Chapter 2

Education Reform in Ontario: Building Capacity Through Collaboration

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2.1 Introduction

Ontario's educational performance preceding the reform was not lagging according to international standards. Students were consistently achieving top-quartile scores in math and top-decile scores in reading in PISA (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). Ontario also had the largest proportion of immigrants in the country: as of 2018, these students represented 44% of the student population (O'Grady et al., 2019) and has seen higher performance of students of immigrant background compared to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average (OECD, 2019). Yet by the province's standards, students were not performing well in literacy and numeracy. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was launched in 2004 to improve student reading, writing and math. The aim of the strategy was to have 75% of 6th graders able to read, write and do math by spring 2008 at the expected level. Only 55% of students had met this goal in 2003. Additionally, only 60% of students were graduating high school within 4 years. The target was to have 85% of Grade 9 students graduate within 4 years by 2010 (Levin, Glaze, & Fullan, 2008).

Just as troubling as student underperformance were the tensions which had risen among teachers and the Ministry of Education during the Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris from 1995 to 2002. The Ontario education system had faced major reforms starting in 1993 when the Royal Commission on Learning was initiated by the previous New Democratic Party (NDP) government. The Harris government acted on some of the recommendations of the reports by this commission and became the first administration to introduce full-scale testing by establishing the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). The EQAO was created as an independent agency which administers and evaluates standardized provincial

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tests – and as well as a College of Teachers to oversee accreditation and professional standards for teachers and teacher training institutions. The Harris government also introduced a new funding model in which municipal education taxes were replaced with province-level taxes. Other changes included amalgamating school boards, moving taxation, establishing a district aggregate average class size, reducing teachers' preparation time by as much as 50%, and increasing the time students and teachers spend in class each year (Earl, Freeman, Lasky, Sutherland, & Torrance, 2002).

Many of these changes were disempowering for teachers and ultimately detrimental for students. The Harris government passed an education bill (Bill 160) which restricted strike actions and mandated requirements for staff, class size, preparation time and established a minimum amount of instructional time. These were previously established by local school boards. Placing these aspects under provincial purview and classifying principals and vice-principals as management excluded them from teacher unions and alienated many teachers (Earl et al., 2002). The Harris administration was widely perceived by educators as being disrespectful to teachers by requiring teachers to implement a hurried curriculum without a full understanding of the standards which had a negative impact on teacher collaboration. The administration's relationship with educators further deteriorated in 1995 when Minister of Education John Snobelen was inadvertently caught on camera saying the government needed to "create a crisis in education to generate support for change" (Parker, 2017). This comment had little impact on the momentum for change that had been generated by the report by the Royal Commission and creation of the EQAO but it represented the manipulation of the government in taking a "brand-building" approach to reform (Parker, 2017).

Initiatives introduced under Premier Harris such as Teacher Adviser Program (TAP) increased teachers' workload which contributed to increased pressure and higher fatigue. As a result, teachers took on fewer extracurricular commitments in protest which negatively impacted their relationships with students. This loss of motivation often occurs when teachers feel reforms are politically mandated rather than student-centered (Hargreaves, 1998 as cited by Earl et al., 2002) and the mounting frustration experienced by many teachers resulted in a province-wide walkout by teachers in October 1997. Over the previous 4 years, 26 million student days had been lost due to strikes (Mourshed et al., 2010), leading many families to exit the public system altogether. Public confidence in education, which had been declining in the late 1990s, hit a low point at 43% in 2002 (Hart & Kempf, 2018).

2.2 British Influence

McGuinty's first priority was to "stabilize the patient" by changing the tone of conflict that had characterized the previous administration (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019). Inspired by the results-oriented approach of a 1997 literacy and numeracy reform in Britain, McGuinty committed to a few

specific deliverables which were maintained across his tenure. This was an important act of accountability which helped rebuild trust with the public and teachers. The work of Special Advisor Michael Fullan provided the theoretical framework for the Ontario education reform, which was modeled on the education reform under British Prime Minister Tony Blair and chief strategist Michael Barber. Fullan had examined this reform while working at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). The Ontario strategy borrowed some elements from the British reform, including their focus on using professional development to build system capacity (Levin, 2008). Yet the British model was considered by many to be “too top-down, too target driven, and too punitive” (Fullan, 2010). Reform leaders in Ontario gave schools and boards more autonomy and flexibility on how they achieved priorities and how they responded to failure to achieve goals – with support rather than punishment (Levin, 2008). In addition, Britain’s gains in education leveled off (Fullan, 2010); Ontario sought to design a reform whose impact would endure.

