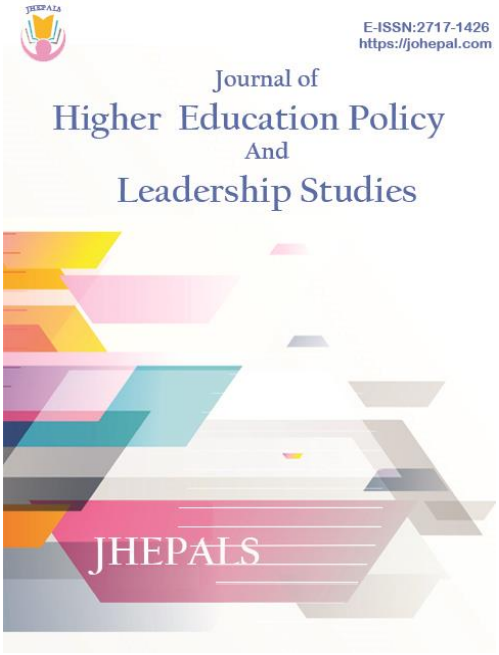
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# A Critical Policy Analysis of the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Strategy: The Dynamics of Non-Performativity

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# A Critical Policy Analysis of the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Strategy: The Dynamics of Non-Performativity

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## Abstract

Institutions of higher education across Ontario are increasingly expressing their commitments to diversity and inclusion through the development of various initiatives, including the implementation of policies that elucidate institutional promises of equity. Few studies have examined such policy efforts in Canadian higher education, but we suggest that insights into school board policies can help to inform a critical analysis of equity policies in universities. This paper is part of a larger project that investigates the enactment of Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy across all school boards in the province. In 2009, the Ontario government mandated all 72 school boards to develop a policy on equity and inclusive education. Drawing on theories of critical policy analysis, this paper provides an analysis of the policies drafted by eight school boards in southwestern Ontario during 2019-2020. Our analysis suggests that these policies largely follow verbatim transcriptions of the Ontario Ministry of Education's equity policy, and fail to construct localized policies that include procedures, enactment strategies, and evaluation methods that respond to existing challenges within each local context. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed (2012), and based on our review of policy documents, our analysis suggests that equity policies function to protect the institution and its image rather than challenging institutional inequities. Ultimately, we argue that these policies are "non-performative" and fail to address systemic inequities in the education system. The implications of this for higher education will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Critical Policy Analysis; Equity; Equity Policies; Ontario; Non-Performativity

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## Introduction

Drawing on theories of critical policy analysis, this paper provides an analysis of the equity policies drafted by eight school boards in southwestern Ontario. Critical policy scholars have long engaged in challenging traditional positivist approaches to policy research and have focused their attention instead on the significance of policy analysis in uncovering and making visible the structural processes that reproduce subordination and marginalization (Apple, 2019; Ball, 1993; Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti & Sellar, 2016; Lipman, 2004; Diem, Young, & Sampson, 2019). Our analysis is thus aligned with critical policy theories which are concerned with "the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge" (Diem, Young, & Sampson, 2019, p. 6), and we understand policy as "systems of values and symbolic systems" (Ball, 1998, p. 124) that are inherently political and complex. This requires us to move beyond understanding policy as authorative decisions that are written into official texts (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In this paper, we focus our analysis on the policy texts of the Ontario government as well as on the policies of eight school boards in southwestern Ontario.* Our analysis aims to illuminate the extent to which the policies developed by these eight school boards have produced local texts that sufficiently address the complexities of equity and offer robust strategies to enact the province's mandated Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. We believe Ontario is an excellent case for this critical policy analysis given its history of and political commitments to equity education since 1993 (1993, 2009, 2014 & 2017). The Ontario case could also reveal the limits of a well-crafted policy as a tool for enacting equity matters in practice.

In an environmental policy scan from across Ontario's 72 different school boards, Shewchuk and Cooper (2018) identified the existence of 785 different equity policies. Their analysis illustrated that most equity related issues such as religious accommodation, antiracism and ethno-cultural discrimination, anti-discrimination procedures for LGBTQ2S+ students, gender identity, and socio-economic status continue to be under-represented in locally developed school board policies. A growing body of scholarship in Ontario has illuminated the symbolic, rhetorical nature of the Ministry's policy approach to equity, evidenced by a lack of public and community consultation in policy development (Segeren & Kutsyuruba, 2012), exclusion of the voice and role of teachers (Cepin & Naimi, 2015), and limited resources to support local policy development and school board-level implementation (Segeren, 2016). To date, few studies have sought to investigate the enactment of Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy (equity policy) in district school boards across the province. In a multi-site case study within a single Ontario school board, Segeren (2016) highlighted the symbolic approach to equity that did not result in

* The collection and analysis of school board policies was conducted between 2019 and 2020. Only collection of publicly available policy documents was included in the analysis. The eight school boards were the largest and more diverse in terms of student population. It should be noted that there are some boards who have gone through processes of creating more localized equity action plans that outline specific steps they will take in their own contexts to address anti-Black racism, inequity, etc. Much of this work has been accelerated since the murder of George Floyd.

