

‘Broken Trust’ – A critical policy analysis of the difficulties faced by disabled intergenerational families seeking education and accommodation

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements..... | 3 |
| Abstract..... | 4 |
| Purpose | 5 |
| Methodology..... | 6 |
| Introduction | 8 |
| Vincent’s Education Journey..... | 10 |
| My Journey Through Education | 11 |
| Vincent’s Journey..... | 12 |
| The Individual Education Plan..... | 12 |
| The Diem et al. Analysis of the IEP..... | 17 |
| Breach of Trust..... | 24 |
| A Transition Without Real Support..... | 26 |
| The Diem et al. Analysis of the IEP Program Guide (2004)..... | 28 |
| Vincent and Neoliberal Expectation | 33 |
| My Journey..... | 35 |
| Trust – The Social Contract which underlines all interactions..... | 37 |
| Broken Trust – Exploitation of Parents of Disabled Students..... | 38 |
| The Diem et al., analysis of the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act..... | 42 |
| Transitioning and Accommodation – Seeking additional funds for support | 46 |
| Student Accommodation Policies – Failures and Acceptance | 46 |
| The Diem et al., analysis of Disabled students’ accommodation policies within an Ontario Post Secondary Educational Environment..... | 50 |
| Conclusion..... | 58 |
| References | 61 |
| Appendix | 64 |
| Afterword – MRP Discussion..... | 64 |

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Abstract

As a result of the presence of racialized, gendered, and socio-economic bias within educational policies intended to assist disabled individuals, many students and their families often encounter abusive and negative accommodation experiences. These failures are particularly damaging during the transition out of high school and even more so within post secondary institutions themselves.

Employing the educational policy analysis model created by Diem, Young, Wilton, Mansfield, and Lee (2014) in their paper entitled “The intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis” this major research paper explores several policies which impact students during these transition periods and highlights the failures that they repeatedly encounter. The personal story of the author is also woven into the analysis to show that there is a human side of this experience which must be included to truly expose the brutal nature of these policy failures.

It is shown throughout that even though policy is crafted with rhetoric that may seem beneficial to the disabled recipient, the intent is often one of control, suppression, and reinforcement of the aforementioned negative biases.

Purpose

This MRP, and to be frank, my entire drive to seek a further education at my age stems from the experiences that I have had as both a disabled individual and the mother of a child with intellectual and physical disabilities. I have encountered struggle and success and I hope that by formalizing my experience and contextualizing what I have experienced within a critical policy analysis, that my own difficulties and challenges can illustrate the struggle that all parents with disabled children face while both they and their child are in the education system in Canada.

As will be shown, policy which is created in order to provide supports and assistance to disabled individuals during transition periods (either from high school to post secondary, or from one level to another of the post-secondary system), is often stained with neoliberal expectations of self-sufficiency, racialized biased attitudes, and an inability to truly understand the humanity of disabled individuals, their needs and those of their families. The struggle of securing unbiased accommodation throughout post-secondary education as an adult student will also be explored.

While I have had some fantastic experiences navigating the maze of approvals, denials, requests, and petitions which act as gatekeepers in the education system in Ontario, I do not believe that the current system is sufficient, and strongly believe that it is designed to limit the success of those who engage it. Without the ability to self-advocate, which my education has brought me, I would never have been able to achieve what I have, nor would I have been able to assist countless other parents with securing supports for themselves and their children.

Methodology

This MRP will undertake a critical review of the policies in place within two unique scenarios: supporting a disabled child through the transition from secondary to post-secondary educational accommodation, and an adult student's experience with managing educational accommodations within a post-secondary setting as part of a non-traditional educational journey. Policy which assists with adding context, such as those which speak to how disabled students seek support for their disabled children, will also be investigated within this critical analysis framework.

Some of the individual documents which will be reviewed are listed below, however the approach which will be taken towards analysing them will revolve around the guidelines laid out by Diem, Young, Welton, Cummings, Mansfield, and Lee in their 2014 article discussing the current state of critical policy analysis (Diem et al., 2014). In their work, Diem et al., outline five critical areas which should be undertaken when committing analysis. These areas will be referred to as "The Diem et al., analysis" throughout the MRP and include:

- 1) ***The difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality.*** This refers to *comparing the verbiage and intent of policy against how the policy is truly enacted, including the unspoken ways in which it is enforced, often including the biased and maligned actions that some administrators and institutions take*
- 2) ***A focus on the policy's roots and the development which occurred to bring it to its current state.*** This allows for the development of an understanding of how the policy came into being, including what the intent of the policy truly was and how those intents were arrived at by the bodies which created the policy

- 3) ***The distribution of power, resources, and knowledge to which the policy speaks.*** *In this area, it is possible to investigate the bias and flawed expectation that a policy might have baked into it on account of the beliefs about who holds power in the relationship impacted by the policy, and what resources are truly available to those who have to live the life created by the policy as compared to what is “expected” to be in place.*
- 4) ***Social Stratification.*** *Within this section, the financial and economic differences between those that create the policy and those that are impacted by it are compared and contrasted. This allows for the identification of established power structures around race and money to be identified and critiqued.*
- 5) ***Policy resistance.*** *Resistance here refers to how individuals who are supposed to happily accept a policy without much push back truly resist the impact of the policy and the negativity and pushback that they face. This area is particularly important to myself and my son since it shows that silence is often the recourse of parents and students when policy is actively used against us. (Diem et al., 2014)*

While each policy will not be specifically broken down and analyzed using each of the 5 points above, several of the approaches will be included in each of analyses.

During the analysis, specific biases and power structures will also be identified. My son and myself have been subjected to racialized, gendered, economic, and sociocultural disenfranchisement and each of these blows will be rolled into our personal story and reinforced by a series of published scholars.

The works of Kingdon as discussed by Greer (2015) will be used to understand the difference between Agenda-setting and alternative specification, which can be leveraged against

point 1 by Diem et al., above. Articles speaking to the layers of race, including the difference between critical race theory and CritLat (Critical LatinX based race theory) will be leveraged to given insight into racist and biased attitudes and the issues that these create with policy creation and enforcement (Atwood, 2011). And works by Gale (2001) and Marshall (2016) will be used to show how feminist ideologies can be introduced to standard critical policy analysis.

When speaking of my own story the works of scholars such as Shanouda and Spagnuolo will be leaned on to show how ministries can take a secretive approach to producing information in order to keep the power structures of certain policies in place and disenfranchise disabled students (Shanouda and Spagnuolo, 2021). Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa (2018) will be used to discuss the reforms which can be implemented to improve the. Many other scholars work will also be cited in order to validate and discuss claims made throughout.

Due to the highly sensitive nature of this discussion, and the current pandemic which has limited in-person contact, interviews were not leveraged to capture the experiences of students undergoing transition/assessment, however this is where my family's own unique experiences, which mirror those of parents whom I have advocated with and for, will be employed.

Introduction

Canada is a country of contrasts and self-conflict: we pride ourselves on being a multicultural society, but now face a national reckoning with respect to our genocides waged against the Aboriginal and native populations. We call ourselves a beacon of racial equality, however every year more and more racialized attacks are occurring against members of BiPOC populations. We claim to be an inclusive and welcoming country, however, have one of the strictest immigration regimes of any developed country in the world which highly regards wealth

and education as key indicators of who will be let in. And, in the arena of disability rights and education we stand tall on claims of an inclusive education system, robust governmental and social supports, and a national ethos of “all are equal” when the reality is anything but. This major research paper will investigate the struggles and difficulties caused by policy gaps, racial bias, and social stigma faced by disabled families who attempt to seek intergenerational accommodations and placement supports during their journey through the post-secondary education system.

