Beyond Rhetoric: How Context Influences Education Policy Advocates' Success

Sue Winton & Lauren Jervis, *York University*

Abstract   This article discusses findings from a study of a 22-year campaign to change special education assessment policy in Ontario by the advocacy organization People for Education (P4E) and explains how dominant discourses enabled the government to leave the issue unresolved. Based on a rhetorical analysis of 58 documents, the article identifies strategies used by P4E to persuade Ontario's government and citizens to view students' uneven access to educational assessments as a problem. Further, since this problem differently impacts children by class and geographical location, it perpetuates inequities. Despite using strategies deemed effective in other change efforts, arguments mobilized by P4E have not been persuasive in a neoliberal context that champions responsibilized individualism, meritocracy, human capital development, and reduced funding of public services.

Keywords   Education policy; Neoliberalism; Advocacy; Special education policy

On March 26, 2018, the then-premier of Ontario, Canada, announced the government would spend $300 million over three years to eliminate waiting lists for special education assessments and improve services for children with special needs (Ontario, Office of the Premier, 2018). Should the impetus for this announcement be attributed to the efforts of advocates who, for decades, pointed to these lists as evidence of a problem with access to assessments in the province's public schools? Should this announcement even be seen as a success for these advocates, given that the government made the announcement only shortly before an election that it was widely expected to—and did—lose (Powers, 2018), leaving no time to actually act on the promise? Policy influence is difficult to establish since it is indirect, complex, and diffuse (Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Weaver-Hightower, 2008), but researchers, activists, and theorists are nevertheless interested in understanding how individuals and groups can impact policy. Many researchers investigate and highlight strategies advocates used in successful campaigns, but they are largely silent on why campaigns are unsuccessful—even when advocates employ those same strategies.

This article discusses findings from a study of a 22-year campaign by Ontario advocacy organization People for Education (P4E) to change special education assessment policy in the province and explains how the discourses dominant in Ontario enabled the government to leave the issue unresolved for so long. It begins by reviewing what is known about how groups influence education policy, pointing out that limited attention has been given to how policy context impacts advocates' success. Next, it describes the historical and contemporary contexts of special education in Ontario, including the assessment and identification process for students with exceptionalities requiring extra support in schools. It then explains the theoretical perspective that grounded the study and describes the methodological approach. It goes on to present findings from a rhetorical analysis of P4E's efforts to influence special education assessment policy in Ontario since 1996. It shows that P4E defines students' uneven access to educational assessments as a policy problem because it means some children are delayed in receiving the supports they need to be successful in school. Furthermore, since this problem differently impacts children by class and geographical location, it perpetuates inequities in a public education system ostensibly committed to equity for all. The article highlights strategies used by P4E to persuade Ontario's government and citizens to adopt this definition of the policy problem and to address it, and it points out that other groups have used the same strategies in successful policy change efforts. It then shows how dominant neoliberal discourses of individualized responsibility, meritocracy, human capital development, and reduced public spending impeded P4E's ability to persuade the government and the public. The political context that finally led to the former premier's announcement in March 2018 is also examined.

What do we know about educational advocacy?

The number of groups vying to influence education policy has increased over the past decades, but understanding of their activities and impact remains limited. A review (Winton, 2017) of recent research on education policy advocacy finds that much of this work examines how new types of policy actors (including think tanks,

philanthropists, and businesses), transnational organizations, and networks influence policy and the ways they have successfully promoted privatization policies in education at the state, national, and international levels (e.g., Anderson & Donchik, 2016; Feuerstein, 2015). The literature on resistance to these policies is much smaller, although the number of studies is growing (e.g., Bocking, 2015; Cortez, 2013; Scott, 2011; Winton & Milani, 2017). Research on advocacy in special education is also limited (Burke & Goldman, 2016), with researchers often focusing on how parents advocate for supports for their own children (e.g., DeRoche, 2015; Trainor, 2010; Zaretsky, 2004). They have shown that parents with financial resources are able to secure special education services and resources for their children that other parents cannot (DeRoche, 2015; Ong-Dean, Daly, & Park, 2011). The national contexts of the majority of studies in all these bodies of research are the United States, England, and Australia; much less is known about education policy advocacy in other countries, including Canada.

Furthermore, with the important exception of work by critical disability scholars who show how enduring racism, classism, and ableism thwart efforts for the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (e.g., Ferri & Connor, 2005), most studies of policy advocacy highlight strategies used by advocates in successful campaigns. These strategies include conducting original research (Christens & Dolans, 2011; Magrath, 2015; McLaughlin, Scott, Dechenese, Hopkins, & Newman, 2009; Oakes, Renee, Rogers, & Lipton, 2008; Winton & Evans, 2016); consulting others' research (McDonald, 2013; Winton & Evans, 2016); engaging traditional and social media (McDonald, 2013; Ramey, 2013); and lobbying decision-makers (Opfer, Young, & Fusarelli, 2008). Some researchers demonstrate how successful advocates draw on their social networks and social capital to secure policy changes (e.g., Green, 2017; Grossman, 2012), while others examine how groups frame issues strategically (e.g., Feuerstein, 2015; Itkonen, 2009).

