

Politics and Education: Decision-Making

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An old clergyman in rural Newfoundland, some years ago, commented that the only vice that Newfoundlanders did not take kindly to, was adVICE. There are some words that educators do not take kindly to, one being 'theory', which graduate students often dismiss as being non-relevant even when introduced as explanation of practice. Another is 'politics' and it is not uncommon to hear it being said that education and politics don't mix. Perhaps, both words, and particularly, 'politics' suffer from lack of a clear definition. If an association test were given to 100 people to state what comes to mind when they hear the word 'politics', more than likely there would be 100 different responses.

A definition from Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics>, September 18, 2010) removes the mystique of the word by defining politics as a process by which groups of people make decisions. This involves social relations involving authority or power, and methods or tactics to formulate and apply policy. So, in actual fact, politics permeates most, if not all, of our daily living, and certainly our education system. There is no doubt that under politics, people raise such issues as rights, immigration, homelessness, unions, poverty, inclusion, funding, social justice, activism, etc.. When words like "rightwing", "leftist" or "radical" get thrown in, some people shy farther and farther away. However, the bottom line is that all acts of group decision-making in the education system are political. Owen (2006) reminds us that in the late 1960's, the term micropolitics of education was coined by Laurence Iannoccone, and defined as 'politics that take place in and around schools (p. 5). Shor (1999) notes that classrooms are labs for social justice (p. xiii). I would prefer to rephrase that to read classrooms are labs for the best possible learning and life experiences, which of course, would include social justice. I agree with Shor that teachers who speak out for what is best, while seemingly critical of the status quo, may not last long in maintaining any such public position.

Owen (2006) notes that "Educational politics, like politics in general, revolves around three entities: people, values and resources" (p. 7). Resources entail knowledge. Freire (1982), perhaps, the best well known advocate of the relevance of education, was critical of how decisions were made regarding the experiences which children encountered. He wrote: "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués, and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the banking concept of education" (p. 5). However, the big question is why do teachers do this? Macedo (2006), a strong supporter of Freire, reiterates one of Freire's tenets that the text is only a small indication of the big world and to read text, one must be able to read the world (an act of being political). Text is understood as any body of knowledge on which a

person may act, such as choosing the experiences (curriculum including printed texts) that children are to encounter. The issue is the degree of teachers' understanding of the process by which such decisions are made, and the teachers' roles and participation in the process. Macedo notes that sometimes in schools, there is a "choiceless choice" (p. 165), choice being "part and parcel of a language of management that celebrates testing, privatizing, and competition" (p. 165).

To begin to have choice, to participate in the decision-making process of schooling in helping shape the experiences that children will encounter, one must have knowledge of the key people who have power affecting these decisions. To gather some information, 14 graduate students in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador were asked to share their thoughts in response to a number of questions. These were all experienced teachers (all more than five years) and covered a range of grade levels from kindergarten to high school. They were to think over their experiences in the past two years in responding. Questions and results are as follows:

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1. About how well would you say you are informed of who in Government affects education:

Not at all informed – 2	Somewhat informed - 10	Very informed - 2
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2. About how well are you informed of day to day issues of Government:

Not at all informed -	Somewhat informed - 13	Very informed – 1
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3. Name one Government issue that has caught your attention in the past two years:

Most referred to economic development or health issues. Three referred to education: implementing a new a math curriculum, teachers' salaries, and how principals are chosen for high schools.

4. To what extent are you likely to speak out at a public meeting on a topic of interest to you:

Not at all - 5	Somewhat likely - 8	Very likely - 1
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5. Have you written a local newspaper on an educational matter:
No - 13, Yes - 1 (reply to a teacher bashing article)
6. Have you communicated with your professional organization over an educational concern:
No - 10, Yes - 4 (hiring process, teacher assessment, educational leave)
7. Have you communicated with the School Board:
No - 9, Yes - 5 (hiring process, employment support, public exam regulations, English Language Arts course)
8. Have you communicated with officials in the Provincial Government:
No - 12, Yes - 2 (scoring rubrics for school tests, public exams)
9. Who inspires you most as an educational/political leader:
(Governor General, President of the United States, PM of a foreign country [by a student of that country], colleagues in the Master's program, parents or other relatives)

Comments

Overall, teachers seem to reflect Macedo's (2006) view of having a choiceless choice. Few felt very informed on who in Government affects education. There were some contacts with Government, media, and professional organizations but these all dealt with some aspect of teacher welfare rather than with providing the best experiences for children. A first reaction is why complain if there is no need to complain or raise issues. The teachers were asked the next questions and the responses are given.