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"substantive change since individual school board staff and school leaders are not equipped with the political clout and resources to address educational inequity" (p. 191).

As the above review demonstrates, equity policies are used to represent a government or institution's commitment but lack the institutional structures necessary to enact and implement them in meaningful ways. Without adequate resourcing and accountability mechanisms, each successive government, depending on the value they place on equity, have been able to continue or archive the mandates of the equity policy. While declarations of commitment, institutionalized through policy documents, appear to communicate an institution's mission, values, and priorities, as succinctly theorized by Sara Ahmed, such policies and documents often function as non-performative speech acts.

As Ahmed (2006; 2012) contends, an institution's performance and image are often judged by what well-crafted documents and policies are implemented, and what the policies say rather than what they do in any tangible way. Statements of commitment, then, ultimately clear institutions from having to do anything more about the issue of inequity due to the presumption that their glossy statements are enough. Problematizing this within the context of university policymaking, Ahmed (2007) writes that:

> Being good at writing documents becomes a competency that is also an obstacle for diversity work, as it means that the university gets judged as good because of the document. It is this very judgement about the document that blocks action, producing a kind of 'marshmallow' feeling, a feeling that we are doing enough, or doing well enough, or even that there is nothing left to do. (p. 599)

Indeed, diversity and equity policies can become potentially antithetical and counterproductive to what such policies are meant to achieve, given that being judged for having produced a well-written document takes attention away from the actions, initiatives, and energy needed to effectively address the underlying issues and problems posited through the written word. With policy statements communicating institutional commitments to inclusion and equity, the institution becomes depicted as one which possess these ideals (Ahmed, 2009). Diversity and equity policies, then, risk becoming "non-performatives." Indeed, offering lip service to diversity by enacting well-crafted policies does little if it fails to bring about the values and changes of which it names. And having a good policy ultimately shields and protects the institution from having to effectively perform the policy or even reflect upon and challenge its own inequitable structures that do contribute to the reproduction of exclusion, marginalization, and oppression. The policies, therefore, become the only necessary outward sign the institution needs to communicate its concern for equity, inclusion, and fairness, allowing the institution to be safeguarded by the policy as their badge of commitment.

Various scholars have highlighted the importance of further research on the myriad ways in which Ontario's vastly diverse set of 72 school boards are responding to the Ontario Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) Strategy (Cepin & Naimi, 2015; Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018; Segeren, 2016). In this paper, we seek to bridge this gap by presenting an analysis of the equity and inclusive education policy documents developed by eight different school boards in southwestern Ontario. This policy analysis is part of a larger study currently underway exploring the ways in which school boards are enacting equity policies through the work of school leaders and teachers. This paper begins by providing a

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historical and political account of the development of equity policies in Ontario since 1993. We then present our analysis of the equity policy texts of eight school boards. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of non-performativity, we argue that the policies analyzed in this paper appear to be non-performative speech acts, where equity policies function to protect the institution and its image rather than challenge social and educational inequities.

## Political and Historical Contexts of Equity Education Policy in Ontario (1993-2020)

This brief introduction provides the trajectory of equity education policy in Ontario since 1993. We believe this context is important in terms of our analysis of equity policy and the changes in the political landscape in Ontario. Ontario has a long history of leading the way in Canada in terms of enacting social justice-oriented policies. Ontario was the second Canadian province (Saskatchewan's Bill of Rights was passed in 1947) to develop a Human Rights Code in 1962 protecting equal rights, opportunities and ending discrimination based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, creed, or age. However, it was not until the election of Ontario's first ever social democratic government in 1990, the New Democratic Party, that the values of equity were institutionalized in an education policy. Facing race riots in the aftermath of L.A. riots in the United States, and following the recommendations of Stephen Lewis in 1992, the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced *PPM No. 119: Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity* (1993) requiring all district school boards to develop and implement Anti-racism and Ethnocultural Equity policy. In stark contrast to liberal paradigms of multiculturalism, PPM No. 119 (1993) identified historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups and individuals such as women, Aboriginals, and racial and cultural minorities and sought to address systemic inequities in multiple areas including "curriculum, learning materials, student assessment and placement, hiring and staffing, race relations, and community relations" (Anderson & Ben Jaafar 2003, p. 9). The equity pendulum would swing swiftly and severely in 1995 with the election of a Conservative government led by Mike Harris, under the banner of a 'Common Sense' Revolution resulting in "tax cuts, less spending on education, educational reform, and an end to policies such as employment equity" (Joshee, 2007, p. 171). During this period the antiracism and ethnocultural policy "was not repealed but it was also not enforced" (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2007, p. 176). Rezai-Rashti (2003) argues that the election of the Progressive Conservative Party in 1995 had dire consequences for PPM No. 119: "the monitoring of the boards' implementation of the policy on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity 'just died'" (p. 6). Unsurprisingly, little attention was paid to issues of equity during the tenure of the Conservative government between 1995 and 2003.