2.3 Strong Leadership

One of the most significant successes of the Ontario reform was the ability of policymakers and educators to link the external structure of the school, which includes standards, assessments, and accountability, with the internal structure of teaching, learning and instruction organization (Cohen & Mehta, 2017), by investing in teacher education, funding, system organization and leadership. The strength of the reform was a united effort across all levels of the education system to build capacity and accountability. A key part of the strategy was creating a Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) to build leadership capacity at the provincial, district and community levels. The LNS was created to build teaching and leadership capacity and directly target improvement of student outcomes without bureaucratic constraints (Levin, 2008). Approximately forty Student Achievement Officers (SAO) were hired to design and implement improvement strategies in support of this initiative. SAO’s and Ministry of Education staff in the Secondary Schools Programs Branch worked with district staff on a local basis to push districts “in a supportive and collegial way, which assisted and motivated districts, rather than in a commanding or punitive way” (Levin, 2008, p. 33). Every school was required to create a team to lead their success initiative.

The commitment to a collaborative and problem-solving approach at all three levels of government was essential to the design and implementation of school-level initiatives and was reflected in the design of leadership infrastructure and initiatives in the Ministry of Education. At the highest level, Canada’s Council of Ministers of Education provides a forum for other provincial Ministers of Education to meet and discuss ideas and practices to implement (OECD, 2011). In 2007, the Leadership Alliance Network for Student Achievement (LANSA) was initiated to partner directors from the five highest-achieving districts with those from the 18 lowest-achieving districts in a professional learning community to share knowledge about how to

implement strategies for literacy and numeracy. Directors, managers, and education officers often work through External Student Success Education Officers (ESSEOs) in regional offices. At the school level, Student Success teams are comprised of administration, student services, special education, co-op and classroom teachers to identify students at risk of not graduating and to coordinate a strategy and support transition from elementary to secondary schools. These ‘Student Success Leaders’ were also given the initiative to plan how funding is allocated to programs (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014). Thus, there was initiative and accountability for educators at all levels of the system.

The selection of leaders in Ontario’s education system was critical in preserving the continuous focus of reform goals. Strategic reform leader Ben Levin was a former deputy minister of education for the province of Manitoba and arrived with practical experience in the field. Premier McGuinty made a novel decision to bring Michael Fullan – former dean of OISE at the University of Toronto – into the cabinet room as an outside expert who became his Special Advisor on Education. In terms of political leadership, Ontario maintained a pattern of selecting leaders from within their ranks. Mary-Jean Gallagher was the director of the Greater Essex County school board term before taking on the role of the Assistant Deputy Minister of Student Achievement, during which she led the literacy and numeracy initiative. One of Gallagher’s priorities was incorporating the LNS into the Ministry of Education, making it a core function of the ministry rather than a reform strategy. Expanding the scope of initiatives by incorporating them into the ministry was a key strategy in ensuring the reforms were sustainable. Kathleen Wynne assumed the role of Minister of Education from 2006 to 2010 following her role as Parliamentary Assistant to former Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy from 2004 to 2006. Minister Wynne had a Master of Education and was previously a school trustee. She assumed the role as Premier after McGuinty’s resignation in 2013, serving for 5 years. Her experience in education made her well-positioned to maintain the administration’s educational priorities (Mourshed et al., 2010), most importantly her role as Minister of Education from 2006 to 2010. Her file on parent involvement as Parliamentary Assistant which involved dealing with parent organizations and representativeness meant she had a working relationship with parents entering her role as Minister (K. Wynne, personal communication, November 5, 2019).

2.4 Student Success Strategy

Reform was implemented at the ministry, district and school levels. Programming at secondary schools was designed to improve student outcomes by increasing engagement with courses and staff. The Student Success/Learning to 18 strategy (SS/L18) launched in 2003 was designed to help secondary students graduate and reach their educational and career goals. The Ministry of Education provided approximately \$130 million to school boards for student success initiatives in 2010/11 and raised funding to about \$150 million in 2012/13 (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario,

2011). The strategy had five key goals: to increase the provincial graduation rate and decrease the drop-out rate, support positive outcomes for all students, provide students with new learning opportunities, build on students' strengths and interests, and provide students with an effective elementary-to-secondary school transition (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014). The two prongs of this approach included innovative programs and instruction aimed at literacy and numeracy such as dual credits and experiential learning, as well as more personalized support from Student Success Teams (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b).

