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Parental Vigilance and the Discursive Construction of Local School Policy

This article examines how a small group of high-socioeconomic status (high-SES) parents organized community opposition to the integration of a special-needs student into a grade 3 classroom in an urban elementary school in Ontario. Using data gathered in a participant observation study, this article shows how parents came to believe that existing special education policy placed the individual needs of the special education student over the needs of the collective. It explicates parents' subsequent efforts to enter into a social discursive process to challenge the policy and ultimately co-construct unofficial integration guidelines specific to the local school. In forcing the school board to explicate special education policy and practice, the parents underscored the nature of schools as contested sites of policy negotiation and established themselves as players in the policy development arena. Furthermore, this article highlights the importance of both history and local context in policy development and implementation and suggests that special education initiatives are best conceptualized as nested in local communities. The article concludes with a suggestion for future research on special education policy and community responses to integration.

Cet article porte sur les démarches entreprises par un petit groupe de parents de statut socio-économique élevé qui ont mené une opposition communautaire pour empêcher qu'un élève en difficulté soit intégré dans une classe de 3^e année dans une école élémentaire en milieu urbain en Ontario. S'appuyant sur les données d'une étude participation-observation, cet article démontre que les parents en sont arrivés à croire que la politique existante relative à l'éducation à l'enfance en difficulté mettait les besoins de l'élève en difficulté avant ceux de la collectivité. On explique les efforts des parents qui visaient à entamer un processus de discours social pour défier la politique et finalement pour participer à l'élaboration de principes directeurs officiels portant sur l'intégration et spécifiques à leur école. En obligeant le conseil scolaire à expliciter les politiques et les procédures concernant l'éducation aux élèves en difficulté, les parents ont fait ressortir la nature des écoles comme sites de contestation sur les politiques et ils se sont érigés en intervenants dans l'arène du développement de politiques. L'article souligne l'importance que jouent, au niveau local, l'histoire et le contexte dans le développement et l'implantation de politiques. On y propose que les initiatives en matière d'éducation à l'enfance en difficulté se conçoivent le mieux comme étant emboîtées dans les communautés locales. Une suggestion quant à la recherche sur les politiques touchant l'éducation à l'enfance en difficulté et les réactions communautaires à l'intégration vient conclure l'article.

Introduction

Social policy over the last decade has undergone a shift in supporting the right of disabled people to live free from barriers that exclude them from productive life. The historic social construction of disability as an individual deficit model continues to be challenged by a growing recognition of the oppressive and discriminatory nature of society's institutions (Dyson, 2001; Kliever &

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Fitzgerald, 2001; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). As a result, more supports are being put in place to assist individuals in their struggle to overcome systemic barriers, and inclusive environments that acknowledge difference and diversity are increasingly becoming the norm.

In the field of education, changes in public attitudes and expectations have worked to translate this new ethos of inclusion into a rejection of the long-practiced institutionalization or warehousing of groups of disabled students in favor of community-based services that are meant to address the individual needs of differently-abled students. These changes have found voice in parental advocacy, government legislation, and court rulings that ask school boards, schools, and teachers to rethink how we meet the needs of these many exceptional students (Meyer, Harry, & Sapon-Shevin, 1997).

In considering how school boards develop and implement such policies, policy is understood in this article as a process rather than a product. Policy is not, as some would suggest, the final output of government or bureaucratic decision-making bodies, but rather a negotiated struggle or contest between "different groups who may lie outside the formal machinery of official policy making" (Ozga, 2000, p. 2). It is "a transformation of intentions in which content, practices, and consequences are generated in the dynamics" (Placier, Hall, McKendall, & Cockrell, 1999, p. 260). By understanding policy in this way, school policy is seen to exist not only in official school board documents and texts but in the active interpretation and steering of board intentions both by individuals who work in local schools and by parents in school communities.

This article examines the interpretation of school policy through the lens of special education. Special education is in many ways a useful mechanism through which to understand the policy process as the often emotionally fueled concerns of parents, teachers, and administrators surrounding special education issues underscore the contested nature of policy implementation at the local school level.

Schools are seen as public arenas (Olsen, 1997) and highly complex micro-political systems located in larger and sometimes distant bureaucracies (McLaughlin, 1987). They are local sites of implementation where macro-based policies developed by bureaucratic school boards attempt to take root. The policies put forward by these boards often focus on macro- and meso-level issues and cannot easily factor in the complex micro-interrelationships we find inside individual schools. As a result, school board policies sometimes meet with opposition at the local level.

In Canada educational policy is the purview of the individual provinces and territories. Provincial ministries of education, having an electoral mandate to govern, make decisions and enact legislation with varying degrees of public consultation. Furthermore, district school boards supplement provincial mandates with local school policy. Although a general acceptance of big governance permeates the process of policy development in Canada, Canadian society is also based on strong notions of democratic participation. As a result, parental involvement sometimes works to challenge or mitigate educational policy at the provincial, district, and local level.

