

Reforming for Racial Justice: A Narrative Synthesis and Critique of the Literature on District Reform in Ontario Over 25 Years

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Article abstract

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Reforming for Racial Justice: A Narrative Synthesis and Critique of the Literature on District Reform in Ontario Over 25 Years

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Abstract

Ontario school districts are struggling to respond to racism in schooling and society. How has the literature on school district reform in Ontario addressed these ongoing and growing concerns? Through a narrative synthesis and a systematic literature review, we map and characterize the existing literature on school district reform in Ontario in the past 25 years. By combining systematic searches in main online databases with key journal and author search, we analyzed and coded a total of 95 documents. Framed through Critical Race Theory (CRT) and in conversation with recent studies on anti-racist district reforms in the United States, we conceptualize four approaches to district reform literature in Ontario: The Politics of Race Evasion, the Politics of Illusory Equity, the Politics of Representation and Recognition, and the Politics of Anti-Racist Resistance. The authors conclude with a commentary on the use of these conceptualizations in district operations and policies, as well as directions for future research. They also propose a potential fifth approach to district reform, The Politics of Regeneration.

Keywords: school district reform, Critical Race Theory, narrative synthesis, systematic literature review, Ontario

As some provinces across Canada eliminate and amalgamate locally elected school boards (Gerbrandt, 2021; Glaze, 2018; Laroche, 2018), and others decide whether to follow suit (The Agenda, 2021), we turn our focus to the role and relevance of school boards in Ontario. Education in Ontario operates in a highly centralized, neoliberal context (Shah, 2018a), with limited central accountability for equitable, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive reform. However, since 2015, three of the largest school boards have been placed under supervision by the Ontario Ministry of Education because of a loss of public confidence and for failing to dismantle anti-Black racism and other forms of racism in the school boards. Student trustees have spoken out about racism they have experienced in Ontario school boards, such as the example in Hamilton District School Board (Taekema, 2020). Several parent and community groups have led social media campaigns highlighting board corruption and experiences of racism directed at them and their children (Paradkhar, 2020) and many have turned to the Ontario Human Rights Commission for support (Nasser, 2021). Despite numerous challenges with school governance, school district operations, and the ongoing examples of racism, the very *site* of collective parent and community action to disrupt racism in schooling, has been *at the district level*. Some school districts are looking for answers, and some districts are engaging in important anti-racist work, however, as this narrative synthesis demonstrates, there is very limited research that explores or documents *how* school districts enact anti-racist reforms in Ontario.

We begin with the premise that school districts matter *if* they can be sites of critical democracy, struggle, accountability, and negotiation for more just educational futures. We make this claim against a

backdrop of colonization and cultural genocide that founded this nation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012), knowing that schooling in Canada, and globally, has been a site of extreme dehumanization and harm, and continues to be harmful for Indigenous populations and historically oppressed populations. Given ongoing examples of racism and the increasing calls for racial justice, how prepared are districts to address the complexities of power, identity, and difference among students, staff, families, and communities? While this question can be answered in multiple ways, from interviews with district leaders, to participatory action research with community activists, this study is a narrative synthesis that maps and characterizes the literature on district reform in Ontario in the last 25 years. Despite the focus on Ontario districts, findings and implications for schooling internationally as mid-system or district reform is an important area of study worldwide.

We begin this study in 1996, just after the election of Ontario Premier Mike Harris who was instrumental in dismantling anti-racist commitments and structures, re-introducing academic streaming, and forefronting standardization and austerity as central to decision-making (Campbell, 2021). The Harris government passed the Fewer School Boards Act, (Bill 104), in 1997, which led to the amalgamation of seven school boards into the Toronto District School Board. In this narrative synthesis, we use the conceptualization of districts put forth by Rorrer et al. (2008), defined as “an organized collective constituted by the superintendent of the board (known as the Director of Education in Ontario); the central office-level administration; and principals, who collectively serve as critical links between the district and the school for developing and implementing solutions to identified problems (Land, 2002; McLaughlin, 1990)” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 311). Recent studies (Sampson & Diem, 2020; Shah, 2018a; Trujillo et al., 2014) have also included other key local actors when researching districts, such as community leaders and organizations, parents, and elected school board trustees. Our conception of district reform includes both the administrative functions of school districts (district staff), the governance responsibilities of school boards (elected trustees), and the politics and possibilities of student, family, and community engagement.

Previous critical reviews of literature on district reform, namely Trujillo’s (2013) study and Rorrer et al.’s (2008) research on districts as institutional actors critiqued the literature on district reform for not moving beyond solely exploring technical aspects of reform. To encompass larger contextual and socio-political factors that are central to systemic inequities in education (Trujillo, 2013), they suggested that district reform studies can employ Critical Race Theory and critical policy analysis to provide a better understanding of the role of districts in advancing equity (Rorrer et al., 2008). We use Critical Race Theory as a central framework and gesture towards decolonial frameworks to analyze the literature and develop a conceptual framework that delineates between various approaches to reform, with a focus on how racism and intersecting systems of oppression are addressed, or not. This conceptual framework is heavily influenced by more recent anti-racist approaches to district reform in the United States (Diem & Welton, 2020; Hashim et al., 2021; Hernández, 2021; Kissell & Trujillo, 2021; Sampson & Diem, 2020; Trujillo, 2013; Turner, 2015, 2020) and anti-racist approaches and critiques to schooling in Ontario (Carr, 1999, 2006, 2008; Dei, 1999; Dei & Karumanchery, 2003; Joshee, 2007; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Shah, 2018a) that have yet to influence school district reform literature in meaningful ways. We reflect on how this research could reconceptualize the role of the district, impact school board operations and the changing policy context in Ontario, and offer insights into the implications for policy development and future research that seeks to dismantle systemic racism in education at the district level.

