Tumultuous times of education reform: a critical reflection on caring in policy and practice
Mary G. Green & Janice L. Tucker
Published online: 21 Apr 2011.

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2010.488701
Tumultuous times of education reform: a critical reflection on caring in policy and practice

MARY G. GREEN and JANICE L. TUCKER

This article examines ‘caring’ in the context of radical education reform in one Canadian province and school district. Historical provincial policy documents set the context for the district analysis. Drawing on our experiences both as participants and researchers, we use theories of care, critical policy, and the tools of critical discourse analysis to interrogate how care is manifested in district policy and practice as well as the extent to which competing discourses, contradictions and multiple perspectives exist. We confront passive compliance to dominant global discourses and identify critical spaces for negotiation, intervention and creativity in order to maintain humanistic and caring values and relationships in everyday work in education.

This article explores the context, texts and consequences (Taylor et al. 1997) of the education reform movement in one Atlantic Canadian Province and uses theories of care and tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine district policy and its impact on the people affected. We critically reflect on how care is manifested in district policy and practice and the extent to which competing discourses, contradictions and multiple perspectives exist within those policy texts. Historical and critical perspectives were used to discuss global, national and provincial policy trends and directions. Workplaces are facing new challenges and undergoing massive changes (das Dores Guerreiro et al. 2004). While some organizations may claim to value caring work relationships and recognize the need for more care, there is often limited evidence of this in the workplace policies and practices.

We reconstruct the story of the impact of educational reform through our reflective lens as two of the district administrators who were active participants in the process. We have been classroom teachers and administrators, worked as curriculum consultants and became district administrators in

Mary Green is an adjunct professor in the School of Education, Box 57, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS, Canada. Email: mary.green@acadiau.ca. There she teaches graduate classes in equity and leadership, inclusive education and curriculum studies. Mary has served in a number of leadership roles over the past thirty years including service as a high school teacher, school district and provincial curriculum specialist, assistant superintendent, and visiting professor at Memorial University. She has a doctor of education degree from the University of South Australia and presented her doctoral research, ‘Caring relations at work: a case study of one Canadian school district’ at several national and international research conferences. Janice Tucker is an associate professor of educational leadership at California Lutheran University, 60 West Olsen Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360, USA. Email: jtucker@clunet.edu. Before entering higher education she was a teacher, school administrator, curriculum consultant and worked as a district administrator in a period of radical educational reform. Her research interests include education policy, change and reform in education and international studies.
senior management positions in a period of unparalleled change. Our work involved an unprecedented organizational restructuring as well as policy development and implementation at the district and provincial levels. We have worked in economically and geographically diverse regions throughout the province. Our experiences spanned two rounds of mandated organizational restructuring over a 10-year period. Collectively, we have more than 50 years of experience working in a variety of positions throughout the K-12 education system. Our work as senior education administrators has been to encourage and support other educators and students and to ensure improved learning and performance. In a highly bureaucratic structure, we have participated in environments where, marginalized by gender and philosophy, we were the minority, particularly as women in education administration, and have found that while caring may be evident in policy, it is not always the highest priority in practice.

We were moved by our many experiences as teachers and senior education administrators to ponder ways of working as leaders within education and, specifically, the impact of the policies we have had a hand in developing and implementing. Often in our work, we have found ourselves contradicting personal values. We have seen many people hurt, discouraged, disheartened and disillusioned through the course of provincially mandated school reform processes. We interrogate the policy and practices inherent in the reform mandate and highlight the importance of humanistic issues in policy production and implementation.

**Theoretical perspectives**

**Caring**

There is an extensive body of literature on caring, particularly within families and personal relationships and the health care professions of social work and nursing (Imre 1982, Noddings 1984, Abel and Nelson 1990, Noddings 1992, Tronto 1993, Beck 1994, Bubeck 1995, Held 1995, Enomoto 1997, Acker 1999, Noddings 2001, Daly 2002, Hankivsky 2004, Green 2008), but most studies related to caring in education focus on care for students and the variety of ways student needs are met, or attempted to be met. The emphasis of this article is more narrowly focused on caring relations between and among employees in large organizations, and specifically within educational institutions. Our definition of caring involves both ‘disposition and practice’ (Tronto 1993: 104). It is an attitude on the part of the one(s) caring—concern for the well-being of those being cared-for; and it requires response, demonstrating connection and responsibility.

While a number of feminist scholars are sympathetic to the idea that an ethic of care is more characteristic of women, or is more apt to be explicit in the experience and ideas of women, an ethic of justice or rights is more explicit in the experience of men (Noddings 1984, Gilligan 1995). Others take issue with that perspective. Claudia Card (1990) suggested that, as gendered beings in a society with a history of patriarchy, women and men inherit different pasts and consequently different social expectations, lines of
communication, opportunities and barriers. Tronto’s (1993) emphasis is on the ongoing responsibility and commitment implied in caring. For her, caring is necessarily relational. She makes the point simply that traditional gender roles in our society imply that men care about but women care for.