Efforts to support students were focused on building a relationship between students and teachers. Related initiatives included the Supervised Alternative Learning for Excused Pupils (SALEP) which was aimed at re-engaging students who were not on track to graduate and preparing them to reach their post-graduation goals. Staff were required to make formal transition plans, monitor students and promote their engagement as a "caring adult" (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014). In further efforts to re-engage students, Ontario introduced legislation in 2005 requiring all students who had not graduated from high school to continue in a school or another appropriate learning program until they were 18 years of age (Levin, 2008).

One of the central tenets of helping secondary students graduate and reach their educational and career goals was providing personalized support for students. Leaders were established in schools to coordinate success initiatives and "to combat the anonymity that many students experience in high schools" (Levin, 2008, p. 35). Initiatives included the Grade 8–9 Transition Planning Initiative launched in 2005, which involved a collaboration between elementary and secondary schools to provide an adult to partner with students to facilitate the transition from elementary to secondary school. As this transition marks one of students' "perilous points in their educational trajectory" (Lee & Burkam, 2003) during which they are at a particularly high risk of dropping out, the narrow targeting of this strategy was instrumental in supporting student retention. Furthermore, the strong relationship between academic background and dropping out (Lee & Burkam, 2003) suggests that gains in student test scores may have contributed to lower dropout rates, thus advancing multiple goals of the reform.

Programming targeted at fostering relationships between students and a caring adult are supported by research showing that high quality student-teacher relationships are a better predictor of achievement in young children than students' relationships with their peers, and in some cases even a better predictor than their relationship with their mother (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). In high school, students' relationships with their teachers are a critical protective factor. Students are less likely to drop out of school when they perceive positive relationships between themselves and their teachers (Lee & Burkam, 2003). This effect persists even once student background and school characteristics are considered, which suggests teachers can play a formative role in student retention across many contexts.

Another key partner in providing individualized support for students were parents. Parents Reaching Out (PRO) was started in 2006 to allow parents on school councils to identify barriers to parental involvement and act to address it. A review

of these parent initiatives revealed that in Ontario's large urban areas, parents emphasized partnerships between homes, schools and communities, as well as language support and feedback from the parent community. The focus in primary schools was on literacy and numeracy, whereas in secondary schools, parents emphasized mental health (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018). The priorities identified by parents in this program can be used as a source of valuable feedback for the development of a larger program or strategy by the ministry.

In their 2006–2007 evaluation of the Student Success Strategy, the non-profit corporation Canadian Council on Learning found that there was a shift from an implied focus on the learner to a “highly intentional focus” on the learner for school programming, including flexibility, choice and monitoring, and that these measures led to improved academic and social outcomes including smoother transition into secondary school, better test scores and graduation rates (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014). The council identified key factors which contributed to student success, including targeted funding, designation of student success staff in schools and leaders in boards, improved scheduling and funding flexibility, professional development opportunities, increased focus at points of student transition within and between schools, and innovative projects.

An area of reform in which Ontario excelled was the specific targeted programming toward student achievement. Professor Alan King performed research over 4 years tracking two cohorts and found that between 2003 and 2004, graduation rates for students going through the new programming was only 68%. Specifically, he found that credit accumulation in Grades 9 and 10 were significant predictors of graduation (King, 2002, 2003; King, 2004 as cited by Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014). Insights from this research were used in designing initiatives for students between Grade 7 and 12. Changes to the Education Act in 2009 increased school board responsibility for student achievement as well as Student Achievement Officers who facilitate professional learning communities for principals (Mourshed et al., 2010). In order to sustain student engagement and bolster course completion rates, a credit recovery initiative was introduced, in which students who failed a course must only repeat the parts which they failed, as opposed to repeating the whole course. Similarly, in credit rescue, schools provide additional assistance to students outside of class who were in danger of failing a course. This design was aimed at mitigating the negative emotional consequences of failure and improving retention rates.

Other initiatives to bolster student achievement included the Specialist High Skills Majors, which allows students to focus their studies in a certain area, and Dual Credit programs, in which students can enroll in courses which would count both towards their secondary school diploma and a post-secondary qualification. In addition, the School-College-Work initiative, aimed at improving the transition from high school to post-secondary pathways, was expanded across the province. The Cooperative Education and Apprenticeship program was also updated to include more scaffolding preceding a coop placement, more flexible course scheduling and tailored course design to allow students to participate in apprenticeships (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014).

In addition to evaluations and research studies, a vital source of feedback for programming was students. In the Student Voice initiative established in 2008, students were encouraged to share their ideas about improving the Ontario school system and strengthen their sense of belonging. Students were also able to voice their opinions on the Minister's Student Advisory Council and apply for grants for leading projects on student engagement (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014).

