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ABSTRACT

Alberta's (Canada) recent educational reforms exhibit the characteristic elements of new public management (NPM), an international government reform trend that has emerged and grown over the past two decades. This paper describes a study undertaken to explore the impacts of the educational reforms on schools, including the behavior of school staff and parent "customers." Interviews with principals and teachers at three Edmonton (Alberta) schools hinted that the reforms may be having unanticipated impacts. These include increasing the gap in educational opportunities and outcomes between lower and higher income students and increasing the levels of principal and teacher stress. Additional "goal-free" evaluations of the educational reforms would help to establish the actual impacts of the reform and whether they are the same as the intended impacts. Contains 25 references. (Author/BT)

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by Judith Ellen Evans

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Organizational and Individual Responses to Educational Reforms in Alberta

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Abstract

Alberta's recent educational reforms exhibit the characteristic elements of new public management (NPM), an international government reform trend that has emerged and grown over the past two decades. This paper describes a study undertaken to explore the impacts of the educational reforms on schools, including the behaviour of school staff and parent 'customers'. Interviews with principals and teachers at three Edmonton schools hinted that the reforms may be having unanticipated impacts. These include increasing the gap in educational opportunities and outcomes between lower and higher income students, and increasing the levels of principal and teacher stress. Additional 'goal-free' evaluations of the educational reforms would help to establish the actual impacts of the reforms and whether they are the same as the intended impacts.

Background

Since 1993 the Klein Conservative government has made a number of changes to educational policy as part of a sweeping public sector reform program. For example, the government has:

- reduced its expenditures on education;
- decreased the number of school boards;
- taken control of the education component of property taxation;
- encouraged competition among schools and school boards through:
 - the introduction of a public choice school funding model and
 - allowing the establishment of charter schools;
- increased local school control by implementing new school-based management requirements, including mandatory school councils; and
- expanded its mandatory achievement testing program and begun to use achievement test results as education system performance measures.

The government's philosophy is that "education cost savings can be achieved without affecting student programs by reducing administration and governance costs" (Alberta Education, 1995). However, in addition to reducing administration and governance

spending, the government has reduced teachers' salaries by 5%, cut the funding for kindergarten programs in half, and decreased the level of provincial support for student transportation and school maintenance and construction. In 1996 the government partially reversed some of these cutbacks. For example, it restored kindergarten funding as part of an 'educational reinvestment program' which also provided additional funding for computer technology and school construction, upgrading and maintenance, but not for teacher salaries (Alberta Education, 1996).

The Klein Conservative government was able to achieve fundamental system changes along with funding reductions because of widespread public support for its 1993 campaign promises to eliminate the provincial deficit and reduce the debt (Hughes, Lowe & McKinnon, 1996; Lisac, 1995). The public believed Premier Klein when he stated that the government had a spending problem (e.g., Klein, 1995) and that radical restructuring of public service delivery was needed to solve it. By acting quickly and following the advice of a former New Zealand Finance Minister, Roger Douglas (1993), the government was able to implement most of its educational reforms before significant opposition could mobilize (Barlow & Robertson, 1994).

The reforms adopted by Alberta are similar in many aspects to the educational reforms adopted by the Thatcher Conservatives in the United Kingdom during the 1980s. These reforms are a manifestation of a larger international government reform trend known as 'the new public management' (NPM). NPM represents a major break from the traditional approach to managing public sector operations, or 'the old public administration' (Pollitt, 1993, 1995b).

NPM assumes that public sector bureaucracy needs fixing and the answer is better management. 'Better' in the case of NPM means a private sector, managerialist approach. The major policy elements of NPM include (Pollitt, 1995a):

- Cost cutting, budget capping, accrual accounting and formula-based funding (e.g., funding based on the number of 'customers' an agency serves).
- Devolving responsibility to new, separate quasi-government agencies (e.g., executive agencies, regional health authorities) and use of contracts and quasi-contracts (e.g., framework agreements, business plans) to monitor performance.
- Decentralizing authority within public agencies (e.g., flatter hierarchies, self-managed teams).
- Implementing a purchaser-provider split (i.e., separating the function of providing services from purchasing them, sometimes within the same organization).
- Introducing competition into the delivery of public services through market and quasi-market mechanisms.

- Establishing performance indicators or measures and requiring staff to work to specific output or outcome targets.
- Shifting the basis of the employment relationship from permanent appointment and seniority to temporary contract and performance related pay.
- Increasing emphasis on customer responsiveness, service standards and quality.