Theorizing Race and Reform

A growing body of scholarship on race, districts, and the politics of education explore both macro-political district influences that are heavily influenced by socio-political, economic, and historical realities, as well as micro-political influences such as the role of racial sense-making in understandings of racial inequity and responses to those inequities, recognizing that relationships in districts are raced, classed, and gendered (Shah, 2018a; Trujillo, 2013; Trujillo et al., 2014; Turner, 2020). We draw largely on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to frame understandings of district reform¹. CRT asserts that racism is both historical and contemporary in its manifestations and impacts that operate culturally, socially, politically, and economically to reproduce racial inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Lad-

¹ Readers will be aware that CRT is very controversial in the United States and elsewhere. We are not engaging that controversy because our aim is to explore anti-racist district reform and CRT is foundational to that exploration.

son-Billings, 2013). CRT also explores the normalization of whiteness and the permanence of racism in systems, laws, structures, society, and the state, making both race and racism largely invisible to White people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The conceptual framework is heavily influenced by four studies on reform and district reform for racial and intersecting justices. In a study of a district reform for equity in Toronto, Canada, Shah (2018a) identified a spectrum of thinking about opportunity gaps along 4 axes: redistribution (inequalities in the material conditions of schooling), recognition (inequalities in cultural belonging and social status), representation (inequalities in voice that affect decision-making), and re-education (inequalities related to pedagogies and learning). Each axis is represented as a spectrum of thinking with affirmative discourses at one end, rooted in neo/liberal notions of individualism, excellence, standardization, and inclusionary politics, and transformative discourses at the other end, rooted in critical notions of difference, recognition, rights, context, and power.

In her ethnographic account of two school districts in Wisconsin, Turner (2020) examined structural inequity, racial sensemaking, and district leadership based on colour-blind managerialism, which manages accountability through monitoring achievement gaps and marketing diversity while appeasing White families, powerful constituents, and local pressures. Turner describes color-blind managerialism as a racial project of school district leadership and policy that highlights the links between colour evasive sense-making and the racialized and classed structures of new managerialism. She identifies the importance of community members, especially from racialized and minoritized groups, understanding and responding to inequities in school districts.

In their book *Anti-Racist Educational Leadership and Policy: Addressing Racism in Public Education*, Diem & Welton (2020) analyzed how several educational policies are developed and implemented through a colour-evasive, market-driven lens, and provide action-oriented solutions to promote racial justice. They explored policies such as school choice, school closures, standardized testing, student discipline, and school funding. They offered anti-racist strategies such as ensuring policies explicitly address racism, centering systemic racism and structural inequalities, identifying causes of structural racism, collecting race-based data, creating pathways and networks for racialized leaders to increase representation, ensuring accountability measures for incidents of racism, and centering conflict as generative.

Finally, we were influenced by a Canadian study that mapped interpretations of decolonization in the context of higher education (Andreotti et al., 2015). While we center this study in CRT, we recognize the importance of decolonizing paradigms that challenge modernity's adherence to systems and structures in helping us explore the tension between reform and abolition. While this study centers school district reform, Andreotti et. al (2015) provided a framework in higher education that includes perspectives of abolition that can easily be mapped on to the work and structures of districts. The authors presented four fluid categories. *Everything is awesome* results in minor institutional change in which there is no recognition of the need for decolonization as a desirable project. *Soft reform* speaks to conditional inclusion into mainstream, liberal spaces through redistribution of resources and tokenistic cultural diversity, leaving structures intact. *Radical reform* speaks to recognition, representation, redistribution, voice, and reconciliation, and challenges epistemic dominance. While the first three phases speak to system expansion, the *beyond reform* space speaks to system decline aimed at dismantling intersecting systems of power. It includes system walkouts (creating alternative communities), system hacking (creating spaces to educate people about the violences of the system), and hospicing (bearing witness and learning from systems in decline). These four studies have informed the conceptual framework that guided our data analysis on school district reforms in Ontario over the past 25 years, which include studies on policies, reforms, district leadership, and governance.

Context

Ontario is one of the most diverse provinces in Canada and has seen major changes to affirming that diversity over the last 25 years. The Ontario education system consists of 72 K-12 publicly-funded school districts that constitute four education systems (English Public, English Catholic, French Public, and French Catholic) serving approximately 2 million students (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). A progressive era of equity policies and practices came to an end with the election of the Conservative Harris government in 1995. We saw the reintroduction of academic streaming and the removal of the Ontario

Ministry of Education's Anti-Racism, Equity and Access Division, both of which had negative effects on the options and pathways for racialized and minoritized students (Parekh et al., 2011). We also saw the complete centralization of school board funding, the amalgamation of seven legacy school boards in the Toronto Area, and decreased salaries and numbers of elected trustees (Garcea, 2014). The Harris government also supported province-wide teacher testing and changes to teachers' working conditions (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

The Liberal government of 2003 took further steps to institutionalize the standards-based curriculum movement in Ontario by defining acceptable performance measures, providing support to schools that did not meet these measures, and holding itself accountable for meeting these targets (Anderson & Macri, 2009). Most important was the introduction of provincially mandated targets for student performance that included 75% of students reaching the provincial standard in grade 6 by 2008 and a secondary school graduation rate of 85% by 2012 (Anderson & Macri, 2009). The Ministry of Education introduced the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat that both supported school boards to reach provincial targets and held them accountable to these targets (Anderson & Macri, 2009).

