

# **Coordinating Policy Layers of School Fundraising in Toronto, Ontario, Canada: An Institutional Ethnography**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I report findings from an investigation into the politics and coordination of school fundraising in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Theoretically grounded in institutional ethnography and critical policy analysis, the study began from the standpoint of parents asked to give money to their children's school(s). I show how provincial and TDSB funding, parent involvement, fundraising, and school council policies organize parents' experience of school fundraising. I also explore how participating in fundraising enables parents to meet neoliberal expectations of a "good parent" and how through their efforts to secure advantages for their children, fundraising parents are accomplices in the privatization of public education. I conclude by discussing possibilities for intervention into the social organization of school fundraising in Toronto schools.

Published version:

Winton, S. (2019). Coordinating policy layers of school fundraising in Toronto, Ontario, Canada: An institutional ethnography. *Educational Policy*, 33(1), 44-66.

In the past year, my children have come home from school with requests to pay for pizza lunches, ski trips, drama performances, and much, much more. As a parent, I want my children to participate in these activities, but as a critical policy researcher, I am keenly aware of fundraising critics' argument that school fundraising efforts reproduce inequities between schools and communities (Winton, 2016). Every notice about a school fundraiser launches my family into a debate about whether or not to participate and the implications of our decision: how do we refuse without looking unsupportive of our school? Will the arts and sports programs continue if parents refuse to pay for them? Our

experiences raise a number of questions: Why are parents (and other caregivers<sup>1</sup>) asked to fundraise for public schools? Why do some parents who oppose school fundraising (like me) nevertheless participate? To answer these questions, I turned to institutional ethnography (IE) because this “alternate sociology” offers a way to examine the social world and explain how everyday experiences happen as they do (Campbell & Gregor, 2008; DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 16).

In this article, I report findings from an IE investigation into the politics and coordination of school fundraising in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The study was motivated by my own experiences as well as my desire to contribute new knowledge to the limited research on school fundraising in Toronto, Ontario, Canada and beyond (Milani & Winton, 2017). Young, Levin, and Wallin (2006) define politics as “the way each of us, whether individually or working with others, tries to make the kind of school, community, or society we want to have” (p. 70). These individual and collective efforts have variable effects on different groups and individuals. Fundraising is one way that many parents in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, try to make their schools into places they desire for their children. Theoretically grounded in institutional ethnography (IE) and critical policy analysis (CPA), my study started with the standpoint of parents invited to participate in school fundraising in an effort to explain how fundraising is organized beyond their worlds of experience.

I begin this article with an overview of ways middle-class parents appropriate education policy to benefit their own children and a review of existing knowledge and

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “parents” throughout the article but recognize that many children are cared for by adults other than, and in addition to, their parents. The social organization of fundraising I discuss may be applicable to many of these caregivers as well.

critiques of school fundraising. Next, I introduce and compare CPA and IE, the theoretical frameworks underlying my investigation and discuss previous research grounded in these perspectives. I then describe my methodological approach before presenting the findings of the study. I present key aspects of policies of the Ontario Ministry of Education ([OME] funding, parent involvement, fundraising, and school council policies) and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) that organize TDSB parents' experience of school fundraising and situate them within the broader neoliberal policy context. I conclude with a discussion of the contributions of the study, including possibilities for intervention into the social organization of school fundraising in the TDSB.

### **Parents, Fundraising and Inequality in Public Schools**

Researchers in Ontario, across Canada, and beyond have demonstrated various ways some middle-class parents exploit policy opportunities to provide their children with advantages in public schools. Milne and Aurini (2015), for example, demonstrated that higher-SES parents in Ontario use “discretionary spaces” in progressive discipline policy to negotiate and secure favorable punishments for their children. Yoon and Gulson (2010) showed that Anglophone middle-class parents in Vancouver, Canada, enact school choice policy in ways that keep their children away from “multilingual others” and provide them with advantages associated with speaking the country's official languages. School fundraising is another practice that affluent parents take up to provide their children with materials, opportunities, and other advantages not available to all children (People for Education ([P4E], 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2016).

While fundraising is common in Canadian and American public schools, there is a paucity of academic scholarship on the phenomenon. Researchers in the USA and Canada (e.g., Brent & Lunden, 2009; Pistiolis, 2012) have documented fundraising strategies and goods and services purchased with fundraised dollars. Many scholars of school fundraising are critical of the practice, arguing that it reproduces class inequalities. Posey-Maddox (2013, 2016), for example, demonstrated that fundraising in Chicago public schools exacerbates disparities in resources and educational opportunities between and within districts and schools and can also marginalize parents with low-incomes within schools. Sattem's (2007) study of fundraising in Oregon's public schools showed that parents in wealthy neighbourhoods have social and cultural competencies that enable them to raise funds that families in low income neighbourhoods do not possess. My own research with Milani (Milani & Winton, 2017) concluded Ontario's school fundraising policy and school fundraising practices in public schools undermine critical democracy.