Conceptualizing Special Education Integration

Most research on special education integration comes from the fields of psychology and education. This body of work contributes to our increased awareness of special education integration from the perspective of students (Primer & Brown, 1995), classroom teachers and school administrators (Richardson and Jordin, 1999; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998; Stanovich & Stanovich, 1997). Much of this research demonstrates the potential benefits of mainstreaming students with disabilities into regular classrooms (Hunt, Farron-Davis, Wrenn, Hirose-Hatai, & Goetz, 1997; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Logan & Malone, 1998) and suggests reciprocally positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities (Hall, 1994). Other research considers issues of special education integration beyond the level of the individual student, teacher, or classroom (McLaughlin, & Warren, 1994, in Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Rose, 2001; Harriman, 2001; Eraclides, 2001) and looks at teacher attitudes, school leadership, and external supports that may facilitate inclusive environments.

Patton and Townsend (1997) suggest that despite many demonstrated positive outcomes, research on the benefits of inclusive schooling remains challenged by the highly diverse nature of the special education population and variance among individual classroom teachers. Skrtic (1991), furthermore, suggests that early mainstreaming efforts focused largely on aspects of physical and social integration, but accomplished little with respect to meaningful or widespread structural or attitudinal change. Although much has been done by proponents of inclusion to foster increased understanding of the need to align special and general education efforts, the relationship between local integration initiatives and school board policy remains relatively unexamined, and there is little critical analysis of the fundamental assumptions in which many special education practices are grounded (Skrtic, 1991).

National attention to educational reform has to a large extent ignored students with disabilities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; McLaughlin & Warren, 1992). What little policy research there is remains highly marginalized, tending to be overshadowed by larger bodies of work on school improvement and teacher development. Yet the relationship between special education policy development, program implementation, and local school context needs to be understood. In fact, as school boards face mounting pressure to service students in integrated settings and to apply national standards assessments to special education students, it would seem imperative that a body of research be developed to inform the educational community about issues surrounding policy development, policy implementation, and special education.

Although this article makes use of special education policy to examine the policy implementation process, I draw on bodies of literature in addition to those that focus on special education research in order to further an understanding of the larger social context in which school policy is situated. Research on detracking (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Wells & Oakes, 1996; Wells & Serna, 1996; Welner, 2001), social class (Anyon, 1981; Lareau, 1987, 2000; Metz, 1990), and English as a second language (ESL) education (Bascia, 2001a; Bascia & Jacka, 2001; Olsen, 1997) offer important insights into the experience of students who are viewed as being outside the perceived norms of the educational system. The experience of these students, who are marginal-

ized by virtue of their race, social class, language, or culture, arguably parallels some of the experiences of special-needs students who find themselves socially, emotionally, or physically isolated. In the case of special-needs students, this isolation is often furthered by medically based conceptualizations of disability that pathologize students' needs (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996) and lingering colonial-based attitudes about the efficacy of disability segregation (Kliwer & Fitzgerald, 2001).

Research consistently demonstrates the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Sharpe, 1997). It is often noted that "race, language and gender biases interact in special education" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996, p. 765). Research on social class may be helpful, therefore, in considering variations in the school experience of various special education students and their families, as class and race often overlap.

In furthering an understanding of the relationship between social class and parental involvement, Metz (1990) and Lareau (2000) both highlight important and distinct ways in which high-socioeconomic status (high-SES) and low-socioeconomic status (low-SES) parents enter the educational arena. They demonstrate how these two groups of parents bring with them varying attitudes, expectations, and ways of problem-solving in schools. In addition, they show that high-SES and low-SES families encounter varying teacher attitudes and expectations that are often based on stereotypical assumptions of class difference. In general, high-SES parents view schooling as a shared relationship: a partnership between teacher and parent. They tend to have a heightened sense of entitlement about their ability to influence their child's school experience. Low-SES parents, on the other hand, foster looser linkages between home and school, tend to be supportive of teachers' efforts, and usually defer to teachers' expertise.

In considering how we think about special-needs students it readily becomes clear that they are a diverse population. In addition to factoring in the differences in learning style as indicated by the many diagnostic categories used to label special-needs students, it is important to remember that these exceptional learners cross lines of sex, race, culture, language, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class. It is difficult in any broad policy statement to define their individual needs just as it is unwise for boards to develop cookie-cutter policies to implement in local schools. More helpful, however, is to examine and understand what sometimes happens when special education policy is interpreted at the local level. By considering points of success and points of failure, and by making linkages between policy and local context, it is possible to further an understanding of how special education policy may best support this diverse group of learners in a variety of learning environments.

This article examines how a small group of high-SES parents organized community opposition to the integration of a special-needs student into a grade 3 classroom of an urban elementary school in Ontario. It explicates the parents' efforts to enter into a discursive process to challenge board policy. Furthermore, it examines how parents ultimately co-constructed unofficial integration guidelines specific to the local school, thereby transforming board policy to meet perceived local school needs. This article highlights the impor-

tance of both history and local context in policy development and implementation and suggests that special education initiatives are best conceptualized as nested in local communities.