Collectively, these studies imply that unsuccessful campaigns may be attributed to advocates' failure to use or possess these strategies, networks, or capital, but the lack of knowledge about unsuccessful policy change efforts makes it difficult to know if these attributions are fitting. Further, while some researchers describe how a policy's context impacted successful change efforts (e.g., Nygreen, 2017; Ramey, 2013), its influence on advocates' unsuccessful campaigns is rarely discussed. Instead, researchers imply that advocates alone are responsible for campaigns' outcomes. The case discussed in this article is one of three campaigns that were explored in a larger study of P4E's policy advocacy over a 22-year period. People for Education used almost identical strategies in its efforts to change provincial school fees (Winton & Milani, 2017), fundraising practices (Winton, 2018), and special education assessment policies, yet the outcomes of the campaigns varied, suggesting that factors besides the strategies advocates use impact the success of their advocacy.

Historical and legal contexts of special education in Ontario

The *Education Amendment Act, 1980* guaranteed that students in Ontario with special needs would be entitled to receive the necessary supports and services for success in the province's public schools. Before 1980, access to special education was uneven

across the province. Some school boards offered classes for students with certain disabilities, notably classes for "slow learners," but opportunities varied widely by location, need, and grade level (Clandfield, 2014, p.133; Gidney, 2002). Until this time school boards were legally permitted to exclude students they deemed unlikely to benefit from education in elementary schools (Gidney, 2002). The demand for education for all students began to intensify in the 1960s and 1970s, and as some boards responded by expanding their offerings, they faced substantial financial costs, and many children waited for access to services (approximately 15,000 children were on waiting lists in 1978; Gidney, 2002).

In 2014–2015, more than 178,500 students in Ontario were eligible for special education support services (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2017). Ontario Regulation 181/98 details the process for identifying students legally entitled to access these supports. This process involves the establishment of identification, placement, and review committees (IPRCs) to formally identify a student as having one or more exceptionalities and to recommend the placement of the student. Cam Cobb (2016) explains that "identification is a powerful gatekeeper in the province" (p. 53). In making its determinations, an IPRC considers educational assessments and other materials deemed necessary, including "a health assessment of the pupil by a qualified medical practitioner" (Ontario Regulation 181/98, s. 15 (2)) and/or "a psychological assessment of the pupil" (Ontario Regulation 181/98, s. 15 (3)). Students may encounter long waiting lists for receiving publicly funded assessments that would enable them to be formally identified as having an exceptionality by an IPRC (Cobb, 2016; Rushowy, 2011). While schools and boards may provide extra supports and services to students who have not been formally identified by an IPRC, there is confusion about when and if they are required to do so, and many students remain on waiting lists to access services.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in critical policy analysis (CPA). Scholars of CPA aim to understand how policies challenge and/or maintain the status quo (Diem, Young, Welton, Cumings Mansfield, & Lee, 2014). The study conceptualizes policy as a cycle that includes three contexts: the contexts of influence, text production, and practices (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992). Government decisions and texts (and their absence) are important in policy cycles' contexts of influence and text production, but practices in schools and communities as well as the activities and texts of non-state actors are also significant. So, too, are discourses. A discourse is "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1997, p. 45). Discourses operate at the broad cultural level and at the micro level of everyday interaction (Fischer, 2003). Cultural discourses "organize [policy] actors' understandings of reality without them necessarily being aware of it" (p. 74). They organize social action and regularize thinking (Fischer, 2003). At the micro level, different discourses produce different ways of understanding a policy issue and responses to it. Actors attempt to change policy through argumentation (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012), using discourses as both

"tactic and theory" (Fulcher, 1999, p. 9). That is, they mobilize discourses that reflect their theories of how the social world works using a range of rhetorical strategies in their efforts to change policy meanings, and ultimately, practices.

Policy actors use numerous rhetorical strategies to persuade others to understand and respond to a social practice in a particular way. Persuasion, a central aspect of policy processes, has received limited attention in education and other fields of policy research (Edwards & Nicoll, 2004; Gottweis, 2012). Rhetoric is multidimensional and includes the following elements: the rhetorical situation (including exigence and audience), persuasive discourses, and the five rhetorical canons (invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery; Leach, 2000). The canon of invention includes arguments that appeal to the audience's reason (logos), confidence in the speaker (ethos), and deeply held values and emotions (pathos; Selzer, 2004). This study examines P4E's efforts to persuade Ontario's government and its citizens to address the issue of untimely and uneven access to assessment and how the policy's context may have influenced the persuasiveness of the group's arguments.