2.5 Capacity Through Collaboration

I believe that teachers and principals and district leaders are not unlike students in that some are strong, some are weak, but they can all improve. – Former Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty

Following a troubled relationship with teachers under the previous administration, it became apparent to McGuinty's government that they "cannot afford to be at war with our teachers" (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019). They recognized teachers as critical partners in leading reform and took action to rebuild a trusting relationship with them. The government abolished some policies such as paper-and-pencil testing of new teachers and the professional development requirement, which had been perceived by many teachers as punitive, and replaced them with an induction program for new teachers and simpler system of teacher performance evaluation (Levin, 2008). Although the original reform design was top-down, reform leaders began to realize the need to develop capacity in districts and schools so that the drive for change did not only originate from the highest levels of leadership (M. Fullan, personal communication, December 9, 2019).

Demonstrating gains in student outcomes made by reform efforts was instrumental in securing funding to support programming. Over the course of the reform, the sustained focus on outcomes contributed to a rise in the education budget from \$10 billion to \$21 billion (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019). Equally important was fostering meaningful relationships with teachers and principals to maintain an understanding of what was happening in the classroom. A critical part of McGuinty's "resolute" leadership was combining his persistence in pursuing reform goals with his demonstration of empathy towards educators (Fullan, 2010). McGuinty held a roundtable with principals once every couple of months to learn about how the reform was being perceived (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019). Furthermore, the Ministry put in place a Partnership Table which brings the Minister of Education together with all major stakeholders on a regular basis. Most policy issues are discussed at these meetings before finalization and announcement (Levin, 2008).

A significant part of creating an environment for progress involved removing "distractors" which were preventing teachers from reaching their potential in the classroom and rebuilding a healthy relationship with teachers (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019). One of the most

important developments in freeing teachers from their extracurricular obligations was the signing of a 4-year collective bargaining agreement (OECD, 2011). Previously, teachers were involved in labour negotiations for agreements which lasted only 2 years. Inspired by the cross-sector cooperation in Ireland which fueled rapid economic growth in the late 1990s and early 2000s, McGuinty helped to extend the term of agreements to allow teacher to devote their resources toward the classroom. Reducing class size was another strategy to remove distractors from the table. Although the research did not offer unanimous support for smaller class size, teachers had expressed concern at having to teach too many students (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019). As part of the collective agreement signed in 2005, the government supported 200 min of weekly preparation time for all elementary teachers which led to creation of about 2,000 new teaching positions for specialists. By 2007, 90% of the province's primary classes (K-3) had twenty or fewer students and about 5,000 new teachers were introduced into the elementary school system (Levin, 2008).

The system of support provided to principals and teachers was based on their conception as "lead learners" who, like their students, needed access to expertise from professionals and peers. In fostering a more collaborative teaching culture to raise student achievement, teachers were provided with strong individual classroom support. They were encouraged to take an "assessment for learning and as learning" approach to their professional learning, which involves specifying goals and implementation strategies, working with peers and engaging in pedagogical reflection (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Learning involves not only teachers' peers but also their students as a vital source of feedback in their personal and professional development.

In an analysis of teaching culture in Ontario school boards, Hargreaves, Shirley, Wangia, Bacon, and D'Angelo (2018) noted a transition from professional collaboration, which is a descriptive approach that refers to how teachers collaborate and emphasizes the equality of all teachers, to the more prescriptive approach of collaborative professionalism, which involves professionals working together to improve student achievement and wellbeing. This approach emphasizes a sense of shared responsibility and values all voices in contributing to a collaborative and equitable learning culture. Key elements of this approach also include regular feedback in professional learning and development as well as collective responsibility among students, defined by "a moral responsibility and a central professional obligation" to student success (Hargreaves et al., 2018). In contrast to the culture of collaboration during the previous administration, once "distractors" had been removed from their workload, teachers were able to focus on developing their teaching skills and be more intentional in their collaboration with their colleagues and students.

Collaborative inquiry, which is an integral part of collaborative professionalism, played a significant role in Ontario educational policy starting in 2010 based on its ability to enhance teacher and student learning by engaging educators as researchers. Consultants and coaches worked with schools to encourage educators to reflect on their practice in collaborative inquiry, not as an expert but as a partner in

learning. “Coaching at the elbow” gave teachers the assistance from instructional coaches as they attempted and practiced new strategies in literacy (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). Evidence suggests that opportunities for teachers to receive this kind of support and coaching during implementation is a feature of effective programs internationally (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Furthermore, research has found that the level of school support emerges as an ‘enabling condition’ for professional development as it influences the extent of active learning, follow-up and feedback and significant effects on program outcomes.