To a considerable extent, education has been viewed as a caring profession, with caring for students and others as a goal that is written into policies and factored into change efforts (Williams et al. 1992, Williams and Sparkes 2000, Atlantic School District [pseudonym] 2003a). Some educational and organizational philosophies are complementary with theories of care, but their implementation may have been hampered by global influences (Levin and Riffel 1997, Blackmore 2000, Burbules and Torres 2000, Franzway 2005), neo-liberal politics (Buzzanell 2000, McLaren and Farahmandpur 2005), and the imposition of corporate agendas (Hochschild 1983, Barlow and Robertson 1994, du Gay 1996, Boyd 1997, Shacklock 1998, Folbre 2001). Drawing mainly on the theoretical work of Noddings (1984, 1992, 2002) and Tronto (1989, 1993), core ideas, concepts and methods are used here to develop an approach that offers a vision for the reconstruction of work in educational contexts.

The research reported here is with a learning institution undergoing external and internal pressure, where people believe caring could be beneficial but, in practice, that it is complicated and difficult to achieve. The challenge to implement managerialist agendas with a caring perspective and how to create change in the lives of disenfranchised employees is not a straightforward process. These turbulent times give cause for reflection on the future, about how we treat people, and the potential of caring practices to improve the quality of employees’ work relationships, which can affect organizational productivity and accomplishment.

In essence, a philosophy of caring asserts that people should have opportunities to speak, be heard, valued and respected, and be successful and productive within an organization (Noddings 1992, Evans 1996, Brunner 1998, Grogan and VanDeman-Blackmon 2001, Delong 2002). The ways in which people in organizations can be cared for are specific: People treat others the way they would like to be treated. People feel cared about when their input is sought and welcomed during decision-making processes that affect them. The aim is to have each person feel powerful so that they feel motivated and bring positive energy and change to the organization (Sernak 1998). In caring workplaces, people have opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and to work independently, and accomplishments are acknowledged and rewarded (Sernak 1998, Grogan and VanDeman-Blackmon 2001, Grogan 2003). Employees are encouraged, given opportunities to learn, and are provided constructive and supportive guidance when they experience challenge or difficulty (Atlantic School District 2003b). They feel free to take risks and share their views. Caring leaders are concerned with personal as well as professional well-being, encourage a balanced life, care about employees’ health, and there is respect for family time and life beyond work (Lowe 2000). In essence, work relationships are focused on, not from a contractual or legalistic standpoint, but from a standpoint of absolute regard (Starratt 1991), and each person’s dignity and worth are honoured. Instead of formal and controlled communication, top-down decision-making, neutral application

**Method and data sources**

The nature of the question being asked in this article requires a departure from traditional empirical methods and the use of CDA, which ‘provides a range of approaches to data’, and a ‘range of theorizations of that data’ (Wetherell et al. 2001: i). According to Wodak and Meyer (2001: 2):

CDA may be defined as fundamentally concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequalities as is expressed, signaled, constituted, and legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse).

Our critical approach entails the belief that knowledge and policy cannot be value-neutral and that education policy is complex and a highly contested endeavour (Taylor et al. 1997). The significance of values cannot be dismissed and should therefore be made known and acknowledged as part of the process. Critical policy analysis is also, by its very nature, concerned about change and reform. According to Fairclough (2001), the text is one part of the process of analysis, which also includes the process of production and the process of interpretation. One way to understand policy in the historical context is by a reflexive examination through an ideological framework to determine the ideas, beliefs, principles and values that inform and form the basis of theories informing each time period. Fairclough (2001) points out that CDA is not just concerned with analysis, but also with how language figures in social relations of power and domination; how language works ideologically; and with the negotiation of personal and social identities in its linguistic and semiotic aspect. Critical discourse analysis can be employed for progressive social change. There is a particular relationship between language and power.

Within current social, political, cultural and economic contexts, we examined the relationship between education policy and conceptualizations of care. We looked at the constructs of care and their implications for practice through the policy documents of a school district (‘Atlantic School District’, pseudonym to preserve anonymity). Taken together, theories of care (Tronto 1989, 1993, Noddings 1984, 1992, 2001, 2002) and critical policy (Taylor et al. 1997) and CDA provides the framework, which enabled us to critique the policies of the Atlantic School District. Our analysis is informed by an understanding that dominant discourses are determined by power struggles and takes a reflective and critical look at texts which, on the surface, seem non-controversial, but we suggest that there are unexamined theories-in-use (Argyris and Schon 1974) embedded in the ambiguities visible through an examination of the policy documents. A fully critical account of discourse requires a theorization and description of both the social processes and structures that give rise to the production of a text and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups, as socio-historical subjects, create meanings in their interaction with texts (Wodak and Meyer 2001).
Throughout the process of analyzing policy, three central considerations offered by Fairclough (1992), along with guiding questions developed by Taylor et al. (1997), were used. According to Fairclough (1992), the considerations for the analysis of discursive practices are ‘force’—what the text is being used to do socially; ‘coherence’—the way in which it is interpreted (what the reader brings to the text); and ‘intertextuality’—the way in which texts are drawn upon in the production of the interpretation of new texts or the way the text borrows from other texts.

