

A Critical Policy Analysis of Educational Policy in Saskatchewan

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Abstract

Teacher voice, defined as an act of democratic professionalism in public education, is not often investigated within educational policy. In Saskatchewan, there is a particular lack of information pertaining to the inclusion of teacher voice in strategic planning in public education. This study investigated the inclusion of teachers and their union, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF), in the Educational Sector Strategic Plan 2014–2020 (ESSP). Using data from two sources: a document analysis and qualitative interviews with classroom teachers, critical policy analysis was used to discover the inclusion or exclusion of teachers in the ESSP. The document analysis noted that teachers and the STF were absent from related documentation, and the exclusion was also felt by the teacher participants. They explained that policy could be made more effective through their inclusion and gave examples of what they found useful or onerous. These findings can help guide future educational policy or adapt the current strategic policy in Saskatchewan.

Keywords: educational policy, critical policy analysis, teacher voice, public education



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The role of curriculum in public education is well understood, but strategic planning is a more recent phenomenon. In Saskatchewan, we are currently on our second strategic plan since 2014, the Provincial Education Plan (PEP). After more than a decade of strategic planning in the province, it should be well known how decisions have been made and who made those decisions. However, few teachers in Saskatchewan seem to have a strong understanding of educational policy. To clarify this perceived curiosity, this study investigated the inclusion of teacher voice in a critical policy analysis of that first strategic plan in Saskatchewan, the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2014–2020 (ESSP). A document analysis was designed to discover inclusion or exclusion of teachers and their union, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) and then 11 classroom teachers were interviewed to discover their perceptions of the policy. The analyses utilized critical policy analysis (CPA) as a methodology where policy is viewed as a staged process and not a completed act that exists at one point in time. CPA provided the research with a wider scope to discover the inclusion or exclusion of teacher voice in educational policy in Saskatchewan.

A Short History of Educational Policy in Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan has a history of collaboration in education that goes back several decades (Lyons, 2006; Newton et al., 2007). As recently as the early 2000s, policy was developed and delivered in a way that left the group responsible for development unclear whether it came from the Ministry of Education, the STF, or from other educational partners (Lyons, 2006). This lack of clarity was deemed to be indicative of collaboration in policy making in Saskatchewan (Lyons, 2006). However, under strategic policy in Saskatchewan, collaboration no longer seemed to be a part of its development. The potential change to collaborative policymaking inspired the research.

Educational Policy

Public policy in education lacks specificity because of the multi-layered, complex nature of decision-making for schools (Young et al., 2023). Schools become the place of competing interests such as those from school boards, trustees, ministries, lobby groups, educators, students, and parents. In general, there are three elements to policy: goals, a problem definition, and instruments to solve the problem (Young et al., 2023). The ESSP mostly set targets for academic achievement and then created initiatives and used standardized tests to aid schools and teachers. The problem was presumably defined by the value statements at the centre of the ESSP matrix (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014b).

Nevertheless, the most familiar form of educational policy in the classroom is the various class curricula for which teachers are responsible for delivering. A curriculum can be a collaborative process involving representatives of governments, special interest groups, teacher unions, and school board associations. In Saskatchewan, partners in education are surveyed, including parents and teachers, and then teachers are invited to apply to be on the committee responsible for creating the curriculum with the Ministry of Education. Those same teachers vet the curriculum in their respective classrooms. The committee can include members of the Ministry of Education, academics, and teachers (Lyons, 2006). The included teachers are often also those involved in educating other professionals in implementing the new curriculum (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2016). Following this process, curriculum development is a collaborative process and fulfills the definition of teacher voice as described in the next subsection (Priestley et al., 2012).

A strategic plan for a system of public education in Saskatchewan, however, does not have a historical process, likely because of the inherently political nature of actions initiated by governments (Young et al., 2023). Therefore, the collaborative nature of curriculum building is not necessarily the framework for a strategic plan. Also, there have been previous policies in the province, such as the *Students First* initiative, placing a stronger student focus on education, but Saskatchewan had never had a policy with measurable academic outcomes for all K-12 public schools before the ESSP (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013). Education policy does have distinct phases: pre-policy, policy, and post-policy. These phases became obstacles to research with teachers because policy actors are rarely involved with the development of written policy (Young et al., 2023). Critical policy analysis was used to overcome this obstacle, and this aspect of the methodology is described in detail in a later section.