Another key strategy in providing support for students was resourcing parents to create their own improvement plans. The Parents Reaching Out (PRO) fund allowed school councils and parent organizations to apply for grants to start activities designed to support student learning at school (\$1,000 for parent projects), regional or provincial level (up to \$30,000). The province made significant investments in education and ensured these funds were distributed among schools and dedicated towards programming which empowered teachers and parents. This initiative was significant because it was an investment in innovation and an act of trust. Ontario funded over 5,500 school council PRO projects and over 200 regional projects with a budget of over \$10 million (Mourshed et al., 2010). This program embodied another key component of the reform which was implementing policies and practices that increased individual and collective capacity to achieve accountability via shared responsibility, achieving both internal and external accountability.

Although equity was not an explicit goal of the reform, supports were put in place to narrow the achievement gap among schools. The “turnaround schools” program offered additional support to a small number of low-achieving schools who opted in voluntarily. The number of these schools had been reduced by 75% by 2006 (Levin, 2008), at which point these schools were put under the administration of the LNS and the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) was established. OFIP is an equity strategy which identifies high needs schools and addresses them with a non-stigmatizing attitude and targeted support by working with educators and stakeholders to plan school improvement strategies. The OFIP School Strategy provides support to OFIP 1 schools, in which under 34% of students are underachieving in reading, and OFIP 2 schools, in which up to 50% of students were demonstrating low performance (Audet et al., 2007).

2.6 Professional Development

Professional development initiatives at Ontario schools combined many elements of the organization partnership model for professional development (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). For instance, the faculty of education at the University of Toronto OISE established a partnership with four school boards in Toronto called the ‘Learning Consortium’ which was aimed at improving teacher development. A planning committee organized formal and informal professional development activities, including in-service and pre-service programs, conferences, and reflective and monitoring

practices. The Teacher Apprenticeship Program was another professional development initiative based in Toronto which helped provide teaching practice to students who wanted to enter teacher training programs but lacked the experience. Apprentices were assigned mentor teachers, and both participated in regular workshops and discussion groups (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Partnerships were formed even at the course level: “Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship” – a course designed by the Ministry of Education and Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto – was offered as part of Specialist High Skills Major program for about 25 students in each district school board (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

Another key aspect of the organization partnership model which was central to Ontario education reform was forming school and teacher networks. LANSAs were aimed at forming partnerships among directors and building capacity to maximize instructional leadership and strategies to improve student outcomes. Directors from the highest-achieving districts formed a professional learning community with directors of the lowest-achieving boards to share strategies about how to implement numeracy and literacy strategies. This provided a framework for professional development around the School Effectiveness Framework and mentorship was implemented at all levels of leadership.

The Teacher Leadership and Learning Program (TLLP) was launched in 2007 as a joint initiative between the Ontario Teachers’ Federation (OTF) and Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) with the goals of supporting experienced teachers in self-directed professional development. Each year, experienced teachers could apply to conduct a TLLP project. A research report found that over 95% of teachers participating in TLLP Summits from 2008 to 2012 reported being satisfied (Campbell, Lieberman, & Yashkina, 2013). Similarly, positive responses were observed for additional unpaid training opportunities which were provided for teachers to build their literacy and numeracy skills over the summer. Over 25,000 teachers attended this programming (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019), suggesting that teachers were intrinsically motivated to improve their classrooms. Although more research is required on the impact of this professional development on student outcomes, the high teacher satisfaction and engagement levels observed in these initiatives is promising for innovation in the classroom.

2.7 Data-Driven Accountability

The reform involved features of American standards-based reforms (SBR’s) such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top which were aimed at reducing educational inequality and improving educational quality (Cohen & Mehta, 2017). The province used many instruments of SBR’s including high academic standards, accountability for school outcomes, and support for school improvement. Examples of these instruments included a high pass rate of 70% on province-wide testing, benchmarks for student achievement on standardized tests, transparency in

reporting of results, and investment in developing the skills and collaboration of teachers and administrators, respectively.

By using an independent agency (EQAO) to measure progress on student test scores, the government maintained accountability and transparency to educators and the public. Although the testing standard is determined by the Minister of Education, EQAO administers curriculum-based testing which results report on strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and are used to inform curriculum improvements, compared to standardized testing which places results on a bell curve (D. Cooke, personal communication, November 8, 2019). Critically, results include more than test scores; teachers are surveyed on their school culture and students are surveyed on their attitudes towards test content (EQAO, 2017a, 2017b). EQAO results are used by a majority of teachers surveyed to identify if their students are meeting curriculum expectations, and by nearly all principals surveyed to inform school improvement plans and changes in teaching practice. Results are also used to guide school board improvement plans and at the ministry level to establish initiatives such as OFIP (EQAO, 2013).