In order to add context to the above, I will couch the journey within my own story and the story of my youngest son, Vincent. Both Vincent and I identify as disabled individuals facing both intellectual and physical limitations which have resulted in the need for accommodation and modification of educational pathways that are often assumed to be standard for all individuals. This major research paper will begin with a review of Vincent and my experience through the education system, focusing on a review of the absence of familial support and the vicious world of racially biased expectations that were put on both him and, myself, as his primary caregiver. I will then review the process of securing a position for Vincent in an appropriate program with particular reference to the “wash our hands of the problem” approach that the TDSB takes for students who do not fit into specific categories. Subsequent to this, I will detail my own journey through secondary education, undergraduate studies, and finally graduate work with a focus on the absence of any kind of support for caregivers of disabled individuals.

It is important to note that a policy pertaining to family relief will also be reviewed. This policy was included to show that disabled individuals’ experiences cannot be viewed in a vacuum. In order to understand the skepticism that disabled parents of disabled children have, it is important to contextualize how policy has functioned in the life of these individuals before

they get to the post-secondary level. This gives context into why many disabled individuals suffer in silence, as they have been repeatedly abandoned and abused by policies throughout their lives leading up to post-secondary education.

Vincent's Education Journey

Vincent's educational journey began with our arrival to Canada. While he was born in the United Kingdom, he and I returned to our native country of Guyana for a brief period before coming to Canada. Due to the absence of formal health networks in our area of the country, Vincent was not identified as a disabled individual until we arrived in Canada. Upon our arrival he was put through a series of diagnostic tests and the results showed that the nearest appropriate diagnosis would be one of Cerebral Palsy.

Once this diagnosis was made, a series of supports were put into place by the team of doctors, social workers, and government administrators that controlled the disability support process at the time, with me having virtually no say. While Guyana was an English-speaking country, which made the transition to Canada much easier since no alternate language support services existed at that time, I still did not have a formal education which would have empowered me to object to some of the policies adopted for his care. In hindsight I have regrets regarding my inability to advocate for my son, and the government's knowledge and exploitation of that lack of knowledge.

However, Vincent was quickly enrolled in a special-needs daycare program, which streamed him to an elementary school that provided support services for disabled children - at the time "retarded" was still a commonly used word and the idea of social stigma against the disabled was just beginning to be understood. Vincent's journey continued through high school

with the TDSB providing support, however there are devastating incidences of abuse and manipulation which I will include later in this work to bring context to failed policy adaptations regarding treatment of disabled families seeking support.

The true horror and complete absence of policy-driven support occurred once Vincent graduated from high school. While disabled students in Ontario are allowed to remain enrolled until the age of 21, the TDSB virtually throws the student into the real world subsequent to graduation with quite literally no bridging support present for individuals facing advance disability (i.e., college and university are not appropriate post secondary choices for him). Had it not been for my own struggles and ability to overcome them, the policy failures present in Ontario would have been detrimental to Vincent's own well-being

My Journey Through Education

As mentioned above, Vincent and I can be looked at as a family unit that faces disability. I have a series of disabilities that have required both physical and intellectual supports in order to make my own experience with the secondary and post-secondary journey possible. While much literature exists that speaks to my own experience of seeking accommodation and being put through an ever-increasingly difficult process of requesting modifications to my own learning plans, this major research paper will focus on the lack of familial supports that I noted through my journey and the policy failures which drive them.

During the time that I was of school-leaving age, it was not common for women within my culture to seek higher education, but instead it was expected that we simply marry and begin the child-rearing process while our husbands work. I myself was streamed into this lifestyle with a marriage at 18 and my first child being born when I was 21. However, life had other plans in

store for me, and unfortunately my husband passed away when our son, Vincent's older brother, was only three months old. As a woman in a community that had little regard for single women, I was forced to develop the advocacy skills that I would later use to procure my own educational accommodations and those for Vincent.

Though my journey has been anything but easy, I wanted to ensure that I nested my major research paper and the subsequent critical policy analysis within the lives of myself and my son to show that real individuals, seeking real benefit for themselves and their family, encounter real stigma, racialization and disenfranchisement by a system riddled with policy gaps and mired by bias and a "not my problem" approach of many governmental agencies and disability service offices whose main intent is purportedly to support disabled students.

Vincent's Journey

Vincent's educational journey to post-secondary education began many years before the opportunity to apply or consider life after high school presented itself. Driven largely by the information contained in his Individual Education Plan (IEP), concepts of race, immigrant, and social status heavily influenced the method in which his post-secondary options were presented and reinforced. In this section, the IEP creation and enforcement process will be examined with particular emphasis placed on the role that race, immigrant, and social status play on the options that were presented to him.

The Individual Education Plan

Within the province of Ontario, once a student is identified as having exceptional needs, they are to be subjected to the creation of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The Ontario Education Act specifically outlines the process and requirements that the IEP is to include, and

several guides which are updated on a more frequent basis are also provided to schools, pupils, and their family to assist them with the understanding of the need for the IEP, and the purpose that it is meant to fulfill (Regulation 181/98 of the Ontario Education Act, 2005).

However, the Education Act automatically creates an unfair power dynamic by empowering the school and its administrators to drive the discussion regarding what aspect of the student's education will be tailored, how the student will be accommodated, and the targeted outcomes that the student will be streamed towards.

According to the Act, a student may be subjected to assessment for an IEP by the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) under the following criteria:

14. (1) The principal of the school at which a pupil is enrolled,

(a) may on written notice to a parent of the pupil; and

(b) shall at the written request of a parent of the pupil,

refer the pupil to a committee established by the board, for a decision as to whether the pupil should be identified as an exceptional pupil and, if so, what the placement of the pupil should be. (O. Reg. 181/98, s. 14 (1), Ontario Education Act of 2005).

The structure of the language in this section of the Act shows who holds the power in this dynamic: while the parent's request will automatically trigger an IPRC review and the potential creation of the IEP, the school is listed as the first driver and even if certain staff identify that the student is struggling, the school *may* initiate the process by reaching out to the parents.

This shows that the process is reliant on several factors including, but not limited to the schools monitoring of the child, and more importantly, the school's ability to communicate with the parent of the child, or to take under consideration the feedback provided by the parent to the school regarding the child's performance (Patten, 2017).

In her work, Sarah Patten shows that communication between schools and parents is woefully lacking, particularly at the high school level where transition to post-secondary education becomes a critical component of the conversation. Patten found that by the time high school commences, parent/teach communication drops to an average of 2-3 times per year, with higher engagement mostly noted amongst families that were heavy participants in school programs/extra-curricular activities. Families reported that on average, only 20% of them expected to hear from their child's school during each academic Year (Patten, 2017).

Along with the low level of communication, the type and method of communication required for productive conversation is often compromised if the parents come from a racialized or immigrant background. The language that the school communicates in may not reflect the language that the parents speak within the home and may contain verbiage which is difficult for the parent to understand. Further to this, parents may come from cultures such as mine where the school is regarded as an unquestionable institution, meaning that parents may review any communication as discipline, instead of an attempt to assist. In their work on the impact of racialization and hierarchical expectations of students from an African background within the Ontario Education system, Shizha, Abdi, Wilson-Forsberg, and Masakure (2020) identify that Black students are often racially discriminated against in two major ways. First, these students are looked down upon as being able to succeed at a lower level than their White counterparts; this is a by-product of colonial attitudes which still strongly present themselves within the education system (Shizha, Abdi, Wilson-Forsberg, and Masakure, 2020).