Methodology

This participant observation study examines the integration of an autistic student into a grade 3 classroom at Southdale School. Pseudonyms are used for all person and place names for the purposes of confidentiality. The impetus for this article arose from of my own experience as a teacher at Southdale. As a special education resource teacher, I worked with primary grade special education students and teachers in regular classroom settings. I had worked with Sam, an autistic student, and his grade 1 classroom teacher two years prior to the beginning of this research. I was familiar with the events that led to his subsequent placement in a self-contained setting at a nearby school for grade 2 and his eventual return to Southdale, his home school, for grade 3. I was not directly involved with Sam or his family during his grade 3 year, which is the period covered by this research. I did, however, observe Sam's integration and saw first hand the conflict that developed between Southdale parents and the school board as a result of his integration.

The school board and Southdale's principal agreed to my study. I was given permission to interview senior special education department board staff, intermediate-level board staff in charge of Sam's integration, school administrators, teachers, and parents. In addition to the participants whom I interviewed formally, all school staff involved in the integration initiative, Sam's mother, and all parents with whom I spoke were aware of my involvement in this research project.

The main method of data collection was unstructured interviews. I met with participants individually and conducted interviews that lasted approximately one hour. This period of data collection took place over four weeks. The interviews were audiotaped and independently transcribed verbatim with the informed consent of participants. Although unstructured, the interviews followed a general outline of questions that focused on the relationship between the school board and the local school, the relationship between the school board and Southdale parents, parental involvement in local school matters, the history of events leading to Sam's integration, and the organization of parental opposition to Sam's integration.

Interview participants included the school's principal, vice-principal, Sam's classroom teacher, two parents of grade 3 students, and a senior representative from the special education department of the school board. In addition, I held ongoing conversations with Sam's mother, two educational assistants who worked with Sam, a senior school board official, and three other parents who were aware of Sam's integration. These weekly and sometimes daily informal conversations took place over a five-month period, and although not audiotaped generated field notes and provided background and context for my research. As mentioned above, everyone with whom I spoke was aware of my involvement in this research project.

I based my analysis of the data on the case study methods of Yin (1989) and the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Thus I began with open coding, a process wherein concepts are identified and developed through

asking questions about the data, and then labeling and grouping the data into categories. I then followed with axial coding of data, grouping the data into more specific categories. During the coding process I made notes that included information about the description of codes and issues that emerged in the coding. These methods are suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to prevent the researcher's biases from blocking what is significant in the data and to keep an ongoing record of the analytic process.

When I analyzed the data, a number of themes emerged: *History as context* underscored how past key events influenced the implementation of policy at the school level; *parents as players* emerged as a way of understanding how parents constructed their role in the policy process; *rationalizing policy at the local level* appeared key to understanding why and how parents engaged in the policy process; *the value of organized vigilance* revealed itself as a key component of effective parental opposition to board policy; *reframing the discourse* highlighted the strategy adopted by parents in transforming board policy; and *incorporating policy into local context* emphasized parents' need to make policy meaningful at the local level.

Background

The community of Southdale is in many ways like many upper-middle-class communities in North America. Most families are white, most parents are well educated, and the vast majority of children speak English as their first language. Discussions of local and provincial politics typically reveal a strong community tendency toward a conservative ideology.

In the heart of this neighborhood sits Southdale Elementary and Middle School, home to more than 800 students from junior kindergarten to grade 8. It is a large and well-maintained building, having undergone extensive renovation and expansion in the early 1990s when the popular push for bilingual (French-English) education brought a newly established French immersion program to the school.

Southdale parents involve themselves in their children's school experience in ways typical of high-SES parents (Lareau, 2000; Metz, 1990). They are active classroom volunteers, strongly support school fundraising activities, and willingly help teachers with weekly photocopying tasks. At the same time they expect their complaints to be heard, readily question low report card grades, and think nothing of contacting the school trustee or superintendent if the principal will not come around to their way of thinking. Southdale playground is home to a dynamic communication network of stay-at-home mothers who report unofficial school news on a rapid-fire basis. Southdale teachers often complain that parents know school news well before most of the staff.

On past matters, Southdale parents have adopted the type of critical stance noted by Lareau (2000). Like the upper-middle-class parents in Lareau's study on schooling and social class, Southdale parents do not hesitate to work collectively to remediate any weakness they may perceive in their children's school. This ability to organize and publicly challenge the school policy became evident during the 1998-1999 school year. At that time a group of Southdale parents, greatly alarmed by what they perceived as an overrepresentation of special education students in the school's English-language stream, bypassed the school principal to take their pleas for extra academic support directly to

senior board of education staff. They lobbied the school and senior board staff in what one parent described as an “unprecedented and unheard of manner.” Their efforts were substantial, organized, and persistent. Although no official policy change resulted from their efforts, unofficial help was quietly provided by the board to this school, and Southdale parents decided that the particular needs of students in English-stream classrooms was a hot topic to be watched. Furthermore, parents believed that their protest sent a clear message to board and school administration that said, “We’re here for our children, we’re not going away, and we’re ready to come to their defense should the need once again arise” (parent of a grade 3 student).