Some of the strongest critiques of school fundraising come from news journalists and non-government organizations. In Ontario, reports by Social Planning Toronto (2011), P4E (2013), and news journalists (e.g., Winsa, 2015) show that amounts raised for schools through fundraising vary according to families' income levels. Winsa (2015), for example, showed that TDSB schools with families with annual income levels of at least \$200,000 collected more than \$500 per student in the 2012/13 school year while families with an annual income of about \$40,000 or less only raised an average of \$100 per student. Knowledge of school fundraising in the TDSB is limited to the disparate amounts raised by individual schools and select educational outcomes for students

(Pizzoferrato, 2014). My study adds new knowledge about the social relations that organize parents' experience of school fundraising in the TDSB.

### **Critical Policy Analysis & Institutional Ethnography**

Scholars who locate their work in the field of CPA in education use a range of theoretical frameworks and methods in their efforts to understand how education policies challenge or sustain inequality. These scholars are generally interested in some or all of the following concerns: differences between policy rhetoric and reality; a policy's roots and its development; the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge in policy as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers"; social stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of privilege and inequality; and the nature of engagement in or resistance to policy of various groups (Diem, Young, Welton, Mansfield & Lee, 2014). CPA scholars recognize that policy is inherently political because it involves making choices about how to organize schools, whose knowledge is mobilized, and which goals are pursued. Like many critical policy scholars, I view my work as part of a political project grounded in a commitment to enhancing equity, and I engage IE to help achieve this goal.

Institutional ethnographers understand the social world as arising in people's everyday activities, activities that are coordinated through social relations beyond individuals' local experiences. IE is the process of inquiry these researchers use to discover how the social world is organized to produce knowledge that can be used by *"people whose everyday activities are being organized against their own interests"* (emphasis in original, Rankin, 2017, p. 1; Smith, 2005, 2006). Institutional

ethnographers, like critical policy researchers, are interested in understanding how local actions are impacted by texts and other influences external to a local site and the implications for social relations and inequality. An important difference between IE and many CPA researchers, however, is how they begin to research these connections. Critical policy researchers often begin with theory grounded in academic literature, identify a specific policy, and ask “how is this policy enacted in this site?” or “why do people enact this policy as they do?”. An institutional ethnographer, however, begins with an individual’s experience and asks “how is this person’s experience organized extra-locally?” That is, the goal of an IE investigation is to discover how people’s experiences are coordinated by social relations that exist beyond individuals’ everyday worlds (Smith, 2005) rather than to generate theory. Smith (2005) calls the translocal social relations that coordinate people’s everyday experience *ruling relations* and describes them as “that extraordinary yet ordinary complex of relations that are textually mediated, that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives – the corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and professional discourses, mass media, and the complex of relations that interconnect them” (p. 10). Knowledge of how ruling relations organize the social world is a prerequisite to knowing how to challenge and change them so that they meet the needs and interests of marginalized people rather than the ruling class (Deveau, 2009).

IE researchers define institutions as “clusters of text-mediated relations organized around specific ruling functions” (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 17). To study the institution of education, then, is to study the complex of ruling relations that coordinate people’s actions and experiences across numerous sites, including schools, school boards,

government offices, and families. Ruling relations are textually-mediated; thus, texts play a key role in ruling and organizing the social world. A text “as a material presence (paper, electronic and so on) is produced, read (watched, listened to) in particular local settings by particular people. People’s activities in the local settings are in this way connected into social relations organized by the text.” (Smith, 2001, p. 164). Texts (including policies) and text-mediated practices connect people in one site to unknown people in other sites. They are the traces of ruling relations because they aim to standardize what people do and know in ways that are recognizable to the institution. People activate texts when engaging and responding to them in some way (Smith, 2005). Texts do not *determine* what people do but they exert control and can produce generalizing effects as people take up or otherwise respond to them (Smith, 2005).