Different narratives explain changes to district reform approaches in Ontario over the years. Hargreaves et al. (2018) referred to a shift from the "Age of Achievement and Effort" until about 2014 to the "Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity" when student well-being became a central focus of the Ontario Ministry of Education. Campbell (2021) identified two strands that have advanced Ontario's focus on excellence and equity. Strand one focused on closing student achievement gaps and improving student success with attention to gender, English Language learners, and Special Education Students. Strand two focused on systemic changes to support classrooms, schools, and districts to address a broader range of systemic discrimination. The latter focus was further supported by Ontario's 2009 Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, the purpose of which was to promote inclusive education and identity and eliminate discriminatory bias and systemic barriers that may limit students' learning, growth, and contribution to society (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Still, many scholars have argued that Ontario's education system has failed to adequately acknowledge the systemic barriers that harm the well-being, experiences, opportunities, and life and schooling outcomes of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized groups of students, students marginalized by poverty, disabled students, and gender and sexual minority students (Airton et al., 2019; Brown & Parekh, 2013; Dei, 2003; Dion et al., 2010; James & Turner, 2017; Shah, 2018a). This narrative synthesis attempts to explain these differences. Furthermore, as much of this research has been used to inform schooling nationally and internationally, findings will have implications well beyond Ontario.

Methods

This systematic literature review is informed by narrative synthesis, which consists of synthesizing findings from multiple studies and presenting results as "storytelling" or narration in order to generate new insights (Mays et al., 2005; Popay et al., 2006). Narrative synthesis, as opposed to the traditional narrative review, relies on a systematic and transparent search, appraisal and synthesis of studies to generate new knowledge (Mays et al., 2005; Popay et al., 2006). As we familiarized ourselves with the literature on district reform in Ontario, we built narratives (or *counter-narratives*) from a critical, anti-racist stance. A narrative, as we understand it, has the power of telling stories that emerge from "data", in this case, data made up of selected publications over a time span of 25 years. This study followed an adaptation of the six iterative stages for narrative synthesis proposed by Popay et al. (2006), which consist of: i) determining the aim of the study and the research questions; ii) conducting the literature search; iii) screening the preliminary list of documents; iv) extracting data and appraising studies; v) developing a conceptual framework for data analysis, and vi) analyzing data and presenting results. Following Hallinger's (2014) call for methodological transparency in systematic literature reviews, we describe each of these stages in detail.

Purpose of Study

The main purpose of this literature review is to map and characterize the existing literature on district reform in education in Ontario over the past 25 years, framed through Critical Race Theory. We conducted a bounded search procedure (Hallinger, 2014) that combined systematic searches in key online

databases with key journal and author searches for the past 25 years (1996 – 2021). 1996 represents the beginning of the Harris years in Ontario that saw some of the most significant reductions in equity and anti-racism structures and policies.

Search Procedures

Systematic searches were conducted in main online databases (Web of Science, ERIC/ProQuest, ProQuest Thesis and Dissertations, Education Source, CBCA, CPI-Q and Scopus). These databases were selected in order to cover a wide spectrum of journals in education, social sciences, and humanities as well as interdisciplinary journals. We combined different search terms and search parameters that were expanded as needed. During our first searches, we used the terms school board* or school district*. Most of the articles that came up were those published in educational change and educational administration journals. We figured that by combining different search terms we could locate articles with critical approaches to districts and district reform that were not published in mainstream educational administration and educational change journals. We then searched for the following terms either in the title or in the abstract: school board*, school district*, combined with polic*, reform*, rac*, equity*, social justice, anti-racism, and CRT. The terms Canada or Ontario was added to refine our search. The online database search method was combined with searches in key education journals in North America. These journals had been previously identified through the online database search and drew on insider knowledge of the research team. Instead of focusing only on journals that are known to publish work on district reform, we expanded our scope to map as many articles as possible about district reform from critical perspectives, to find counter-narratives to what has traditionally been published about district reform. Articles were reviewed in journals concerned with educational administration and management, educational change, educational policy and leadership, public policy, race, ethnic studies, and critical studies. Key author search using the ancestry approach, as well as a review of reviews of literature on district reform and bibliographies were also part of the search strategy. While issues of trustworthiness and quality of the studies were considered, we decided not to limit our search to peer-reviewed journals, since we wanted to include studies about district reform that had traditionally been excluded from academic discussions. For this reason, we decided to include well-circulated research reports, doctoral dissertations, and practitioner magazines. Through this combined search method, a total of 256 documents were generated for this time period. All the articles were saved in the citation management program Zotero.

Study Selection Using Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The second step consisted of conducting a full document screening to determine whether they met the following inclusion criteria:

- School districts as the main unit of analysis
- Studies conducted in Ontario, Canada and studies by Ontario-based scholars that include Ontario in their wider school district analysis
- Studies focusing on provincial policies directly affecting school districts in aspects of equity or anti-racism (i.e., equity or anti-racism policies)
- Studies that have been published in the past 25 years (1996 – 2021)

Through this screening process a total of 95 empirical and conceptual documents were selected as part of the final database. Many documents were excluded because they did not focus primarily on the district as a unit of analysis (e.g., school level leadership), had not been conducted primarily in Ontario, or had not been published in the past 25 years. We included articles concerning governance, equitable reforms, district leadership, and policy changes/assessments concerning districts. We did not include articles about school-level leadership (Lopez, 2021; McMahan, 2007, 2009; Ryan, 2003; Shah, 2018b; Tuters & Portelli, 2017) despite their influence on principals and district leaders. Articles about curriculum or teacher training were not included. We did not include books, book reviews, review essays, conference papers, or newspaper articles.