The pre-policy phase was particularly problematic when investigating the ESSP. For example, the impetus for the ESSP appeared to be the adoption of the business model of organization, Lean or Lean Sigma Six, a strategy by Toyota Motors (Black & Miller, 2016; George, 2002; Huxley, 2015). The ESSP then set goals or outcomes for all public schools in Saskatchewan, the policy stage. Some examples of outcomes included: to improve graduation rates, to increase the proportion of students ready for grade one, to increase the number of students meeting academic levels, and there was a financial goal to find budget savings (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014b). As teachers were involved at this stage, this research aimed to measure their influence, their voice.

Teacher Voice

Teachers were chosen as the ‘critical’ element of the research from the perceived exclusion of the group from the development and delivery of the ESSP, yet teacher involvement in decision-making is not a novel or recent development. Gillett-Swan and Baroutsis (2024) did an overview of the research on teacher voice and provided an effective definition while also referencing similar terms in the literature. Teacher participation indicates a lesser degree of inclusion and can limit involvement to being a source of information. Teacher agency, meanwhile, is more empowering than participation because teachers have more control over decisions, but these decisions are often limited to the classroom. Hence, voice is the term used in this research because it encapsulates both empowerment and participation, essential elements of critical research. More specifically, teacher voice is the democratic professional inclusion of teachers as partners in decision-making, where partnership includes participation beyond that of an informant (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024; Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015). Teacher voice is thus a more robust concept than teacher agency or teacher participation.

Coincidentally, teacher voice complements the methodology where policy is viewed as a staged process. This process, described by Ball as policy enactments (Maguire et al., 2015), avoids the common practice of analyzing only the implementation of policy, thereby ignoring its creation and arrival at the people involved (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). A policy enactment views policy as a process, thereby allowing investigation into how the policy came to be and into the power and influence inherent to it (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). Utilizing this methodology, partners in policymaking can be investigated at various stages, including development, delivery, and implementation. Unfortunately, the inclusion of teacher voice is not well documented in the literature at any stage (Levinson et al., 2009; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017), but there are indications of the benefits of including teacher voice in policy.

Teacher voice is often legitimized through the union (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015), often called associations or federations in Canada, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF), for example. However, teacher unions can be limited in their scope to focus on collective bargaining of contracts and codes of professional conduct (Bascia, 2016; Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015). Because of this, a complete fulfillment of teacher voice includes both their union and individual teachers in decision-making. Saskatchewan has a long history of including teacher voice going back to at least the 1980s (Lyons, 2006; Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2016). At various times, active classroom teachers, representatives of the STF, the Ministry of Education, the School Boards Association, and other organizations have been brought together to improve curricula in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2016). Teachers would then vet the curriculum in their respective classrooms and would also be involved in introducing it to teachers across the province. This process meets the ideal definition of teacher voice as teachers are involved and active in the entirety of the policy enactment.

In addition to valuing democratic participation in itself, teacher voice in policy can make policy reform more effective and efficient. In two studies in Alberta, the inclusion of teacher voice in reform and in Professional Learning Committees found that reform was more effective and that there was also an increase in teacher motivation (Friesen et al., 1983; Riveros et al., 2012). These findings were corroborated by a study in Israel (Klein, 2016). Perhaps the strongest support for teacher voice comes from Finland, where high levels of teacher empowerment coincide with a much-lauded education system (Orlowski, 2016; Robertson, 2012; Sahlberg, 2013, 2015). Notably, the closest of these examples to Saskatchewan is two dated studies from Alberta. This article aims to help alleviate this gap in the literature.