The perceived negative effect of special-needs learners on Southdale’s English-stream classrooms remains an issue of great significance for many parents in this community. They believe that there is *de facto* streaming resulting from dual-track schooling and that the French immersion stream is seen as highly advantaged if not gifted. The English stream, some parents claim, is an unduly burdened program for students with generally weaker academic skills or identified learning disabilities. To the outside observer it might seem unlikely that such a longstanding struggle involving equity-based issues would be played out among the privileged and highly homogeneous community of Southdale. Yet just such a struggle has taken place and continues to take place at the school. As a result, parents of English-stream students are acutely sensitive to issues of special education and special-needs students in regular classrooms. It is perhaps for this reason that the seemingly simple and routine integration of a grade 3 autistic student provoked such a profound, unanticipated, and, in the school board’s opinion, unwarranted parental response.

A “Typical” Integration Effort

In fall 2001 the special education department of the local school board demonstrated its commitment to integration through the initiation of a pilot project for autistic students. This project, intended to prepare autistic students for eventual full-time integration into regular classrooms, was designed to utilize both self-contained and integrated classroom settings and involved the mid-day transfer and busing of students. Despite the program’s commitment to the principles of integration, the proposed model was contested by many special education teachers in the school board because it appeared to contradict best practice with respect to the education of autistic students who, it is generally accepted, require high levels of structure, predictability, consistency, and routine (Jordan, 1997). Regardless, the special education department proceeded with plans to implement the program during the first term of the 2001-2002 school year.

Southdale was the home school for Sam, one of the 24 students selected to participate in the pilot project. Sam had attended Southdale for his junior kindergarten, senior kindergarten, and grade 1 years. For his grade 2 year he had been transferred to a self-contained special education class at another school. Sam was widely remembered, however, by Southdale’s school administration, teachers, and parent community as a volatile, difficult-to-manage, physically aggressive student. His mother was perceived by school administration and other parents to be confrontational and unreasonable: a stance she

believed was necessary in order to get the services and school supports she saw as essential for her son.

At the end of Sam's grade 2 year, and at his mother's insistence, the school board's special education department placed Sam in the pilot project. This decision meant that Sam would be returned to Southdale every afternoon for integration into a regular grade 3 classroom. When duly informed of this by the school board, the principal, vice-principal, and classroom teacher reiterated to the school board their belief that Sam was a highly inappropriate candidate for integration. Senior board personnel, who had never met Sam, rejected the local school's concern as unfounded and informed the school's principal that Sam would be arriving imminently.

Six months after Sam's entry into the pilot project and his return to Southdale, it may be said that things did not go as planned by those involved in the development and implementation of this integration initiative. Sam's mother, following a confrontation with school staff, was served with a restraining order barring her from entering the school. The classroom teacher, faced with Sam's daily outbursts and antics that required her to bring classroom lessons to a halt, reported essentially giving up trying to do anything but get her students safely through each day. The parents of other students in Sam's class, expressing concern for the safety of their own children, contacted school administration, senior school board personnel, and provincial Ministry of Education staff. As for the child this program was designed to support, Sam's mother reported that he was increasingly frustrated and confused. According to his classroom teacher, he appeared to want to be with his peers in the regular classroom, but was limited in the amount of time he was integrated due to his increasingly erratic and sometimes violent behavior. As a result, Sam ultimately spent most of his time at Southdale isolated from other students, always closely shadowed in the regular classroom by an educational assistant, and sometimes physically restrained in an empty guidance office when his outbursts became dangerous to himself or others.

After seven months at Southdale School, Sam was transferred to a behavior program at another area school. His mother was vehemently opposed to the move, but the school board gave her no other choice, claiming it could no longer safely support Sam in an integrated classroom setting. Sam's mother threatened legal action and is presently seeking advice from the Ontario Human Rights Commission in an attempt to have her son readmitted to Southdale.

Did the actions of Southdale parents play any part in the board's decision to transfer Sam to another school? The board's official answer is, "No. All decisions concerning any child's integration are made by appropriate board staff in consultation with parents. Community pressure plays no part in our decisions" (board official). The principal, sitting between the board and the parents, believes the entire experience eventually made the board "a little more sensitive" to Southdale parents' concerns, but fears this learning "is not going to be generalized" to other school sites (Southdale principal). The parents, on the other hand, believe strongly that their actions greatly influenced the board's decision to transfer Sam. During the course of my interviews, parents stated their belief that although Sam's deteriorating behavior was the ultimate

reason for his transfer, parental pressure also played a key role in forcing the board's hand. Furthermore, Southdale parents stated their belief that in the future the board would not consider another integration such as Sam's at Southdale School. Whether this is true remains to be seen as future integration initiatives take place.