Secondly, Black students are often viewed as “disruptive,” or “problematic” within the education system, which is a result of racist hierarchical stereotypes which place White students higher than their Black counterparts. This double disenfranchisement manifests itself as

ambivalence towards the successes of these students and to the opinions of their parents (Shizha et al., 2020).

These assumptions of student participation and ability automatically undermine the functionality and benefit that the IEP can bring to the student. If students are looked upon as having no ability to succeed, the likelihood of the school to drive the process will be diminished, as the school expects the student to “underachieve.”

This problem is not only seen in the Black population, but in the general immigrant population as well - all racialized populations can be shown to have been subjected to bias and stereotypes within the Ontario Education System. For example, LatinX students who were immigrants to North America and enrolled in an English Education System were identified as having a far more difficult time accessing and processing supports which were available, compared to their White counterparts (Parada, Olivo, and Bravo, 2021). This difficulty stems from intersectional factors such as language barriers, lack of understanding of the complexities of the education system, and an absence of exposure to the resources that are available to them (Parada et al., 2021).

Throughout the section of the Education Act which speaks towards the process of assessing and understanding the needs of the student, the language is written in a form which appears to “empower” the parent (i.e., the parent is allowed to be present, the parent is allowed to comment, the parent is allowed to initiate the process, etc.) (Ontario Education Act, 2005). However, the above clearly shows that the parent’s ability to set their child on the right track towards post-secondary education is going to be heavily compromised if the school and board itself holds negative, racist, and dismissive views of the parent and their child.

In addition to the above, the Ministry of Education provides The Individual Education Plans: Standards for Development, Program Planning, and Implementation guide which is designed to act as a supplemental guide to the Act itself (Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2004). Within this supplement, transitioning to post secondary education is referenced with the following two points act as a guide for what should be included within the consideration:

- Specific goals for the student's transition to postsecondary activities. The goals must be realistic and must reflect the strengths, needs, and interests of the student.
- The actions required, now and in the future, to achieve the stated goals. The actions identified must build on the student's identified strengths, needs, and interests; (Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2004).

Here again the language focuses on perceived expectation where the goals that the student should strive for must be "realistic," however, as demonstrated, if racialized disabled students are subjected to negative stereotypes surrounding their ability to transition, how can these assessments be done fairly, maximizing the transition process to the student's benefit? In their work comparing educational transitions amongst racialized groups, Robson, Anisef, Brown, and Nagaoka compared the transition outcomes for racialized students within the Chicago and Toronto district School boards (Robson, Anisef, Brown, 2019). While here in Canada, we like to hold ourselves to the belief that we are not as heavily affected by racist behaviour and intolerance as our American neighbours, this study proves the contrary. Robson et al., were able to show that race had a stronger negative impact here in Toronto than it did in Chicago, with lower rates of transitioning to post secondary education being seen in Toronto. While Vincent was not expected to transition to University or College level education due to the profound

nature of his intellectual disability, these studies highlight that the IEP approach is poisoned by racist ideologies which impact both disabled and non-disabled students

The Diem et al. Analysis of the IEP

In order to thoroughly review the IEP's intent, impact and history, the Diem et al. analysis can be used to identify areas of struggle and disenfranchisement which exists within it.

1) The difference between rhetoric and intent

The words employed in the act are reassuring, empowering and give the appearance that the student is to be placed front and center of the conversation. The parent/student rights are listed clearly and show that the student/parent has the right to be present at every step of the process, including playing an active role in the decisions regarding their child's future. Strong language such as:

*“A parent of a pupil and, when the pupil is 16 years of age or older, the pupil, are **entitled** to be present at and **participate in all discussions** about the pupil at the meeting held by the special education appeal board under section 28” (O. Reg. 181/98, s. 5 (2), Ontario Education Act of 2005).*

As well as the following section which speaks specifically to the transition that students are to undergo leading up to their graduation from secondary education:

*“When the pupil is 14 years of age or older, the individual education **plan must also include** a plan for transition to appropriate post-secondary school activities such as **work**, future education and community living” (O.Reg. 181/98, s. 6(4), Ontario Education Act of 2005)*

These words simply pay lip service to what parents are entitled to without developing mechanisms which actually make them possible. As highlighted in the previous section, communication between parents and the school drops drastically as the child progresses through their education in both disabled and non-disabled populations. This instantly challenges the myth that the school will heavily involve the parent in planning as is the parent's right above.

Further to this, it is important to note the language which speaks to the transition process. Firstly, a plan must be actively created beginning when the child is 14, however many students transition between middle school and high school at that same age, meaning that the plan may be created by one administrator, and passed to another in a different school. As Marshall shows, the presence of "micropolitics," that exist within one school and may be absent/stronger in the next school can seriously hinder the transition plan's intent (Marshall, 2016). From my own experience, no transition plan was developed for my son, even though I had specifically asked his middle school and high school teacher regarding what I was to do after school was finished. I was never invited to a single IEP meeting until I understood from friends and family that it was my right to do so. Once I became involved, I realized that the rhetoric that I was fed was just that, empty rhetoric, and nothing more. The gaps which exist here are shown to be dreadful, with parents simply thrown to the open market with a few lists of locations that their students may be accepted into with no actual guarantee of successful placement.

Finally, the transition plan elements mentioned above contains two obvious signs of bias: the first option listed for post-secondary accommodation is work, not further education, and when that option for education is listed, it does not specifically call out university/college accommodations but rather "further education." This type of microaggression reveals the intent behind the policy: create good workers from these broken students, and if they wish to achieve

post-secondary education, university and college will not be specifically referenced so as to not create the additional burden for the system to actively engage these students' unique post-secondary educational needs.

2) A focus on the policy's roots and the development which occurred to bring it to its current state

Viewing the IEP's failures from a historical perspective allows us to understand why the gaps exist.

Beginning in the 1970s, conscientious efforts were made by various independent school boards in order to create programs which focused in on disabled students and empowering them to succeed. These programs however had two major flaws: they varied from district to district meaning that students received drastically different education experiences from one region to the other, and they mainly focused on "measurable" disability, such as having a "low IQ" or possessing a physical disability such as a visual, verbal, or hearing related disability (Ellis and Axelrod, 2016).

These unaligned policies suddenly began to rapidly change once activism in the early 1980s drove the school boards to provide better funding and more beneficial approaches to disabled students, along with the introduction of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms by the mid 1980s. These two pushes eventually led to a more formalized support process being undertaken (Ellis and Axelrod, 2016).

Unfortunately, failures began to occur due the absence of disabled voices from the conversation, the presence of a series of lingering assumptions about disabled students, and unwillingness to actually make an effort to accommodate these needs. An example of this is

found in the language of the current act when it references the supports that student have available to them which schools must make an effort to provide. It states:

“A person or body required by this regulation to communicate in writing to a parent or pupil shall, at the request of the parent or pupil, use braille, large print or audio-cassette format for communication” (O.Reg. 181/98, s.4, Ontario Education Act of 2005)

This highlights how incredibly outdated and worn this act is. Technically, if a school was so inclined, or if resources were limited, they could simply provide one of the above methods of accommodation to a parent/student in the current day which would still be useless to them. Many new forms of accommodations exist; however the act did not even include a call out for the *possibility* of using other more student appropriate methods of accommodation if they should become available in the future. The lack of a long-term perspective is evident.