## Policy Program Memorandum 119: Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools (2009, 2013)

In 2003, Ontarians elected a Liberal government, headed by Premier Dalton McGuinty who brought about a new round of policy changes in Ontario's education system. Referred to as the Education Premier, McGuinty focused his sights on improving student achievement and increasing graduation rates. His legacy includes programmes such as Student Success, Specialist High Skills Major, and full-day Kindergarten. According to Campbell (2021),

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between 2003 and 2018, "there was sustained development of system-wide strategies to advance improvements for all students, including attention to developing school leadership practices to support priority goals for improved student outcomes" (p. 3). From the beginning, the McGuinty government articulated a vision for education in Ontario focused on increased student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in the education system (OME, 2009). This emphasis on student achievement and focus on standardized tests reflect a neoliberal approach to increase the use of metrics in assessing equity through the gaze of performance data (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2018)

In 2009, after 16 years of silence regarding the previous equity policy, the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced a province-wide policy mandate that all district school boards were to develop and implement an equity and inclusive education policy. *PPM No. 119: Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools* (2009), replaced the 1993 Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity policy. The 2009 policy used the language of inclusivity and focused on "respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education, and identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit students' learning, growth, and contribution to society" (OME, 2013, p. 2). The Ministry urged district school boards to take a "system-wide approach to identifying and removing discriminatory biases and systemic barriers" (OME, 2013, p. 3) by stipulating that school board policies on equity and inclusive education would address eight areas of focus, including issues related to curriculum, assessment, religious accommodations, school climate, community relationships, and accountability.

Throughout Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, equity was framed instrumentally, as a necessary condition for reducing gaps in student achievement. The focus of equity policy on performance data, standardized testing and closing the achievement gap have been taken up by several scholars as a pervasive market-driven form of neoliberal accountability that has resulted in serious consequences for racialized and other marginalized groups (Rezai-Rashti &Lingard, 2021; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Connell, 2013; Savage, Sellar & Gorur, 2013). Martino and Rezai-Rashti's (2013) research on Ontario's equity policy and the failing boys' discourse provides a critical analysis of how Ontario's equity policy is embedded within the logics of the prevailing neoliberal, market-driven discourses of education characterized by audit culture and performance indicators. The tendency of reducing inequitable incidents to individual misconducts, emphasis on students' academic performance relying on quantitative data, and a focus on celebrating diversity and inclusivity in school curriculum and assessment, are typical examples of the operation of neoliberal governance. Rezai-Rashti, Segeren and Martino (2017) argue that under neoliberal modes of education governance and policymaking characterized by performative accountability, measurement, and facticity, equity has been re-articulated to focus on under-achievement and closing the achievement gap. This reconstitution of equity is most evident through "the emergence of boys as the new disadvantaged in Ontario, the erasure of racialised minority students who are replaced by the category of 'recent immigrant', and the invisibility of social class and redistributive policy mechanisms" (Rezai-Rashti, Segeren & Martino, 2017, p. 161). As such, equity creates "self-responsibilizing, self-capitalizing individuals" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 184) where an equitable school

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environment has become about individual "choice" and "freedom" rather than an institutional responsibility.

## Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario (2014)

In 2014, the Ontario Ministry of Education released Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario. During this period in Ontario, policymakers and researchers argued that "the goal of reduced student gaps in performance was considered to have made progress" (Campbell, 2021, p. 14). As such, the government's priorities for education in Ontario, as outlined in Achieving Excellence, broadened to include achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being, and enhancing public confidence. In terms of ensuring equity, Achieving Excellence acknowledges that "every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or other factors" (OME, 2014, p. 8). Special emphasis was placed on "Aboriginal students, children and youth in care, children and students with special education needs, recent immigrants and children from families experiencing poverty" (p. 8). Within this document, nine action items were noted as part of the focus on equity, including curricula and supports for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students; increased online learning opportunities for students in remote or rural communities; as well as academic and social supports for children with special education needs and youth in care (OME, 2014).

Academics and professional organizations have sought to examine the shifting discourses and directives that accompanied the Ministry's renewed vision for public education in Ontario during this period. For example, Hargreaves et al.'s (2018) report Leading from the Middle: Spreading Learning, Well-being, and Identity Across Ontario, documents the impact of a consortium of 10 district school boards affiliated with the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and the substantial changes that have been made in the system over the past several years. Based on over 200 interviews with educators, project leaders, and project coordinators at the board and Ministry level, the authors argue that Ontario is moving from an Age of Achievement and Effort to an Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity by highlighting significant policy-driven changes in the areas of improving student learning, developing well-being, and building student identities. According to the report, a focus on achievement is "now balanced with recognition of the needs, interests, identities and well-being of students, along with a deeper view of what constitutes worthwhile learning" (p. 30). Acknowledging the success and strides of Ontario school boards as "leading bold and sophisticated change for today's students, in one of the highest performing and most culturally diverse educational systems in the world" (p .3), the report points to Leading from the Middle, an organizational strategy that tasks district school boards with locally developing policies and processes to address equity and wellbeing. Leading from the middle seeks to connect provincial policies (the top) to local practices (the bottom) through "shared, professional judgment, collective responsibility for initiating and implementing change, and systemic impact that benefits all students" (p. 3). The focus on equity found within Achieving Excellence represents a continuation of the Ontario Ministry's commitment to locally developed equity initiatives across its 72 school boards.