Many critical policy scholars share institutional ethnographers’ interest in understanding how policy texts impact what people do and, like institutional ethnographic researchers, investigate policy discourses. Ball (1994), for example, sees policy texts as both text and as discourse. However, unlike those researchers who identify discourses in a text and then treat them as phenomena that exist external to actual people, IE researchers always maintain their focus on the individuals that are speaking, reading, and otherwise engaging with them . Further, while both CPA and IE are concerned with how policy texts influence individuals’ work, the definitions of work and text adopted by institutional ethnographers are much broader than those typically adopted by CPA researchers. In IE, work includes anything a person does that takes time, is done intentionally, and takes effort. Thus, an IE investigation of a person’s work undertaken to

meet institutional expectations may include textually-mediated activities not typically examined in policy research.

A handful of scholars have used IE in critical policy research to show how education policies organize educators' and parents' work in ways that engage them in the reproduction of inequalities and inequities in public education. Cormack and Comber (2013), for example, used CPA and IE to reveal how Australia's new high-stakes testing organized teachers' and a principal's work in a rural school. Their study demonstrates that educators oriented their talk, leadership, and pedagogical practices to the terms and expectations of the tests, changes that strengthened educators' deficit view of poor students and their families. Andre-Bechely (2005) investigated how parents in California engage in a district's school choice processes. Her study demonstrated that the policy requires parents to make choices for their own children that produces negative outcomes for other people's children and thus demands "parents' complicity in the continuing inequities and inequalities of schooling" (p. 271).

Cormack and Comber's (2013) and Andre-Bechely's (2005) studies demonstrate how policies produce generalizing effects, however, other studies using IE highlight how people resist or reinterpret policy texts and discourses. For example, Peacock, Lingard and Seller's (2014) study of university-based workers and student-equity policy group members in Australia shows how these groups each appropriated federal policy differently to meet their distinct local interests and, when it aligned with their goals, in ways that supported efforts to enhance equity for marginalized students. Examining parents, Nichols and Griffith (2009) show how parents' work in relation to their children's schooling in British Columbia, Canada, is organized by the province's



accountability policies. Importantly, they show that this is true even for parents who actively reject the policies and their discourses because parents must engage with these texts in order to reject them.

I build on the work of these and other critical policy scholars who use IE to investigate how policies impact equity. Like Andre-Bechely (2005), I am particularly interested in how parents' activities can implicate them in the reproduction of inequality in public schools.

### **Methodological Approach**

IE researchers' interest in discovering how the social world is organized leads them to examine two analytical sites: 1) the local setting where life is experienced by people; and 2) the translocal sites that are beyond individual's everyday experiences (Campbell & Gregor, 2008). The investigation of the local setting begins from a person's embodied experience and involves the identification of a "puzzle" or a rupture between what the person knows from their life in the everyday world and objective knowledge used to control society (G. Smith, 1990). As I mentioned above, my knowledge of the ways school fundraising perpetuates inequities between schools conflicts with messages from my sons' school which present fundraising as an important way for parents to support their schools and children's academic success. My study began from the standpoint of an "everyday parent" (i.e., a parent that is not involved in organizing school fundraising initiatives) of children in a public school system in Toronto, Ontario called and compelled to participate in school fundraising. I asked: *how is school fundraising in Toronto socially organized?*

I have collected and analyzed data concurrently since initiating the study in June 2016 while attending a workshop on IE led by Dorothy Smith and Susan Turner. They encouraged me to begin my project by writing everything I knew about fundraising from my own experience as a parent and former elementary school teacher. I reviewed my notes and a few fundraising notices I had received and identified references to institutional texts and practices they contained. In September 2016, I began systematically collecting texts related to school fundraising that I received as a parent. These texts came to me through email notices, back-to-school packages, school newsletters, and social media posts. I encountered additional texts as I walked through my sons' school, shopped in my neighbourhood, and read our local newspaper. I was not yet sure of the direction my study would take, but I continued to read and analyze the texts I gathered to identify discourses and references to institutional roles, work processes and other texts they contained. I began collecting a second set of texts based on my findings of the on-going analysis of this first set. The second set included official and unofficial policy documents produced by the TDSB and the OME. I limited my focus on the TDSB because my sons' school is in this school district. While variations between texts produced by different school boards exist, all of Ontario's 72 public school boards must work within the laws and policies of Ontario's government, including its Ministry of Education.