Many teachers were distrustful and unsupportive of the EQAO because it was used by the administration for accountability and competition (Campbell & Levin, 2009). The Ontario Statistical Neighbours system which was established by the LNS and Information Management Branch was important in making the data-driven approach to reform accessible and individualized to schools. This program allowed schools and districts to compare their performance to that of other schools with similar demographics (Levin, 2008). This service included several indicators including EQAO results, demographic information from Statistics Canada, school programs, and information about programs related to literacy and numeracy initiatives. An important feature of this instrument was that it could be used by non-experts to make inquiries on an ad hoc basis and make searches based on individual schools and any combination of indicators (Campbell & Levin, 2009). Analyses revealed the most powerful predictors of student achievement were socioeconomic status, parental education and student mobility. Furthermore, the amount of low-achieving schools had dropped significantly by 2008, although schools that were performing in the middle of the range were not demonstrating improvement over time, which prompted the LNS to focus on these schools (Campbell & Levin, 2009). Data from this program informed Secretariat decisions and development of programs such as OFIP. Furthermore, this data was used to connect principals to share best practices as a method to “share and care and to support one another through the system” (D. McGuinty, personal communication, December 11, 2019).

2.8 Results

The success of the reform was reflected in both the dramatic improvement in student achievement and positive feedback from teachers. Literacy and numeracy rates improved from 54% to 70% on average for EQAO. 125,000 students achieved

higher proficiency in reading and writing than without such a strategy; 93,000 more students graduated from high school (Ontario Ministry of Education & Fullan, 2013). Over 90% of teachers reported that the board had provided them with opportunities to improve their teaching practice and knowledge in literacy and numeracy, and at least 75% of teachers believed they had gained moderately or significantly improved understanding of effective techniques for teaching literacy and numeracy over the past three years (Audet et al., 2007). Public satisfaction with the school system and teacher performance rose to an all-time high of 65% in 2012 (Hart & Kempf, 2018).

Although the reform was considered successful in achieving the desired outcomes, student performance often fell just short of the benchmarks. A proficiency rate of 70%, just short of the original goal of 75%, was achieved for literacy and numeracy, and 82%, not 85%, was reached for high school graduation rates (Ontario Ministry of Education & Fullan, 2013). Furthermore, math scores faced stagnation in the years following the reform. In 2017, 62% of primary students met provincial standards for math compared to 67% in 2013, and 50% of junior students met this standard in 2017 compared to 57% in 2013. In contrast, scores for reading have improved: 74% of primary students meet provincial reading standards in 2017 compared to 68% in 2013, and this percentage rose from 77% to 81% in junior students (Hargreaves et al., 2018). In the context of Canadian performance, Ontario has scored below the national average on math since 2012 and above average on reading since 2009 (O'Grady et al., 2019). Thus, a critical challenge for Ontario lies in changing the trajectory of its math scores.

2.9 Criticisms

One of the limitations of reform outcomes analyses is that they are mostly described by those closely involved in its design and implementation as opposed to external evaluators. The McKinsey report which analyzed and helped popularize the reform success has been criticized for citing little psychological and sociological research on learning and teaching in their analysis of nations' educational attainment (Coffield, 2012). While academic expertise was a critical part of the reform strategy and implementation, buy-in from teachers and parents was a significant motivator in starting reform efforts. Often, the practitioner was valued over the researcher for driving change in school communities (M. Fullan, personal communication, December 9, 2019).

Despite gains in achieving more equitable student performance, particularly for English Language Learners (Campbell & Levin, 2009), the reform strategy has been criticized for raising general test performance rather than narrowing the achievement gap (Hargreaves & Braun, 2013). Many student subgroups, especially indigenous students, underperformed compared to their peers (Ontario Ministry of Education & Fullan, 2013). In addition, analysis of the reform has revealed the possibility that educators may have focused on students who were scoring just

below the standard at the cost of ignoring students who struggled at much lower levels of achievement (Hargreaves et al., 2018). It is speculated that problems with school leadership and ministry staff may have led to pressures for teachers to focus on these “bubble kids” who were scoring just below target proficiency levels. Instead of raising the bar to narrow the gap, some have proposed the alternative strategy of narrowing the gap to raise the bar by addressing equity in order to improve overall quality (Hargreaves & Braun, 2013). Between 2009 and 2018, more rapid declines in math and reading among low-achieving students compared to their higher-achieving peers has contributed to increasing performance gaps (OECD, 2019).