3) The distribution of power, resources, and knowledge to which the policy speaks

Ellis and Axelrod’s work regarding the history of the development of a standardized disabled education process includes an important section regarding the responsibility of supporting the student and their family (2016).

Within their article, they mention that in 1997, the responsibility for organizing educational accommodations for these students originally lay with the individual district school boards but were then displaced to the centralized Ministry of Education. This creates the third problem highlighted in Diem et al.,’s model: a disjoint between expectation and reality with respect to resources (Diem et al., 2014).

The IEP in its current form mandates a series of accommodations within the transition section including the following:

“In developing a transition plan under subsection (4) the principal shall consult with such community agencies and post-secondary educational institutions as he or she considers appropriate” (O.Reg. 181/98, s. 6(7), Ontario Education Act of 2005).

With the concentration of responsibility being moved from each individual district to the centralized provincial ministry, it may have created a uniform approach, however it creates a failure in the transition process. While my son and I were always lucky enough to reside in Canada’s largest city, Toronto, those who reside in smaller communities are particularly disenfranchised based on the failure of the policy to account for the fact that many communities simply lack the appropriate resources to support their disabled citizens. Here Kingdon’s “expectation vs. reality” construct becomes very important (Greer, 2015).

Kingdon shows that along with agenda setting, many policies are developed with an “alternative specification” component. This component relates to how the policy is actually enacted by those who are responsible for turning it into real action (Greer, 2015).

The act’s rhetoric sounds wonderful, where principals play an active role in sourcing the accommodations that a student needs, however with the displacement of control of these programs from the districts to the ministry as highlighted by Ellis and Axelrod (2016), impossible alternative specifications exist (Greer, 2015). Afterall, how can a principal find appropriate resources if they simply do not exist in the student’s community?

4) Social Stratification – Money and Reality

As will be shown in the section titled “breach of trust” mentioned below, even in this world of student support during transition, money is king and is often used to disenfranchise students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Within the policy section that speaks to the creation of transition plans, there is no mention regarding financially supporting the student once they exit the secondary school system. Yes, there are references to reaching out to community services, which may include ODSP and alternate support systems, however the act does not make specific recommendations for the financial transition that these students are going to undergo.

In their work regarding Critical Race Theory and the presence of power structures relating to finances and race, Lopez showed that assumptions by administrators regarding student accommodation are often fueled by silent racially biased beliefs (Lopez, 2003). The majority of the students in my son's class were coloured and all their families had the same concerns: what do we do for money once the student transitions out of secondary school. During one of the limited meetings that were held for parents to ask questions, this topic arose, and we were simply directed to contact ODSP for further assistance.

An unspoken discrimination that is written into the policy speaks to the parent's financial capability and the impact this has on the transition process. Within the act it specifically states that parents are entitled to be present at committee meetings and can identify individuals who should be on the committee itself. Both of the "rights" make an assumption that financially impoverished parents cannot fulfill: the ability to randomly take time off work to meet with the school, committee, and administrators. While in theory a parent may be present, this would mandate that the parent has the ability to take arbitrary days off work, and that the parent has had enough educational experience and exposure to the Canadian system to make informed decisions.

Taking days off work at a whim is a luxury that many lower-earning jobs do not offer. Many parents would not be able to make the time during the day to speak with the school, travel

to committee meetings, and even identify individuals that they feel comfortable being on the committee. Yes, teachers are empowered to be on the committee, however once I selected Vincent's teacher who would be crafting his educational plan, I was completely cut out of the process, with the committee repeatedly holding meetings without me due to my "inability to attend because of alternate commitments." I was only unable to attend because once I asked if they could accommodate outside of school hours and was unilaterally told no, I was cut out of decision making by Vincent's teacher and the remainder of the committee members.

5) Policy Resistance

Within this element of the Diem et al framework, challenges to the policies and how they are received are important to consider. Zahra Brown's MRP on the issues facing Black women navigating the system are pertinent here. Brown highlights that not only do racist social constructs of Blackness lower an individual's standing within the eyes of many academic institutions, but that the intersectionality of being Black and a woman further disenfranchises individuals within these settings (Brown, 2020).

My experience with resisting the policies found in the transition plan very much highlight the issue that Brown speaks to. In many circumstances, including incidences referenced in this MRP, my language skills were questioned when I spoke up for my son, my opinions were derided and dismissed as "being new to the system," or simply not having enough of an understanding of my son's own disability and his own best interests. None of that was true, I have made every effort possible and turned my journey and my son's journey through disability into a major drive behind my education, culminating in this MRP. I was dismissed for being a Black woman and attempts to raise protest and better my child were immediately overridden by school staff and administrators. In fact, it was not until I met another Black woman who was an

administrator for a day program that Vincent could qualify for, did my experience turn around. I was heard, and my concerns were addressed, unlike before when dealing with an all-White administrative team.

Breach of Trust

The transition from high school to post-secondary living is one which is driven by the educator with the parent allowed to contribute or initiate the process. This current process requires a heavy degree of trust within the educational system, where parents are expected to believe that their child's educational wellbeing is held above all else when an IEP is being developed. However, many parents of disabled children with whom I have advocated have advised me that they also experienced the same terrifying and troubling experience I am about to discuss.

I visited Vincent's school shortly after the implementation of his IEP. I knew nothing of the education system, no one had made any real attempt to include me in the discussions of his disability, and the entire process was driven by the Board of Education and Vincent's educators. During this visit, everything seemed normal, and I had extremely high hopes for the future and for my son's ability to be educated.

At one point, during the middle of my conversation with his teacher, she said "The Education Assistant would like to have a word with you." Coming from a culture where that statement normally indicated trouble, I was very worried, so I quickly approached the EA who was on the other side of the room.

The Education Assistant, without mincing words, advised “A lot of these students require extra attention, including your son Vincent, if you pay me \$50 per week, I will ensure that Vincent receives the attention that he needs and is not forgotten.”

A bribe. I was asked to pay a bribe. I was asked to pay a bribe to ensure that my son would not be neglected. I was asked to pay a bribe so that my fragile, disabled, “crippled” son would not be ignored.

To say I was stunned would be an understatement. I quickly said that I did not have the money as I was Vincent’s sole supporter, and the Education Assistant dropped the conversation. I was directed to speak with the EA by the teacher, indicating she was fully aware of what the EA would ask me. My world crumbled in that moment and the sheer terror of the neglect that my son would face if I didn’t “Pay up” washed over me. I returned to my car and wept for a long period of time. Any trust that I had that my son would be taken care of was utterly destroyed, and I felt as an immigrant, as a woman of colour and as a parent, that if I spoke out, my son would be seriously mistreated. So, I kept quiet.

I kept quiet for years, growing my education and evolving my activism so that I could support other parents such as myself. Several years later, when I started telling this story to parents, I realized that I was not alone. Almost every other parent had a story about being approached for bribes so that their child could get “extra attention” within the Toronto District School Board. I now understand what a horrendous abuse this was and have helped other parents advocate for their children when facing similar situations.

While this is anecdotal, it highlights an intense issue which exists within this discussion: how are parents expected to trust that schools will provide the best transition plan for their children once they leave high school, if the school itself has proven to breach the trust which

underpins the creation of the IEP. Education Boards may have lofty goals and high-minded plans, but when those entrusted to implement those plans are corrupt, where are disabled student's parents supposed to go?