Discussion

In beginning this discussion, I wish to make clear my own position on the importance and value of integration. Not only do I see integration as benefiting the special-needs child, I regard integrated classrooms, schools, and communities as essential components of a fair and just society. They are bridges to understanding and as such must be nurtured and encouraged.

At the same time, I believe that integrated settings must be adequately supported. When special-needs students are placed in integrated settings without such support, the ability of integration to build bridges of understanding between diverse groups is undermined. Inadequately supported integration initiatives, in my opinion, provide fodder for integration opponents who attest that educating special-needs students in congregated settings better meets the needs of all students.

My interest in researching this particular integration initiative is neither to pass judgment on its particular suitability nor to comment on whether I believe Southdale parents were justified in their opposition. Rather, my interest lies in examining the possible relationship between this community's negative reaction to this particular board policy and the absence of strong policy mandates at the local school level. I wish to consider whether clearer and more explicit public articulation by school boards about the goals and purposes of integration might facilitate the creation of school climates that are more supportive of inclusionary practice. In short, it is through better understanding of this failed integration effort that I hope future integration initiatives might succeed.

History as Context

In her writing on educational indicators, Oakes (1989) makes a point that is helpful when trying to understand the situation at Southdale School. She notes that "Schools are complex and intricate places. Policy makers should temper their reading of any one indicator with the following caveat: It is nearly impossible to understand this single item, idea, or attribute outside the school context" (p. 195).

In the case of Southdale School, context was perhaps the most important and the least considered factor affecting the community's response to Sam's integration. Policymakers appeared not only ignorant of context at Southdale, but resisted ongoing attempts by school staff and parents to make them more aware. Nor did they appear to understand this community's beliefs about integration and special-needs students.

According to the principal,

[The school board] underestimated the child and the community and the teacher. They underestimated the level of community involvement in the class. They underestimated the anger on the part of the community for the failure of the board to act when the child was abusing his peers in kindergarten and grade 1.

The school board failed to realize the importance of history in this traditional community of active and engaged parents. Yet history exists as a backdrop for many of the day-to-day interactions that occur between Southdale parents and the school. It provides context for this community's reaction to school decisions and is vital to any understanding of why on any particular day certain decisions are more contested by parents than others. As noted by Olsen (1997) in her ethnographic study of Madison High, history frames any understanding of "[the] daily struggle." This point was made explicit by parent Helen Cunningham, who stated,

The concern that we raised is that these children have a history, and I think that is important in this discussion. This is not a new child. This is not a child that the [other] children have never had involvement with. We have to respect that some of these children were terrorized with nightmares, you know, bedwetting, crying out at night.

History is an extremely important factor in understanding Southdale parents' opposition to Sam's integration. Sam's grade 1 experience at Southdale, for example, had been seen by many parents as problematic and remained fodder for ongoing playground conversation. Debbie Matthews, a Southdale parent, recalled her impressions of that year:

There was a boy who was in [my son's] classroom who interrupted daily, constantly. He would pull his pants down, he would call out, [and] he was unmanageable. He took up the teacher's entire time. The teaching assistant who was with him and who [was only paid] to be there half-time took her own time to be there some afternoons. The entire direction of the class or the focus of the class often ended up having to be around him because of his behavior and his acting out ... No story could ever go fully told when the teacher was reading a story to the kids because it got interrupted so many times because you ... never knew [what would happen next]. So that was what made grade 1 just pretty much a waste of time, I would say, for most of the kids in the class. (Debbie Matthews, parent)

Furthermore, Ms. Matthews remembered a specific event that had occurred, stating,

A child who was wearing a cast had it stomped on because of one of [Sam's] angry outbursts. It wasn't because she was near him. He went and sought her out and stomped on it because he was not getting his way ... [He] would focus on certain children and would pick on them.

According to both Ms. Matthews and Ms. Cunningham, the overriding objection of the parents to Sam's grade 3 integration was based on memories of this grade 1 year. In their opinion, many parents continued to regard Sam as a threat to the safety of the other children, believing that students "never felt really safe being with him because [of] the outbursts" (Ms. Matthews, parent). Furthermore, they felt that the whole grade 1 year had been highly stressful for most of Sam's classmates because "no one knew what was going to happen next" (Ms. Matthews, parent).

The principal of Southdale, Elizabeth Ferguson, put it succinctly when she said, "There is a lot of memory and history that comes into play with this child that the parents haven't forgotten about." According to the principal, in plan-

ning Sam's return to the school for grade 3, the school board, rather than acknowledging the child's past, chose to ignore it. She further added that, "Despite the warnings that [Southdale's school administration] supplied to the people in charge, they made the decision that they were going to deal with this case like every other one." Yet this case was not, in her opinion, "anywhere in the spectrum of typical."

Sam's case was in fact highly atypical despite the board's continued efforts to apply typical board policy. As noted by the principal, "In my 29 years of experience with the board, I have only met one other child who was as disruptive to the school as this one." Yet Elizabeth believed that the board viewed the local school opposition as "a tempest in a teapot" (Southdale principal). In her opinion, "The approach that was taken [by the board] was the 'typical' one and it wasn't very helpful to the class or the teacher or the child."