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Additionally, Achieving Excellence, also represents the first system-level articulation of and commitment to well-being. This policy focus on well-being can be seen as a response to what has been constructed as a crisis in youth well-being and an attempt to address issues of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social well-being. In a discussion document that lays out the Ontario Ministry of Education's well-being strategy, a robust concept of well-being is defined as "a positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are being met. It is supported through equity and respect for our diverse identities and strengths" (OME, 2016, p. 3). Kempf (2018) argues that while this link to equity is significant in that it offers "the possibility of shifting away from individual pathologies and/or needs to a framework recognizing the rights of individuals and groups, as well as the responsibilities of the structures which serve these individuals and groups", the focus on well-being is still situated within an overall Ministry-level vision for quality education as defined by and measured through achievement. Not clearly articulated in the well-being discussion document or Achieving Excellence are "the issues of what precisely constitutes wellbeing and how wellbeing will be measured, by whom, with what instruments, and to what ends" (Kempf, 2018, p. 5). While some consider this document representative of an "expansion of the concept and approaches to equity" (Campbell, 2021, p. 14), others are critical of the discourse of well-being, seeking "to deconstruct the 'taken for granted' concept of wellbeing to reveal how seemingly soft language can be used to mask harsher ideological purposes" (Spratt, 2017, p. 2). Hargreaves et al.'s (2018) review suggests that "well-being initiatives are ubiquitous. Well-being was addressed everywhere we studied . . . [even] without any specific implementation strategy from the top, work on well-being has spread all across Ontario" (p. 30). Kempf (2018), however, argues that the Ministry lacks a clear and coherent strategy for realizing this policy value and its specific meaning. As with equity, well-being becomes a non-performative policy value, articulated in glossy policy texts without the adequate resourcing or accountability in regard to localized contextualization and implementation that would impact systemic inequities across the education system.

## Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan (2017)

In 2017, the Ministry of Education released Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan that set forth policies, priorities, and professional development to better achieve the lofty vision of "ensuring equity" articulated in Achieving Excellence (2014). The Action Plan represents "the province's roadmap to identifying and eliminating discriminatory practices, systemic barriers and bias from schools and classrooms to support the potential for all students to succeed" (OME, 2017, p. 4). The Action Plan acknowledges the advancements that have been made in the Ontario context, including educating newcomers to Canada and supporting LGBTQ and Two-Spirited students. And yet, "as we have grown to better understand these issues, it has become clear that further action is required . . . the work of schools and boards to realize the goals of the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy is still ongoing today" (OME, 2017, p. 17).

The Action Plan is embedded in a human rights paradigm and necessitated four key initiative areas (detailed below), all executed by a newly created Education Equity Secretariat, headed at the time of writing by the assistant deputy minister at the Ontario

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Ministry of Education. In terms of school and classroom practices, the Plan notes disproportionately poor outcomes for "racialized students, students experiencing poverty, Indigenous students, newcomers to Canada, students who identify as LGBTQ or Two-Spirited, children and youth in care, religious minorities, French language minorities, students with disabilities, and students with special education needs" (p. 13). As such, recommendations are made to change the existing streaming of students into applied and academic courses at the Grade 10 level, implement culturally responsive pedagogy, and collect data on suspension and expulsion rates. In regard to leadership, governance, and human resource practices, the Plan calls for greater diversity in the recruitment, hiring and promotion of educators and leaders, providing ongoing equity and human rights training for all staff, as well as the strengthening accountability mechanisms for equity work, including performance appraisals of school and stem leaders and in directors' reports. A notable addition to the Plan is the focus on data collection, integration and reporting with a focus on the collection of voluntarily provided identity-based data for students and staff to "help local school boards identify where systemic barriers exist, and … determine how to eliminate discriminatory biases in order to support equity and student achievement and well-being through training and targeted programs and supports" (p. 19). Finally, organizational culture change is not just a priority within school boards and schools but also at the Ministry where "applying an equity lens to internal ministry structures, policies, programs and practices, we will work to ensure an authentic and vibrant organizational culture" (p. 19).

In 2018, as school boards began to implement the Equity Action Plan, the Progressive Conservative Party was elected to form the government of Ontario. Under the leadership of Premier Doug Ford and the slogan 'government for the people' the Equity Action Plan has essentially been archived and equity-related initiatives have been paused or cancelled. Shaker (2019) observes that Ford's Ministry of Education is using age—old neoliberal tactics: "the uploading of control coupled with the downloading of responsibility —minus sufficient resources" (n.p.). Upon election, Ford repealed the newly released Physical and Health Education curriculum and reinstated the 1998 version, cancelled curriculum writing sessions around Indigenous education and reconciliation, increased class sizes for grades 4 through 12, and mandated e-learning credits for high school graduation.