10. How satisfied are you with conditions of teaching (classroom resources, student allocation, professional development, administration, etc.)

Not at all satisfied - 2	Somewhat - 11	Satisfied - 1	Very – 0
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11. Are you a member of any Professional Organization:

No - 13, Yes - 1

12. Are you an active member of a Special Interest Group of your Provincial Professional Organization:

No - 13, Yes - 1

No one was very satisfied with existing conditions in the school, and two were not at all satisfied. They did not see people beyond the school as an avenue for making conditions more satisfying. They did not name any leader who had made a great contribution to improving conditions for schooling for children. For those teachers at the early childhood level, there was no concern for the nature and range of experiences for children entering school, especially children from low-income neighbourhoods. A political decision of a previous Provincial Government was to de-focus the role of the home and community in providing early learning experiences by not funding resource people from Family Resource Centres who might work at the community level, but instead put emphasis on initiating parents and children into the school system through experiences that might be considered deficit rather than asset based - a controversial edu-political stance among early childhood educators. Rather than believing in, and enhancing and enriching the experiences that parents of all social classes provide for their children, the emphasis of their approach was on telling parents what they must do and need to know about entrance into kindergarten. What is surprising is that only one teacher was a member of a professional organization, that being English as a second language organization. The teaching of reading is one of the main expectations of schools and the International Reading Association, represents over 100,000 individual members and over a hundred countries as institutional members. In some provinces, such as Alberta, there are several provincial and local councils of this professional organization, both for general teacher participation and for reading specialists. However, none of the teachers in this sample was a member yet the graduate course they attended was literacy focused.

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13. Have you spoken to your school principal/vice-principal on a matter of educational concern:

No - 6, Yes - 8 (classroom size, teacher evaluation, student transfers, magazine subscriptions, discipline, workload, at risk students, assessment, one's own professional development)

14. Do you get together with other teachers (2 or more) to discuss educational issues:

No - 2, Yes - 12

15. Do you express concerns from these get-togethers to educational authorities:

No - 9, Yes - 5

16. What materials/resources do you use in teaching reading/writing/literacy:

(A range were listed)

17. How were these chosen:

(through years of practice/experience - 1, through professional development – 2, by Government/School Board/were there - 11)

18. When you think of professional development, what comes to mind:

beneficial/professional growth and development
 applicable
 hands on/teacher driven
 teachers sharing
 opportunity to learn
 new skills
 contact with other professionals
 teaching the teacher
 helping students understand how they learn
 not enough time to engage in profitable discussion
 not enough time to share with teachers in similar situations
 need to be meaningful
 sometimes a waste of time
 "talk shops" which don't often lead to action

Comments

Teachers were more likely to be involved at a school level in expressing opinions, seeking change. The starting point for such initiative was a get together with other teachers. While most topics were under school control, some dealt with issues over which outside forces (Government) had control - classroom size, teacher evaluation. What may be considered disturbing are the reasons behind choosing materials/resources for teaching reading/writing/literacy. In almost all cases these were determined from without or were accepted without question. This confirms Owen's (2006) conclusion that "Frequently, districts become closed in their decision-making activities by default when the stakeholders decline to participate" (p. 77). One avenue when teachers get together is through professional development experiences. Most of the comments refer to benefits of sharing and learning with/from other teachers. Five of the comments were not positive and felt the professional experiences could be more profitable. Discussion with some of the participants showed that there was never any controversy, or any questioning as to why particular decisions were made re teaching and resources, and in almost all cases, the professional development experiences were led by other teachers who shared what was successful in their classrooms.