Methodology

People for Education (2018) describes itself as "a unique organization in Canada: independent, non-partisan, and fueled by a belief in the power and promise of public education" (para. 1). The group was founded in 1996 by parents concerned about controversial education cuts and other policy changes taking place in Ontario. From a small grassroots organization, P4E has grown into a well-known advocacy group that regularly tracks and reports on the impact of government policies as experienced by people in schools across the province. It advocates for changes to multiple policy issues, thereby offering the opportunity to compare campaigns where rhetorical strategies were similar but outcomes were different.

It is difficult to determine policy influence (Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Weaver-Hightower, 2008), but by a number of indicators, P4E is an influential policy actor in Ontario. The group's influence is suggested by: references to and praise for P4E's work by elected officials (including Ontario's premier) and journalists (Gordon, 2017); frequent invitations to offer expert opinions by news journalists; teacher unions' and researchers' references to its survey findings; diverse partnerships with university researchers and organizations; the participation of school, district, government, and not-for-profit organization leaders and politicians (including Ontario's Minister of Education) at its annual conference; and the group's membership on government advisory groups.

Rhetorical analysis is the method used in this study, which aims to identify how P4E attempted to persuade Ontario's government and citizens to view and respond to the issue of access to assessments in a particular way and explore how influences beyond Ontario's special education policy cycle may have influenced P4E's persuasiveness. Rhetorical analysis involves establishing how a problem is defined, how the audience is constructed, and how elements from the rhetorical canons of invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery are engaged (Leach, 2000; Winton, 2013). Further, it requires that the rhetorical strategies identified at the micro level be considered in relation to broader cultural discourses.

Data for the rhetorical analysis included 58 documents published between 1996 and 2018. The documents include texts authored by P4E or a P4E member (33), transcripts from debates in the Ontario Legislature (4), and texts including explicit references to P4E's research and/or quotes from P4E members published by teacher unions (8), the Ontario Human Rights Commission (1), and various media sources (12). Each document was read multiple times and phrases of text that included appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos or reflected the other canons of rhetoric were highlighted. With the aid of qualitative software, the phrases were given codes named for the kind of appeal or canon. The data was also considered and highlighted according to how it defined the problem (exigence) and constructed its audiences. After the coding process was completed, consideration was given to how P4E's rhetorical strategies both challenged and reflected dominant cultural discourses in Ontario and discourses and practices within the province's special education policy cycle. These discourses and practices were identified through a review of academic literature and media reports, the authors' knowledge of the Ontario context and prior research, and with input from scholars at academic conferences.

Findings
A rhetorical analysis of P4E's advocacy

People for Education has defined students' delayed access to educational assessments as a policy problem because it means some children do not receive special education supports when they need them. Further, since this problem impacts students differently based on their family income and/or where they live, it creates inequities within Ontario's public education system. This understanding of the policy problem underlies P4E's 2012 recommendation that the Ontario government "develop an equitable and needs-based process for determining who gets psycho-educational assessments" (P4E, 2012, p. 5). This call to action, one among many, demonstrates that one of P4E's key audiences is the Ontario government. By speaking directly to policymakers, such as when the group called on the government to "provide a one-time grant to eliminate existing special education waiting lists" (P4E, 2002, p. 3), P4E constructs the government as responsible for improving access to assessments and able to do so.

A second important audience for P4E's persuasive efforts is the broader public. This audience is evident in part through the content of the group's annual reports. These reports not only present findings from the group's surveys on policy effects, they also explain how various processes work, such as the IPRC process. This is knowledge that government officials would presumably already possess. Evidence that Ontario's citizens make up a key audience is also found in the means through which the group disseminates its arguments: on its website, in email newsletters to over 15,000 subscribers, and through the media.

To appeal to its audiences' sense of reason, or logos, P4E cites evidence from its annual survey of schools to demonstrate the problem of uneven and delayed access to educational assessments. For example, in its 2000 *Elementary Tracking Report* (People for Education, 2000), the group quoted a principal who said: "Our school is in desperate need to have children assessed and placed in proper programs to help them" (p. 18). Another principal, quoted in P4E's 2015 report, explains that "Getting students

assessed is our major bottleneck to providing special education services" (P4E, 2015, p. 17). The group also presents numerical evidence that the problem exists—and is worsening. In 2002, for example, P4E (2002) reported that 39,400 elementary students were on wait lists for services related to special education and of these students, 65 percent were waiting for assessments—a 12 percent increase since 2000–2001.