To help us consider the breadth of policy, Taylor et al. (1997: 44) offered a helpful framework involving exploring the contexts, text and consequences of policy. ‘Contexts’ are the social, economic, political and historical factors leading up to the development of a particular policy. ‘Texts’ refer to the naming and framing of issues, which bring particular issues to the foreground, send some into background and leave others out altogether. ‘Consequences’ are the effects of policy.

As researcher practitioners, we draw on our experiences, insights and reflection to strengthen and add richness to the analysis. Additionally, we traced education policy over three decades in one province through the examination of two Royal Commission Reports and illuminate how they created the context for the reform in districts that follows. Our sources included: Report of the Royal Commission on Education and Youth, Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Volume 1 (Warren 1967) and Our Children Our Future. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Delivery of Programs and Services into Primary, Elementary, Secondary Education (Williams et al. 1992).

In the examination of district policy, we employ tools of CDA to interrogate common trends, themes and contradictions. Three district policies were selected for analysis: Our Vision for Teaching and Learning (Atlantic School District 2003a), the Teaching and Learning Decision-Making Matrix (Atlantic School District 2003c) and the Teachers’ Personal and Professional Growth and Development policy (Atlantic School District 2003b).

**Context of education reform**

*Global policy trends*

Globalization has had a significant influence on policy in recent years. It is accepted as inevitable and a justification for centrally driven education policy that is closely linked to economic needs and productivity gains. Schools are controlled through strong accountability frameworks that include performance management of principals and teachers and standardized testing (Apple 2000, Blackmore 2000, Burbules and Torres 2000). Neo-liberalism is the predominant ideology of globalization (Thomson 2000). Social policy is shaped and judged by its economic utility and education policy is driven by economic rationality. Students are seen as future workers and must be given the skills and dispositions to meet the needs of the marketplace. Teachers are drawn in line with strict accountability measures and the curriculum is narrowed to market utility (Apple 2000, Burbules and Torres 2000). A state of crisis has been created through a
concerted attack on schools and educators, with alarms raised about high dropout rates and a decline in functional literacy skills (Apple 2000, Burbules and Torres 2000).

As in other parts of Canada and around the world, the policies of Newfoundland and Labrador in the late 1990s were being influenced by larger global forces acting, not just on education policy, but affecting all social and economic policy. There is a growing and alarming trend toward the erosion of local input and control over policy matters and a loss of autonomy of the state in policies as critical as education. The impact on education is a growing acceptance of the neo-liberal influence on policy that affects all aspects of education and is reflected in ‘an educational agenda that privileges, if not directly imposes, particular policies for evaluation, financing, assessment, standards, teacher training, curriculum, instruction, and testing’ (Burbules and Torres 2000: 15).

Blackmore and Sachs (2007: 10) found that:

the management paradigm mobilized during the 1990s was more modernist than postmodernist. It was about reengineering education in ‘hard-line’ ways, promoting images of being tough, entrepreneurial, and decisive, sideling the human costs, and utilizing demoralizing and dehumanizing strategies of downloading responsibility, downsizing organizations, and outsourcing or casualizing core work.

Corporate managerialism (Sinclair 1989: 389), contributes to a ‘rational, out-put oriented, plan-based and management led view of educational reform’. Taylor et al. (1997) elaborated how corporate managerialism includes a demand for smaller government and belief in market competition, that old bureaucratic structures are inefficient and expensive, and that they are unable to respond quickly. Newfoundland and Labrador, like other Canadian provinces and countries, must compete in a global marketplace, where economies and competitiveness are paramount, populations are transient and there is competition for scarce resources (Williams and Sparkes 2000). This is evident in the shift in focus to effectiveness, competition and accountability that marks the policy direction in current times. These are the ‘universalizing tendencies in educational reform’ (Halpin 1994: 204).

Provincial context

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada’s most easterly province, has a distinctive political and cultural history. It has a vast geography, with a total area of more than 400,000 sq. km., 17,500 km. of coastline and a population of just over 500,000 scattered throughout hundreds of towns and coastal communities. In recent years, a unique combination of social, political and economic circumstances created the conditions for major policy shifts, with education being at the core of the reform movement.