A Transition Without Real Support

New suggestions were debuted into the Ontario Education system beginning in 2010 where the transition to post-secondary education began to be a major focus. While still related to the Ontario Education Act and its suggestions regarding transition, these new policies and tactics were advertised as having the ability to better support students with intellectual disabilities. As with many government policies, the reality was quite different.

The transition planning suggestions found in the newly updated transition guides issued by the Ministry of Education beginning in 2010 - A memorandum issued by the Ministry of Education in 2013 shows the presence of neo-liberal lip service being performed by the board. The memorandum in part reads:

To begin the protocol revision process, in February 2013, MCYS/MCSS regional offices and EDU field offices will jointly lead initial meetings with local district school boards and agencies to outline the vision for integrated transition planning processes as well as the next steps for school board involvement in regional protocol revision. These regional meetings will also allow participants to engage in cross-sector discussions to identify practices and local considerations to enhance and support integrated transition planning. Materials to support this process will be distributed for the regional meetings. As part of the ongoing protocol revision process, other stakeholders will be invited to

provide input, including youth with a developmental disability and their families (Clarke, Gitterman, and Carter-Whitney, 2013).

It is evident here that the board still assumes that their academics and staff are doing the best job possible most likely due to the qualifications and “expertise” which the staff hold, with the inclusion of parental and student input seen as an after-thought. The board openly acknowledges that there are gaps in the process and that those gaps are caused by a lack of training, staffing, and resourcing, however, still refuse to provide a person-centered approach to overhauling the system.

A review of the implementation of the changes mentioned in the memorandum was done by Katie McKay a contact for the district of Niagara’s developmental services organizations who interviewed several service providers regarding the real-life outcomes that these suggested changes brought. In her works, she highlights several failures in the transition planning process (McKay, 2017).

Firstly, virtually all transition planning puts the onus on the parents or the students to engage their community. Several of the providers who were interviewed by McKay highlight their frustration in the student’s inability to advocate for themselves. Students and their parents are often placed in front of these service providers with only written recommendations from the school and no actual in-person support from the school. Service providers also indicate that these students are not categorized or identified in detail, with the expectation being that their parents would have a sufficient understanding of their children’s medical condition to explain and advocate on their behalf (McKay, 2017). This expectation can be classed as neo-liberal since it expects the parent to be fully able, and not themselves have an intellectual disability, and it

expects the student, regardless of level of disability, to ‘keep up’ with the conversations about their future with these providers.

Gunnar Stangvik (2014), a researcher working in Norway, highlighted this expectation as being particularly influenced by neoliberal bias when he noted that the majority of disabled students were provided constant in-class support through an education assistant, however once they leave the secondary school setting, they are expected to be “self-capitalising” individuals, who rely on their own skill to navigate the world and earn an income (Stangvik, 2014). Based on my own personal experience, and the obvious issues surrounding profoundly disabled individuals, this ability to earn independently is clearly absent, however deeply ingrained capitalist expectations continue to emphasize it.

McKay (2017) continues on and illustrates that societal expectations are often one of the greatest downfalls that these transitioning students face. Disabled students coming to the end of their secondary education are often viewed as burdens to society that must be relegated to menial and low-intellect jobs, so as to minimize the liability that they may cause to a company, and which in of itself prevents companies from hiring these individuals to carry out complex tasks (McKay, 2017).

This barrier is compounded by the fact that the IEP goes to great length to claim that a student’s education is designed with their “interests” and desires in mind, clearly again only paying lip service to developing a proper transition plan for students graduating from secondary school environments (McKay, 2017).

The Diem et al. Analysis of the IEP Program Guide (2004)

Along with the memorandum issued above, the Ontario Ministry of Education published a guide initially in 2000 and subsequently updated in 2004, to assist program managers and individual districts with their interpretations of the IEP mandates found in the Education Act. This guide included a breakdown of several areas of the IEP, including the transition plan, which will be analysed using the model developed by Diem et al., (2014) below.

1) The difference between rhetoric and intent

The section speaking to transitioning from secondary to post secondary education commences by clarifying the purpose of the transition standard and the requirements for the standard as listed in the Education Act.

The purpose section of the standard clarifies that it's main intent is to meet post secondary goals that are appropriate to (the student's) strengths, needs, and interest," (IEP Guide 2004). Here the rhetoric seems to indicate that the plan will put the student first, dedicating resources and constant support to ensure that the student can reach their full potential. However, when placing this language within the context of Moses and Gair's (2004) work on the importance of symbolic language, the flaws become more obvious.

The language employed gives the appearance of placing the student and their needs at the centre of all educational planning, very much inline with the "Person Centered Approach" which was beginning to gain strong popularity during the time that this guide was written. As Moses and Gair's (2004) work shows, this is a common practice when developing educational policy. They show that research into how to structure programs and the real outcomes of these programs are often not given the same level of importance as symbolic language, buzz words and slogans when developing policy (Moses and Gair, 2004).

Unfortunately, this is a situation where intent and rhetoric absolutely do not match. Students and their families may be provided with the belief that they are placed first, however due to resource constraints, lack of community options, and ignorance on the part of educators and administrators on how best to implement plans, the intent mentioned above is lost.

2) A focus on the policy's roots and the development which occurred to bring it to its current state combined with 3) The distribution of power, resources, and knowledge to which the policy speaks¹

While this guide's "roots" are located in the need to clarify the thinly written IEP regulations that exist within the Education Act, there is a section within the guide that provides a historical context that can be leveraged to explore why this guide was produced from a policy review perspective.

Within the introduction of the guide, it states that it was produced as a response to the amalgamation of the IEP planning process into one system, controlled by the Ministry, as opposed to the previously described system which saw each district responsible for the IEP creation process that their students were subjected to (IEP Guide, 2004). While each individual district is allowed to create a template which their individual schools follow, they are still expected to defer to the instruction and guidance from the centralized ministry.

The introduction also includes a "warning" as it were.

As this was the Ministry's first attempt to create a singular IEP process, regardless of the individual community limitations that a student may be subjected to, the introduction claims that the Ministry will conduct "random" checks of selected districts to ensure that they are adhering

¹ Due to the overlap of section 2 and 3 of Diem et al.,'s model, they were combined for the analysis of this policy.

to policy, followed by another round of checks to assess compliance to the guide's suggestions.

Again, placing this within the work of Moses and Gair (2004), we see the use of symbolic and grandiose language which masks the real intent of the program. By claim that the checks would be "random," they are admitting that they do not have sufficient staff to oversee the entire process on a district-by-district level, even though each district had previously managed to create and manage their own IEP process. This shows that they are using language of violence (i.e., we will check, you better be ready for us) to enforce compliance with these policies without providing sufficient oversight resources (Moses and Gair, 2004).

4) Social Stratification – Money and Reality

Approximately 2 years after this guide was published, the Ontario government debuted their "Moral Education" approach, as outlined by Winton (2003). In their article, Winton shows that this initiative, largely funded by private for-profit organizations and some non-profit organizations, put an emphasis on creating "moral" citizens, using buzz words like "good citizens" and "community leaders" without truly explaining what that means (Winton, 2003). While the intent may be to create students who are upstanding and can contribute, neoliberal bias against disabled students strongly influenced how the policy was implemented.

The guide repeats the same line found in the Education Act when speaking to the transition process. It states that the key element of the transition plan within the IEP is to "plan for the student's transition to appropriate post secondary activities, such as work, further education and community living." (IEP Guide, 2004).