## Overview of the Equity Policies in Eight School Boards

To examine how the Ministry's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy has been enacted at the school board level, we conducted a detailed analysis of the equity policies developed by eight school boards in southwestern Ontario. * The eight school boards were intentionally chosen due to their size and the diversity of the communities within which they are located. An additional 71 equity-related policy documents in the eight school boards (see Table 1) were also analyzed as a complementary assessment to illuminate how equity policies have been supported by a network of related policies to address a variety of equity issues in each

* The eight school boards include Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB), Lambton Kent District School Board (LKDSB), London District Catholic School Board (LDCSB), St. Clair Catholic District School Board (SCCDSB), Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB), Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB), Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB), and Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board (WECDSB).

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board. These 71 policies focus on a wide range of topics, including religious accommodation, hiring and promotion, bullying prevention and intervention, workplace harassment, and accessibility accommodation. While our analysis is based primarily on a board's equity policy, we also draw upon the equity-related policies to support and enrich our discussion.

Table 1
Southwestern Ontario School Boards Equity and Related Policies

| School Board | Policy Documents Reviewed |
|---|---|
| Greater Essex County District School Board | Equity policy document:<br>• R-AD-38: Equity and Inclusive Education<br>Other related policy documents:<br>• R-AD-29: Bullying Prevention and Intervention<br>• P-AD-48: Human Rights<br>• R-AD-48: Hunan Rights<br>• Guidelines for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances Part 1 & Part 2<br>• Greater Essex County District School Board School Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Well-Being |
| Lambton Kent District School Board | Equity policy document:<br>• R-AD-154-16: Equity and Inclusive Education<br>Other related policy documents:<br>• P-AD-159-13: Accessibility in Employment<br>• R-AD-159-13: Accessibility in Employment<br>• P-AD-150-18: Accessibility Standards: Customer Service, Information, Communication, Employment and Student Transportation<br>• R-AD-150-18: Accessibility Standards – Customer Service<br>• P-AD-160-20: Provision for Accessible Student Transportation Services<br>• Annual Accessibility Report (Prepared by Lambton Kent District School Board Accessibility Committee)<br>• Religious Accommodation Guideline<br>• P-SE-314-15: Use of Service Dogs by Students, Staff and Community Members<br>• R-SE-314-15: Use of Service Dogs by Students, Staff and Community Members<br>• P-SE-314.1-19: Use of Guide Dog, Service Dog or Service Animal by a Student<br>• R-SE-314.1-19: Use of Guide Dog, Service Dog or Service Animal by a Student |
| London District Catholic School Board | Equity policy document:<br>• A 3.1: Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity<br>Other related policy documents:<br>• A 3.3: Safe Schools: Progressive Discipline, Suspension and Appeals, Expulsion and Appeals<br>• A 3.4: Inclusive Language<br>• A 3.5: Bullying Prevention and Intervention<br>• A 3.7: A Respectful Workplace, Violence and Harassment Prevention Policy<br>• A 3.8: Religious Accommodation<br>• A 5.1: Accessible Provision of Services<br>• G 1.1: Equal Opportunity Employment<br>• J 5.4: Belonging/Safe Schools Committee<br>• I 6.2: Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment Practices |
| St. Clair Catholic District School Board | Equity policy document:<br>• Procedures: Equity and Inclusive Education (Religious Accommodation Guideline is included as one section in this policy).<br>Other related policy documents: |

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| | |
|---|---|
| | • Policy: Equal Opportunity Employment<br>• Procedure: Equal Opportunity Employment<br>• Policy: Integrated Accessibility Standards<br>• Procedure: Integrated Accessibility Standards<br>• Policy: Student Discipline<br>• Policy: Student Use of Guide Dogs and Service Animals<br>• Procedure: Student Use of Guide Dogs and Service Animals<br>• Policy: Supervised Alternative Learning<br>• Procedure: Supervised Alternative Learning<br>• Policy: Workplace Violence Prevention<br>• Procedure: Workplace Violence Prevention |
| Thames Valley District School Board | Equity policy document:<br>• Policy 2022: Equity and Inclusive Education<br>Other related policy documents:<br>• Policy 5012: Accessibility Standards for Customer Service<br>• Policy 3013: Equitable Recruitment, Selection and Promotion of Staff<br>• Policy 3004: Harassment<br>• Procedure 3004a: Harassment<br>• Procedure 2022a: Religious and Creed-Based Accommodation of Students<br>• Procedure 2022b: Religious and Creed-Based Accommodation of Staff<br>• Procedure 4008h: Safe Schools<br>• Procedure 5012e: Use of Service Animals by General Public<br>• Procedure 5012f: Use of Service Dogs by Students and Staff<br>• Procedure 5012b: Use of Support Persons<br>• Guidelines for the Accommodation of Trans and Gender Diverse Students and Staff |
| Waterloo Catholic District School Board | Equity policy document:<br>• Administrative Procedures Memorandum APC037: Equity Inclusive Education<br>Other related policy documents:<br>• Administrative Procedures Memorandum APC034: Bullying Prevention and Intervention<br>• Administrative Procedures Memorandum APC038: Religious Accommodation<br>• Administrative Procedures Memorandum APC039: First Nation, Metis and Inuit – Voluntary & Confidential Self-Identification<br>• Administrative Procedures Memorandum APH020: Guide Dog and Service Animals –Student Use<br>• Administrative Procedures Memorandum APO028: Fair and Equitable Hiring and Promotions Policy<br>• Administrative Procedures Memorandum APS024: Employee Workplace Harassment/Discrimination Prevention Policy<br>• Accessibility Policy Statement |
| Waterloo Region District School Board | Equity Policy document:<br>• Board Policy 1008: Equity and Inclusion<br>Other related policy documents:<br>• Board Policy 6009: Student Bullying and Intervention<br>• Board Policy 1012: Faith and Religious Accommodations<br>• Board Policy 1004: Harassment<br>• Administrative Procedure 1235: Accommodation of Persons who Identify as Transgender<br>• Administrative Procedure 1540: Religious and Cultural Days of Significance in Schools<br>• Board Policy 1013: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Voluntary Self-Identification |