Education policy direction over the past 40 years has been shaped by the recommendations of two major royal commission reports (Warren 1967, Williams et al. 1992). Much of the focus of the first report was on the social forces that seemed to be impacting education at the time of the study, which included technological developments, the growing recognition of the
economic returns from education, the growth of knowledge and changing personal values (Warren 1967). In identifying the forces influencing education at the time, most policy-makers link education to economic prosperity and personal fulfilment. Technological innovations create the need for new knowledge and skills, while automation eliminates jobs and results in unemployment. Projections for the future call for higher education and special training to meet the demands of the technological age, while unemployment and poverty are predicted for the least educated. Economists around the world and the Economic Council of Canada supported education as the means of promoting technological progress, economic growth, and human, social and cultural development. Education was the means to higher salaries and personal success, and contributed significantly to the growth of the nation.

Less than 25 years after the first royal commission report, the provincial government commissioned the second study to review the state of education in the province and make recommendations to inform policy in the coming years (Williams et al. 1992). This commission report (1992: xv) identified the major factors for consideration as:

- chronic and perhaps irreversible changes in our traditional industries,
- the changing nature of the workplace,
- the introduction of new technologies,
- changing population characteristics,
- changing family structures,
- increasing strains on economic resources,
- new expectations,
- and a heightened awareness of the rights of individuals and groups whose liberties have been constrained in the past.

The report (1992: 29) stressed that the province’s challenge was to ensure that:

- children obtain the skills, knowledge and abilities essential to survival in a fast-changing highly competitive world ... fundamental changes are required to create sensitive, responsive learning environments capable of preparing our youth for the future.

The study of the provincial documents shows that in the past 40 years there have been gradual shifts in policy direction, shifts which have sped up in recent years. In the early 1970s, along with the liberal views calling for equality of educational opportunity for all students, there was evidence of the influence of modernist views and the economic demands of the economy. As the movement to greater political involvement increases, there is increased emphasis on economic efficiency and restructuring, while the role of educators is diminished.

A major recommendation of the report, which had also been a recommendation of every major report in the past, was to restructure the province’s school districts through the elimination of the duplication of the provincially funded denominational schools. With the harsh economic conditions, it was now a more palatable political concept. Given the historical context and entrenchment of the religions infrastructure in the school system, this was a highly contested policy directive that eventually resulted in a constitutional amendment supported by 73% of the population.

Following the amendment in 1997, which facilitated the elimination of denominational education, a major restructuring took place that saw the demise of the 27 separate denominational boards and the creation of 11 new boards and a total reorganization of the province’s schools. In a province
whose 500-year history of settlement reveal that communities’ identities were intricately linked with religion, this amounted to a catastrophic change of the entire social order. In the next few years, the educational system undertook a restructuring plan that was unprecedented. It cut at the very core of the social, political and economic fabric of the province and had an impact virtually every community. Senior administrators in all 27 districts were dismissed, with four new administrators hired for each of the 11 new districts. In the next three years, 150 schools would close in the province, displacing students, teachers and school and district administrators. This province, a seemingly insignificant player in the larger picture, is inextricably linked with broader global trends that are affecting educational policies in many western countries. Though this province’s policy is ostensibly responding to local needs, there are significant parallels here to global trends that seem driven by an urgency to respond to an emerging world order. Education is being reshaped to be an extension of broader economic policy, with restructuring and devolution as key strategies as policies tighten control over curriculum guidelines and financial management, and as educators are increasingly subjected to market conditions that include greater control through accountability, surveillance and loss of professional autonomy (Blackmore 2000).

Educational leadership in this paradigm is located in the neo-liberal version of the performing school, with the main emphasis being on management and accountability (Blackmore 2000). Conditions in the local and global context conspired to move forward an agenda that advanced decentralization through a radical restructuring that reverberated through the entire system and impacted people in all levels of the organization. The policy landscape throughout this period was characterized as tumultuous, with radical change that challenged the very principles by which education had previously functioned, creating both substantive changes in the organization and structure of schools and regulatory changes in the form of governance and control in and over education (Ball 2008: 194).

**District context**

The district at the centre of this study covers an area of approximately 175 by 70 km, including rural and semi-urban communities. Some of its municipalities are among the oldest fishing communities in North America. In total, the district is made up of 127 communities with a strong history of coastal settlement and commerce. Despite some potential for growth and development mainly through entrepreneurial work ethic, changes in the fishery, together with declining birth rates and increased out-migration have presented significant challenges.

With the first district consolidation in 1996, four school boards were merged to form the district under study. When it began its operations in January 1997, there were 57 schools and 12,915 students. Twenty-three schools were closed over the next four years, affecting all employees in some way. Almost without exception, schools were working with redefined attendance zones, different grade configurations, staff changes and facility
renovations. Adding to the frustration, during the period of reform, the provincial government annually decreased the allocation of financial and human resources to districts and there were two provincial strikes of public service employees that involved all support staff.