Governments tend to implement elements of NPM simultaneously. Formula funding, market mechanisms, contractual agreements and performance measures enable governments to enhance central control over service delivery at the same time that responsibility for service delivery is privatized or devolved. In most jurisdictions, NPM implementation has been combined with deep, centrally imposed, across-the-board budget cuts.

"Reinventing Government", a book by Osborne and Gaebler (1992), provides numerous anecdotes in support of the benefits of 'running government like a business'. No other NPM reference has had a larger impact on government and public sector restructuring in North America. However, not all public management thinkers have the same unreserved enthusiasm for NPM. For example, NPM has been criticized for: its simplistic 'scientific management' (Taylor, 1911) assumptions about worker motivation; its tendency to focus organizational attention on opportunities to cut costs rather than to improve service quality; its exaggerated claims that 'more can be achieved with less'; its failure to acknowledge political reality and the problems inherent in separating policy formulation and service delivery; the potential of its contracts, measures, and targets to upset the balance of existing organizational controls; its promotion of the superiority of business values over the traditional values of the public service; and its tendency to encourage strategic maximization behaviour or goal displacement when organizational or individual rewards are tightly linked to performance on a few measured dimensions (e.g., Jacobs, 1992; Kerr, 1975; Mintzberg, 1994, 1996; Perrin, 1994, 1996; Pollitt, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Savoie, 1995a, 1995b; Winston, 1993; Winston & Rogers, 1995).

Despite the breadth and scope of NPM reforms, and considerable years of experience with them in a number of western democratic nations, there have been remarkably few evaluation studies (Pollitt, 1995a). The manner in which NPM reform programs are introduced (in all-or-nothing fashion) means NPM is usually difficult to evaluate. Furthermore, NPM government reform champions are often so convinced of the value of NPM that they fail to see any need to evaluate. The limited available evidence suggests that, of the three major claims of NPM -- "better service, produced at lower cost, by public servants whose morale has improved" (Borins, 1995) -- the only claim for which there is support is lower costs, when costs are defined as current

government expenditures.

The growing number of voices critical of NPM, the lack of strong, definitive evidence that NPM works, the absence of broad stakeholder input into the government's NPM educational reform agenda, and the business values and practices at the heart of NPM were some of the factors that led to my interest in conducting a study exploring the impacts of Alberta's NPM educational reforms.

Method

Participants in the study were three principals and four teachers at three Edmonton schools -- an elementary school, a junior high school, and a high school. Each study school was affiliated with a publicly-funded Edmonton school board, the Edmonton Catholic School Board or the Edmonton Public School Board. The three schools were chosen using a stratified random sampling procedure. The principals who volunteered provided the names of their staff members but otherwise had no direct involvement in recruiting teachers. Teachers were recruited by means of a letter from the researcher placed in their staff mailboxes.

Principal and teacher volunteers participated in one hour semi-structured individual interviews, which took place in the spring of 1996. All participants allowed me to audiotape their comments. Interviews covered a range of issues including the use of information in school-based decision making, the province's accountability framework and the impacts of accountability and other information on organizational behaviour. During the interviews, participants were asked to comment on the following topics:

- the environmental context in which the school operated (e.g., political, economic, sociological and technological trends affecting the school);
- other stakeholders (e.g., Alberta Education, the school board, the parents and the students) and how they affected the operation of the school;
- school decision-making (e.g., the types of decisions made at the school, how they are made, who is involved and the results);
- examples of information available to the school or specifically collected by the school, who uses the information (including other stakeholders), how the information affects school decisions, and how its use by the school or other system actors affects staff personally and the education of students;
- the perceived value of different kinds of available information and why certain information is (or is not) perceived to be valuable;

- school uses of achievement or diploma examination results;
and
- other kinds of information that would be of value but which
are not currently available to the participant.

Differences emerged in the comments of staff across the three schools, as well as between principals and teachers. Interestingly, participants' comments suggested a substantial level of agreement regarding the mechanisms by which reforms were impacting on the operation of, and decisions made at, the schools. This agreement existed despite differences in participants' personal evaluations (good/bad) of various aspects of the reforms.

Key Findings

Environmental context -- Participants saw three contextual factors as important in influencing the operation of their schools: the family background of students, especially the students' socioeconomic status; the adequacy of the level of available resources; and the school's location.

Students' backgrounds were perceived to influence the nature of the problems that teachers had to cope with in the classroom and the extent to which parents played an active role in their children's education. A school that served lower income students had to deal with issues related to students' health status and unstable family situations (e.g., hunger, fatigue, disabilities affecting learning, and discipline). Students at this school had lower academic performance as measured by provincial examinations and parents were perceived to be less involved in their children's education than higher income parents. However, lower income parents were also perceived to encounter barriers to greater involvement (e.g., low education, inability to speak English). In comparison, a school serving higher income students faced comparatively few of these problems and received high parental support. This school was in a greatly advantaged position in terms of fulfilling its educational mandate, and its ability to demonstrate good results on the province's achievement examinations.