Data sources for this literature review include 95 English-language documents on district reform in Ontario, including peer-reviewed articles (n=63), book chapters (n=4), research reports (n=13), doctoral dissertations (n=13), education magazine articles (n=1), and one article published in an international encyclopedia. While some publications make specific reference to a school district, many speak about

districts in Ontario broadly, and can include English Catholic, French Catholic, English public, and French public boards. Documents included in our database come from a variety of sources representing the wide range of documents available to scholars and practitioners in this field.

Data Extraction and Initial Coding

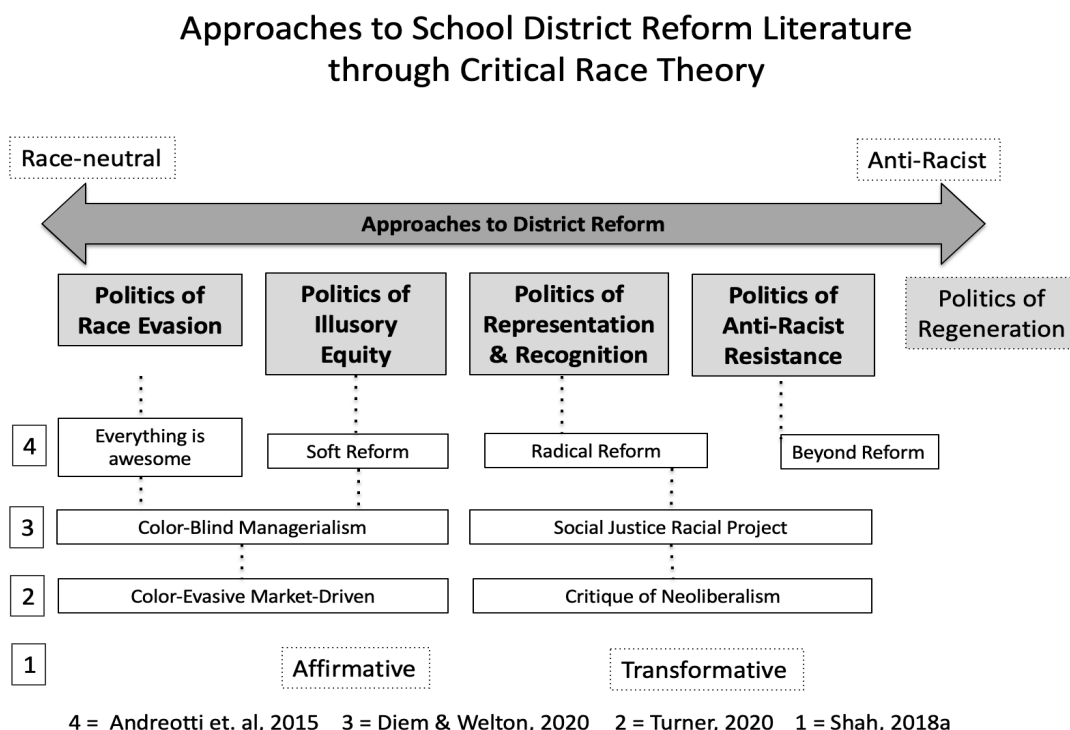
Data extraction was conducted in two stages. The first stage consisted of extracting general descriptive data for each study such as reference (author, title, source, date), purpose/ research questions, context (location), conceptual & theoretical framings, methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, literature review, conceptual piece) and general findings. This information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The second stage consisted of a normative appraisal of studies based on CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2013). We developed a set of nine categories connected to critical pedagogies, specifically CRT, including: a) centers issues of race and inequality in education; b) identifies causes of inequalities; c) identifies intersecting forms of subordination; d) positions equity as separate from excellence; e) challenges the status quo; f) includes historically oppressed communities, g) challenges traditional paradigms, and h) analyzes the impact of neoliberalism and colour evasion on education equity. All documents were appraised against each of the nine categories. Data clearly illustrating the main aspects of each category was extracted from each document and placed into an Excel spreadsheet. Thus, the final spreadsheet contains key citations from each document for each of the applicable categories.

This second stage of coding and the subsequent analysis was an iterative process that spanned eight months. Each article was first examined and coded by one of the researchers with a second researcher reviewing the coding independently and then discussing the final coding. In some ambiguous cases we went back to the critical, CRT framing and closely examined different sections of the article until we reached an agreement. In a few cases, it was hard to choose the evidence from each document that best illustrated the aspects that were being appraised, and the dialogue between researchers was even more important here. At the end of this data extraction process and initial coding, the 95 documents were categorized into general descriptive categories and appraised using critical, CRT-derived criteria.