I also conducted interviews with 3 parents who are also members of school councils (Carol, Janine, Mickey), a parent who used to organize book fair fundraisers (Mary), a teacher (Susan), 2 retired principals (Neil and Lisa), and a current central

administrator (Mary Claire)<sup>2</sup>; all the participants are or were (prior to retirement) affiliated with the TDSB. I asked participants to describe their fundraising work, how they learned it, and how they make decisions about what to do. The primary purposes of interviews in IE are to learn about the institutional relations that organize the interviewee's experience (rather than the subjective beliefs, feelings, or thoughts of the interviewee) and to inform the next steps in the inquiry (DeVault and McCoy, 2006). The aim is *not* to generalize about a group of people interviewed but rather “to find and describe social processes that have generalizing effects” (DeVault and McCoy, 2006, p. 18). During the interviews, I listened for participants' explicit references to texts and asked them to tell me what the texts direct them to do. Later, when reviewing transcripts of the interviews, I identified other organizing institutional texts in the participants' talk and tracked them down, where possible. Participants also often suggested other people I might talk to that could inform my understanding, and I invited them to participate in the study.

Finally, I gained additional knowledge about fundraising processes by attending meetings about fundraising and inequities in schools hosted by school trustees and local social planning councils, participating in meetings and events at my sons' school, visiting fundraising events in my neighbourhood schools, and talking to people informally throughout the 2016-2017 school year. I took notes and photographs of school fundraising events when possible to record what I observed. I collected handouts provided by speakers at some of the meetings. I also gathered official minutes from ward

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<sup>2</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms

and school council meetings, and I reviewed media articles, reports, and the extant academic literature collected in my previous research (Winton, 2016; Winton & Milani, 2017).

Rankin (2017) explains that analysis in IE is “reflexive, iterative, political, and relentlessly empirical...[it] develops as one thinks and writes” (p. 10). I used two main analytical strategies to construct an institutional ethnographic account of how school fundraising is socially organized for the everyday parent (i.e., parents not involved with organizing school fundraising initiatives) of children in the TDSB. The first strategy was mapping. I began by placing the “everyday parent” on the map and used lines to identify and connect the institutional texts and their material forms to site of the “everyday parent” to show the ruling relations that organize the parent’s everyday experience (Rankin, 2017). The second analytical strategy I used was indexing. Indexing involves identifying recurring practices, discourses, or text while keeping the materiality of the data intact rather than grouping data into thematic categories (Rankin, 2017). For example, while reading transcripts from interviews with participants, I indexed practices and texts that addressed “accounting procedures for fundraised dollars” and “education funding”. Then, guided by concerns of CPA (Diem et al., 2014), I considered the map and indexed data and asked: who benefits from the way fundraising is socially organized in the TDSB? Who loses? How? What effects does the organization of fundraising in the TDSB have on relationships of privilege and inequality?

## **Findings & Discussion**

Like many jurisdictions around the world, Ontario's governments since the 1990s have instituted numerous policies and practices that reflect, contain, and mobilize neoliberal values and discourses (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; Sattler, 2012). These policies and discourses advocate systems of governance that encourage institutions and individuals to embrace market norms and claim that market principals should organize social, economic, and political spheres (Brown, 2006; Connell, 2010; Larner, 2000). They construct individuals as rational actors who make informed choices and thus are responsible for the outcomes of the choices they make. A key role for governments, according to neoliberal rationality, is to facilitate market conditions, attitudes, and behaviour (Brown, 2006; Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017). Rather than provide social services directly, governments instead increase involvement of private actors in public program delivery, advocate reduced government funding of social programs, and place more responsibility on individuals to achieve social and economic outcomes (Landeros, 2011). Successive governments in Ontario have taken up this new function and over the past few decades have introduced policies that advocate new roles for government, school districts, and parents. Policy changes introduced by the Progressive Conservative government between 1995 and 2003 had, and continue to have, a dramatic impact on public education in the province.

Reforms introduced in the *Education Quality Improvement Act* in 1997, in particular, continue to play a key role in contemporary school fundraising practices in the TDSB. This *Act*, introduced alongside broader public spending cuts, included a new approach to funding the province's public schools. Prior to this change, public school boards could top up funds they received from the provincial government by drawing from

their local property tax base. This arrangement particularly benefitted public boards in urban centres (Bedard & Lawton, 2000). Under the new law, the provincial government took exclusive control over how much tax could be raised locally, determined school board budgets, and funded each board with grants. The law also introduced new constraints on education spending: public funds could be used only to pay for only classroom-related expenses. The impact of the funding changes varied across boards, but urban boards and their schools, especially those in the TDSB, were particularly hard hit (MacKenzie, 2015; 2017). Many parents and educators across the province claimed the funding changes left their schools drastically underfunded and placed new demands on parents to fundraise (Coyle, 2001; Gidney, 1999). Although adjustments have been made to the formula used to determine funding over the past two decades, some observers (e.g., Mackenzie, 2015, 2017; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2017) argue there are on-going problems with the funding formula that leave some aspects of public education inadequately funded.