Participants related the adequacy of the level of available resources to the socioeconomic status of the children served, the prevalence of disabilities affecting learning among the school's student population, and the size of the school's student population. A school serving lower income students encountered a higher level of physical and mental disabilities in the student population and a higher level of other educational special needs (e.g., English as a second language students) than a school serving higher income students. Participants at the school serving lower income students felt that the per capita funding formula and special needs allocations might not properly recognize the level of special needs that existed among their students. In

combination with a small student population, high special needs meant the school expected to experience future resource shortfalls. An insufficient budget was perceived to hinder the principal and teachers in carrying out the school's mandate, and anxiety concerning resources appeared to be contributing to higher levels of stress among staff.

Schools in lower income neighbourhoods with low student populations had more difficult budget situations than schools located in higher income neighbourhoods. A school with programs that appealed to higher income, higher achieving students was able to maintain or increase its budget by drawing students from beyond the immediately surrounding area. A school with lower achievement examination results could not hope to draw additional students. It had two options for maintaining or increasing its budget: changing its program and marketing itself on future promise; or trying to get the school board and community agencies to provide additional resources in recognition of its students' special needs.

Influence of stakeholders -- Participants perceived that stakeholders outside the school had a considerable influence on the operation of the schools.

Alberta Education was perceived to influence the schools through its policy steering role (e.g., per capita student funding, curriculum). Although there was a sense in which the reforms were perceived to reduce the direct influence of Alberta Education on the schools, participants also noted that the government was creating additional accountability expectations. In turn, the schools were required to do more work to meet these expectations (e.g., production of three-year business plans).

School boards were perceived to have changed in a number of ways in response to the government's reforms. Some of these changes, such as flattening the administrative hierarchy, were welcomed by participants, particularly principals. However, some participants were less enthusiastic about reductions in support services and new arrangements that required them to pay for services like specialized testing out of school budgets. Schools were also taking on new responsibilities (e.g., developing and printing computer-generated report cards at the school) that were formerly handled by the school board. Participants' comments hint that all of the 'administrative cost reductions' as measured and reported by Alberta Education may not be true cost savings. Some administrative costs have simply been passed on to the schools.

A school board difference emerged in that Edmonton Public School Board staff seemed more comfortable with their understanding of the 'rules of the restructured system' than Edmonton Catholic School Board staff at the time of the interviews. In this regard, earlier school system changes by the

Edmonton Public School Board that anticipated many of the government's reforms appear to have been beneficial in helping the board's staff to make the transition.

Parents were perceived to influence schools through exercising their right to choose a school and through the manner in which they related to the school. Participants believed that higher income parents were more likely to actively exercise choice than lower income parents. The choices of higher, but not lower, income parents were perceived to be influenced by comparative information on school achievement and diploma examination scores. Lower income parents were perceived to prefer neighbourhood schools. Participants remarked that student transportation costs were a barrier to lower income parents exercising choice.

While many lower income parents were seen to be insufficiently involved in their children's education and with their children's schools, participants were satisfied with higher income parents' amount of involvement. Indeed, having 'on-side' parents was vital to the marketing efforts of a school trying to increase its enrolment. However, teachers reported situations where they felt parents were too involved with education, interfering with -- rather than assisting -- their efforts to teach. Principals were seen to play an important role in balancing the interests of parents and teachers.

Participants believed that parent 'choice' was having a much greater impact on the operation of their schools than parent 'voice'. All participants agreed that the mandating of school councils had made little difference to the operation of their schools, since their schools had always had parent advisory groups. Parents who served on school councils were perceived to support the efforts of the schools. In contrast to school councils, the charter school, which was spontaneously mentioned by some participants, evoked strong negative reactions. Participants believed the charter school gave parents too much power.

Students were perceived to influence the operation of the school through their capacity and willingness to learn and their ability to exceed the standards on the achievement examinations. Higher academic achievers were described as more intrinsically enjoyable to teach. Lower academic achievers provided teachers with fewer immediate psychological rewards. The situation of having a special needs student in the classroom without adequate resources to assist the student (e.g., a teacher aide) was particularly problematic. Teachers in schools with smaller student populations and budgets were most likely to report situations related to inadequate classroom resources.

The comments of participants suggested that students had little direct influence on decisions relating to the operation of the school except at the high school level. Interestingly, none

of the participants mentioned that students influenced their parents' school choice decisions.