A group of 15 colleagues (not the participants in this study) were asked if they were able to choose a speaker/facilitator for an educational conference, whom would they choose. These were all experienced educators, with 5 working at a university/college and 10 within the school system. All named a person who was an expert in their field of teaching. No one named a person known for his or her political stance on education. In recent years, simultaneous with my involvement in education, I have engaged in another line of activity - municipal politics and am currently mayor of a town. There are many similarities in the politics of both institutions including funding, resources, decision-making and control from without. There are also levels of professional involvement, from the municipal government to the provincial organization to the national organization. This past spring I attended the annual convention of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities (FCM). Among the key speakers were the current Prime Minister, the former Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Leader of the NDP, and the Green Party, and former Cabinet ministers. Municipal government was important enough to them to participate, through presentation, questions and interaction afterwards. How is municipal government more important to the well being of the nation than education - universities, colleges, schools? In my experience with educational conferences, someone from Government usually brings greetings on behalf of Government and then hastily makes their retreat. They do not seem to think there is anything worth learning, even from the opening presentation! And they do not seem to have a message or argument of the priority of education among other responsibilities of Government and how they are addressing or plan to address this priority. Also, they are not challenged by educators to do so. Educators do not seem to have goals which they want to achieve from Government and the strategies to best achieve them. One of the major speakers at the FCM Conference strongly emphasized the value of selective lobbying - of finding out the background of MHA's or MP's whose background is in municipal politics and focusing the lobbying on them. Elected Government representatives with similar backgrounds to the lobbyists have a better understanding of the issues and are likely to try and move the agenda forward, sometimes making it their agenda. In the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, many elected members of Government are former educators, so there should be a large lobbying body.

Discussion

Simply, politics is group decision-making so it affects most of what goes on in schools. It applies to big issues such as how to provide for children who come to school hungry, about inclusiveness versus separate teaching for children with various mental or learning challenges, but it also deals with such academic issues as how children shall be taught to read and write. It affects how to help those children who are not learning to expectation and in identifying the level of expectation of children's learning. In the case of early childhood education, it relates to whether the school subscribes to an asset or deficit approach. It relates to deciding what counts as research including the credentials of all those who write articles, or develop school programs as researchers. It relates to accepting more than the number of recommended students for class size (soft cap), selecting the first on the list for enrollment in French immersion, or a draw out of the hat

as to which students will get into Intensive Core French? Ironically, this is similar to a process in municipal government, where a tie for mayor is decided by a draw out of hat, or other container! It relates to opportunities in providing input to Government policy. Recently there were Government announcements calling for input into a new early childhood policy. This was carried in a column in the local newspaper on September 4, interestingly under the heading: Education/Politics, noting that Government was to hold hearings on early childhood strategy learning. I saw no other information regarding this until the paper reported on September 17 under a column "Education" that the hearings had been held in the St. John's area. One wonders how many educators or people in general were involved? One wonders why the times for hearings were not widely publicized. There are about 280 municipalities in the province which can be easily contacted by their provincial body (the provincial body actually sends out a flyer to all municipalities each week) which could be used as an avenue by the Department of Education to notify stakeholders. Sometimes the challenge is about having an opportunity for getting involved in decision-making.

Politics as decision-making is about knowing who are the controllers of what goes on in the classroom. While the teachers are the actors, they are not necessarily the directors. Politics in education calls for a different kind of knowledge on the part of teachers. As Jipson (2000) states, "knowledge (must be) valued in terms of its potential to contribute to progressive social change and social justice" (p. 173). And progressive social change and social justice include all of the decisions referred to above.

But when it comes time to bell the cat, who will do it, or who should do it? Should the university, as the training ground for teachers, help instill an understanding of politics and participation in decision-making as an important part of teaching? Nieto's book, *"Dear Paulo: Letters from those who dare to teach"* provides interesting insights into teachers developing political sensitivity. Should school leaders promote such a stance in addressing school issues? Should school board officials capitalize on time for professional development to address not only what we should do on Monday morning, but also why we should do it, based on who said so? Should those who set up educational conferences invite politicians from all levels of government to address their philosophies and support for education? Municipal governments are often left out of the picture as significant partners, yet the current school system in Newfoundland and Labrador is based on a community model, and the municipal government represents the community of which the school is a part. How should school councils be most effectively run and how can they address political (decision-making) issues that may be sensitive to the relationship between school and School Board? How many school councils invite the MHA for the district in which they are located, for a discussion on educational issues?

Data from this study showed that while teachers are not likely to be knowledgeable of, or involved with authorities outside the school in decision-making, they do take advantage of times they can share amongst themselves to address educational issues of importance to them. The school leader must take advantage of this and not only encourage this kind of interaction but provide for such discussions working their way

through the school to affect decisions that regulate the operation of the school, including curriculum choices. As Diaz Soto (2000) points out, face-to-face networks have potential and should not be replaced by having power and decision-making authority rest in one or a few. Owens (2006) reminds us that "education is supposed to be about 'what is best for kids'" (p. 5) and therefore all stakeholders must share in decision-making, Diaz Soto (2000) perhaps best sums up this goal: "Only when we dream our dreams in solidarity with multiple voices will diverse children, families and communities experience social justice and equity in our lifetimes" (p. 208).

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