Indeed, the discourse that fundraising is necessary is dominant in Ontario (Winton, 2016). Janine, a parent I interviewed, explained why she leads and participates in fundraising initiatives at her school:

[T]he government doesn't supply enough funding for schools... Like our kids don't even have textbooks, okay? I find that appalling. It's photocopied sheets and papers. .... and it's all "sorry, there's no money. there's no money. there's no money"... this is why we fundraise ....

Like Janine, the teacher I spoke with, Susan, believes education funding is inadequate. She stated that "to properly fund a classroom to learn the way that I think kids need to

learn, there's no way that money exists." Mary Claire, a principal, recognizes that teachers and the media mobilize this idea. She shared, "[Parents will] be talking to the teachers and the teachers will say something like, 'Oh, this is, you know, the board doesn't fund [it].' And then, and then, the *Toronto Star* writes articles about how, you know, schools are starving."

In the following section I discuss key aspects of three mutually reinforcing and overlapping policies that organize TDSB parents' experience of fundraising in their children's schools: parent involvement, fundraising, and school council policies.

### ***Parent Involvement***

Parent engagement matters. Study after study has shown us that student achievement improves when parents play an active role in their children's education, and that good schools become even better schools when parents are involved. (OME, 2011, para. 1)

While parents have long been part of their children's schooling, expectations for their involvement have changed and intensified under neoliberal rationality. Davies and Bansel (2007) explain that neoliberal subjects' "desires, hopes, ideals and fears have been shaped in such a way that they desire to be morally worthy, responsabilized individuals, who, as successful entrepreneurs, can produce the best for themselves and their families" (p. 251). According to this logic, parents are responsible for their children's success or failure (Dudley-Marling, 2001).

In Ontario, government texts, such as the OME's *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* (OME, 2010), consistently emphasize parents' responsibility for their children's success. The government's tip sheet, *Parents*

*Matter*, suggests various ways parents can be involved and explains: “As a parent, you have a strong influence on your children’s attitudes toward school learning and future success” (OME, 2016, p.1). TDSB texts similarly call upon parents to be engaged in their children’s education because of its benefits to students. The board’s “How to Get Involved” web page also links supporting students to supporting schools. It explains: “Parents and community members play a very important role in ensuring the success of our schools and students. There are a variety of ways that you can get involved and contribute to your school community” (TDSB, 2014). The Principal’s Message in my sons’ school September newsletter restates this idea and suggests how parents should participate:

[School Name] values parent involvement. Teachers will keep you informed of classroom activities and provide on-going communication when necessary. As well, please feel free to connect with your child’s teacher to share your ideas on how to help your child be more successful, or with any concerns. Thank you for helping us make [School Name] such a great place to learn and grow.

In this quote, the principal reproduces the Ontario government’s and TDSB’s message that parents share responsibility for their children’s success and informs them of ways they can meet their responsibility.

### ***School Fundraising***

Principals, the TDSB, and the provincial government also endorse fundraising as a way parents can be involved, help their children be successful, and support their schools. Ontario’s *Fundraising Guideline* (OME, 2012) states:



The province recognizes that parents and communities may choose to support their schools through fundraising activities. These activities have the potential to enrich the experience of our students, but also help build a broader sense of community outside school hours. Funds can be raised for a particular school or on a board level – both have the potential to enhance parent engagement and contribute to a student’s educational experience. (p. 1)

This text goes on to say that “Funds raised for school purposes: should not be used to replace public funding for education; and should not be used to support items funded through provincial grants, such as classroom learning materials, textbooks and repairs or for capital projects that significantly increase operating costs” (OME, 2012, p.1).

However, exactly what public funding *should* provide to all schools remains unclear, and as I discuss below, this ambiguity enables parents and educators to adopt variable and self-serving definitions of goods that can be purchased with fundraised dollars.

The TDSB adopted its first fundraising policy in 2001, long before the OME’s *Fundraising Guideline*. This policy text defines fundraising as a “local school activity that is a collaborative effort among parents, students, school staff and the school community to raise funds to enhance the school program and support school initiatives.” (TDSB, 2003, p. 1). The board’s Business Development office produces numerous texts to support and regulate school fundraising efforts, including an annual fundraising guide, a list of approved vendors for fundraising, and a guide for writing successful grant applications. Texts produced by the TDSB since 2012, including tweets, fundraising webpages, and annual fundraising guides reproduce the government’s assertion that fundraising should not be used to pay for materials required for students to learn

curriculum expectations. The TDSB's 2016-2017 *Fundraising Guide*, for example, states:

...it is not the responsibility of parents or school communities to raise funds for basic educational requirements, but rather that school communities may raise funds to enhance programs and support school/student initiatives.