Developing our Conceptual Framing and Data Analysis

After the data extraction stage was finished, we turned to the conceptual literature for our data analysis. We reviewed multiple articles about district reform that had been written from critical stances. As stated above, we found three articles (Diem & Welton, 2020; Shah, 2018a; Turner, 2020) that conceptualized research about district reform from critical and anti-racist perspectives. We added a fourth article (Andreotti et al., 2015) that explored reform in higher education from decolonial framings. Instead of using any single one of these frameworks to categorize the articles, we developed our own conceptual framework by combining dimensions and criteria from all frameworks [See Figure 1]. Thus, our final conceptual categories were generated inductively by analyzing the narratives and approaches to district reform from the article database in conversation with concepts in these four articles. Through this iterative process we went back to our research questions, reviewed the extracted data, and discussed common and distinct trends. It is important to note that our analysis focused on the articles and texts at hand, and not on the researchers themselves. Our narrative analysis landed in the following four conceptual approaches: Politics of Race Evasion, Politics of Illusory Equity, Politics of Representation and Recognition and, Politics of Anti-Racist Resistance. These approaches are developed in the General Findings section. All articles from our database were coded deductively into one of the four categories, understanding that this is a spectrum and that these categories are overlapping rather than exclusionary.

Figure 1
Approaches to School District Reform Literature through Critical Race Theory



Limitations

Some of the methodological limitations of this study stem from the complexity of incorporating as many studies as possible about district reform in Ontario in our literature review. In this sense, we did not focus on assessing the robustness of studies but rather including as many as we found relevant to our study. Also, it was sometimes difficult to appraise heterogeneous studies that are presented in very different formats (peer-reviewed versus technical reports), that used different methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed) or that aimed at very different objectives (conceptual versus empirical).

Descriptive Findings

Table 1 provides high-level descriptive findings of the studies that were included and analyzed.

Table 1
Descriptive Data Grouped by Conceptual Categories

	Politics of Race Evasion (1)	Politics of Illusory Equity (2)	Politics of Representation and Recognition (3)	Politics of Anti-Racist Resistance (4)
Total publications per category	18	19	30	28
% of total number of publications	19.00%	20.00%	32%	29%

	Politics of Race Evasion (1)	Politics of Illusory Equity (2)	Politics of Representation and Recognition (3)	Politics of Anti-Racist Resistance (4)
Types of publications	14 peer-reviewed articles, 2 research report, 1 doctoral dissertation, 1 chapter in encyclopedia	11 peer-reviewed articles, 6 research reports, 1 doctoral dissertation, 1 book chapter	18 peer-reviewed articles, 8 doctoral dissertations, 2 research reports, 2 book chapters	20 peer-reviewed articles, 3 research reports, 3 doctoral dissertations, 1 magazine article, 1 book chapter
Main journals (In the case of peer-reviewed articles with two or more publications)	Journal of Educational Change; Journal of Educational Administration; Leadership and Policy in Schools	Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy; Journal of Educational Change	Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy; Canadian Journal of Education; Education Policy Analysis Archives	Race, Ethnicity and Education; Journal of Education Policy
Dates of Publication	2004 - 2020	2000-2020	2000-2021	1999-2020

Total # of publications: 95

A total of 95 articles were included in our database. The majority of the publications fall into categories 3 and 4 of our analytic framework, representing 32 and 29 percent of all publications, respectively. Publications in categories one and two have a higher percentage of articles published in peer-reviewed journals that generally specialize in educational change, educational administration, and leadership. Publications in categories three and four include more doctoral dissertations and research reports and tend to be published in a wider variety of journals, not restricted to educational administration and leadership. As shown by the dates of publication, these four strands of literature have developed simultaneously, with category one showing a slightly later starting date. While we searched for articles published between 1996 and 2021, we could not find any relevant articles published in 1996, 1997 and 1998.

General Findings

We present the four approaches separately for clarity and distinction, recognizing that in reality, they are permeable, overlapping, and at times, aspirational. These approaches are inherently political in whose ideologies, realities, and imaginings they enable and foreclose. Below, we describe each approach as a narrative synthesis with regards to conceptions of equity and anti-racism, the goal of district reform, district-level leadership, policy analysis, governance, parent and community engagement and accountability.

Politics of Race Evasion

In the *politics of race evasion*, there is a complete absence of race analysis. District research that is silent on issues of race and racism are interventions that uphold white supremacy in their very erasure of collective experiences. There is a hyper-focus on the individual student, family, and educator, which purports values of neo/liberalism and colour-evasion in upholding the myths of neutrality and objectiv-

ity. In this approach, we see district reform literature concerned with increasing student achievement, or “raising the bar” (Anderson, 2006; Cooper & Levin, 2013; Fullan, 2010, 2016; Hannay & Earl, 2012; Leithwood, 2013b; Leithwood & Azah, 2017). This approach is primarily concerned with district effectiveness and conceives of effectiveness as meeting targeted goals for student achievement. Studies in this approach use narrow, market-based indicators of literacy and numeracy on standardized test scores as “evidence” of both teaching and learning, and an “objective” measure through which educators can engage in professional learning to improve student performance. This body of literature is often critiqued by critical scholars as it promotes narrow ideals based on norms defined by whiteness that center the interests, perspectives, and realities of white people (Leonardo, 2004; Portelli et al., 2007).

Many of the studies focus on strategies of knowledge mobilization to create knowledge workers (Kay & Carruthers, 2017; Cooper & Levin, 2003; Hannay & Earl, 2012), with a focus on data-literacy and professional learning (Hannay & Earl, 2012; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). However, the particular knowledge that is valued here does not consider nor account for difference, systems of power, or identities. For example, none of the frameworks or studies that interrogate student data and achievement include CRT or any anti-oppressive framework that accounts for larger socio-political and historical contexts, even studies of districts serving a high proportion of “disadvantaged”, “low SES”, or “minority” students. This approach encourages district leaders to become the lead instructional learners to improve student achievement as measured by standardized test scores (Anderson, 2013; Fullan, 2010; Leithwood, 2013b; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood et al., 2019) and focuses on the creation of professional learning communities to facilitate such learning (Garofalo, 2015; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Telford, 2014).

