998). Despite this trend in low public school expenditures, California spends \$7.85 for each test administered, while millions of dollars have been allocated to improve students' achievement on tests. Evidently, testing is regarded as a priority by the government, but the disparities caused by the decentralization of funding are not. This highly decentralized system causes inequalities to remain, or even widen, since property taxes are what really makes a difference in the quality and quantity of education.

#### *Charter schools*

Charter schools are public schools created by a group of teachers, parents and community leaders or a community-based organisation, and are usually sponsored by a public school board or county board of education. Charter schools are generally exempt from most laws governing school districts. California was the second state in the U.S. to start this experiment in 1992, and in 1997 there were already more than 130 charter schools. The law requires that a public charter school be non-sectarian and participate in the STAR program (California Department of Education, 1999d).

There is a striking resemblance between American charter schools and British grant-maintained schools. In fact, charter schools have the authority to decide on such matters as budget, staff, and curriculum but at the same time they are accountable to meet standards of performance (Whitty et al., 1998). As previously argued, this promotion of choice, marketization of education, and competition based on test results only increases the gap between schools with high numbers of 'advantaged' and high performing students and schools with high numbers of socially disadvantaged and low performing students.

#### **Educational Reforms in Ontario, Canada in the 80s and 90s**

A shift in the distribution of authority is occurring in Ontario, similarly to England and California. Recently, the Boards' control in Ontario has been decreased through centralization of decision-making at the provincial level, especially in the areas of curriculum development and finance (Wilson, 1999). Responsibilities of the Ontario Ministry of Education now include developing curriculum policy, determining provincial standards for student achievement, setting diploma requirements, evaluating and approving learning materials for use in schools, and distributing funds allocated by the provincial legislature to assist school boards with the operation of schools and school boards, as well as the duties of teachers and school board officials (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1999).

In 1995, Ontario's New Democratic Party (NDP) government released the Common Curriculum for grades one to nine and reinstated standardized testing (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1995). However, the election of the Progressive Conservative government in the same year resulted in the rejection of the NDP curriculum revision because it was judged to be too vague. The common curriculum set specific outcomes only for grades three, six and nine, and curriculum development was still decentralized to Ontario's 166 local school boards (Wilson, 1999).

In 1996, with the approval of the Education Improvement Act, Bill 160, the Ontario Ministry of Education was charged with instituting several reforms, including: (1) implementing standardized testing and establishing an Education Quality Accountability Office, (2) financial cuts to kindergarten, summer school, upgrading, special education, adult education, continuing education, school councils and school boards, and (3) changing the funding formula.

#### *Standardized testing and streaming*

The initial reforms concerned elementary and junior level schools, including the introduction of a new provincial curriculum, province-wide testing in grades three and six, and standardized report cards. In 1999, a new high school program was started which implemented such changes as re-introduction of streaming, new graduation requirements, number of compulsory courses, introduction of a grade 10 literacy test, and a decrease from five years of schooling to four.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office testing (EQAO) was first administered in the academic year 1996-'97 for Grades 3 and 6. The Grade 10 Literacy Test will be administered for the first time in the spring of 2000. For the Grades 3 and 6 testing, teachers did not know the content of the tests until one month before, when practice tests were administered. During that month, teachers were pressured by principals to cover test material to ensure that students knew it. The practice of teaching to the test has been an inevitable consequence. Tests that were supposed to assess students' performance are being used to assess school's performance. It will most likely be the inner city schools that will achieve the lowest scores as many of their students are at a disadvantage--linguistically, socially, and economically.

Although previous policies had been aimed at "de-streaming," streaming has been re-introduced in high schools with two streams of courses, namely academic and applied. The re-introduction of streaming shows that equality issues are not a priority on the Ministry's agenda. Problems such as the relationship between the social and ethnocultural background and streaming, as well as dropping out, have not been resolved. Previous policies of de-streaming were supported by research showing that choices of vocational streaming-or dropping out-are related to students' SES and ethnic background (Churchill & Kaprielian-Churchill, 1991).

#### *Funding*

Elementary and secondary school financing is done at the municipal level, mainly through local property taxes, and at the provincial level through provincial grants. Each year, the province establishes a dollar amount, which is intended to provide a base level of education to a student. The amount of the provincial grant varies to ensure equality of

resources, thus boards that raise less property taxes due to lower property values, receive bigger grants (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1997). The Ministry of Education has now assumed direct financial control over school boards. Local property taxes are set and collected centrally by the Ministry, rather than locally by school boards.