Examining the reform beyond the classroom reveals barriers to access that may be a consequence of lending a high degree of autonomy to stakeholders. For instance, to receive a grant from the PRO initiative, parents must describe how the project will enhance parent engagement in support of improved student achievement, human rights and equity, and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). The pathway to school involvement, though, is not equally accessible to all parents. Families who do not speak English demonstrate lower participation in school-based involvement strategies. In contrast, higher family socioeconomic status is related to a broader range of school-based parent involvement and higher student outcomes in reading and numeracy (Daniel, Wang, & Berthelsen, 2016). School-based parent involvement positively predicts children’s self-regulation which is linked to higher reading scores. Addressing these barriers in the classroom may be difficult for teachers who report having an especially difficult time engaging with disadvantaged families.

A review of parent initiatives revealed that in Ontario’s large urban areas, parents emphasized partnerships between homes, schools and communities, as well as language support and feedback from the parent community. The focus in primary schools was on literacy and numeracy, whereas in secondary schools parents emphasized mental health (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018). There is evidence suggesting that the extent to which parents communicate their expectations about schoolwork and work with their children to make plans to reach educational and career goals not only positively impacts adolescent academic achievement but also mental health in high school (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Although there is no evidence that school-based involvement is directly related to improved academic performance, this was considered a critical strategy in helping families undergoing transitions feel a part of the community which was instrumental in effecting change in these communities in the years following the reform (K. Wynne, personal communication, November 5, 2019).

2.10 Defining and Assessing Twenty-First Century Competencies

While the original intent of the reform was limited to improving literacy and numeracy, partway through the reform these academic skills were conceptualized as being a foundation for the development of interpersonal skills for the twenty-first century (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b; Canadians for 21st Century Learning and Innovation, 2012). Furthermore, the definition of literacy and numeracy started to shift to encompass a broader range of skills than basic competency as the reform progressed. Literacy was described as a tool for connection and personal growth which involves critical thinking, imagination, problem-solving, and a sense of social justice. Numeracy was defined as a framework for reasoning, problem-solving, learning and expression (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b).

A 2013 analysis revealed that the use of twenty-first century learning competencies was not formally discussed in Ontario policy documents. The framework, rather than including skills related to character development, instead focused on ‘hard skills’ which would prepare students for the workforce (Action Canada Task Force, 2013). Furthermore, the documents were identified as being unclear on how media and digital literacy - which are components of twenty-first century learning - would be incorporated into curriculum. Analysis revealed an emphasis in policy documents on critical thinking and character, which was accompanied by a lack of attention to computer and digital technologies, and a minimal focus on creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation.

2.11 Twenty-First Century Skills in the Curriculum

A critical challenge currently faced by Ontario educators is how to define and assess twenty-first century skills in the classroom. The U.S. National Research Council study “Education for Life and Work” identified four key challenges in order to develop assessments for twenty-first century competencies, including the need to consider choosing one subset of competencies from a range of competency frameworks to define student expectations; developing appropriate psychometric tools; considering the pressure of accountability that may bias people to standardized tests over more holistic assessments; and understanding the need to train teachers on strategies to promote deep learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). In Canada, twenty-first century skills are conceptualized as global competencies that are built on literacy and numeracy (O’Grady et al., 2019). Ministers have endorsed the competencies of critical thinking and problem solving, innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship, learning to learn/self-awareness and self-direction, collaboration, communication, and global citizenship and sustainability. Although there is a range of frameworks for twenty-first century competencies in Canadian provinces and internationally, they are not necessarily priorities operationally and the lack of

pedagogical methodology poses challenges for implementing them in the classroom (M. Fullan, personal communication, December 9, 2019).

In a survey of teachers from across Canada, those from Ontario indicated their curriculum placed a lower stress on character development of all the provinces surveyed, even though ministry documents in Ontario had the most references to character development (Action Canada Task Force, 2013). Ontario cites the Grade 10 Civics and Citizenship course as evidence of curriculum which fosters twenty-first century competencies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). “Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship” was a unique collaboration between OME and the University of Toronto but was only available to a select number of students in each district school board (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Thus, “creative” content is not formally integrated throughout the curriculum and has generally limited representation even in elective courses. In most other countries, twenty-first century competencies are embedded across the curriculum as opposed to being taught as separate subjects (Kane & Ng-A-Fook, as cited by Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Presently, few of the frameworks and curricula for Ontario provide clearly elaborated standards or describe the impact of such a curriculum on learners.