According to the principal, the methods prescribed by typical board policy could not possibly have facilitated a positive outcome in this case. The end result was the type of "hyperrational" policy noted by Wise (1979, in Darling-Hammond, 1997) that causes organizations "to treat clients inflexibly rather than in accordance with their needs" and impairs "organizational problem solving" (p. 54). In this case, hyperrational policy may have caused the board to stop listening to the concerns of the local school and thwarted efforts by the principal, the classroom teacher, and Southdale parents to brainstorm solutions. It also arguably placed Sam in an environment wholly unsuited to his needs as the school board stopped responding to requests by both Sam's mother and the principal for more help such as additional classroom support or on-site occupational therapy to remediate Sam's difficulty with sensory integration.

It may be that three factors were written into Southdale's history as a result of these early experiences. First, Southdale parents came to believe that "the board is out there separate" (Helen Cunningham, parent). It is not in touch with the daily lives of Southdale students, staff, and parents. It is a distant and secretive bureaucracy that holds power over local schools and makes decisions that sometimes fail to consider local school needs.

Second, Southdale parents came to believe that they needed to be vigilant in protecting their children against ill-conceived school board policies, particularly in the area of special education. Based on their experience with Sam in grade 1, they had little faith in the board's willingness to consider the potential negative impact of special-needs students on regular classrooms. More specifically, the parents believed that board policy focused largely on the rights of individual special-needs students. The rights of non-special education students were, in the minds of Southdale parents, ignored by special education policy. Consequently, these grade 3 students were seen by Southdale parents to be those more at risk.

Third, Southdale parents came to believe that strategic parental advocacy can effect change at the local level despite school board resistance. In the words of Southdale's vice-principal, these parents "understand systems [and] understand structures.... [Southdale parents] are so resourceful in knowing how the system works and, in fact, many of them 'work the system' quite skillfully" (Vice-principal, Southdale School).

Given the history and context of Southdale School's relationship to English-French streaming and special education issues, it is easy to understand why the board's decision to integrate Sam into a regular classroom provoked such a hue and cry from Southdale parents. Also, given the board's reliance on what appeared to be hyperrational policy measures, we can perhaps understand its failure to pay heed to local opposition and the inadequacy of its problem-solving abilities.

Parents as Players

According to Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, and Henry (1997), the past few decades have seen the rise of powerful social movements determined to have a voice in community, national, and world affairs. These groups form alliances and create points of pressure to ensure their engagement in the democratic policy process. The actions of the Southdale community appear to reflect this type of social movement, perhaps suggesting that parents are demanding more input into local school issues that were previously the sole purview of school administration and boards.

Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) suggest that one of the by-products of globalization has been a weakening of the boundaries in public schooling. As a result, the autonomy of schools is no longer respected, and parents, perhaps responding to the push toward the marketization and commercialization of public education, feel entitled to act as consumer advocates in an era of "parentocracy" (Acker, 1999). The decision by Southdale parents to challenge board policy and enter into a social discursive process may, therefore, be understood as an offshoot of a postmodern reconceptualization of schooling combined with the inclination of high-SES parents to involve themselves in matters of school policy.

As noted by Southdale's principal and vice-principal, Southdale parents feel entitled to participate fully in all matters of schooling. According to the principal,

They are involved and supportive of all the things we want them to be and sometimes they are involved in nosy ways in things that we don't want them to be involved in. They seem to think that everything is their purview.

In the case of Sam's integration, their purview came to include the parameters of successful integration. Spurred on by their sense of entitlement, Southdale parents developed specific strategies to oppose, resist, reconceptualize, and ultimately transform Sam's grade 3 integration. These strategies may best be understood as a cycle of advocacy that acted to determine rational guidelines for successful integration; disseminate the guidelines to other parents, school administration, and teachers; build a case for the guidelines by reframing the discourse surrounding special integration; and finally, incorporate the guidelines into Southdale's reading of board policy, thereby creating a proviso to integration policy specific to Southdale.

Rationalizing Policy at the Local Level

The need to have rational policy guidelines against which the success or failure of Sam's integration could be judged was important to Southdale parents. During the course of the parents' unprecedented meeting with board officials,

the parents asked two particular questions of senior board staff: "How will you monitor this situation?" and "How will you determine if this is a successful integration or not?" (Ms. Cunningham). According to Ms. Cunningham, who acted as spokesperson for the parents at the meeting, "there was no comment [the board] could give except, 'This child has every right to be in his home school.'" Ms. Cunningham then asked the question, "Where does that leave us as a group of parents who are advocating for our children, who are involved in the lives of our children, who are aware of how the class is affected?" Again, no comment was forthcoming from the board.