Opponents of Bill 160 argue that the per-pupil funding mechanism does not take into consideration the needs of some urban schools, which may be greater than those of some suburban or rural schools. Inner-city schools that count a high population of newly immigrated students, students with lower SES and ethnic minority students, have a greater need for ESL and Special Education classes. Others argue that Bill 160 will lead eventually to a privatized education system, and that it deals with quality and improvement but "has no grounded discussion on equity questions" (Dei & Karumanchery, 1999, p.116).

Provincial funding has been progressively decreasing. In 1997, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation asserted that spending cuts by the Ministry totaled "well over one billion dollars over three years," and feared that additional reductions "will be writing off a generation of Ontario students and jeopardizing our province's future" (Small & Girard, 1997). Although the initial aim of the changes was to 'raise standards' and achieve 'excellence' in education, these cuts have instead resulted in a decrease in quality at all levels of education, as reflected by the annual OISE/UT (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto) survey on education (Livingstone, Hart, & Davie, 1998). Consequently, those parents who can afford it send their children to private schools, as seen by the increase in enrollment in private schools from 80,340 in 1995, to 92,070 in 1997 (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1995-1998).

As reported by the media, the most recent government proposal includes funding of independent schools and further cuts to public schools (Walkom, 1999). This proposal is clearly another step towards devolution and choice, however, the issues of quality and equality have not been considered. If this reform is implemented, the quality of education offered by public schools will suffer further. Consequently, this will widen the gap between students attending public schools and students attending high-quality private schools.

#### *Common Issues*

Through this analysis, it clearly appears that there are some similarities between educational reforms and policies in England, Ontario, and California. There are common trends of standardization, streaming, testing, public funding cuts, performance-based funding, devolution, and choice.

These policies have a dual aim. The first aim is to increase government control. Economic under-performance is being blamed on poorly skilled and educated workers and modest scoring achieved on international tests are often used as proof that education systems are not performing well. Governments feel that greater central control is needed to achieve excellence in education, so they make schools and teachers accountable for their work through centralized curricula and testing. However, the calls for excellence seem to contrast with recent funding cuts in public education. The second



aim is to decrease boards/LEAs' control through devolution of authority to the schools and through the quest for parental choice.

Several issues can be raised after analyzing these policies. The first is related to standardized testing. Which students are disadvantaged by this emphasis on testing and what are these tests really measuring? The students who are disadvantaged by these reforms are the ethnic minority students with a lower ability in English. The tests measure only isolated skills, and there is hardly, if any, critical thinking involved. Placing too much emphasis on standardized assessment tests encourages the practices of rote learning and teaching to the test. Curricula become test-driven. As one Principal of an American high school put it, "we are preparing a generation of robots" (House, 1998, p.34).

The second issue is the accountability of schools based on test scores. Is the system only testing the students, or is it ultimately testing the individual performance of each teacher and the overall performance of each school? The pressure is on everyone--on the students to perform academically, on the teachers to perform in their work, and on the school principals to perform as managers. However, not everyone is given the same chance to succeed in these test-driven systems. Inner-city schools with bigger populations of ESL and low SES students can hardly perform as well as suburban schools with populations of mainly mono-cultural, mono-racial, middle-class students. Furthermore, per-pupil funding does not leave much room for special programs usually needed for disadvantaged students.

The third point is related to choice. In England and California, and probably soon in Ontario (charter schools already exist in the province of Alberta), parents are encouraged to compare performance tables of schools and choose accordingly. However, the issue of choice brings up two questions. How do we know if parents actually use performance tables as criteria of choice? If some parents do base their choice on academic performance of schools, what does that mean in practice for low-performing schools? Parents mostly choose according to class- and race-based criteria, although some might choose according to academic excellence criteria. This means that teachers in low-performing schools might be perceived as not doing their job effectively, without acknowledging the correlation of other factors, such as the proportion of ESL students, as previously mentioned. Thus, choice based on test scores and social/racial bias can only "reinforce the existing hierarchy of schools" (Whitty et al., 1998, p. 117).

Ultimately, the students who will gain from these reforms appear to be the high achieving students and also the standard-level students with middle-class parents who can choose the 'right' school after educated research. Those who are most likely disadvantaged by these reforms are students with limited proficiency in English, lower SES students, and students from ethnic minorities.

Advocates of these policies cross-nationally do not seem concerned with issues of equality, but rather with 'high standards' in education and with 'market-driven' education. Their goal is to create the efficient and skilled human capital needed to achieve higher economic performance in global markets. However, in their effort to

attain their goal, they might be increasing the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.'

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