School-based management -- Budgetary constraints had an impact on how participants reacted to school-based management. If the participant's school had an adequate budget as a result of high enrolment, or prospects for increasing the school's enrolment were believed to be good, reactions toward school-based management tended to be more favourable, particularly among principals.

Teachers were less enthusiastic about school-based management than principals, even though principals believed it was important to involve teachers in decision-making. Teachers preferred to limit their own involvement to issues where their expertise was really needed or where they were given the authority to make the decisions themselves.

School business planning received mixed reviews. To the extent that it created an opportunity to reflect on and consider the big picture, principals and teachers felt business planning had some value. However, the requirement to prepare a paper document (in a different format, if the school already had an existing strategic, growth or business plan) was time-consuming and some participants regarded it as a make-work exercise. Teachers questioned the meaningfulness of their schools' business plan performance targets.

Devolved decision-making authority meant that schools were frequently targeted by vendors of products and services. Participants' schools were also reported to receive considerable volumes of information or, as one participant described it, 'required reading' from Alberta Education and the school boards. Participants reported a variety of coping strategies to deal with this overabundance of incoming material. Most participants, especially principals, felt their problem was too much, as opposed to too little, information for decision-making.

Accountability framework -- Participants' comments suggested that schools were indeed engaging in strategic behaviour in response to the restructuring of financial incentives. For example, one school was trying to recruit high achieving students. Participants recognized that recruiting the best students is more likely to result in better overall school performance on the provincial examinations and impress 'school shopping' high income parents, than efforts directed at improving the education of students currently in the school. Indeed, the restructured education system incentives reward schools that are successful at attracting top academic students.

However, principals and teachers did report efforts directed at improving the quality of students' education. The degree of effort reported by participants at a school was related to the

leadership behaviours exhibited by the principal. Participative target-setting in relation to three-year business plans (e.g., "in 1998, X% of our students will achieve the acceptable standard on the language arts achievement examination"), seemed to have little, if any, impact. Teachers observed that professional development activities were their main source of ideas for improving their teaching approach.

Regardless of the characteristics of the students they served, participants (especially teachers) felt comparisons of schools based on unadjusted achievement and diploma examination results were unfair. Even though they did not provide a valid indicator of either school or teacher performance, poor examination results were reported to have a negative emotional impact on staff in a school serving lower income children. Serving disadvantaged students, or being a 'just a classroom teacher' with no administrative duties, appeared to be associated with higher levels of work-related stress among participants in this study, as reflected in the content of participants' interview comments and by their nonverbal behaviour (e.g., tone of voice) during the interview.

Principals and teachers believed that the emphasis on achievement and diploma examination performance was having a negative impact on students who, for one reason or another, experienced learning difficulties. Some participants asserted that the current focus on achievement -- to the neglect of the other goals of education -- was creating winners and losers among students. Principals and teachers at all schools mentioned that students who were not academically inclined were continuing to fall through the cracks.

Information that Participants Wanted, But Didn't Have -- When asked about their information 'wish list', several participants spoke about the need for information on valid educational principles and approaches -- information that would help them decide if they were making the right choices for students. Two paradoxical themes emerged from participants' comments: first, that education has not responded quickly enough to the changing times; and second, that education has been too quick to adopt many innovations, sometimes on the basis of minimal and questionable evidence regarding their benefits. One participant cited the province's educational reforms as an example of the quickness to adopt innovations without evidence.

Discussion

Based on the themes that emerged from these interviews, I derived a theoretical model of the dynamics of Alberta's reformed educational system. The theoretical model suggests that, over time, schools may become increasingly stratified by the socioeconomic status of students, the experience level of

teachers, and provincial examination results. Fiscal and accountability pressures may gradually take their toll on those doing the educating, resulting in higher rates of turnover and stress leaves, particularly among those principals and teachers serving lower income and academically disadvantaged children. Furthermore, the trend toward teachers seeking an increasing level of professional training may reverse, as school boards have fewer resources to compensate those with education beyond what is required to obtain a basic teaching credential.

The theoretical model's predictions are pessimistic. Most Albertans concerned about the welfare of children and interested in a strong public education system would undoubtedly hope that they are not supported. Nevertheless, it is important not to dismiss these possible unwanted impacts of reform purely for ideological reasons without first seeking out and evaluating the relevant evidence. Year-to-year changes in the government's three-year business plan educational performance measures do not provide sufficient evidence for testing the theoretical model. Goal-free evaluation (Scriven, 1991; Worthen & Sanders, 1987), which allows for the measurement of unintended as well as intended consequences, is a more appropriate approach for understanding the impacts the reforms are actually producing.

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