This approach also focuses on technocratic changes and within-district factors as levers for change. For example, we see lists of characteristics of highly effective districts that focus almost exclusively on within-system factors, such as negotiating top-down and bottom-up demands, capacity-building, and managing resources with the flexibility that schools need to adapt reforms to local schools (Anderson, 2006, 2013; Anderson et al., 2012; Fullan, 2009, 2010; Leithwood & Azah, 2017). These characteristics are largely disconnected from the political, ideological, and demographic contexts of districts, which have disproportionately disadvantaged racialized and minoritized students (Noguera, 2006).

Politics of Illusory Equity

In the *politics of illusory equity*, the role of districts is to identify and close gaps in standardized test scores based on limited markers of identity. These studies explored achievement gaps in relation to Indigeneity, gender, students with Special Education needs, and English language learners (Li, 2008). Race, gender identity, and sexual orientation are not included in this conception of demographic data collection, significantly skewing understandings of “gaps” and the systems of oppression that give rise to them. In this approach, there is a separation between discourses of equity aimed at “closing gaps” and discourses of excellence aimed at “raising the bar”, with some studies speaking to the importance of both raising the bar and closing the gap (Anderson & Macri, 2009; Campbell et al., 2006; Fullan et al., 2004), and other studies positioning excellence and equity as the same goal (Hargreaves, 2020; Hargreaves et al., 2018). Similar to studies in the first approach, these studies demonstrate a strong focus on building data literacy, using evidence (standardized test scores) for organizational learning and accountability, and centralizing and aligning instructional and assessment practices to meet predetermined standards. In contrast to the first approach, this approach has a greater focus on targeted strategies for increasing literacy and numeracy scores for particular populations of students *in the gap* (Campbell, 2014) as well as “minimizing undesirable, indirect effects of assessment on student learning and well-being” (Campbell et al., 2018, p. 7).

This gap-closing approach is framed through inclusionary and additive politics that leave, intact, an existing neoliberal order (Shah, 2018a) and colour-blind managerialism (Turner, 2020). Despite an increased focus on identity, the theoretical framings that guide these studies do not engage an analysis of power. Equity in education is constructed as “sameness in outcomes, success, readiness to learn, potential, and choices” (Shah, 2018a, p. 39). As such, supports are put in place to “fill gaps” for students “at risk” (Leithwood, 2010), which reinforces deficit mindsets, essentializes the experiences of students with particular identities, and locates both failure and success in individual students and their families,

distracting attention from structures that create and sustain differential student outcomes. Importantly, this approach begins to measure and pay attention to markers beyond student achievement, such as student wellness and mental health (Anderson & Macri, 2009; Campbell et al., 2018; Hargreaves, 2020; Hargreaves & Braun, 2011; Hargreaves et al., 2018). However, similar to gap-closing measures, studies in this approach take individualized and “neutral” approaches to wellness that are separate from discourses of identity and power. Similarly, district leadership is conceptualized as attending to both student achievement and well-being (Anderson & Macri, 2009).

In this approach, we also see a movement from within district factors to beyond districts factors that position districts as local checkpoints and sites of advocacy (Bedard & Lawson, 2000; Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Galway & Wiens, 2013; Gaskell, 2001; Maclellan, 2009; Maharaj, 2020; Sheppard & Galway, 2016; Sheppard et al., 2013). These studies make a strong contribution to the necessity of districts in supporting local representation and parent and community voice in challenging policies, funding procedures, and power structures within districts. However, they do not acknowledge the ways in which intersecting oppressions determine how problems are defined, how conflicts are framed, and whose voices are heard or denied.

Politics of Representation and Recognition

In the *politics of representation and recognition* we see a shift away from neoliberal and new managerial approaches to student achievement to critiques of neoliberal framings of equity from critical stances, such as the harmful distinction between excellence and equity (Parekh et al., 2011; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Segeren & Kutsyuruba, 2012; Shah, 2016, 2018a). We find a commitment to identifying and closing a variety of gaps in student experiences, well-being, and engagement, disaggregated by many more facets of identity, including race, gender, and sexuality (Adrienne, 2020; Airton et al., 2019; Rayside, 2014; Shah, 2018a; Wallace, 2000). Gaps are understood here to be caused by structural barriers in schooling and society and pedagogical gaps that result in disparate opportunities to learn (Segeren & Kutsyuruba, 2012; Shah, 2018a) and student well-being (Shah 2018a; Short, 2014). For example, studies exposed differences in student programming, outcomes, and pathways that further harm historically oppressed populations (Brown & Parekh, 2013; Brown et al., 2020; Parekh et al., 2011; Parekh et al., 2016; Robson et al., 2014). As such, districts can either be constructed as sites of potential harm *or* they can be sites that redress harm depending on the policies, structures, and practices in place.