People for Education has argued that a contributing factor to students' uneven ability to be assessed is the existence of caps on the number of children that can be assessed each year in some school boards and the variation between boards' policies related to caps. Again, it presented evidence from its surveys to support this claim. In 2013, for example, P4E (2013) reported:

> Some students may not even make it onto waiting lists: 47% of elementary and 41% of secondary principals across Ontario report that there is a restriction on the number of students they can put forward for assessment. And just as special education services vary across the province, so do restrictions on waiting lists: 74% of elementary schools in eastern Ontario, and 68% of those in central Ontario reported caps, while only 28% of schools in the GTA [Greater Toronto Area] did. (p. 2)

Another reason students' access to assessments is uneven, P4E has argued, is due to differences in boards' access to psychologists. In 2002 the group presented its finding that 46 percent of secondary schools in Toronto have regular access to psychologists, whereas no schools in the northern part of the province do. In 2012 P4E similarly presented evidence that elementary schools' access to a psychologist varies by region.

Finally, P4E argues that students' access is uneven because parents who can pay for their children to receive private assessments can have their needs considered by IPRCs sooner than students whose parents cannot. In 2011, the group combined data from its survey and government data to demonstrate this point, stating: "The average number of children on special education waiting lists in high poverty schools (10) is more than double the average number of children (4) per low poverty school" (P4E, 2011, p. 22). In 2014 P4E drew on its survey data to show that the likelihood of parents using private assessments is greater in the richest 25 percent of schools compared to the poorest 25 percent of schools in the province (P4E, 2014). People for Education's use of evidence gathered through research, in this case to persuade its audiences that the problem of untimely and uneven access to assessments exists, is a common rhetorical appeal to logos, and many studies of successful policy change campaigns identify advocates' use of research evidence as an effective advocacy strategy (e.g., Best, 1987; Christens & Dolans, 2011; Magrath, 2015; McLaughlin, et al., 2009; Oakes et al., 2008; Winton & Evans, 2016). Why was this strategy ineffective for P4E for so long?

In addition to appealing to reason, P4E attempts to persuade its audiences by appealing to values they are assumed to hold (pathos) and share with P4E. Specifically, P4E appeals to audience members' commitment to equity and the belief that Ontario's public education system must offer equal opportunity to all students. In 1996, for example, a P4E member said she was told her child would have to wait months to be assessed unless she could pay for a private assessment. She told a news

journalist, "That's okay for us because we can afford it, but what about other families? We have to maintain a public system equal to all" (Crawford, 1996, p. F5). The group restated this appeal in its 2001 annual report:

> Parents who can afford it … pay privately for music lessons, tutors, and assessments for Special Education. But if we are to preserve the most important tenet of public education — that every child deserves an equal chance to succeed — growing inequities in the system must be addressed immediately. (P4E, 2001, p. 3)

In 2002, P4E described this situation as a "two-tiered system" (P4E, 2002, p. 9), and in 2011, in an introduction to its findings of the relationship between family income and accessing timely assessments and special education supports, the group warns that the results "fly in the face of the fundamental premise of public education—that it should provide all students with an equitable chance for success" (P4E, 2011, p. 3).

In addition, P4E uses metaphors to construct the access to special education assessments problem as a crisis. In its 2002 *Special Education and the Funding Formula*, for example, the group employs the language of the hospital emergency room or a battlefield when it writes:

> Special education is degenerating into an *emergency service* [emphasis added] offered only to the most needy students. … The Funding Formula has created *a triage system of special education* [emphasis added] in which only the most needy are served. (P4E, 2002, p. 1)

Eleven years later a heading in the *Report on Special Education* reads: "Special Education Triage" and the report goes on to explain that "The majority of comments from principals [on the 2013 survey] focused on operating in *triage* mode with special education resources" (P4E, 2013, p. 3). The use of the crisis metaphor is familiar in education policy debates (e.g., McIntush, 2000; Washington, Torres, Gholson, & Martin, 2012). It is used to evoke fear, suggests immediate action must be taken, and can be very powerful (Washington et al., 2012). In this case, however, mobilizing this metaphor did not have the anticipated effect.

Beyond appeals to logos and pathos, P4E must also convince its audiences of its credibility. The group's appeals to ethos have changed over time. When P4E first formed, its members drew on their positions as parents with firsthand knowledge of the effects of policy decisions in their children's schools. After the group started conducting its annual surveys of schools, as discussed above, P4E began referencing evidence of the problem gathered through its research. Its findings were, and often still are, the only source of this data, making it difficult to contest. The group will sometimes highlight congruency between its findings and arguments and those of other researchers, which also enhances its credibility. In addition, as mentioned, many of P4E's research reports conclude with direct calls to actions, which constructs P4E as positioned to advise government officials.

People for Education also uses the voices of principals and parents to establish its credibility and the credibility of its findings. In its 2016 report, for example, the words of a school principal follow a discussion of the numbers of children on waiting lists and parents paying for private assessments so their children can avoid waiting:

> [We] need MORE psycho-educational assessments. In more affluent schools, where parents are working and have coverage, they make up for the lack of assessments by having parents pay privately, which frees up assessments for the children who are left. When you work in a less affluent school there are often more students who need the assessment, fewer parents who can afford to go privately, and there are not nearly enough assessments to go around. (P4E, 2016, p. 3)

Including the voices of people who experience the phenomena discussed by P4E firsthand helps establish that P4E's findings accurately reflect what happens in schools.