It seemed things were only just settling (with new policies and operational procedures developed but only partially implemented, employee layoffs and reassignments worked through, and many school closures accomplished) when the second school board consolidation was announced. The remaining district personnel were directed, yet again, to consolidate the policies of their predecessor boards into workable new creations that professionals could rely on to offer clarity and direction during this time of intense turbulence, confusion, uncertainty and change.

The magnitude of the reform was unprecedented; yet along with the turmoil of structural reorganization, there remained an expectation that the district and each school would engage in an ongoing and continual process of growth and development. These were known to some as school improvement processes and to others as the effective schools movement and, at the district level, as 'strategic planning'. Components of those processes involved developing mission statements, together with an implementation plan to make the vision, mission and purpose statements practical, observable and achievable. It is within this context that the concept of care is examined in the policies that shaped the professional practice within the school district.

**Analyses of policy texts**

A CDA of the three district policy documents reveals that attempts to show care or develop care were central to the meanings the documents had for the district administrators. However, responses to the administrators’ attempts to develop and implement caring policies clashed with managerial discourses and provincial restructuring imperatives. The potency of the caring discourses ran counter to the province’s activities, which were being pressured by globalizing forces.

All three district policy documents studied represent an attempt by administrators to socialize and conform educators within the new school district into a preferred way of working. The policies indicated an effort to construct the work of educators and ensure compliance to policy mandates through dominance, coercion, pressure, position and invitation. The district goal was consistency and coherence across and among schools. There were new personnel bringing new perspectives and priorities and a desire to separate from the past. Additionally, mandates from government, the ambition of individuals and requests from schools and individuals complicated the administrators’ attempts to create order out of chaos. There was opportunity to build consensus and caring work relationships, but the result appears to be contrived.

**Our Vision for Teaching and Learning** (Atlantic School District 2003a) was officially approved by the school board for implementation and was promoted as the current, negotiated consensus of the espoused best practices and thinking on teaching, and set future direction. The document was
designed to guide instruction in the classroom and was expected to be referenced in regular staff meetings and professional development sessions. It was constructed to be authoritative, legitimate and efficient and offer the formal, official, objective position of the school board. The policy uses words such as ‘democracy’, ‘participation’, ‘diversity’, ‘shared decision-making’ and ‘collaboration’ that are often contradictory. A rationalist vocabulary is coupled with words like ‘visions’, ‘missions’, ‘values’ and ‘beliefs’. One intent of the document was to stimulate thought and dialogue, but it also brought forced change, accountability and consistency, with evaluation, accountability, surveillance and power being underlying themes. Administrators must legitimate the organization to multiple constituencies (Anderson 1990). Schools need discourses of democracy and equity just as much as they require discourses that reflect objective, scientific, research-based practices and reforms to socially engineer increased student outcomes.

The document incorporates a coercive form of power, using language such as, ‘We will conduct assessments’ (Atlantic School District 2003b). Teachers, principals and parents are the intended targets of the policy: ‘teachers take responsibility’, ‘teachers are accountable’ and ‘teachers ensure’ (Atlantic School District 2003b). Responsibility for ensuring that curriculum goals are achieved rests with the teacher. The term ‘collaboration’ sends a democratic message, but words like ‘effective’ and ‘performance standards’ send a marketization of education (i.e. deficit theory) message. Both discourses seem to be at work in this document.

The vision statement is an example of a modern technology of control par excellence, because it disciplines subjects while hiding the source of its power (Anderson 2001). While one intent of Our Vision for Teaching and Learning (Atlantic School District 2003a) was to stimulate thought and dialogue, this form of policy-making with its contradictory goals, processes and strategies, forces change and brings accountability and consistency.

Elements of care and caring are explicitly and implicitly evident in the district vision statement. A specific care relation is evidenced with individual students, as well as students as groups (Atlantic School District 2003a):

Teaching takes place in a caring, co-operative, nurturing, inclusive, structured, resource-rich environment with routines of high expectations and mutual respect. There is an emphasis on the development of self-discipline and responsibility; however, appropriate consequences for violation of school and classroom rules and procedures are well established.

This policy favours a respect for a range of human capacities, and speaks against an ideology of control that forces all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they might actually care about. The policy holds teachers responsible and accountable for student learning and the needs of students and is justified as part of their roles as ‘reflective professionals’. A great deal is expected of teachers under the rubric of caring professionals (Atlantic School District 2003a):

Because teaching and learning is a complex dynamic process, teachers constantly strive to gain more knowledge and understanding of the research about how the human brain learns in order to improve their teaching methods. Our best practices are based on research, and our vision for teaching and learning evolves accordingly.
Care is voiced for teachers as professionals, who are described as having their own individual needs: The district will demonstrate its care for teachers and provide assistance to them so that they can continuously learn new strategies and techniques, meet instructional standards, and raise the levels of student achievement. But they too have a mutual responsibility and accountability to contribute to the learning of their students.