(TDSB, 2016, p.1)

This quote, the TDSB's policy definition of fundraising, and the quote above from the OME's *Fundraising Guideline* state that fundraised dollars can be used to purchase materials or opportunities that "enhance" or "enrich" students' school experiences. References to using funds for these purposes are also present in the notices I received from the school council at my sons' school (the school council is an advisory body comprised mainly of parents; its role in school fundraising will be discussed in detail below). The order forms for buying pizza on designated days, for example, say: "Profits raised are used by the School Council to enhance student education..." Similarly, an invitation to make a donation to the school council states: "All funds raised support enrichment programming for all students". The council's use of the words "enhance" and "enrichment programming" demonstrate its alignment with TDSB and government fundraising policies while justifying its requests to parents.

What constitutes basic/required and enhanced educational materials has been a subject of debate between the Ontario government and critics of its fundraising policy in the province since 2005 (Winton, 2016). In 2011, after many years of promising to address growing concerns that fundraising was undermining Ontario public education's commitment to equal opportunity for all students, the OME finally released a draft of the first provincial *Fundraising Guideline*. Groups and individuals wary of intensifying

fundraising in schools called upon the government to specify the materials, resources and programs that should be available to all students in the province. The final *Fundraising Guideline*, introduced in 2012, states that “Funds raised for school purposes are to be used to complement, not replace, public funding for education” (p. 4) and lists examples of acceptable and unacceptable uses of fundraised dollars. However, the lists are vague and incomplete, thus creating opportunities for educators and parents to impose their own definitions of what is required and what is complementary in ways that suit their interests.

This flexibility was acknowledged by one of the retired principals I interviewed. When I asked whether musical instruments are required or enhanced materials she explained: “the Board will tell you very clearly, I guess if you’re suggesting it’s a need and it’s part of your curriculum, then you should be paying for it out of your budget.” However, the TDSB permits schools to compete for and receive grants to fund the purchase of musical instruments, and the *Fundraising Guideline*, lists “*extracurricular band equipment*” (my emphasis, OME, 2012, p. 4) as an acceptable item to purchase using fundraised dollars, thus reinforcing the principal’s point that the same items can be defined variously as an extra or an essential.

A principal’s ability to define an item or opportunity as essential or not is important because both TDSB’s and OME’s fundraising policies ascribe a key role to school principals. These texts state that the principal must approve all school fundraising activities. While acknowledging that this is true, the principals I spoke with also said that how they engage with fundraising is influenced by the affluence of the school community. In schools in which the students are from families with low incomes,

principals may decide not to pursue fundraising to the same extent or in the same ways in school communities with higher incomes. Lisa, a retired principal, explained: “when you're struggling to raise \$2,000, \$3,000, \$4,000 a year... You might throw the chocolates out there because they're the easiest thing to do, magazines in certain areas, the ice-cream cookies, whatever, uh, that's the typical kind of fundraising when you're just struggling to raise some dollars”. She explained further: “it depends on the social economic[s] of your group. So, yes, in some areas where I could only raise \$3,000, I wouldn't have put a technology plan together for my parents.”

Neil similarly described how the affluence of the school community impacted his experience with fundraising in schools. Speaking about the first school he worked as principal, Neil explained:

when I was first there ... there was no computer lab of any kind... And, I, you know...I mentioned that at our school council meeting and BOOM...you know, you just mention something and within three weeks all of a sudden we had \$30,000 to buy [them].

Neil contrasted this experience to fundraising for another of his schools, this one in an area with many poor families. In this second school, he formed a community association external to the school so he could solicit money from diverse sources that as a school principal he could not access. He explained: “That was the job. It was like two jobs. Yeah, I had the principal's job, and I had that job. That job was in the evening and the principal's job was during the day. And, that's how it was for about two years.” The community association ultimately donated the funds back to the TDSB so they could be used to improve the school's outdoor facilities. Lisa and Neil's varying descriptions of

their work as school principals illustrate how a school community's affluence impacts administrative decisions and fundraising work. They also highlight the principal as a key actor in determining local school fundraising policy enactment and parents' local experiences of school fundraising.