These appeals to ethos, similar to P4E's appeals to logos and pathos, are not unique. Nor are the metaphors and strategies the group uses to mobilize its rhetoric. All the rhetorical strategies identified here have been identified by other researchers as contributing to advocates' success in other cases. This article now turns to a discussion about aspects of the context of this policy change campaign to explain why P4E's advocacy efforts remained unsuccessful for so long.

Impacts of context on P4E's success

The persuasiveness of an argument is influenced by the broader context in which it is mobilized (Fischer, 2003). This section examines dominant discourses in Ontario and aspects of the province's special education assessment policy to help explain why P4E was unable to persuade its audiences that this policy needed to change.

The creation and enactment of all policy in Ontario over the past few decades, including special education assessment policy, has taken place in a context dominated by neoliberal rationality (Clandfield, 2014; Sattler, 2012). Neoliberal rationality asserts that the economic, political, and social spheres are best organized according to market principles and views governments' role as facilitating market attitudes, conditions, and behaviour while limiting public spending (Brown, 2006; Connell, 2010; Larner, 2000). The primary task of schools, according to neoliberal logic, is to prepare young people to successfully compete in local and global marketplaces (i.e., to develop human capital). Further, neoliberal rationality sees individuals as responsible for their well-being and the well-being of their family and encourages people to view others' failure to meet this responsibility as "morally repugnant" (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016, p. 5; see also Larner, 2000). A number of these ideas challenge the importance of the problem of uneven access to special education assessments as constructed by P4E and help explain why the group's arguments were not persuasive enough for the government to address the problem or for citizens to demand it to.

First, meeting the needs of children through special education is expensive. Ontario's government earmarked $2.86 billion for the 2017–2018 school year alone (Alphonso & Giovannetti, 2018). Thus, within a discursive context that advocates less public spending, P4E's calls for more money for special education may appear unreasonable given how much is already allocated to it. Further, under neoliberal rationality, public schools' key purpose is to produce human capital (Connell, 2013).

From this perspective, children viewed as unlikely to contribute productively to the economy may not be viewed as a good investment, and this raises questions about whether spending money on special education is a good use of limited public funds. While provincial data is not available, figures from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB, 2013) show that children identified with exceptionalities (excluding being gifted) are less likely to graduate from high school or attend postsecondary institutions than those without identified exceptionalities (excluding being gifted). Gillian Parekh, Isabel Killoran, and Cameron Crawford (2011) also found that students in special education programs, apart from the gifted program, in the TDSB had lower rates of access to "socially valued educational opportunities" (p. 275) such as French immersion. They conclude that "[n]eoliberalism could be the economic rationale for a meritocratic system that determines which demographics are streamed into basic education tracks and away from more marketable education opportunities" (p. 275), thereby perpetuating discrimination and further marginalizing students in special education programs. However, in their efforts to facilitate market competition and to justify its unequal outcomes, governments must also create *the perception* of equal opportunity for success (Naidoo, 2016). Funding special education to some extent thus creates the appearance that the Ontario government is meeting this requirement while portraying itself as committed to equity.

Further, P4E's argument that allowing parents to pay for private assessments is problematic because not everyone can afford to do so conflicts with the neoliberal discourse of meritocracy that constructs successful (i.e., affluent) people as deserving of their success and entitled to the rewards it brings. In the case of waiting lists for assessment, this meritocratic discourse suggests that parents who can afford to pay for private assessments have earned both the ability and right to do so. In addition, paying for private assessments enables parents to enact neoliberal expectations of good parenting, which construct parents as responsible for their children's well-being and success. Accordingly, parents are expected to do whatever they can to provide their children with what they need to be successful. And practically speaking, by allowing private assessments, school boards face fewer demands for assessment and save money since fewer students overall will be assessed at the boards' expense. This may be desirable, since many boards spend more money on special education than the dedicated funding they receive for it (Rushowy & Ferguson, 2015). Finally, even though waits might be years-long for some children, once they *are* assessed parents can be expected to focus their energy on meeting their child's needs rather than how long the assessments took. That is, the problem of waiting for assessments is a one-time issue for parents in most cases.