The *Teaching and Learning Decision Making Matrix* (Atlantic School District 2003c) was produced out of the intention to build collaboration among all groups and flatten the traditional hierarchical, authoritative model of organization operant within the district. The matrix was intended as a point of reference for administrators to see that Our Vision for Teaching and Learning was implemented in classrooms throughout the district, but also as a mechanism to demonstrate how shared decisions are made.

The development of the district matrix was intended as a dialogue to help us work together systematically and confidently in supportive ways, but there was little attention given to supporting those who were implementing it. Through a series of dialogues and collaborative working sessions, negotiations of power and rights were worked out. It was an effort to share power and decision-making and demonstrates the complexities and intricacies involved with the process of working that way. The process began from the perspectives of care and justice, with commitment to persons, values, rules and principles intermingled. Through the matrix, the district aimed to reduce the hierarchy within the organization and redistribute power downwards, thus empowering employees. Unfortunately, the district’s commitment to establish a caring community often became subsumed in the maintenance of the power positions with language such as ‘right to be informed, right to veto or amend, right to advise’. Participants often did not know the reason behind decisions made by the administrators and this contributed to negative perceptions of the staff’s relationship with them. There was incredulity in the rhetoric about collaboration and shared decision-making. Misunderstandings developed because administrators failed to communicate their dilemmas to staff. The district administrators felt significant pressure from the community and from school reforms and the extended time necessary to communicate in appropriate ways was just not found. Senior administrators often gave mixed messages so that our collaborative, open, caring messages were contradicted by our authoritative and unilateral directions and actions.

It became evident that colleagues should not have been pushed into behaviours and thinking they did not understand or agree with, as it brought out scepticism and complacency, rather than energy, commitment and action. An ethic of caring does not sit in judgement and proceed by accusation and punishment (Noddings 1992: 120).

The teaching and learning matrix represents formal relationships that facilitate and sanction control where there would otherwise be a lack of trust, or simply an inability to predict and plan necessary actions. Persons impacted by this are presented as competing for positions and the effects of these relationships were negative for many. Some principals usurped authority, causing the Director of Education to revert to dealing in unilateral and hierarchical ways on some issues. There was a lack of faith that the teaching
and learning matrix would actually work the way it was intended and this devalued the discourse of care.

This policy was attempting to ‘suture together and over matters of difference between participating and competing interests in the process of policy text production’ (Taylor et al. 1997: 50), a form of policy as settlement. Sharing decision-making caused some conflicts between district administrators and some programme specialists and principals who held strong anti-establishment views. The matrix sought to overcome these conflicts, but resulted in further confusion. There was a lack of understanding and failure of implementation of the matrix on some peoples’ parts, and it was an ambiguous and often confusing process. Despite a striving for unity, fragmentation was the result. The shared decision-making process felt contrived and imposed, and consequently the intent to build community was not realized.

The Teachers’ Personal and Professional Growth and Development (Atlantic School District 2003b) policy was selected for analysis because it represents a tangible attempt via policy development to demonstrate care for teachers and their professional development. It was implemented to facilitate the creation of an organizational environment in which knowledge was highly valued and ongoing learning activities were encouraged. The Teachers’ Personal and Professional Growth and Development policy exudes a vision that breaks from tradition when the responsibility for maintaining teacher accountability resided with the administration.

The district was shifting the responsibility and resources for teachers’ professional development from the district and the province to the school and individual. This offered substantial opportunity to create and support alternative and local initiatives that would value and give credence to the views and perspectives of educators at the local level. The process aimed ‘to create a pedagogical space that maximized collaboration, response and agency, a safe space’ (Kamler 2001: 122), where teachers could challenge dominant discourses and implement alternatives.

Concepts such as the knowledge society, lifelong learning and the learning organization, have become part of conventional business wisdom, but employers still do little to provide employees with adequate training opportunities (Lowe 2000). The policy under discussion encouraged responsible self-evaluation, where professional educators assess their work and draw on peers to learn necessary new things. The policy implied that the dominant training model of teachers’ professional development—a model focused on expanding an individual’s repertoire of well-defined and skilful classroom practice—was not adequate to achieve the new visions of teaching and learning. This professional development policy places classroom practice in the larger contexts of school and district practice. It is grounded in a bigger picture—the purposes and practices of schooling and providing teachers with an opportunity to see connections between their work and that of others. Teachers are viewed as key participants in the reform effort, even while acknowledgement is made of the ways in which the entire organization is implicated.

The focus is on outcomes, access and participation, with a balance of obligation and opportunity implicit in the policy. It was the expectation that teachers and principals would develop their own policies, plans and
strategies within the overall district framework. The policy indicated that teachers should identify goals that address their own personal and professional needs, but that they must line up with the needs of the school and the district. In this way, this policy can be interpreted as a mechanism to control, to direct and to put parameters on the professional development of teachers.