While affluent parent communities might simplify fundraising, they can also create challenges for principals who wish to change existing practices. Mary Claire explained why she allowed book fairs to be held at one of her schools with affluent parents despite her disapproval of them: "Oh, my God. The parents would call the trustee. [Laughs]. I can just hear it now. Oh, "Principal Bans Book Fairs". I can just see it on the cover of *The [Toronto] Star*. No, no, no, no, no." This quote demonstrates how Mary Claire perceived the limits of her ability to disrupt a popular fundraising initiative due to anticipated parent response despite institutional policy that gives her the authority to do so. It also suggests a political tradeoff: allowing parents keen to fundraise to do so is a way for principals to maintain parental support.

Later in our conversation Mary Claire spoke of her need to "pick her battles" with the middle-class parents who wanted to fundraise in the school. While she allowed them to continue fundraising, she changed the process for determining how the funds were spent. She invited a few parents to be members of the school's budget committee where decisions about how to spend all money coming into the school, including fundraised dollars, were made. This strategy aligned with TDSB and OME policy texts that state principals should consult school councils to determine how to spend fundraised dollars. As this policy expectation and a number of quotes above suggest, school councils often (but not always and not exclusively) play a key role in fundraising initiatives in Ontario

schools. I turn now to how parent members of these organizational bodies organize parents' experiences with fundraising.

### ***School Councils***

According to Ontario Regulation 612/00, a school council is an advisory body to the school principal or board made up of a majority of parents. School councils were introduced in 1997 as part of the *Education Quality Improvement Act* and are mandatory in every publicly-funded school in Ontario. Along with fundraising and reinforcing schools' expectations at home, joining the school council is an institutionally sanctioned way for parents to be involved with their children's schooling. Both Janine (school council member) and Mary Claire (central TDSB administrator) noted in their interviews that is mostly women who join school councils.

While the purpose of school councils, according to Ontario Regulation 612/00, "is, through the active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents", the OME's (2001) *School Councils: A Guide for Members* explains that "school councils may decide to include fundraising as one of their priorities" (p. 3.3). The majority of school councils in the TDSB do fundraise (86%), and it is one of councils' most time-consuming activities (Erling, 2017). Some councils have formal fundraising leadership positions for parents (e.g., pizza lunch coordinator, carnival organizer, direct deposit program leader). Parent members may opt to apply for grants and/or solicit donations from people and organizations other than parents affiliated with the school. The work of parent fundraisers, including accounting and reporting procedures, is coordinated in part by Ontario Regulation 612/00, the *Fundraising Guideline* (OME, 2012), the TDSB's (2013)

*Procedures for School Council Funds* and other TDSB policy texts related to fundraising discussed above. Coordinating fundraising initiatives can be very time-consuming.

Janine, who coordinates book fairs, explained:

these roles, they are very, very demanding, like incredibly demanding, like I cannot tell you how many hours I've clocked in for... it's during the day, it's, it's not like someone could take off work and say "I'm sorry I'm volunteering".

The amount of time and other resources (such as access to computers, grant writing skills, facility with Ontario's official languages) parents need to organize fundraisers helps explain why the amounts raised by school councils vary widely between schools.

Many parents are hooked into school fundraising through the invitations to participate from parents leading fundraising initiatives on behalf of school councils. The requests may come through letters, newsletters, posters hanging at the school, email notices, social media postings, or direct appeals from school staff, school council members, other parents, and even one's own children. The school council at my sons' school sent home a letter that explains: "The [School Name] School Council has chosen to do fundraising. As a result, the School Council has been able to contribute funds to [School Name] to help pay for many extra items, programs and events that enhance the student experience". This quote references the option to fundraise highlighted in the OME's (2002) *School Councils: A Guide for Members* and the institutional language of using fundraised dollars to pay for extras and enhancements in schools.

Notably, school councils are not the only bodies that ask parents for money. Requests may also come from teachers or Home and School Associations (where they exist). Eight TDSB schools have external charities that fundraise for them (TDSB, 2017). These organizations do not report their fundraised revenue to the TDSB, and their

fundraising activities and purchases are difficult to track. External charities are generally affiliated with schools in affluent communities and are another way school fundraising varies by parents' affluence.

### **Neoliberalism, Fundraising, and the “Good Parent”**

Upon receiving a request to buy a product, donate cash, or take part in some other school fundraising initiative parents must decide if they will participate. Whether or not they can afford to contribute will, of course, inform their decisions. Parents' need to consider their economic situation brings into view various organizing institutions and ruling relations beyond the institution of education that intersect with it, including those related to health, income, labour, higher education, and costs of living (e.g., housing, food, utilities, transportation, etc.). An examination of all these relations is beyond the scope of this article, but I return here briefly to my earlier discussion of neoliberal policy expectations of parents and discuss how participating in fundraising enables parents who can afford to do so to meet institutional expectations, ideals of “good parenting”, and create schools they desire for their children.