Here it is obvious that two assumptions are made about students, even with this "moral citizen" approach in full swing the guide reinforces neoliberal stigma about disabled students. This is done by again placing "work" as the first option in the list of assumptions about the next

best steps for disabled students. Further education is mentioned but only as an after thought to the concept of working to earn a living. Finally, community living (a buzzword often used to mean supported living, or living within a group home style setting, in order to avoid older negative images of asylum style living), is mentioned as if it is expected that disabled students covered by the transition section of the IEP will never be able to have full independent living, and while being pushed to work, they will still be a burden to society.

The above may seem drastic or a strong condemnation, but as Diem et al., show, it is important to consider policy from all angles to ensure that none of the nuances are missed (Diem et al., 2014). My own experiences and those of my son listed below show that this strong neo liberal bias is present where earning money and being self-sufficient is prized above all else, and the reliance on support should be minimized if the student can do a task to earn an income, even if that task brings no happiness.

5) Policy Resistance

While it is difficult to “resist” a guide, the policy guide does illustrate that resistance is not really tolerated, humored, or taken into account when developing the IEP (IEP Guide, 2004). Within the section titled “Parent/Student Consultation” the guide makes it clear that parents are to be involved in the process, and students may also play an active role if they are over the age of 16. However, the IEP is developed while the student is 14, not 16, meaning that there are two years in which a student may have active and important input that they wish to put forward, however they are simply locked out of the process unless their parents wish to be involved. Yes, the child is a minor, however this complete exclusion from the process shows that the

government is not willing to accept resistant from students at the beginning of the IEP process (IEP Guide, 2004).

Further to the above, the parents' rights and responsibilities are outline where parents are made to "sign a form" indicating the following:

- They were consulted in the development of the IEP
- They declined the opportunity to be consulted
- They have received a copy of the IEP
- any comments they provided are noted on the form (IEP Guide, 2004)

As shown by Smith and Miller-Kahn (2004), policies are the government's way of assigning value to specific groups, namely the group that is the recipient of the policy. As an example, disabled students have work pushed in the IEP transition plan more than post-secondary education, so in this case, the policy values disabled students more as workers than as thinkers (Smith and Miller-Kahn, 2004). With respect to the IEP transition plan parental requirements listed above, Smith and Miller-Kahn's ideas show that the opinion of parents is not highly valued since parents are simply made to sign a form stating that they were consulted, and no call out is made to handling parents objections or protests to the conclusions reached by the IEP review committee, except for simply having their "comments" written on the form (note the lack of words such as 'objections', 'protest', 'disagreement', etc.) (Smith and Miller-Kahn, 2004). In fact, the parent's objections are completely disregarded as no explanation is given in the guide on how to handle them, or what mediation steps are available.

Vincent and Neoliberal Expectation

While enrolled in secondary school, I was strongly discouraged from participating in the IEP creation process by Vincent's teachers and the staff that catered to his needs in the school. This came as a shock to me after I became familiar with the fact that I should have been allowed to attend his IEP meetings, however on several occasions I was simply told after the fact that meetings had been held. As a disabled individual myself, I wondered if their conception of me as "slow" or "stupid," contributed to me being excluded from the IEP review process - an experience quickly showed me that this was the case.

An education assistant in class was extremely happy to meet me one day - I was very pleased as my previous experience highlighted above shows that I had not had very positive experiences thus far. She stated that she was very happy to see the degree of involvement that I had with my son's education, including filling out the daily log that was sent home with him. She spoke highly of my ability to "articulate" myself and in one final racially charged blow, she stated that she was so surprised that I could write that well in English. I come from Guyana; we only speak English. I only speak English. English is my sole language. All hope that I had that she would positively reinforce my son was washed away in that instant, and with just cause.

Vincent is a lover of music, and a community resource which was always present to him was external music classes. I visited the school one day, expecting Vincent to be away at the external location they visited for these classes, however I saw him in school, and what I saw him doing crushed me.

Similar to the scene from a Victorian workhouse, or modern-day sweatshop, they had placed a large bag of mixed screws, nails, and corks in front of him, and he was tasked with separating each of the three items out into their own individual pile. When he should have been

in his music class, he was instead made to do a menial and subservient task that, when I asked the teacher why he was assigned it, she said “it would help him with his future.”

This was around 2010, not around 1910. They had removed him from his music class because they felt this was “better preparation.” I immediately spoke up, advised that it was absurd to expect him to do a task like this as he is practically blind, and was very disappointed that he had been removed.

Contrary to the expectation that the IEP would lead parents to believe where the school would have welcomed my input and reinstate Vincent into the music class, I was reprimanded by the teacher, who advised that she was “shocked” that I would be so against Vincent training for the future. My mind swirled with disbelief, and this was one of the few times that I was happy that my son could possibly be graduating soon and out of the mistreatment he received from the Toronto District School Board.

My son was being groomed to be a menial taskworker, unhappy, but because of the neo-liberal expectation of self-sufficiency, would “at least” be able to make some money.

McKay shows that this experience is not singular - in her work she shows that rates of participation of students, and their families is extremely low in this post-secondary transition process, with many service providers saying that while the school has advised that the student has been involved in decision making, the reality is that it is mostly the parents with the educators leading the discussion (Mckay, 2017).

My Journey

While many papers have been written on the difficulty in seeking accommodation at the post secondary level for disabled individuals, a lack of insight exists with respect to individuals

in my situation: disabled students seeking both support for themselves and for their disabled children while the parent is enrolled in post-secondary education. Though the accommodation process appears to be fulsome at first glance, a deeper investigation into the gaps that exist with supporting the above population shows that old ideas rooted in capitalist, sexist, and racist ideologies still dominate the accommodation seeking process.

This section of the MRP will continue the critical policy review pertaining to accommodation at the post secondary level, however, will now focus in on the challenges mentioned above. A key item which will be stressed on in this section revolves around concepts of trust and the level of confidence that disabled students are meant to assume is present when they are seeking the accommodation process. The impacts of broken trust, and the long-lasting lack of credibility that breaking this trust can have will also be touched on.

As the mother of a disabled child, the main driver in my desire to continue my education path, the care and support of my child is my paramount concern. As the system has shown: if I do not advocate for him, he would have been streamed into the life of thoughtless manual labour, with no emphasis on what his true aspirations were. The current policies and processes in place to cater to both his needs and mine are not only woefully lacking or absent altogether, but also peppered with the biases mentioned above.

Trust – The Social Contract which underlines all interactions

Trust is the foundation of any relationship – particularly those relationships where an unequal power dynamic exists (i.e., the disabled student and the large, wealthy post-secondary institution that holds all the power). Disabled students are expected to trust that the system has their best interest at heart and will attempt to do everything within its power to create an environment in which the student can succeed.

Silvers and Francis (2005) offer insight into the social contract which exists between disabled individuals and society/social institutions. In their work on the concept of the “outlier problem,” they show that social contracts (agreements we all enter into with the institutions that govern our daily lives), are rooted in the idea that the less powerful individual will have their needs addressed in a fair and equal way (Silvers and Francis, 2005). However, this is not the case.

The social contract is immediately compromised, if not entirely broken once race, sex, and disability status are brought into consideration. Silvers and Francis show that when these “social contracts,” are created, participants are divided into two major groups – the “in-groups” and “the outliers” (Silvers and Francis, 2005). The so-called “in-groups” benefit from full protection and consideration in the relationship, often receiving protective and preferential treatment, while the “outliers” are frequently deprived of an equal status (Silvers and Francis, 2005).

