

From Neoliberalism to Social Justice and Humanism

Mary G. Green

I have drawn on a thirty year career spent teaching and learning in a unique Canadian context to narrate a rigorous self, social, historical, cultural, and political reflection of educators who despite disturbing experiences with reform draw purpose from faith in the possibilities and potential of more caring policy and practice. With appreciation and understanding of the social and political challenges involved, I advocate for the infusion of more humanism into work in education.

Since the 1990s, work in education has been defined by increasing personal risks through downsizing or employer restructuring, rising workloads, and growing family tensions. There are demands to do more with less, blame for the underachievement of students, fiscal restraint, and greater scrutiny and accountability with abundant testing and evaluation processes. During these turbulent times, there have been communication breakdowns, more unilateral decision making, mistrust, skepticism, and a lack of care. All of this is negative for individuals and groups, as well as for educational organizations as a whole.

I have been moved by my experiences as a teacher, curriculum consultant, district administrator and now university academic to ponder ways of working as a leader within education, and specifically the impact of the reform policies I and others have had a hand in developing and implementing. Through the process of mandated reform, I found myself in untenable positions where my personal values were questioned and many people hurt, discouraged, disheartened, and disillusioned.

Through an ethnographic case study (Green 2008) conducted within a school district at the time of the unprecedented reform movement (that abolished Newfoundland and Labrador's denominational education system and created a new public system), I profiled the everyday reality and turbulence experienced by employees positioned at various levels within the organization and implementers involved in the process of reform. I wrote through the eyes of 'insiders', intricately involved in the process as policy makers, administrators, middle managers, principals, and teachers and narrated our story through my lens as a district administrator who experienced and participated in its implementation. I interrogated district policies, conducted individual and group interviews and chronicled everyday experiences that became 'critical incidents' representative and illustrative of what the reform embodied. My examination of policies, transcripts, personal journal entries, and critical incidents highlighted the impact on people as we struggled to deliver on the neoliberal reform mandates imposed upon us and our efforts to settle the turbulence we experienced as a consequence. People, whose voices were often silenced, were thrown into chaos and expected to work in some uncaring, as well as caring, ways. Our relationships between and among colleagues provided learning opportunities and enabled me to examine numerous contradictions and paradoxes that defined our lives in the school district.

The focus of my research has been to explore the concept of caring within the context of neoliberal education policy direction, and seek possibilities for intervention and new leadership

approaches. My reflection on and analysis of our local reform movement illuminated a past burdened with the financial responsibility of a publicly funded religious-based education system in a shrinking population base in the midst of an economic crisis. While unique in some ways, I've discovered that thereform challenges experienced in our province reverberate throughout global education contexts. I believe amore hopeful beacon for future reforms is needed and I share my work with the intent to offer helpful recommendations for future reforms that emphasize the importance of relationships and the need for greater attention to the humanistic elements so critical in any change process.

While the research literature reports on various conceptions and processes of care, there is little attention given to the potential and practice of caring educators working in bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations during times of “severe turbulence” (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). There is an absence of literature about the contexts in which caring educators carry out their work, how individuals are positioned in contradictory ways, and how they manage multiple and competing agendas. I attempt to address that gap by profiling the everyday reality and turbulence experienced by individuals involved in the process of education reform and address some practical questions and dilemmas. My goal is to open up dialogue about themes that have been difficult to discuss in many educational work contexts — gender equity, the need for more care, and how people are treated during demanding and chaotic times. I tell stories to illuminate the cultural, organizational, historical, patriarchal, and contradictory stories that are sometimes invisible or considered inappropriate to talk about on a daily basis. When we pursue our missions, we don't pause to think about how people, including ourselves, are treated. We don't think about how we create, perpetuate, or challenge (with our words and deeds) the culture in which we live and work through our daily encounters.

In order for us to become all that we are capable of, we need to reflect on who we are, where we've come from, and critique that in honest ways through various lenses, if we hope to make our world of work and education more socially just. My goal is to present examples of my experiences and perspectives, as well as those of my colleagues, as valid ‘other’ stories. I hope that readers will relate to, consider, and adjust some of their own attitudes and practices to be more caring and respectful of people with whom they work. I do not argue against the necessity of change and reform but rather highlightthe ways we as leaders carry out reform mandates, and urge us to consider alternate, more humanistic ways of working.

The stories I tell are an attempt to reveal the subtle workings of educational organizations. By paying attention to the everyday experiences of educators in a local context, we begin to understand the bigger picture. We have to be able to relate to one another before we can understand our interdependence and the complexity of our work. It is helpful to consider who has privilege, who is marginalized, whose opinions count, how people should be treated, and what must change. My interpretations and stories are not adequate to convey the full range of experiences in our workplaces. We need more stories to motivate change toward a better balanced understanding of how we should be working with each other. I aim in some respects to challenge current systems of oppression, exploitation, power, and privilege — the dominant bureaucratic ways of working – and believe we must hear more such stories in order to create new and different ones.

My research pertained specifically to a school district, a learning institution, undergoing external and internal pressure, where people believed caring could be beneficial, but in practice was complicated and difficult to achieve. The challenge to implement managerialist agendas with a caring perspective and to create change in the lives of disenfranchised employees was not a straightforward process. Good intent and significant action were exerted to establish a collaborative and caring work environment with various structures and policies put in place and many individuals did their best to work in caring and collaborative ways. Although the findings are limited in terms of our ability to generalize from them, they are useful to educational policy makers as well as practitioners who wish to improve relationships within organizational settings. My research identified factors unique to one school district in one Canadian province that strived to overcome organizational barriers, enable individuals to work together, and support caring processes. Further study is required to provide insight into the potential barriers and supports for future caring practices in organizations and assist others in responding to some of the dilemmas that any education reform process is likely to involve.

Work in education is stressful and often contradicts the commonly held perspective and dominant discourse that it is a nurturing and caring environment. While some organizations claim to value caring work relationships and recognize the need for more care, there is limited evidence of this in the policies and practices of our workplaces, and the value of care for others is rarely evident in the hierarchical and managerial contexts in which we work. Examining learning from the shortcomings of the past provides a critical element that can help determine the success or failure of future efforts by shedding light on obstacles to avoid, problems to correct, and methods to embrace. With these insights, we may strive to overcome hurt and disappointment and foster more caring and effective educational organizations.