So far, P4E's advocacy campaign regarding special education assessment wait times has been treated as largely unsuccessful. Some might cite the government's aforementioned announcement in March of 2018 as evidence that the advocacy was, in fact, successful. It is true that in finally pledging to eliminate the wait lists, Ontario's government was addressing the concerns raised by P4E. Then Premier Kathleen Wynne's framing of the new special education funding as an effort to "give *every child* [emphasis added] the support they need to succeed to achieve in school" (Ontario, Office of the Premier, 2018) gestures to a conception of the public educa-

tion system as a place that should privilege equity, which aligns with P4E's arguments. That being said, the political context likely played a key role in the timing of the Liberal government's funding commitment. Its promise to increase investment in special education shortly before a provincial election fit with the Liberal Party's campaign strategy. Its election platform (which also contained the promise to eliminate wait lists for assessments) was titled *The Ontario Liberal Plan for Care and Opportunity* (Ontario Liberal Party, 2018), and a promise to improve special education aligned with both the emphasis on caring for Ontarians and on increasing opportunities for achievement and prosperity. Furthermore, the promise fit in with a theme of strengthening or enhancing public services, in contrast to the Progressive Conservatives' focus on reducing the cost of government—something that the Liberals warned would entail cutting services (Ontario Liberal Party, 2018).

More importantly, though, it would not be accurate to consider the March 2018 funding announcement a substantive success for those advocating for an improvement in special education assessment wait times. The announcement was made so shortly before the election that the Liberal government did not have time to implement the promised improvements. With the subsequent change in government, there is no guarantee that the promise will be acted upon. Ultimately, if Kathleen Wynne's government had wanted to prioritize addressing assessment waiting lists, this announcement would have been made much earlier than the eleventh hour.

Conclusions

While it might be tempting for researchers to recommend particular rhetorical strategies or for advocates to replicate strategies utilized by other actors in successful policy change efforts, this study's findings show that advocates' success depends on much more than the persuasive strategies employed. These findings also contribute a Canadian example and new knowledge to a growing body of literature that examines how context in general, and a context in which neoliberal discourses are dominant in particular, impacts education policy advocacy. Despite using rhetorical strategies deemed effective in other change efforts, arguments mobilized by P4E in its attempts to change special education assessment policy in Ontario were not persuasive in a neoliberal context that championed responsibilized individualism, meritocracy, human capital development, and the reduced funding of public services. The argument that allowing parents to pay for private assessments so their children bypass waiting lists is problematic, for example, may not resonate with parents who can afford to do so and who are operating in a context that emphasizes their responsibility for their children's success.

These findings do not, however, lead to the conclusion that policy advocacy efforts by public groups are futile in the context of neoliberal rationality. Rather, they highlight the need for policy actors to construct their arguments in ways that resonate with broader cultural discourses. While connecting arguments to dominant discourses runs the risk of upholding them, these findings also show that when dominant cultural discourses interact with individual policy cycles, the effects of advocacy efforts are unpredictable. People for Education used the same strategies in its efforts to change assessment wait times as it used in other policy change efforts during the

same time period in Ontario, yet the results differed in each case (Winton, 2018; Winton & Milani, 2017). That is, P4E constructed school fundraising and the practice of collecting school fees for basic and enhanced materials as problematic because they create and perpetuate inequities between and within school communities. The group used the same rhetorical strategies to persuade the Ontario government and its citizens in these cases as it did in the special education assessment case, but P4E's policy meaning only became dominant in the case of charging school fees for basic learning materials (Winton & Milani, 2017). Discouragingly, the findings show that a highly credible group's construction of a policy problem as a problem because it creates and perpetuates inequities in schools and society, along with decades of supporting evidence from affected individuals, is not sufficiently persuasive for the government to enact—or for the public to demand—changes to official policies and practices in Ontario's public schools.

References

Alphonso, C., & Giovannetti, J. (2018, March 26). Ontario Liberals promise $300-million to support special education. *Globe and Mail*. Retrieved December 1, 2018, from https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ontario-liberals-promise-300-million -to-support-special-education/.

Anderson, G.L., & Donchik, L.M. (2016). Privatizing schooling and policy making. *Education policy*, *30*(2), 322–364.

Best, J. (1987). Rhetoric in claims-making: Constructing the missing children problem. *Social Problems*, *34*(2), 101–121.

Bocking, P. (2015). Why do governments adopt neoliberal education policies? Critical theory on policy movement in the context of contemporary reform in Mexico. *Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research*, *26(1)*, 74–100.

Bowe, R., Ball, S.J., & Gold, A. (1992). *Reforming education and changing schools: Case studies in policy sociology.* London, UK: Routledge.

Brown, W. (2006). American nightmare: Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and de-democratization. *Political Theory, 34*(6), 690–714.

Burke, M.M., & Goldman, S.E. (2016). Documenting the experiences of special education advocates. *The Journal of Special Education*, *5*(1), 3–13.

Christens, B.D., & Dolan, T. (2011). Interweaving youth development, community development, and social change through youth organizing. *Youth & Society*, *43*(2), 528–548.

Clandfield, D. (2014). Special education and streaming. In *Restacking the deck: Streaming by race, class and gender in Ontario schools.* (Vol. 2, pp. 113–184). Ottawa, ON, Canada: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Cobb, C. (2016). You can lose what you never had. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(1), 52–66.