In the absence of clear board directives, Southdale parents took it on themselves to decide what would and would not be accepted as part of any integration at Southdale School. As far as the parents were concerned, they had tried it the board's way with the end result being, in the parents' minds, a disastrous and deteriorating situation in the grade 3 classroom. So in Ms. Cunningham's opinion, the parents had no choice but to act. "We shared with [the board] what our concerns were from a safety perspective, from a classroom disruption perspective, and they still did not choose to listen," she explained. According to Ms. Matthews, who was also present at the meeting, "That's why we decided to position ourselves in the classroom after the meeting so that we [could] witness things and say, 'I saw it!'" Ms. Matthews explained how the parents "all decided that they would like to be a part of witnessing what was going on [in the classroom] because [they] were not sure [they] were going to get really good feedback about what was happening throughout the day." So the parents arranged to "spend the first hour and a half of every afternoon in the classroom" in order to "see what happened." The result was an ongoing process of "note-taking" and post-observation "debriefing" that gave rise to a de facto set of parameters to guide all future integration initiatives at Southdale. In a sense, what emerged was a set of guidelines best described as the *ten commandments of special education* as determined by the parents of Southdale School.

The Value of Organized Vigilance

Once the guidelines of successful integration were determined by a core group of parents, the information was disseminated in what appeared to be a highly organized, vigilant, and effective manner. The experience of Southdale parents in their previous fight with the board over dual-track schooling became important in that it established a preexisting local network of concerned and ready parents able to disseminate the newly developed commandments of special education. According to Southdale's vice-principal, "[The parents] have already gone through this process before.... I think you have many people coming together with a common goal. These are parents who have been meeting and talking and e-mailing each other all along."

In working to disseminate their own guidelines for integration, the parents were relentless and approached the task from multiple angles. They challenged Sam's integration with local school administrators, the special education departmental staff, senior board administration, and provincial Ministry of Education officials. They contacted the media, sought legal advice, and even consulted with experts in the fields of child development and psychology in order to, "build their case" (Ms. Matthews). Throughout the process, Ms. Cunningham was careful to position herself as a neutral party in order to act as

a liaison between Sam's mother, school administration, and board staff. She stated, "I purposely aligned myself to be open and communicative with [Sam's] mom and with the administration. I mean, I am connected with them all, and that's not with any hidden agenda. It's just to try to understand the whole perspective."

Although Ms. Cunningham stated that she had no hidden agenda, she did admit that her ongoing dialogue with the various parties provided her with insight into how the issue of Sam's integration was framed from multiple perspectives. According to Ms. Cunningham, these various relationships allowed her to learn the language of each group, which when communicated to the other parents appeared to provide the entire group of Southdale parents with the necessary and appropriate discourse to engage Sam's mother, school administration, and the school board. Rather than appearing as confrontational, the parents appeared to empathize with all parties concerned and in the process probably accessed far more information than would normally have been provided to any group of parents.

Reframing the Discourse

Southdale parents continued to build a case for their particular vision of successful integration by engaging in a discursive process with other parents, teachers, and local school administrators. Bascia (2001b) notes the importance of language in framing social interaction and in redefining existing power relations. Furthermore, she notes that dominant ideologies can be challenged when those who are typically in subordinate roles introduce a counter-discourse. Corson (1995) similarly argues that "language is the vehicle for identifying, manipulating and changing power relations between people" (p. 3). These are important points to note in understanding how Southdale parents challenged Sam's integration by reframing board policy and introducing a newly constructed discourse.

Increasingly, special education discourse emphasizes notions of inclusivity and integration (Dyson, 2001). This discourse was co-opted by Southdale parents in arguing against Sam's integration. The parents' ability to use rational, dispassionate, educational language was highly effective as a tool to reframe local school discourse about Sam's integration. By focusing on what was best for the entire community of learners, and by emphasizing how Sam's inability to manage the regular classroom setting was contributing to his forced segregation and social isolation through multiple time-outs, parents found a way to oppose Sam's placement while seemingly fighting for his needs. Furthermore, by focusing discussions on what was "best for Sam," Southdale parents shifted the discursive battle away from statements that could be read as "We don't want him in our children's classroom" to seemingly constructive but more nuanced statements such as "We need to determine what's best for Sam." The parents' facility with hegemonic discourse put the board on the defensive. Southdale parents resisted the school board's portrayal of them as "those crackpot, sensitive people from that school" (principal) emphasizing instead their abilities as "intellectual peers" capable of "semantic dialogue" (vice-principal).

Southdale parents put forward a rational argument against Sam's integration without addressing the deeper issues that may have been present. By

keeping the discussion focused solely on what they thought was best for Sam, Southdale parents never revealed their true beliefs about the integration of special-needs students. There was no ready opportunity for school administration or board officials to engage the community in an open, frank, and probably beneficial discussion of difference and diversity. According to the classroom teacher, fear and lack of understanding played a significant role in parental opposition to Sam's integration, but there was no ready or easy forum to discuss these issues. Thus parents' concerns were left largely unaddressed and, in the classroom teacher's opinion, allowed to grow.