Critical Policy Analysis

The example of historical inclusion of teacher voice in Saskatchewan models the three stages of policy necessary to the analysis, its development, delivery, and implementation. Policy can be divided into several different stages; however, a three-staged policy analysis is consistent with both Ball's concept of policy enactments (Maguire et al., 2015) and with critical research (Apple, 2019; Ball, 1993; Diem et al., 2019; Hyatt, 2013). Ball, however, envisioned the three stages to be: influence, development, and implementation. With no available data on influence and with teachers being the group of importance, implementation was separated into two stages (delivery and implementation) rather than the conceptualization of policy (influence and development). The development of policy encompasses the period from its inception, including the influences therein, to the completion of a policy document. Delivery, meanwhile, is where policy is interpreted and translated into action, often through professional development opportunities for teachers (Apple, 2019; Ball, 1993; Young et al., 2023).¹ Empowerment in policy delivery comes from the opportunity to interpret policy (Maguire et al., 2015). If educational policy is designed to reach students, then these actors are classroom teachers. Implementation is how the policy is realized in the classroom by teachers. Even though there are stages, it is important to note that policy enactments are not linear. The ESSP has cycles, for example, where outcomes are adjusted and

¹ Apple (2019) preferred the term distribution to describe the middle stage of critical policy analysis while Young et al. (2023) used policy enactment. This research used 'delivery' to better describe the interpretation of policy and not be confused with Ball's (1993) concept of enactments.

initiatives are included to achieve those outcomes. This means that the stages of the policy are ongoing and overlapping over the duration of the ESSP.

At each stage, analysis determined the inclusion or exclusion of teacher voice. Because the result of the development of policy is a document, a document analysis is necessary for the development stage. Critical discourse analysis was the analytical method, and it used inductive and deductive coding (Hahn, 2008), a process consistent with critical policy analysis (Rogers et al., 2016). The documents were coded inductively, looking for any mention of teachers or their union, the STF. Sections of the documents were particularly scrutinized where groups or individuals were cited as contributors or leaders of the policy. The analysis of the qualitative teacher interviews was coded in the same way, using questions directly asking for involvement at each stage of policy. Deductive coding then sought to discover themes related to the research questions.

Participants were recruited by a purposeful snowball sampling. Contacts of the researcher and the supervising professor were used in several school divisions to invite potential participants from the school of the contact. The broad sample of elementary and high school teachers in both rural and urban schools was designed to discover commonalities across public education in Saskatchewan. This was particularly challenging given that recruitment and interviews occurred over the lockdown period of COVID-19 in 2020. Conclusions cannot be made from 11 voices; rather, they can humanize, add to, or refute findings of the document analysis. Critical policy analysis was thus used to investigate teacher voice (or lack thereof) at each stage of policy using both documents and teacher interviews in the quest to better illuminate the power dynamics in the Saskatchewan public education system.

Situating the Researcher

My primary interest in this topic developed from my experiences as a high school teacher in rural Saskatchewan. I had been a high school teacher well before the implementation of the ESSP and have continued in the same job since. As a postgraduate student before the COVID-19 pandemic, I recall reflecting upon the policy and finding its arrival curious, as I could not recall consultation or information about its development. My dissertation aimed to satisfy this curiosity - was the delivery and implementation of the ESSP unique to me, or was it a province-wide phenomenon? To situate myself on a personal level, I am a white male who understands that I am more typical of the dominant group in respect to critical research (Vandenberg & Hall, 2011). Nevertheless, I am attempting to be clear that the critical element of this research was to analyze the power relationships between partners in public education, and I tried not to overstep this scope.

Searching for Teacher Voice

Teacher voice is the democratic inclusion of classroom teachers and their union in decision-making in public education (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015). The search for teacher voice was both a direct and indirect process. To discover the inclusion of teacher voice was direct. Documents and transcripts were analyzed for mention of teachers, their union (the STF), or for personal inclusion in the ESSP. The absence or exclusion of teachers was more indirect. Where groups or individuals were included in decision-making or leadership, the absence of teachers or the STF is not explicit but is determined to be the exclusion of teacher voice.