The policy is ironic, given the province’s history of major government funding cuts, and its pervasive attitude that education needed to be trimmed and tightened rather than nurtured and grown. The limitations of financial resources placed constraints on the types of learning experiences that could be provided. The messy and often contentious forms of professional development (those requiring significant dialogue, higher order thinking, for example, and significant time and money) to examine existing practice were often deemed to be too expensive and time consuming, before results could be measured or the process justified.

There are contradictory discourses in the Teachers’ Personal and Professional Growth and Development policy (Atlantic School District 2003b). On the one hand, teachers are viewed as professionals who make their own decisions about what they need to learn and how they should plan and implement teaching and learning strategies in their classrooms. On the other hand, the district outlines specific parameters and guidelines that must be followed in the development and implementation of each individual teacher’s growth plan. There is the notion that teachers are autonomous, but also that they need to be monitored, checked on and systematically evaluated. The policy is compatible with the organizational structures and cultures in which the work of the district happens (within the context of the district’s goals and school goals). This policy is based on the pursuit of knowledge, the idea that educators, like students, are lifelong learners, who need to be cared about and supported as educators interrogate our own individual beliefs and patterns of practice. The objective is to help employees to be knowledgeable, confident and resilient, and able to cope with multiple and often intense demands. However, this text contains contradictions. While teachers are expected to be willing to generate knowledge and assess the knowledge of others, bureaucratic restraint is inherent in a policy so heavily influenced and dominated by district direction. Frequent use is made of the word ‘should’, indicating that action is imperative.

Teachers completed an annual professional development request, outlining their needs, and discussed it with school administrators to determine what could be provided at the local level. The requests were submitted to and collated by district personnel who helped organize them and provide a response. School, as well as district funding, was made available to enable professional development. In a time of serious cost cutting, these efforts could certainly be recognized as meaningful ways to care for teachers. Care for teachers is tangibly demonstrated through the allocation of flexible funds to be used as the teachers, with their support team, deemed most appropriate. Former models of professional development provided standardized learning opportunities for teachers, where what they should learn was prescribed for them by others. While the provision of money, in and of itself, could never be sufficient or the sole solution, it did provide opportunities for teachers that they had not had before, and it demonstrated a real commitment on the part
of the district to move away from old models of teacher training toward a more self-directed learning model.

Transposing the policy into action required the support and commitment of each educator at the district office, along with every principal. Supported by assigned district personnel, the principals were counted on to lead the changes at the school level. Lines of authority were used to enforce the policies. In constructing the policies of the district, it was felt by some that the top administrators were inviting or persuading others to join ‘our side’. Some colleagues were silenced and some felt their positions were threatened. The sometimes heavy-handed attempt to introduce different processes was an overly ambitious undertaking, given the turmoil being experienced throughout the system. Through insistence, impatience and sometimes even coercion, the administrators’ determination to complete the matrix development contradicted and undermined our own caring efforts. Unfortunately, because of mixed messages conveyed by the leadership of the district, some felt cajoled and pressured into accepting the views and perspectives of others rather than expressing their own. The contradictions inherent in the policies and policy development processes exacerbated this situation.

**Consequences**

There were multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings embedded within the district documents. While they reflected mainstream thinking in education, and represented a set of espoused theories and values of what personnel in the school district need to know and know how to do, the texts are also sites of struggle. They show traces of differing discourses and ideologies, and struggles for power and dominance. Despite growing awareness among senior management of the importance of workers’ knowledge, skills and involvement in decision-making, the fact remains that traditional work structures, management control systems and an overriding focus on costs and profits make it difficult to nurture care in the workplace (Lowe 2000). Resolving this contradiction remains a pressing issue on the human resource policy landscape. Despite district administrators’ caring messages emphasizing lifelong learning, ongoing professional development and shared decision-making, the administrators in the district were confronted with some of the challenges attendant the processes of globalization filtered down from above.

The development of policy is a political and institutional process, and involves contestation and compromise among and between differing groups and interests (Taylor *et al.* 1997):

In privileging the institutional and collective view, however, the language of reform underestimates the intricate ways in which individual and institutional lives are interwoven. It under-examines the points at which certain organizational interests of schools and occupational interests of teachers may collide. (Little 1994: 4)

On the one hand, organizational learning theory claims to emphasize teamwork, collaboration and personal mastery, while, on the other, much reform
sets up structures and systems thinking that seem to reinforce old models and ways of thinking. Ultimately, we are driven not by what we know, but rather by what we feel.