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| | |
|---|---|
| | • Administrative Procedure 3720: Racial, Religious and Ethnocultural harassment<br>• Workforce Consensus, 'Representing Ourselves, Representing Our Students!'<br>• 2016-19 Operational Goals (https://www.wrdsb.ca/learning/2016-19-operational-goals/) |
| Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board | Equity policy document:<br>• Policy A14: Promoting and Supporting Equity & Inclusion within a Catholic Community<br>Other related policy documents:<br>• Religious Accommodation Guideline<br>• Policy A31: Accessibility Standards for Customer Service<br>• PR A31: Accessibility Standards for Customer Service<br>• Policy A32: Integrated Accessibility Standards<br>• PR A32: Integrated Accessibility Standard<br>• Policy H03: Hiring and Promotion<br>• PR H08: Workplace Harassment<br>• Policy H19: Violence Prevention in the Workplace |

In order to analyze and classify school board equity policies, five criteria, developed by our research collaborators at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, are used: policy substance, style and readability, structure of document, accountability and evaluation, and funding.

- Policy substance: to what extent does the policy take an anti-oppressive, anti-racist, anti-discriminatory, and intersectional lens to create tangible procedures and recommendations to prevent or remedy discriminatory practices based on race, class, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, ability, and any other identity markers
- Style and readability: to what extent is the policy composed in a comprehensible way, interprets equity in a robust manner, and references race-based data
- Structure of document: to what extent does the policy localize the Ontario equity policy in an original and robust manner, including critical definitions of important terms
- Accountability and evaluation: to what extent does the policy include detailed enactment, accountability, and evaluation measures to ensure robust implementation of the equity policy
- Funding: to what extent does the policy include the specific funding allocated to equity work, and whether detailed recommendations and procedures have been provided to ensure the equitable allocation and access to funding and resources among schools.

## Findings

As shown in Table 2, four out of the eight equity policies in the selected school boards are classified as "weak" and the rest as "weak-medium." The policies that were examined in this study all fail to meet the criteria listed above, especially in terms of accountability and evaluation as well as funding. The weak-medium policies are rated slightly higher with regards to style and readability as well as structure, but all fail to localize beyond the Ontario equity policy in terms of structure and substance. In general, weak-medium policies, though slightly more robust than weak ones, share similar characteristics: limited critical

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understanding and articulation of equity and other important related terms, little to no original interpretation and localization of the Ontario equity policy, a limited description of a board-specific equity agenda, few detailed strategies to address systemic discrimination, an inadequate explication of concrete monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and no explanation of funding allocation. In the following paragraphs we provide a more detailed discussion of each criteria with specific examples from the equity policies that were analyzed.

Table 2
Overview of the School Board Equity Policies in Southwestern Ontario

| School Board | Policy Substance | Style & Readability | Structure of Document | Accountability & Evaluation | Funding | Overall Rating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| GECDSB | Medium | Medium | Medium | Weak-Medium | Weak | Weak-Medium |
| LKDSB | Weak-Medium | Medium | Medium | Weak-Medium | Weak | Weak-Medium |
| LDCSB | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak |
| SCCDSB | Medium | Medium | Medium | Weak-Medium | Weak | Weak-Medium |
| TVDSB | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak |
| WCDSB | Medium | Medium | Medium | Weak-Medium | Weak | Weak-Medium |
| WRDSB | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak | Weak |
| WECDSB | Weak | Weak-Medium | Weak-Medium | Weak | Weak | Weak |

In terms of policy substance, our analysis reveals there was no critical articulation of equity and other related terms in all policies reviewed. In a few cases, brief definitions of equity and related terms are offered but they are verbatim transcriptions of the text used in either the Ministry's equity policy or in other government documents without providing further critical interpretation of the terms. For example, many policies did not differentiate between equity and equality. Several policies acknowledge the existence of systemic barriers and individual biases related to various identity markers, but they do not elaborate on the importance of intersectionality and the complexities of multiple identities and how they contribute to social location and privilege. Despite the acknowledgement of systemic barriers and individual biases as contributing factors to educational inequity, many of the policy mechanisms are procedures to accommodate individual needs, rather than school- and system-wide changes. For example, in some of the "Harassment" policies that were analyzed, although racial harassment, religious harassment, and ethnocultural harassment are all separately defined, the policy fails to reference intersectional forms of harassment. This limiting and problematic omission presumes universal experiences of harassment based on race, ethnicity, and religion without considering the intersections of all markers of identity.