Document Analysis

The specific documents analyzed for the inclusion or exclusion of teacher voice were:

- ESSP Matrix Cycles 1–4
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education Annual Reports 2014–2019
- Educational Governance Review Report 2016
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and SSBA Press Release 2014
- STF Open Letters to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education 2014, 2017

The ESSP Matrix cycles were the policy documents but included no background information (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014b, 2015b, 2016b, 2017b). They were written as outcome targets that did not include a description of their development or their results. The press release (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014c), STF Open Letters (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2014, 2017), and the Educational Governance Review Report (Perrins, 2016) shed light on the development of the ESSP while the Annual Reports presented the results of the policy and illuminated changes to leadership and decision-making (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014a, 2015a, 2016a, 2017a, 2018, 2019a).

Qualitative Interviews with Teachers

To gain a broad perspective on teacher voice, 11 elementary and secondary teachers from a combination of rural and urban schools were interviewed for the research. The variety of roles and schools added to the reliability of the analysis. Potential recruits in school leadership, including administration and union roles, were excluded because of the power differential that is inherent to critical research. For example, school or division administration may have different responsibilities under the ESSP than those of classroom teachers. Meanwhile, union leadership with the STF may lend itself to a stronger bias toward teacher voice. Three participants had additional but insignificant leadership roles, and none had a role with the STF. School administration duties were held for two teachers, but only at the end of the time period of the ESSP.

The positionality of the researcher, then, was also of consequence to critical research. I was a classroom teacher interviewing classroom teachers, a balanced relationship (Plas & Kvale, 1996). For research looking at power relationships, it is important to be aware of them in the research process as well, and not have a direct power relationship between the researcher and participants. The benefits are similar to those that protect anonymity; participants are free to express themselves freely (Plas & Kvale, 1996). Consequently, transcripts were scrubbed of identifiers such as names, schools, and school divisions. Pseudonyms and a minimal amount of background information are in the chart below. This information is important for the reader to provide context for the comments used in the analysis. In Saskatchewan, Saskatoon and Regina are the only areas considered urban, while rural is used for everyone outside of the two cities. North Saskatchewan is also often a separate region in Saskatchewan but was not used in this study.

Pseudonym	Population Centre	School Level
Charlie	urban	kindergarten
Dwayne	urban	elementary
Jordan	rural	secondary
Lila	urban	elementary
Max	urban	elementary
Molly	rural	elementary

Rene	rural	secondary
Sandy	rural	kindergarten
Scotty	urban	secondary
Taylor	rural	elementary
Terry	urban	secondary

Teacher Voice in Policy

Teacher voice was determined by a combination of the document analysis and analysis of the transcripts of teacher interviews. The document analysis provided evidence of teacher inclusion in the development of policy, and teachers commented on the delivery and implementation of the ESSP. Participants were also instrumental in supporting the findings of the document analysis. In short, no participants felt included in the ESSP beyond some control once the policy reached their classrooms. The document analysis is in the next subsection, followed by the analysis of teacher interviews and conclusions, respectively.

Document Analysis

The analysis for teacher voice in the documents sought any mention of teachers or the STF. The principal document, the ESSP, was the product of those involved in its development and should have provided the strongest evidence of inclusion of the voice of all the partners included in its development. However, the policy was presented as a list of outcomes and strategies or “hoshins” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2014b). Therefore, Saskatchewan Ministry of Education Annual Reports, press releases, and other related documents were analyzed for the inclusion of teacher voice.

After coding, two groups were central to the creation and leadership of the ESSP: the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and the senior administration of school divisions. Together, they created the outcomes and were represented on the Provincial Leadership Team, responsible for the outcomes as the policy was implemented. First Nations and Metis representatives were added to leadership groups after the initial implementation of the policy, primarily involved in the leadership of the First Nations Metis academic improvement outcome.

The coding revealed only two instances where teachers were mentioned in the ESSP and related documents. Both comments placed them at the implementation stage and not with development or on leadership teams. The first introduced a resource that teachers were to be able to use for an outcome, and the second was that they were needed for their skills in the classroom (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). These references placed teachers as employees or labour responsible for implementing the policy, because they included no reference to voice or leadership (Plas & Kvale, 1996; Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015). The STF was not mentioned in the ESSP. The annual Government reports and press releases complement the ESSP to provide a larger picture and similarly lack any reference to teachers or the STF.