Disabled students are expected to believe that institutions will keep their best interest at hearts, however, as has been shown in numerous other works, once the concept of disability is brought into the discussion, the relationship becomes unequal and exploitation occurs. An example of this can be found in the works of Michael Gill (2005). During his time in post-

secondary education, he was advised that he would be “transitioned” into a working environment where disabled individuals could earn a living and support themselves; the truth was very different from the reality (Gill, 2005).

Gill was immediately transferred from his educational surrounding into a workshop environment filled with repetitive, non-stimulating tasks that paid a meager \$30 per month. After several months in the program, he noticed that not a single individual had been transitioned from the workshop program to a better paying or public facing job, something that he and the other students had been promised (Gill, 2005). While this experience speaks to Vincent’s time during his transition, it, along with the work by Silvers and Francis (2005) show that trust, a key component of the social contract that is designed to support students in transitioning and the accommodation process, is just expected of disabled individuals, regardless of past experience. People facing disability are made to feel that they must trust those in power, and in many circumstances, particularly relating to education and transition, that trust is repeatedly broken. Once that trust is broken, it echoes throughout a disabled individual’s life and sets the tone of distrust and skepticism of the solutions and supports provided by institutions, which is often valid and concerning.

Broken Trust – Exploitation of Parents of Disabled Students

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, one of the largest accommodations seeking measures that I had to undertake during my transition to post-secondary education was find the appropriate resources for my son, Vincent. To be very blunt: I never tried because the single time that I did try to seek support for my son, they tried to take him from me.

Several years ago, when Vincent was a young child, his father and I divorced. In hindsight, I realize now how much courage it took to break that marital bond between myself and his father, particularly being a woman from a culture where women's rights are second to men's and the expectation is that women simply do what their husband's demand. However, in the moment, the situation was extremely psychologically taxing, and the prospect of being a single disabled mother to a disabled child was terrifying.

I approached Vincent's school and notified them that I was experiencing some psychological trauma as a result of the divorce and felt extremely overwhelmed by the prospect of raising two children on my own, particularly since one child (Vincent) required so much extra attention and support. While I had had negative experiences with the school board, out of desperation, I turned to them. This was an unmitigated disaster.

The school immediately turned to the Children's Aid Society (CAS), stating that they were "mandated" to by the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act which required them to involve Children's Aid Society whenever a child "may be in danger." I immediately clarified the situation and said that yes, while I was a disabled mother, it did not mean that my depression, clearly stemming from undergoing my divorce, would "endanger" my child in any fashion. The school did not care about this and still pressed for the involvement of CAS as they felt unable to support someone in my situation.

The immediate suggestion from the CAS staff member assigned to my case was to separate my child from me and put him into protective custody as my ability to take care of my son was compromised. Yes, this was more than 15 years ago, however the literature shows that

the situation has not changed for parents who find themselves at the mercy of CAS workers who do not understand the nature of disability.

According to McConnell, Feldman, Aunos, and Prasad (2011), almost 25% of CAS cases involving a disabled parent result in the parent losing parental rights of the child. This rate is almost 20 times higher than what non-disabled parents experience (McConnell et al., 2011). They go on to show that in cases involving parents who are disabled, CAS deems the parent at least partially incapable of managing their child's affairs 7/10 times, regardless of the level of disability demonstrated by the parent. The authors conclude by saying that alternate services should be made available to parents with disability, and that the rates of family separation clearly show that there is an overwhelming belief held by CAS and family courts that parents with disability are less able to care for their children. The problem was also compounded by intersectional disenfranchisement, with Black and other non-White parents, experiencing a much higher rate of family separation than their White counterparts. (McConnell et al., 2011).

The CAS sent investigators to my son's school to go through his bags, validate that he was being sent to school with a lunch every day, discuss his personal hygiene, emotional status, and psychological well-being with his teachers. I was not advised of any of this, nor was it necessary as there had never been an allegation that my child was being mistreated or abused. They even went to his brother's school and interrogated his brother in hopes he would "slip up" and reveal some unspoken, unproven abuse that was happening in our home. My elder son returned home, psychologically traumatized by the experience asking if he was going to have to live with another family because his mother was "crazy."

This nightmare concluded with me standing in front of the home that they wanted to place Vincent in, about to sign the documentation that would have fully released my parental rights to the state (without any legal representation present to defend me). My mother had come along with me, not fully understanding what was happening. Thankfully she read the documentation along with me, took me outside, and in a begging tone said something I will never forget, “those White men are about to take your son from you.” It was not until my own mother jumped in and saved me and my son that I understood I was being misled. It wasn’t until another coloured mother explained to me what I was about to do, that the true nature of the situation became clear.

Needless to say, whatever trust I had in my ability to receive support was immediately destroyed that day, and to be frank, was never restored. I am lucky to be a disabled parent who had a support group around her that defended me and my child from unfounded accusations, however many other women and men in my situation are not as lucky, particularly if they do not speak English, nor have a firm understanding of the bias that is endemic in our support system.

While the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act is not directly related to the transition process, it plays a fundamental role in the lives of parents in post-secondary education seeking accommodations/assistance with their caregiving obligations, particularly if their child is also disabled. This was where my trust, and the trust of many other parents I have advocated and worked with, begins to be broken, so as such, it is vital to examine it from a critical policy analysis perspective, using the five step Diem et al., (2014) model that has been employed thus far. This policy prevents many parents from reaching out since, as shown by McConnell et al.,

(2011), disabled parents are deemed incompetent by a biased system whose only role is to empower the majority while ignoring and disenfranchising the minority.

The Diem et al., analysis of the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act

The Child, Youth, and Family Services Act (2017) speaks to a wide array of measures which are available to ensure that children are housed and cared for in a supportive and beneficial fashion and gives the government/Children Aid Society/schools the ability to begin proceedings against the parent of a child that fails to provide the above. Using the Diem et al., (2014) five step model, the policy will be analysed below to show that loose definitions, unclear meaning, and a bias against disabled parents put families in a situation where they can be unfairly separated if they voluntarily seek assistance

1) The difference between rhetoric and intent

In section titled “Voluntary Agreements” it states that parents or caregivers have the right to seek care if they believe that they are not adequately prepared to take on the responsibility of their child. The section reads:

A person who is temporarily unable to care adequately for a child in the person’s custody, and the society having jurisdiction where the person resides, may make a written agreement for the society’s care and custody of the child (Part V, sec. 75. Child, Youth, and Family Services Act of 2017)

This rhetoric makes it appear as if the parent is in full control; there are also several other sections below which reinforce the parent’s right to terminate the agreement, and even limits the timeframe in which a child can be held ((Part V, sec. 74-79, Child, Youth, and Family Services

Act of 2017). All of these create a situation in which parents appear to be in control of the situation when they approach the authorities for help with their children

However, the Act goes on to state the following pertaining to the removal of the voluntary agreement and the conditions in which Children's Aid Societies and other power-holding institutions can intervene including:

(3) Where notice of a wish to terminate a temporary care agreement is given by or to a society under subsection (1), the society shall as soon as possible, and in any event before the agreement terminates under subsection (2)

(b) where the society is of the opinion that the child would be in need of protection of returned to the person referred to in clause (a) bring the child before the court under this Part to determine whether the child would be in need of protection in that case (Part V, sec. 76, Child, Youth, and Family Services Act of 2017)

Here we see the clear mismatch between rhetoric and intent. The rhetoric at the top appears to show that the act is there to offer temporary relief to the parent, however once those rights are handed over to the government, the government has the right to immediately turn on the parent and put the child through an assessment if the government "is of the opinion," that the child would be endangered. There are no stable definitions regarding how to arrive at the "opinion" that the child is in danger, but this section of the policy clearly empowers the government more than the parent.