In terms of style and structure, weak policies are verbatim transcriptions of the Ontario equity policy, but much shorter in length (2-7 pages). These policies make broad and generic statements or summaries as per the Ontario equity policy, without offering specific plans or strategies in terms of enhancing equity, diversity, and inclusion. Weak-medium policies are longer in length, ranging from 8 to 12 pages. Unlike weak policies which are brief summaries of the eight areas of focus listed in the Ontario equity policy, weak-medium

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policies also describe the roles and responsibilities of school boards, senior leadership, and school administrators in enacting the equity policy.

With regard to accountability, the 79 policies had a dearth of tangible and specific strategies, procedures, or programs through which the policy would be enacted and equity work could be enhanced. In addition to a lack of implementation plans, weak policies had a limited discussion of monitoring or evaluation mechanisms for specifying equity-related outcomes, timelines for implementation, and data collection for reporting on stated outcomes. Weak-medium policies are more robust and include more detailed descriptions of the expected outcomes of the policy and the roles and responsibilities of school boards and schools in reaching these outcomes. Several factors may explain the lack of implementation plans and monitoring or evaluation mechanisms. First, in all equity and related policies, equity has not appeared to be a priority on the agenda, and the strategic goals of the equity policy are not clearly defined. Second, there are insufficient resources allocated to the implementation of the policy, such as professional development for school leaders or teachers that would support the values of the policy. Additionally, there is a lack of dedicated personnel assigned to do equity work. At the time of data collection, out of the eight southwestern Ontario school boards, only three (GECDSB, TVDSB, and WRDSB) had a dedicated equity personnel such as an Equity and Inclusive Education Officer.

Finally, none of the polices analyzed make references to the specific funding that the board has allocated, nor do they specify the measures taken to ensure the equitable allocation of and access to funding and resources among schools. In terms of provincial funding, there is a scarcity of necessary resources required to support implementation. As with previous iterations of the provincially mandated equity policy, the Ministry of Education has failed to provide adequate time, human, and financial resources to support board-level implementation of the strategy.

In conclusion, the majority of the 79 equity and related policies will most likely become non-performative consequent to the limitations discussed above. With the multiple and competing demands that school boards face linked to mandated Ministry initiatives, it should not be surprising that without adequate resourcing and robust accountability mechanisms, the responsibility for equity that has been downloaded onto district school boards is largely unfulfilled. Successive governments and education ministries continue to draft and re-draft statements of equity, diversity, and inclusion, texts that, to date, have done little to impact systemic level change in the Ontario education system.

## Discussion & Concluding Remarks

The heart of Sara Ahmed's arguments relevant to our discussion of 79 equity and equity-related documents across eight school boards in southwestern Ontario coalesce between two poignant critiques: that these policies have been implemented with the purpose of protecting the institution and its image rather than genuinely seeking to challenge structures of inequity, and demonstrating how declarations of commitment to equity ultimately function as "non-performatives" that "do not bring into effect that which they name" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 119). Although policies may convince the institution that they are "doing good" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 71), it is necessary to "trouble good intentions" in an effort to

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ensure that institutions are held accountable for effectively practicing that which they name (de Leeuw, Greenwood, & Lindsay, 2013).

We engage with Ahmed's theoretical insights to question whether the school boards treat equity as a core value that they genuinely care to see come to fruition, or if implementing an equity policy and equity-related documents is merely an obligation enforced on them as part of a larger bureaucratic policy agenda in education (Kimura, 2014). This is a particularly poignant question that we believe needs to be asked and problematized, especially in an era where diversity and equity have become defining elements of performance and audit culture (Ahmed, 2006). As an institution's commitment to diversity and equity has become auditable, Ahmed's (2012a) articulation of performance culture lays bare the reality that documents "come to be treated as units of measurement, allowing an assessment of whether an organization is fulfilling its duty to promote equity" (p. 98). What we find relevant here is that performance and audit culture has largely become part of the "politics of documentation" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 115), where policies can contain "myth messages" which "can be sustained and strengthened by auditing systems and institutional practices which materialize an educational myth" (Lourie, 2015, p. 49). Indeed, the implications of documentation as being a sort of substitute for explicit and viable action is what is particularly concerning to us, as is the over-use of words such as "equity." When policy documents do not genuinely speak to what "equity" has historically signified, they risk becoming what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) describe as "symbolic policies."