Connell, R. (2010). Understanding neoliberalism. In S. Braedley & M. Luxton (Eds.), Neoliberalism and everyday life (pp. 22–36). Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Connell, R. (2013). The neoliberal cascade and education: An essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education, 54*(2), 99–112.

Cortez, G.A. (2013). Occupy public education: A community's struggle for educational resources in the era of privatization. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *46*(1), 7–19.

Crawford, T. (1996, April 21). Middle class standing up to be counted. *Toronto Star*, p. F1.

Davies, S. (1999). From moral duty to cultural rights: A case study of political framing in education. *Sociology of Education*, *72*(1), 1–21.

DeRoche, C. (2015). Labels in education: The role of parents and parental cultural capital in acquiring diagnoses and educational accommodations. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *38*(4), 1–24.

Diem, S., Young, M.D., Welton, A.D., Cumings Mansfield, K., & Lee, P. (2014). The intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 27*(9) 1068–1090.

Edwards, R., & Nicoll, K. (2004). Expertise, competence and reflection in the rhetoric of professional development. *British Educational Research Journal, 32*(1), 115–131.

Ferri, B.A., & Connor, D.J. (2005). Tools of exclusion: Race, disability, and (re) segregated education. *Teachers College Record*, *107*(3), 453–474.

Feuerstein, A. (2015). Parental trigger laws and the power of framing in educational politics. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *23*(79), 1–34.

Fischer, F. (2003). *Reframing public policy: Discursive politics and deliberative practices*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Fischer, F., & Gottweis, H. (2012). Introduction: The argumentative turn revisited. *The argumentative turn revisited: Public policy as communicative practice* (pp. 1–30). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fulcher, G. (1999). *Disabling policies? A comparative approach to education policy and disability* (2nd ed.). Sheffield, UK: Philip Armstrong Publications.

Gallagher-Mackay, K., & Kidder, A. (2014). *Special education: A People for Education report*. Toronto, ON: People for Education.

Gidney, R.D. (1999). *From Hope to Harris: The reshaping of Ontario's schools*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Gordon, A. (2017, September 2). Annie Kidder and People for Education have made a mark on Ontario schools, but have they become part of the system? *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved July 10, 2018, from https://www.thestar.com.

Gottweis, H. (2012). Political rhetoric and stem cell policy in the United States: Embodiments, scenographies, and emotions. In F. Fischer & H. Gottweis (Eds.), *The argumentative turn revisited: Public policy as communicative practice* (pp. 211–235). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Green, T. (2017). 'We felt they took the heart out of the community': Examining a community-based response to urban school closure. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *25* (21), 1–30.

Grossmann, M. (2012). Interest group influence on US policy change: An assessment based on policy history. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *1*(2), 171–192.

Hajer, M.A. (1997). *The politics of environmental discourse: Ecological modernization and the policy process*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Itkonen, T. (2009). Stories of hope and decline: Interest group effectiveness in national special education policy. *Education policy*, *23*(1), 43–65.

Larner, W. (2000). Neo-liberalism: Policy, ideology, governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy, 63*, 5–25.

Leach, J. (2000). Rhetorical analysis. In M.W. Bauer & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound* (pp. 207–226). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Magrath, B. (2015). Information politics, transnational advocacy, and education for all. *Comparative Education Review*, *59*(4), 666–692.

McDonald, L. (2013). In their own words: U.S. think tank 'experts' and the framing of education policy debates. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, *11*(3), 1–28.

McIntush, H.G. (2000). Defining education: The rhetorical enactment of ideology in *A Nation at Risk*. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *3*(3), 419–443.

McLaughlin, M.W., Scott, W.R., Deschenes, S., Hopkins, D., & Newman, A. (2009). *Between movement and establishment: Organizations advocating for youth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Naidoo, R. (2016, March 21). *The FreshEd Podcast* [podcast]. Retrieved December 3, 2018, from https://soundcloud.com/freshed-podcast/freshed-20-rajani-naidoo.

Nygreen, K. (2017). Negotiating tensions: Grassroots organizing, school reform, and the paradox of neoliberal democracy. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *48*(1), 42–60.

Oakes, J., Renée, M., Rogers, J., & Lipton, M. (2008). Research and community organizing as tools for democratizing education policymaking. In C. Sugrue (Ed.), *The future of educational change: International perspectives* (pp. 136–154). New York, NY: Routledge.

Olmedo, A., & Wilkins, A. (2016). Governing through parents: A genealogical enquiry of education policy and the construction of neoliberal subjectivities in England. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 38(4), 1–17.

Ong-Dean, C., Daly, A. J., & Park, V. (2011). Privileged advocates: disability and education policy in the USA. *Policy Futures in Education, 9*(3), 392. https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2011.9.3.392

Ontario Liberal Party. (2018). *The Ontario Liberal plan for care and opportunity*. Retrieved December 3, 2018, from https://platform.ontarioliberal.ca/full-platform-text/.