The last major curriculum changes for elementary and secondary schools occurred under the Harris administration. Curriculum reform was not the major focus of the reform in 2003; although there was an increase in the focus and resources for literacy and numeracy in the high school curriculum, only minor revisions were made to the applied math curriculum, teacher resources and assessment strategies as part of the numeracy initiative (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014). The Ministry of Education later performed consultations with school boards, built awareness of the Character Development Initiative, established resource teams and incentive funding to assist schools in implementing and expanding their Character Development initiatives, and conducted regional forums to engage with and foster a sense of shared responsibility among and engage parents, educators and the wider community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). Yet there was still a weak presence of interpersonal skills in the Ontario curriculum.

The intended successor of the reform for literacy and numeracy was a soft skills reform, but with the election of a new government, this change is occurring as part of deep learning. The deep learning movement in Ontario which began around 2015 provided the operational definitions of soft skills and the methodology for teachers to implement them. The 6 C’s framework for deep learning (Fullan & Scott, 2014) includes character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking as learning outcomes for new pedagogies. Classroom activities, learning progressions and rubrics are designed as a lens for teaching which can be applied to subject-specific content. These tools are explicitly aimed at building capacity in students by making learning intrinsically motivating by fostering autonomy and belongingness (Quinn, McEachen, Fullan, Gardner, & Drummy, 2019). Teachers have access to detailed rubrics for various stages of development for a range of interpersonal competencies, as well as frameworks for evaluating and reflecting on parallel curriculum standards and deep learning competencies. To build capacity at the school and district levels, Quinn et al. (2019) encourage establishing

transparency in practice, creating common language for using and sharing research-based instruction, and providing sustained opportunities for teacher feedback and learning.

2.12 Moving Forward

The election of a new government in 2018 resulted in a shift to a “back to basics” approach to education which included proposals for a new math curriculum and a focus on STEM. This approach echoes the mandate of the McGuinty government in targeting foundational academic skills, with a renewed focus on math. Yet recent tensions at the time of writing between the government and teachers have culminated in the first major province-wide strike of the main Ontario education unions since 1997 (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). These actions are in response to proposed increased class sizes and the introduction of mandatory online courses that signals a regression from the changes enacted under the McGuinty administration. Although twenty-first century skills are not part of the new administration’s priorities, the capacity developed in schools and districts during the literacy and numeracy reform set the foundation for districts to take their own initiative to adopt deep learning. Although skilled leadership was central to introducing reform for academic skills, the gains in building capacity made during the tenure of McGuinty and later Wynne contributed to the ability of districts to innovate independently and find their own methods of implementing soft skills reform (M. Fullan, personal communication, December 9, 2019).

2.13 Conclusion

The reform in Ontario elementary and secondary schools beginning in 2003 under Dalton McGuinty’s administration was successful in accomplishing its goals of significantly improving literacy and numeracy performance and improving secondary school graduation rates. A critical component of reform was improving teacher culture to foster a sense of shared responsibility and granting a high level of autonomy to teachers and administration in implementing reform in classrooms. Results were observed not only in improved standardized test scores from students but also in increased new teacher retention rates since the 1990s (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b). The supportive and continuous political leadership of the Ontario Premier’s office for ten years and interdisciplinary leadership including experts experienced in education reform contributed to a unique environment for change that is not likely to be replicated in other provinces. An emphasis on relationship-building, mobilization of data and collaboration with stakeholders as part of a reform in professional norms may hold promise for other contexts. The Ontario reform shows that changes

in teacher performance can be motivated by investing resources in professional development and supporting the structure rather than the size of the incentive.

As other countries develop strategies for educational improvement, Ontario must consider its role in the global context. Canada has demonstrated a stagnant trend in reading performance since 2000 and declining performance in math since 2003 (OECD, 2019). Concerningly, a faster decline in scores for the lowest-achieving students compared to highest-achieving students contributed to a greater performance gap (OECD, 2019). Throughout the country, the disparity between high- and low-achievers in math and science scores is greater than the OECD average (O'Grady et al., 2019). Therefore, Canadian provinces and territories including and beyond Ontario must develop strategies for boosting math scores. More broadly, educators must look beyond Canadian borders and continue contributing to the international mission of making progress towards the fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of providing inclusive and equitable education for all learners.

In future years, collecting a broader range of data, including behavioural indicators such as absentee rates and rates of violent incidents (D. Cooke, personal communication, November 8, 2019), would give educators access to more detailed information to use in designing improvement strategies. It is essential that new tools of measurement are developed to assess outcomes of new pedagogies and that educators and researchers determine how to adapt the EQAO to measure soft skills. Continuing to integrate research and practitioner knowledge to inform curriculum for twenty-first century skills may forecast Ontario's move from being a great education system to an excellent one.

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