All three district policies could all be interpreted as mechanisms, procedures, influences and pressures to invite, persuade and silence opponents. The policies and guidelines were established to provide equitable opportunity and shared decision-making, but they imposed limits and specified the participants to be involved. The policies, procedures and positional addresses played a powerful role in transforming the ambiguity of the early years of the district’s conception into clarity, and provided some consistency and a path forward for the educational community to follow. The documents referenced here played a significant role in socializing educators and others into the ways work was carried out in the district, but not towards their shared intentions. Unfortunately, due to complex, imposed, continuing and persistent changes to the education system of the province, there could be no orderly application and follow through of the district’s policies and procedures. This resulted in inconsistency, misrepresentation, miscommunication and perceptions of confusion, and contradiction. All this was interpreted by many as being uncaring.

Educators must focus on human relations and move from struggling against something to struggling toward something. Arguments are being made for a pedagogy of relations, based on the notion of democratic relations (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004: 6). As Margonis (2004:51) noted:

> Respectful relationships being built in the process of collective decision making ... establishing educationally conducive relationships ... free flowing communicative give-and-take, the willingness to try new methods and fail and return to the drawing board, and the ability to appreciate one another in the process of creating ... these are social abilities made possible by relationships.

Caring is an inherently human quality, and yet in contexts where humans spend considerable time together, often engaged in complex and challenging tasks, care is not often understood as a phenomenon or concept that is pertinent or as having potential to enhance and improve relationships and productivity. To improve schools, one must invest in people, support people and develop them. Caring needs to become a valued part of the social/public world, with a balance struck between rules, principles and moral judgements. Dialogue is needed to determine just rules and regulations, which serve as guides for making moral decisions. For an organization to become more humane and less oppressive, an ethic of caring has to replace the focus on principles, rules and duty. Caring, justice and power need to work together. As educational leaders, we must understand that the particular needs of individuals serve as guidelines for equitable and moral treatment for members of the larger profession. Power of position or authority provides the space in which the moral debate about fairness and justice can take place. To facilitate this kind of dialogue and debate, leaders need to be driven by moral purpose to incorporate caring into institutions currently dominated by reasoning and ‘power over’.

An ethic of caring requires organizational structures and leadership that support thinking and doing, feeling and action, theory and practice. It demands resources, skills and knowledge. It is yet to be determined whether
those in educational organizations will be willing to give enough to change the system that has been entrenched with competition, autonomy, control and independence, in order to cultivate interdependence, connection and community. Some people believe they can change, nurture care and help the system to change in positive ways. Their caring experiences and attitudes evidence that reformers need to allow time to build trust, connection and community.

Caring relationships are difficult to sustain in work environments, where individuals and groups are under the pressure of competing interests and demands. Through this critical reflection of caring policies, common concerns were revealed and the possibilities for alternative practices were identified and created. Despite much pressure from above and many challenges within, there are options emerging from the collaboration of groups and communities and the caring approaches and policies of leaders.

Conclusion

To find new ways forward in globalizing contexts, we must seek to increase involvement in decision-making, at local and global levels, by working to establish structures and processes that advance democracy and democratic work environments. If we are to find cohesion in our work lives, we will have to improve upon our processes of negotiating diversity within a commitment to care. These ends are especially difficult to achieve when governments and large organizations push us in the opposite direction.

Consistent with broader, global trends, our work shows that there has been a considerable shift in policy direction over the past 40 years, resulting in a movement away from the needs of people and favouring social, political and economic efficiency. The concept of care in policy has not been the priority, where it remains is the result of individual/local initiative and practice. People in positions of power and privilege need to notice how pervasive and central care is to human life and raise questions about the adequacy of care in current education policy.

Leaders, particularly those determined to do things differently, need to understand the tumultuous nature of educational change in a new political era if they are to be successful in implementing new policies (Barlow and Robertson 1994). Fullan noted that politically motivated reforms produce overload, unrealistic timelines, uncoordinated demands, simplistic solutions, misdirected efforts, inconsistencies and underestimation of what it takes to bring about reform. Once the political mileage has been wrung out of a reform, its implementation—and its contradictions—are left to teachers and school board officials to workout (Fullan 2005). This is especially true when the public begins to question the wisdom of the reform. Educators seemingly fail to comprehend the interconnectedness of their work with broader policy agendas and how well-meaning reform can set off a chain of unintended and almost irreversible consequences.

Consistent with Taylor et al. (1997), our experiences clearly demonstrate that the relationship between policy and change is complex and contradictory and cannot be produced by government mandate alone. At
the multiple levels of policy production and implementation policy filters through cultural, social, economic and political interpretations and is influenced by local interests, values and agendas.

However, in spite of the complexity of the multiple layers of the implementation process the spaces that exist among theory, policy and practice create opportunities for local possibilities and agency (Tucker 2005). Stories of hope were being created in response to the shifting landscapes and accompanying turmoil that occur in the midst of educational reform. We found that some of these stories exist in the attempts to maintain a balance of caring and accountability in one rural school district on the eastern edge of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

References


Folbre, N. New Press).