In this approach, we see a rise in equity policy reviews and an analysis of how policies have influenced, and have been influenced by, district practices (Joshee, 2007; Joshee & Johnson, 2007; Martin, 2011; Milnes, 2014; Nicholls, 2017; Portelli et al., 2007; Rezai-Rashti, 2003; Sattler, 2012; Segeren, 2016; Segeren & Kutsyuruba, 2012; Shah, 2018). We also see the introduction of historical and contextual analyses of Ontario school districts (Campbell, 2021; Gaskell et al., 2008; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Shah, 2016, 2018a; Shewchuck & Cooper, 2018) as well as discourses focused on rights, recognition, and difference in programming and decision-making (Brown et al., 2020; Campbell, 2021; Rayside, 2014; Shah, 2016, 2018a). Recognition and representation are also explored in how identity influences the experiences of school district and school board leaders (Adrienne et al., 2020; Higginbottom, 2018; Kawabe, 2018; Singh, 2010) and how they enact leadership towards social justice (Ryan & Tuters, 2017).

There is a focus on building relationships with community partners and families, ensuring that multiple, often excluded voices are included in decision-making processes (Gaskell & Levin, 2009; Hands, 2013; Kearns & Pollock, 2008). However, while there is a focus on power and larger socio-economic and historical contexts, structural racism and anti-racism tend to be erased in conversations of “equity and social justice”, privileging marginalization based on disability, language, social class, and immigrant status, often in the absence of race-based analysis. Finally, accountability is positioned towards students, families, and communities and explore the ways in which equity discourses limit the engagement of particular families and communities (Shah, 2020).

Politics of Anti-Racist Resistance

In the *politics of anti-racist resistance*, race, racialization, and anti-racism are central to notions of reform (Abawi, 2018; Carr, 1999, 2008; Davidson, 2009; Dei & Karumanchery, 1999; James & Turner, 2017; Logan, 2018). These studies highlight myths, contradictions, and inconsistencies in critical equity

discourses and policies (Abawi & Brady, 2017; Carr, 1999; Joshee, 2007; McCaskell, 2005; Skerrett, 2008; Wilson, 2020), symbolic enactments of equity policies (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; George et al., 2020), and the invisibility and erasure of anti-Indigenity, anti-Black racism, and other forms of racism in discourses of equity and social justice (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2015). As such, studies promote the deconstruction and dismantling of programs, structures, and practices that perpetuate disproportionate and disparate outcomes and experiences for Black, Indigenous, and racialized youth (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernandez & Parekh, 2017). They also complicate inequities within equities, highlight contradictions and complicities, and expose how the logics of white supremacy subvert anti-racist efforts in district relations, discourses, and structures (Carr, 2006 2008; James & Turner, 2017; Levine-Rasky, 2014; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). For example, while some scholars speak to programs and reforms for particular populations of students (Dion et al., 2010; James & Turner, 2017), others expose parent and community opposition to alternative spaces such as Africentric and Islamic schools (Gulson & Webb, 2012; Kalervo et al., 2012; Levine-Rasky, 2014). Studies call for accountability systems and measures such as the collection of race-based data, adequate resources to support anti-racist initiatives, and greater consequences for educators' racist and oppressive behaviours (Carr, 1999, 2006, 2008; Davidson, 2009; James & Turner, 2017; Logan, 2018; Rezai-Rashti, et al., 2015).

This category centers historically silenced voices of students, families, and communities, with calls for structural changes to district resources, governance, and positions of power (Dion et al., 2010; James & Turner, 2017; Wilson, 2020). In this approach, districts are seen as sites of resistance, struggle, and critical democracy. District leaders take an active stance against powerful constituencies and influential players that are intent on perpetuating the status quo (Carr, 1999, 2006, 2008; Levine-Rasky, 2014), and have strong relations with communities (Johnson, 2013, 2016; Logan, 2018) and Indigenous elders (Dion, 2014). Accountability is first and foremost to students, families, and communities most harmed by historical and contemporary manifestations of racism and intersecting oppressions (James & Turner, 2017; Zine, 2001).

Discussion

While we situate the analysis of this research in an Ontario context, findings can be applied to a much larger national and international context. The framework presented can also be applied beyond district reform, and as such, has implications for conversations about schooling and society more broadly. Initially, we thought that our mapping of the literature would evolve linearly over time from category one to four. In actuality, there has been a parallel development of the four approaches to the study of district reform in Ontario. There is also minimal cross-fertilization between these approaches, with a fairly significant division between the first two and latter two approaches.

As we consider the policy context in Ontario over the last 25 years, we notice that literature on school effectiveness, school improvement, and educational change, which is central to the first two approaches, has dominated district policies and practices. Leithwood's (2010) study of school districts effectively closing gaps has been central to Ontario's notions of leadership (Leithwood, 2013a) and district effectiveness (Leithwood, 2013b). As stated above, this literature is essentially silent on equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression, and promotes linear, apolitical, and one-size-fits-all approaches to district reform. However, the contribution of approaches one and two is that they focus on the *operationalization* of district reforms. On the other hand, while studies in approaches three and four offer important critiques of the first two approaches, they offer fewer ideas on how to enact and operationalize anti-racist school district reform. Yet, these studies consider history, context, and outside-of-district factors that do not fall within the traditional scope of educational change literature. Unsurprisingly, we see research contributions from sociology, social justice education, and critical policy analysis. The literature on school district reform would benefit greatly from research that operationalizes anti-racist district reform, which must guard against a one-size-fits-all or checklist approach, include ongoing reflection and action, and build in accountability systems and checkpoints to disrupt the ways in which whiteness will inevitably dilute and divert these reforms. For example, we notice how language has been co-opted by whiteness over time. The vastness of equity has been diminished to efforts at "gap-closing", identity often ignores race, racism, and racialization, and anti-racism has been diluted to include racial identity without attention to structural racism.