Ontario, Office of the Premier. (2018, March 26). *Driving student success with more supportive classrooms* [press release]. Retrieved December 3, 2018, from https://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2018/03/driving-student-success-with-more-supportive-classrooms.html.

Ontario Regulation 181/98 Identification and placement of exceptional pupils. (2005). *Ontario e-Laws.* Retrieved December 1, 2018, from https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/980181.

Opfer, V.D., Young, T.V., & Fusarelli, L.D. (2008). Politics of interest: Interest groups and advocacy coalitions in American education. In B.S. Cooper, J.G. Cibulka, & L.D. Fusarelli (Eds.), *Handbook of education politics and policy* (pp. 196–216). New York, NY: Routledge.

Parekh, G., Killoran, I., & Crawford, C. (2011). The Toronto connection: Poverty, perceived ability, and access to education equity. *Canadian Journal of Education, 34*(3), 249–279.

People for Education. (2000). *The tracking report 2000: The effects of funding and policy changes in Ontario's elementary schools.* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2001). *The 2001 tracking report: The effects of funding and policy changes in Ontario's elementary schools.* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2002). *Special education and the funding formula.* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2011). *Annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools 2011.* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2012). *Special education.* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2013). *Special education.* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2014) *Public education: Our best Investment* (Annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools 2014). Toronto: People for Education.

People for Education. (2015). *Ontario's schools: The gap between policy and reality (Annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools 2015).* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2016). *The geography of opportunity: What's needed for broader student success (Annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools).* Toronto, ON: People for Education.

People for Education. (2018). *Public education. Public good.* Retrieved December 3, 2018, from https://peopleforeducation.ca/about/

Powers, L. (2018, June 7). 'We have taken back Ontario': Doug Ford leads PCs to majority government. *CBC News.* Retrieved December 3, 2018, from http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/we-have-taken-back-ontario-doug-ford-leads-pcs-to-majority-government-1.4696736.

Ramey, J.B. (2013). For the public good: Urban youth advocacy and the fight for public education. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(8), 1260–1267.

Rushowy, K. (2011, June 1). Special-ed wait times troubling. *Toronto Star*, p. GT1.

Rushowy, K., & Ferguson, R. (2015, March 12). Special ed cuts to hit most Ontario boards. *Toronto Star.* Retrieved 23 April, 2017, from https://www.thestar.com.

Sattler, P. (2012). Education governance reform in Ontario: Neoliberalism in context. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 128,* 1–28.

Selzer, J. (2004). Rhetorical analysis: Understanding how texts persuade readers. In C. Bazerman & P. Prior (Eds.), *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices* (pp. 279–307). Mahwah, NJ: Routledge.

Scott, J.T. (2011). Market-driven education reform and the racial politics of advocacy. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 86(5), 580–599.

Toronto District School Board. (2013). *Special education fact sheet #4.* Retrieved April 13, 2017, from http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/Gr9CohortFactSheet4Special Education13May13.pdf.

Trainor, A. A. (2010). Diverse approaches to parent advocacy during special education home-school interactions: Identification and use of cultural and social capital. *Remedial and Special Education, 31*(1), 34–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932508324401

Wang, Y. (2017). The social networks and paradoxes of the opt-out movement amid the Common Core State Standards implementation: The case of New York. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *25*(34), 1–27.

Washington, D., Torres, Z., Gholson, M., & Martin, D.B. (2012). Crisis as a discursive frame in mathematics education research and reform. In S. Mukhopadhyay & W-E. Roth (Eds.), *Alternative forms of knowing (in) Mathematics* (pp. 53–69). Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.

Weaver-Hightower, M. B. (2008). An ecology metaphor for educational policy analysis: A call to complexity. *Educational Researcher, 37*(3), 153–167. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08318050

Winton, S. (2013). Rhetorical analysis in critical policy research. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 26(2), 158–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2012.666288

Winton, S. (2017). *What do we know about advocacy groups and educational policy? A review of the English-language literature*. Paper presented at the World Educational Research Association Focal Meeting and Hong Kong Educational Research Association International Conference 2017, Hong Kong, China. November 30–December 2, 2017.

Winton, S. (2018). Challenging fundraising, challenging inequity: Contextual constraints on advocacy groups' policy influence. *Critical Studies in Education*, *59*(1), 54–73.

Winton, S., & Evans, M.P. (2016). Consulting, mediating, conducting, and supporting: How community-based organizations engage with research to influence policy. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *15*(1), 4–25.

Winton, S., & Milani, M. (2017). Policy advocacy, inequity, and school fees and fundraising in Ontario, Canada. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *25*(40), 1–33. http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2679

Zaretsky, L. (2004). Advocacy and administration: from conflict to collaboration. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *42*(2), 270–286.