In most of the policy documents that we reviewed in this article, equity is claimed as a fundamental principle or basis upon which all the accompanying policies were developed. This claim is usually included in a general statement, opening preamble, or a reference suggesting its alignment with a board's "equity and inclusion" policy. In fact, all school boards included in this study have indicated in their equity policy that they are committed to "incorporating the principles of equity and inclusive education into all aspects of the Board's operations, structures, policies, programs, procedures, guidelines, and practices"; each ensuring a strong commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and fairness. But a thorough review of each board's equity-related policies seems to suggest otherwise. What we have observed in our analysis is that the use of equity in numerous documents is, quite frankly, superficial in nature. A simple review of the equity policies across varying boards reveals a generic interpretation of equity, where verbatim transcriptions of the original Ontario Ministry of Education's (2009) equity policy is adopted. The failure to design localized equity policies that reflect community demographics of schools, coupled with little to no mention of any detailed procedures, enactment strategies, and evaluation methods to ensure equitable processes and accountability, reveals the mandated nature of many of these policies. We argue that a significant implication of this is that mandated policies do little to ensure social and educational equity, despite brief speech acts that outline a school board's aim to "ensure" equity, which ultimately contribute to sustaining structural inequities. We do note that future research is needed and currently underway to explore the enactment of these policy texts in various district school boards across the province. This research will address the limitation that only publicly available texts were included in the analysis and the nuance of the gaps between policy and practice that is vital to critical policy scholarship.

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Given the limitations of this article, we highlight one pressing issue that we observed in our analysis in the effort to illustrate the implications of the equity policies which we have analyzed: racial inequity in schools. Despite reports, scholarship, and published statics on a myriad of social and educational issues facing racialized students in Ontario, it is surprising how few school boards have explicitly addressed racism in their equity policies. In fact, in our review of the eight school boards, only one document actually includes a definition of racism. And although 'race' was included alongside other social identities such as gender, sexuality, and ability in most equity policies, it was included rather broadly and more generally, and not subject to further discussion; nor was it contextualized or addressed using anti-oppressive, anti-racist, or anti-discriminatory practices and procedures. While some policies do acknowledge the existence of systemic barriers as well as biases based on race, they generally do not make any clear reference to how racism is a deeply pervasive educational issue that is reproduced in educational structures, from peers, to teachers, to the curriculum and assessments. Nor do such policies address what race-based data has been or will be collected, or how school boards intend on combatting racial inequities. McPherson's (2020) critique of equity and inclusivity policy documents and strategies in Ontario also demonstrates that such documents "do not go quite far enough in identifying how layers of oppression…create and maintain additional barriers to an adequate education" (p. 152). Without considering and acknowledging intersecting oppressions, strategies and efforts to address educational issues facing Black and racialized students will "likely omit key considerations and prove impractical" (McPherson, 2020, p. 152).

As observed in their study of provincial education policies related to equity in Ontario and British Columbia, George, Maier, and Robinson (2020) found that while race is acknowledged in both provincial policies, both also ignore the persistence of racism as a systemic issue; describing instead how racism is an interpersonal problem that resides in select individuals, such as students rather than faculty and administration. Similar to our analysis, the authors observed that policies lacked substantive mandates to facilitate practices that addressed racism constructively, and that "[i]nstead, the language around racial equity, if present at all, was vague and aspirational" (George, Maier & Robinson, 2020, p. 166). Arguing that both provinces perpetuate what they call "symbolic anti-racism," which subscribes to a form of Canadian liberal multiculturalism which stresses acceptance of difference that ultimately negates racial inequality, George, Maier, and Robinson conclude that these documents are slowly removing any reference to race and racism and replacing them "with a focus on culture, diversity, inclusion, and equity" (p. 170).

As Ahmed (2012a) argues, policies often downplay and obscure institutional racism and the recognition of how power and inequity are systemic rather than interpersonal and outside the structures of the institution itself. And we extend Ahmed's insights to what we have observed in our own critical policy analysis. While flashy words and commitments to equity are echoed in many of the documents we analyzed, as Ahmed reminds us, such words and statements alone do not replace the real need to acknowledge the reality of systemic inequities that are reproduced within the context of education, including higher education. Ahmed's theoretical and qualitative insights have largely focused on institutions of higher education, and we find that her work urges caution as we consider emerging equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives of Canadian universities. While universities are in the process of implementing various phases of institutional strategies to demonstrate their

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commitments to such values and principles, our problematization of school board policies in this article, we believe, offers key insights into the potential limitations of higher education policies. As equity, diversity, and inclusion training, workshops, and policies become increasingly present in universities (see Campbell, 2021; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019), we must wait and see whether they indeed practice what they name, especially in a moment in time where all social institutions are being asked to demonstrate their commitments to equity. We have to wonder whether equity is a real concern of universities, or whether they are merely symbolic expressions that are largely mandated.

We thus want to conclude this article by illuminating the implications of the symbolic use of equity in educational policies. We worry that as words like equity circulate in educational policies, the more likely they will become "emptied of force; the more they move around…the less work they do" (Ahmed, 2016, p. 4). The textual analysis of our study suggests that the term equity has been overused, undertheorized, and disconnected from its transformational purpose in the pursuit of social justice, and our apprehension rests in the non-performativity of equity policies, which we fear will void its value and significance in the struggle for educational and social equity in Ontario.

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