The STF, however, had two documents that addressed the ESSP directly. In 2014 and 2017, they published letters that they had written to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education on the STF website. The STF (2014) stated:

Lack of early and meaningful engagement with teachers and other stakeholders outside the Ministry of Education and school division leadership has left the impression of another

top-down initiative. In some instances, this has been exacerbated by the manner in which the draft plan has been communicated at the school level as a fait accompli during the feedback phase. (p. 2)

In 2017, they reiterated this concern that “teachers are still not present in significant and meaningful ways in all levels of the planning process” (Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, 2017, p. 6).

In the ESSP, there was an absence of teacher voice, which was confirmed by the STF. Hence, teacher voice was excluded from the development stage of policy. However, even if the union was left out of the development of the ESSP, teachers as individuals may have been involved in policy enactment. The teacher interviews did, however, help illustrate the STF statements.

Teacher Interviews

Teacher participants were asked if they were included in the creation of the ESSP (development), any professional development and in its initial presentation to teachers (delivery), and to describe how it was realized in their respective classrooms (implementation). Moreover, they were asked to describe how teacher voice would look in the ESSP. Their responses were coded and analyzed to discover their perceptions of inclusion or lack thereof. The testimony of 11 participants was not intended to be conclusive for the inclusion or exclusion of teachers in the ESSP. Rather, their experiences give a view into individual classrooms when analyzing a policy that affects all public schools and classes.

Connecting the document analysis and the development stage, none of the teacher participants were involved in the creation of the ESSP, and all 11 expressed their desire to be included in its development. These responses reflected the findings in the document analysis that teachers were excluded. Nevertheless, when asked to expand upon what participation may entail, teacher participants gave examples of inclusion of voice, such as in surveys, and noted that teachers can make policy more effective. “Dwayne” encapsulated the perspective of the teacher participants: “ultimately, the goals we follow are the ones that we create as teachers at the school level. For a government to set arbitrary goals, I don't know that that has any bearing on anything.” Increased effectiveness of policy from the inclusion of teachers is reflected here, where policy was deemed arbitrary (Friesen et al., 1983; Klein, 2016; Riveros et al., 2012). Surveys are examples of teacher participation (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024), but inclusion in goal setting would be empowering and would be considered teacher voice.

The middle stage of policy, delivery, is how teachers interpret the policy and plan their implementation. Accordingly, teacher participants were asked to describe their introduction to the ESSP and their involvement in professional development to achieve the outcomes. Six of the participants mentioned staff meetings at the start of the year and activities using the hoshins at that meeting. “Sandy”: “Well, we had our admin come to our first meeting with these papers. With these, what do they call them? Hoshins?” This short quote noted that the administration led the initial professional development, as well as expressing some confusion about the policy. None of the teachers were involved in the professional development or in leading the activities that prepared them to implement the ESSP.

In summary, the delivery of the ESSP mirrored the perceptions of teacher voice in policy development - most teachers learned of the policy at their respective schools, not before, therefore they did not have influence on its arrival and presentation to teachers. The hoshin activity was

mentioned across schools and school divisions by the six teacher participants. There was activity on the outcomes of the ESSP, but the activity was prescribed. Teacher inclusion in an activity does give them some voice in its interpretation, but a lack of leadership limits this influence. Therefore, there is evidence of teacher participation, and if the activity led to changing the ESSP for the school, then there would be teacher agency. However, since the activity was prescribed, these experiences fall short of the teacher voice.

Policy implementation is often more complex for analyzing teacher voice because policy can be presented as a *fait accompli* – major decisions have already been made (Ball, 1993). However, policy can be prescriptive and controlling, or it can be flexible, thereby allowing teachers freedom of choice (Ball, 1993). For teachers, flexibility means that they can have power even after the policy has been developed and delivered. For example, if a teacher can manipulate policy when it is to be implemented into their practice or classroom, they are deemed to have a degree of control, also known as teacher agency (Dunn, 2018; Priestley et al., 2015). Moreover, if they find that the policy adds to their ability to help students learn, then the policy is perceived to make teaching and learning more effective. However, teacher agency does not fulfil the terms of teacher voice. If teachers can choose to reject a policy or change the outcome itself, then they have voice. Adaptation or rejection of policies is an indicator of control; hence, they are deemed to be indicators of democratic professionalism, teacher voice (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015).