Incorporating Policy Into Local Context

As Sam's behaviors escalated, according to the classroom teacher, and as the discussion about Sam's integration continued, it appeared that many Southdale parents and some teachers adopted these parent-developed guidelines as the local school standard for managing Sam's and all future integration initiatives. This proactive stance on the part of the parents did not surprise the vice-principal. It was her opinion that a lack of willingness on the part of both the board and Sam's mother to work with the community in establishing guidelines for Sam's integration caused "a community that was very compassionate and that may have gone along with a project to welcome a differently-abled child into the community [to get] their backs up" (vice-principal). The vice-principal further added, "if [these parents] feel that their children are going to get the raw end of the deal, then they are going to fight for what they believe in."

Parents' belief in their ability to effect change may be equally as important as their ability to do so, for if enough parents in enough schools begin exerting pressure on school boards in highly organized ways, change of some sort is likely to occur. This point was made clear to me during a conversation I had with Ms. Cunningham following Sam's transfer out of the school. I inquired as to the situation in her son's grade 3 class now that Sam was no longer integrated. She replied that all was "back to normal" but added, "Did you hear that Sam's mom is trying to get him back in here? But don't worry. We're ready to keep up the fight!" Undoubtedly, the experience of opposing Sam's integration has strengthened Ms. Cunningham's belief in the power of parental organization to influence local school policy. She is committed to remaining vigilant on behalf of Southdale's children and continues to disseminate her views on integration. Arguably, Ms. Cunningham's views are fast becoming an integral part of Southdale's culture of special education as more and more parents and an increasing number of teachers adopt her counter-discourse about integration.

The basic argument made by Mrs. Cunningham, and increasingly espoused by Southdale parents and staff, is reflected in these words:

I don't have a fear of integration but I do disagree with it if it's not a benefit to both [parties]—the child being integrated and the whole class.... I think what came out of [this situation] is, "Whose rights supersede who? Does the right of an individual to be in the home school supersede the rights of all the children in the classroom to a just education?" (Ms. Cunningham, parent)

Conclusion

Schools are contested sites of negotiation wherein we co-construct the rules of democracy, and in the case of Southdale School the rules of special education integration. Southdale is an important site for learning because the transparent nature of events that occurred shows how history and context may interact with policy. It also helps demonstrate how the notion of disadvantaged students is conceptualized in various sites by various communities. In addition, Southdale helps lay bare how parental engagement can shape local reading of special education policy and influence policy implementation.

In the end many questions remain: Did Southdale parents' efforts to emphasize their concern for "Sam's welfare" obscure a subculture of discrimination against students who are perceived as different? Did the argument put forward by Southdale parents to suggest they support integration only when it makes sense overshadow their deeper belief that integration actually never makes sense where their own children are involved?

In fairness to the parents of Southdale, this research cannot provide answers to these questions. The integration of Sam did not appear to be ideal, and even the most equity-minded of parents would probably object to their child facing the type of physical threat that the teacher believed was posed by Sam. Even Ms. Matthews, whose own children have moderate learning needs, was hard pressed to rationalize Sam's integration at any cost. Similarly, the highly experienced special education advocate hired by Sam's mother conceded that Sam's placement in the regular classroom was in the end not appropriate. However, he argued strongly that the school board had caused the ultimate failure of Sam's integration by not providing appropriate classroom supports.

The question about the root of parental opposition to Sam's integration, although left partly unanswered by this research, may be worthwhile considering as future research sheds additional light on the relationship between local context, parental advocacy, and special-needs policy. For example, in schools that publicly commit to support integration as a fundamental principle, research may consider whether the placement of special-needs students in regular classrooms is accepted, made conditional, or opposed by groups of parents similar to those at Southdale. Future research may also help demonstrate how history and context factor into parental responses to integration policy and how such responses may be influenced by local context and social class.

In the meantime, policymakers would be wise to pay heed to McLaughlin's (1987) cautionary note that "vague mandates and weak guidelines provide opportunity for dominant coalitions or competing issues to shape program choices" (p. 173), for if anything is to be learned from Southdale's experience, it is that poorly coordinated implementation, inadequate local school support, and ineffective communication by board staff gave an organized group of high-SES parents room to maneuver and provided ample ammunition for their fight against integration. This is not to suggest that iron-fisted ruling or rigid methods of implementation are the answer. On the contrary, the other lesson to be learned from Southdale is that policy must provide clear mandates and strong guidelines that are informed by the local school context.

In the end it is difficult to reconcile macro- and micro-level issues. This is particularly apparent in the case of special education where students' individual differences can make sweeping policy statements potentially irrelevant. At the same time, educational initiatives such as special education integration do require policy directives because, as noted by Ms. Cunningham,

All people recognize that integration is here to stay. I think, though, the parameters of when integration can work have to be assessed, and I think that, in this situation, there was no assessment to see whether it was even a good fit.

Perhaps Ms. Cunningham's words should be seen as a cautionary note for policymakers to consider more fully the history and context of local schools and the full needs of special education students when developing special education policy, because the Southdale experience suggests that in the absence of meaningful and locally relevant guidelines parents like Ms. Cunningham may work to fill the void.

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