While beyond the scope of this study, we also encourage further research that questions how researcher positionality (race, gender, sexuality, and more) and role has influenced each approach. Interestingly, categories three and four include several scholar-practitioners who have worked or presently work in school districts (Brown & Parekh, 2013; Kawabe, 2018; Logan, 2018; McCaskell, 2010; Shah, 2016, 2018a; Wilson, 2020), offering very different analyses. This is not simply a matter of differences in social identities and role; we see fundamental differences in perspectives, awareness, and purpose between these approaches. Consequently, we also invite exploratory research into the ways in which whiteness is maintained in whose voices are centered in the consultation, research, and evaluation of large-scale, provincial district reforms. Finally, while our focus in this narrative synthesis was on the articles and not the individual researchers, we note that some researchers change categories over time. While this may seem promising, we caution against acts of interest convergence in which researchers aim to maintain their relevance by aligning their work to “equity” and “anti-racism” as these become more salient concepts in educational leadership and policy discourses.

Conceptualizing Literature on Anti-Racist District Reform

The conceptual approaches provided in this narrative synthesis can be used as a tool for researchers and practitioners. They invite researchers in educational administration, policy, and reform to reconceptualize their work and consider how and why they choose to center equity and racial justice (or not). The approaches also encourage researchers to be in ongoing dialogue with larger research communities, to consider how approaches to equity and racial justice perpetuate inequities, and to hold each other responsible for naming and disrupting patterns of co-optation. The approaches can also be used as a tool for provincial policymakers and district leaders to assess the purpose and potential outcomes of district operations, policies, structures, and evaluative tools, and to make more conscious choices about how to center racial and intersecting justices. They can also be used as a starting point to develop accountability systems and measures that operationalize anti-racist district reforms, including evaluations of the permutations of white supremacy and colonial practices in district operations.

In acknowledging the partiality of any theoretical framing and the partiality of this analysis, we turn our focus to what is unnamed. For example, what is the place of literature that speaks to a politics of resistance in relation to social class, disability, or gender and sexual diversity, and not necessarily race? The *politics of anti-racist resistance* demands a focus on what is silenced in society and schooling, and critiquing systems that perpetuate this silencing, including all forms of intersectional oppression with a recognition of how race is often erased. We also note that there are limited studies on the experiences of Indigenous, racialized and minoritized educators in the literature on districts and district reform. Finally, we draw special attention to the limited number of studies that speak to the importance and operationalization of centering Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty in school district operations. Anti-racist framings need to be understood as inextricably linked to anti-colonial framings of district reform that center de/colonial relations, processes of knowledge production, and the ongoing manifestation of colonialism in mechanisms of schooling (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001).

The first three approaches presented here operate on the premise that school districts can and should be reformed. The fourth category begins to destabilize the reform narrative by contending with that which can be disrupted and dismantled to create safer, more equitable, and more humane environments for *all* students. However, what if reform is not possible nor desired? How does acknowledging the limits of district reform research and practice invite different inquiries and foci? What if, for Black, Indigenous, and racialized students to thrive, the very notions of schooling and reform must die? As we engage these inquiries and imagine alternative spaces for *all* students to thrive and flourish, we also acknowledge that similar efforts for alternativity, such as charter schools, whether forced or because of a politics of desperation (Stovall, 2013), have had disproportionately negative effects on Black and Brown communities (Waitoller & Super, 2017). Given these cautions, we offer another potential framing for school districts: the *politics of regeneration*.

Building on the work of Andreotti et al. (2015), we consider structures that may need to be dismantled *and* created to support students and families both within and outside of the district. For example, what might we understand about the possibilities and limitations of school districts if we learn from community activists, alternative learning spaces, or informal support networks of educators and parents/caregivers that navigate systemic violence? The *politics of regeneration* calls for a reconceptualization

of districts that destabilizes its fixity and imagines a more porous construct, which is in/formed by a constellation of relations and ideas that extend well beyond normative ideas of a static, stable construct that is impervious to historical and socio-political contexts and realities. A *politics of regeneration* makes space for generative conflict and centers multiple and contradictory truths. It also disrupts fantasies of certainty, innocence, security, and control (Andreotti et al., 2015). In a *politics of regeneration*, districts are cultural and political mechanisms that raise the collective consciousness of the communities within and beyond the district. Future educational research can document how districts let go of structures, practices and policies that have long-harmed historically oppressed populations and the struggles and opportunities that these shifts present. Educational research can explore how districts learn from perceived failures and crises. It can also document and analyze creative structures and processes that districts co-design with communities and families such as those that center dialogue, healing and wellness, community-building, and interconnected struggles for liberation.

Conclusion

This narrative synthesis and systematic literature review map the existing literature on school district reform in Ontario over the past 25 years. Drawing largely on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and in conversation with decolonial framings, we situate the literature within four approaches to district reform literature in Ontario: *the politics of race evasion*, *the politics of illusory equity*, *the politics of representation and recognition*, and *the politics of anti-racist resistance*. In recognizing the limitations of the very notion of reform, we offer a fifth approach, *the politics of regeneration*. In considering these five frames and the limitations of this study, we offer a conceptualization of anti-racist district reform that takes seriously a politics of representation and recognition that centers race and Indigeneity, an intersectional politics of anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance, and a politics of regeneration. This approach is not simply centering content that attends to the interests, needs, realities, and desires of equity- and sovereignty-seeking groups; it also necessitates different relations and processes that negotiate gradients of harm and resistance, and work with notions of incompleteness, ambivalence, healing and creativity that are necessary elements of building better educational futures.

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