Five teachers who responded were deemed to be resisting the ESSP and demonstrated some empowerment in that resistance. Resistance was direct in “Rene’s” experience: “It was not relevant to the teaching in my classroom in any way, shape, or form.” “Sandy” was less direct but also resistant: “But there’s always one who doesn’t follow the plan. That’s usually me because it is not feasible to do the writing that the division has planned.” “Charlie” expressed a passive resistance: “For my own classroom, I don’t know if it’s really changed anything.” “Rene”, “Sandy”, and “Charlie” displayed levels of inaction on the ESSP, passive resistance.

“Charlie” was not just indifferent or resigned to the ESSP, but they preferred their own pedagogic practices based on research: “I do feel that there’s been a change in our classrooms and a lot of teachers are feeling this pressure to do more reading with their kindergartens and less play with the kindergartens.” Rather than the reading-intensive Early Years Outcome, “Charlie” chose to continue with play-based learning and thus rejected the policy.

“Max” discussed how policy was viewed when it was first introduced: “and I wonder if it’s because it doesn’t show that: is it working? Rather than pushing back anymore, you just look for the shortest way to get it done.” “Max” explained how and why policy can be ineffective when imposed upon the actors. Inclusion increases motivation, whereas “Max” explained that the imposition of policy resulted in minimal compliance, which does not lead to effective implementation (Friesen et al., 1983; Klein, 2016; Riveros et al., 2012).

Resistance is a form of power (Duarte & Brewer, 2019); however, it is being exercised against the ESSP and not as a provision of it. For example, “Charlie” focused on their own pedagogy, play-based learning, going against the pressure felt by other teachers of the Early Years Outcome. “Rene” and “Sandy” were more defiant, extolling the policy to be irrelevant to their practices. Irrelevance seemed to be felt by “Dwayne” and “Max,” who nevertheless complied with the strategies provided. There were thus examples of various levels of teacher agency under the ESSP: rejection, resistance, and compliance. These examples do not constitute teacher voice because they do not reject or resist the policy outcomes; rather, they oppose the strategies provided

for their respective classrooms. Adapting how policy is realized in the classroom is teacher agency (Dunn, 2018; Priestley et al., 2015).

Conversely, there were teacher participants who aligned with the ESSP. “Taylor” and “Jordan” found strategies to be useful, the *Saskatchewan Reads* program, for example. Other teacher participants, “Rene”, “Charlie”, “Max”, and “Sandy”, recognized that the outcomes themselves were not problematic, only how they were designed for schools. For example, “Rene” felt increasing graduation rates to be commendable, but the professional development was not relevant to their classes they taught.

The deductive coding discovered a positive emergent theme from the transcript analysis. From the ESSP outcome on improving academic outcomes for Indigenous students, teacher participants felt encouraged and motivated in its implementation. The main connected initiative, *Following their Voices* (FTV), aims to include Indigenous students’ voices in school decision-making. Teacher participants familiar with this initiative had only positive comments in their responses.

Conclusions

For teacher voice in Saskatchewan, the document analysis found two instances where teachers were mentioned. They were connected as recipients of the outcomes and were not connected alongside any partners in developing or leading the implementation and tracking of the policy. The STF was fully absent in the document analysis. Teacher voice was not included in the development of the ESSP.

In the transcript analysis, no teacher participants felt they had a voice in creating the ESSP. Teachers felt that their voice should be an important aspect of policy development; two participants understood that their inclusion would keep the ESSP relevant and effective. Lack of voice was tied to feelings of disengagement among teachers. Teacher participants provided a perspective that they would be productive partners in a policy enactment for its effectiveness and for student learning.

Teacher participants did not feel included at the policy delivery stage. Five participants described an introduction to the outcomes by an administrator-led activity before the start of the 2014-2015 school year, and none were involved in providing any professional development to prepare for the ESSP. The teacher participants described teacher participation where they were not empowered by the opportunity to interpret policy for others.