My findings demonstrate that OME and TDSB policies call TDSB parents to support their children's success by becoming involved in their schools. While there is a wide range of ways parents may be involved, institutionally supported ways include joining the school council and engaging in school fundraising. Parents' participation on school councils enable schools and boards to meet this government policy mandate, while organizing and contributing to school fundraising enables parents who can afford to do so to address perceived shortfalls in funding and produce the schools they want for their children. Fundraised dollars are used to purchase playground equipment, library books,



computers, arts performances, yoga classes, field trips, Science workshops, team jerseys, and more (Winsa, 2015).

TDSB parents' desire to enhance their children's schools must be understood in the broader context of neoliberal policies and discourses that place responsibility for children's success in school, and more broadly, in a competitive society, on parents (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016; Dudley-Marling, 2001). In this context, the ability to provide their children with materials and opportunities perceived to be lacking yet necessary for success will appeal to parents desiring to achieve the neoliberal ideal. Scholars have shown that parents, especially affluent mothers, consider their children's achievements in school a reflection of their dedication and good parenting (e.g., Landeros, 2011). Griffith and Smith (2005) identified a dominant mothering discourse in Ontario that defines a good mother as one who subordinates the conditions of her life and unpaid labour to the needs of her children and their schooling. This discourse demands that a good mother look to experts to know what to do to meet their children's needs, and "*[a]bove all, it promotes the responsiveness of parenting practices to educational requirements*" (emphasis in original, Griffith & Smith, 2005, p. 40). Participating in school fundraising enables mothers (and involved fathers) of children in the TDSB to meet the expectations of this mothering discourse. However, through their efforts to support and secure advantages for their children in public schools, fundraising parents are accomplices in the privatization of public schools and help strengthen the notion of education as primarily a private good.

## **Conclusion**

While all schools in the board are subject to OME and TDSB fundraising, parent involvement, and school council policies, my IE investigation of the social organization of school fundraising in the TDSB shows that parents' local experiences are also impacted by the decisions and activities of the principal of their children's school, the choices and activities of parent members of the school council, and the affluence of the school's parent community. Principals leading schools located in low income communities may decide not to try to raise funds from parents or to raise only relatively modest amounts. Principals of schools with middle-class parents may find their decisions constrained as well: they may be unable or unwilling to stop or limit school fundraising because of concerns about pushback from parents who want to fundraise. Allowing parents keen to fundraise to do so is a way for principals to maintain parental support while improving the material and symbolic resources of the school.

Key concerns of CPA include identifying policy "winners" and "losers" and understanding how policies impact relationships of inequality and privilege (Diem et al., 2014). Engaging IE, I have demonstrated that the organization of fundraising in the TDSB disproportionately benefits middle-class parents and their children by enabling these parents to create the schooling experiences they desire for their children – experiences not available to all children – thus perpetuating social inequalities that exist outside the school. I have also revealed *how* this happens through texts and text-mediated practices.

My study's findings support critics of school fundraising in the TDSB who argue that the board's and OME's policies enable some students, predominantly those in schools in affluent neighbourhoods, to enjoy materials and opportunities not available to

all students (People for Education 2013; Social Planning Toronto, 2011). Fundraising critics' proposed solutions include: clarification of the materials considered "essential"; changes to the how board funding is determined; limiting, pooling and equitable redistribution of fundraised dollars; and a ban on school fundraising (Pizzoferrato, 2014; Social Planning Toronto, 2011). One of the shared purposes of CPA and IE is to identify possibilities for intervention in processes that disadvantage some groups of people while advantaging others. The findings of this study suggest that a ban on school fundraising is the only option that might address the inequities the practice perpetuates since a ban is the only option that addresses the pressure placed on parents to do whatever they can to ensure their children's success. A ban would also enable school councils to spend more time on priorities other than fundraising, relieve principals of pressure to support a practice they may believe to be problematic, reduce pressure on parents who cannot afford or do not wish to participate in fundraising, and affirm the Ontario government's commitment to equity in the province's public education system (OME, 2017). However, in the current climate of reduced public spending and increased privatization of public services in Ontario, an all-out ban seems unlikely. The findings of this study suggest at two alternative targets for intervening into fundraising practices at the local level: principals and school councils. Both principals and school councils have the option to say no to permitting and leading fundraising initiatives, although "good neoliberal parents" will need to be convinced that the school can provide everything students need to be successful at school and competitive in broader society before fundraising ceases in local schools.

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