Teacher participants described agency at the implementation stage. Teachers had agency in that they could adapt or resist the ESSP to an extent. Nevertheless, resistance was likely to be a part of teachers’ professionalism rather than being afforded under the policy itself because it was limited to the classroom.

Nonetheless, there were outliers where teacher participants adopted or aligned with the ESSP. “Taylor”, for instance and discussed below, found a policy resource useful in their classroom. Accordingly, aligning with the ESSP demonstrated that the policy had flexibility and was not necessarily limiting teacher voice. Alignment occurred when a teacher agreed with the purpose of a policy or found the policy useful in their practice. Four teachers spoke of aligning with the ESSP. Examples of matching purpose and usefulness were both expressed. “Jordan” questioned how alignment worked for most teachers and if it signalled agency or resignation.

The emergent theme models the conclusion that can be learned from the eleven participants, the encouragement that follows the inclusion of voice. *Following their Voices* left the

teachers with positive feelings. At each stage of the policy analysis, participants were able to elucidate the negative effects of exclusions and the positives of inclusion or empowerment.

Considering Teachers as Partners in Education

Teacher participants discussed how to make policy more effective, and the findings, in general, can be applied to the current policy in Saskatchewan. Teachers are essential to school systems, and when their voice is included, policy effectiveness improves (Apple, 2019; Ball, 2017; Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015). From this study, it seemed teachers themselves understood this and were keen to improve learning for their students. Preferred pedagogies for reading and kindergarten could be promoted alongside existing models and strategies, for example.

When reflecting on the ESSP, teacher participants found that certain elements were not relevant or detrimental to their classrooms. For example, teacher participants familiar with the Early Years Outcome felt that the proposed strategies were more appropriate for older students. The Graduation Rates Outcome was described as redundant, off purpose, or requiring irrelevant professional development. Teacher voice could reduce these negative effects (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015) by advocating for teachers to decide the required amount of testing or providing them choice or leadership in professional development, thereby reducing time out of class and ensuring the relevancy of professional learning. Their experiences can help shape current and future planning for education in Saskatchewan.

Provincial Education Plan (PEP)

Recently, in Saskatchewan, a new provincial strategic plan has been put in place. In 2019, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education published the *Framework for a Provincial Education Plan 2020-2030* and the *Report of the Provincial Education Planning Team*. These documents detail the process and the groups involved in developing the *Provincial Education Plan 2020–2030* (PEP). Teachers have a voice in this iteration of policy through the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF). The amount of teacher voice in the PEP may be questionable. A footnote from the *Framework for a Provincial Education Plan 2020-2030* states:

The STF, while one of the planning partners, undertook a separate process of engagement through the Re-Imagine Education project. The STF submitted Education Re-Imagined: 12 Actions for Education to the Minister of Education on November 4, 2019. This work will inform the further development of the provincial education plan. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2019b, p. 2)

In that same document, the STF report was not included amongst a list of other foundational documents, which begs the question of the extent to which the work has been granted legitimacy.

With the inclusion of the STF, the PEP qualifies as including teacher voice; however, there needs to be clarity to determine if it meets the ideal of including both individual teachers and having teacher representation in decision-making as well. For example, STF is included as a planning partner, but the inclusion of individual teacher voices is unclear. Both the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and the STF conducted surveys for Saskatchewan residents to inform the policy. However, the STF report may not be included in the planning, and there is no clarity as to how teachers' responses were used in the version from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. In order to continue to meet the ideal definition of teacher voice in the later stages of policy (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015), teachers and the STF need to be included in the professional development required to implement the PEP.

At first glance, there are similarities and differences between the PEP and the ESSP. It remains a block of outcomes to be targeted, including an Indigenous outcome. However, there was a teacher consultation ahead of time regarding the availability of surveys. This ensured teacher participation. The inclusion of the STF confirms teacher voice, but the time of their inclusion is problematic. There are also new outcomes related to parent engagement and mental health, which are more complex to evaluate than academic outcomes. It may be too early with the PEP to see if they have learned from the ESSP, but we will see how all the outcomes progress, with or without teacher voice.

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