Unfortunately, as shown by Mixon-Michell and Hanna (2017), Black families are far more likely to be subjected to scrutiny from child welfare authorities than their White counterparts. This leads to higher rates of family separation – the rhetoric in this policy may

appear to promote the child's well-being but that is undermined by the real nature of the policy to be one of carrying on racist beliefs about the ability of coloured families to care for their own children.

3) *The distribution of Power, Resource and Knowledge to which the policy speaks*²

The policy is crafted in a manner to empower the authorities to sever the parental bond in the name of protecting the child. It should be made clear that some children are subjected to unimaginable cruelty and this act does in fact assist them greatly, however, as has been shown above, the act's main purpose can be lost when the regulation is enacted.

In almost every circumstance where the parent is granted a right, and the children are mentioned, the government's ability to challenge the right of the parent on grounds of "opinion" or "belief" are strongly enforced. There is no definition given for what a Children's Aid Society may deem to be a dangerous situation, however the simple act of believing that a child may be in danger is sufficient grounds to begin the separation process – particularly if the parent's mental state is compromised.

I simply asked for support as a single parent and woman in a society that often looks down on individuals such as ourselves, however my disability automatically clouded the situation and stole any power I had in the situation away from me. I was left at the mercy of a system tainted by bias with no recourse for support, all while being told that "this was good for Vincent," and that I was "making the right choice," to enter into a voluntary custodial agreement whereafter I could potentially lose all rights over my son. For lack of a better phrase: I was lied

² Section 2 of the model was omitted as the history and development of the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act was not relevant to this discussion.

to, and my low-level of power in a White dominated anti-feminist society nearly cost me the most precious thing that I have ever had.

How on Earth could I then be expected to believe that the policies which were in place to supposedly support me and my son as I continued in post-secondary education were in fact going to benefit me, and not result in my family being destroyed?

4) Social Stratification – Money and Reality and 5) Policy and Resistance³

The Act itself does not speak of any kind of financial implications regarding child custody – this again is meant to give the impression that all children are treated equally, and all parents have the same rights. Access to justice issues aside, the Act's sole reliance on government resources to make decisions pertaining to a disabled parent's fitness as a parent, instead of having robust outside resources available, show a strong bias towards wealthy parents.

Within the funding and accountability section of the policy, it makes it clear that the government shall be the sole funder of Children's Aid Societies, and that the funding provided to these groups should be spent within approved methods that the government vets and the ministry approves of (, Part I, sec. 40, Child, Family, and Youth Services Act of 2017). This means that governments are the sole source of revenue for these often cash-strapped agencies.

As Gary Cameron shows in his work (2017) analysing the outcomes of this centralized approach, there are several flaws which exist that lead to worker-burn out, social workers taking less challenging or ministry-approved approaches which may in fact be more detrimental, even though they are compliant with policy, and a lack of prioritizing the well-being and overall welfare of the child

³ Due to considerable overlap, section 4 and 5 of the model were combined for this analysis

One of the suggestions that Cameron highlights with respect to the funding issue and a strong method in which the kinds of policy failure created by a lack of funding would be to look outside of Canada in order to understand the approaches that other countries are taking (Cameron, 2017). Cameron also shows that a “richer, more nuanced and more inclusive statement of values and intentions is needed to guide our system of child and family welfare,” (Cameron, 2017). A consistent approach is intended and reinforced by the centralization of decision making into the ministry, however this has led to a tunnel vision approach where old assumptions regarding parents, particularly racialized disabled parents, are reinforced and lead to repeated failures, such as what I experienced.

Transitioning and Accommodation – Seeking additional funds for support

With a broken level of trust based on the issues mentioned above, I was extremely skeptical of the support processes in place, however still believed that the school would attempt to put my best interest first. This is an assumption that many disabled individuals make regarding their funding and accommodation, regardless of how many situations they have been in the past, since seeking additional funding and augmentations for support is often the only way that disabled individuals can complete their education. Unfortunately, I was again let down by a system driven by the neoliberal and ableist expectations of disabled individuals.

Student Accommodation Policies – Failures and Acceptance

Within Ontario, each institution providing post-secondary academic instruction is required to have a clear set of policies which protect disabled students from unfair bias, and which also ensure that students are supported in the most beneficial form. However, as with the

other policies discussed throughout this MRP, two assumptions are required by the student: the obligation to drive the entire accommodation process truly falls on the disabled student seeking accommodation, and the process for appeal when poor decision making happens on the part of the post-secondary institution is convoluted and difficult to follow, or structured in a way which makes accessing, petitioning and demanding real change from these policies virtually impossible.

While undertaking my undergraduate education, I was poorly advised – a program coordinator unfamiliar with my program (a small department focusing on disability studies, with a large disabled student population) advised that a course would be sufficient to meet the academic requirements of my degree, however it turned out to not be so. I ended up having to spend an additional semester at the University where I did my undergraduate studies and in turn had to delay entrance into my graduate studies program at York. I was extremely upset and hurt by the fact that my school had let me down to the point where, had I wanted to continue on with graduate education immediately after my undergraduate, those opportunities would have had to have been put on hold while I sorted out the poor advising that I had received.

After speaking with my fellow students, they had explained that they too had experienced similar situations due to a lack of understanding of their accommodation requirements, and an unfamiliarity with the Critical Disability Studies program within the advisory administration. Students felt that this was the case as the majority of students enrolled in the program were disabled and many of the individuals that worked in the advisory department gave these students the impression that they, the students, were “receiving enough support,” and should have been able to navigate the intricacies of both their accommodation and academic requirement as necessary.

One of the main reasons for this poor advisory experience that seemed to be uniform amongst disabled students stems from the centralization of knowledge and specialization that can occur within university administration. With respect to disabled students, this is seen in the centralization of all disabled related matters into the “Disability Services Offices,” of most schools (Waterfield and Whelan, 2017). This practice of centralizing all administrative individuals who address, support, and work with disabled individuals into a single office has led to a two-fold problem (Waterfield and Whelan, 2017).

Firstly, funding has not been increased in Ontario as the case load in these departments has continued to rise. More students who identify as disabled are being accepted into post-secondary settings, and as such the ability to provide meaningful and targeted support is woefully lacking (Waterfield and Whelan, 2016).

Along with the level of overwork faced by many of the administrative staff that work in the DSOs of universities, this centralization of knowledge and authority into a single office leaves many other areas of student support, such as the career and academic advisory groups, lacking the appropriate staff with training. This is to say that those with knowledge about disability tend to be centralized in these DSOs and are not present in other departments (Waterfield and Whelan, 2016).

As shown by Shanouda and Spagnuolo (2021), this centralization of knowledge relating to disability support and absence in other areas is almost “encouraged” by the way in which the government handles the dissemination of policy and procedures to their staff members, particularly with respect to the manuals that speaks to assessment and funding allocation policies. They showed that in order to do their analysis of DSOs and student academic/financial support, they could not simply approach the Disability Services Offices of each university and

ask for the ministry provided manuals – the exact opposite was true (Shanouda and Spagnuolo, 2021).

According to the authors: they approached the DSO for several Canadian post-secondary institutions and were told that the manuals were not for public consumption and were not available to individuals unaffiliated with the respective DSO. In order to access these documents, the authors had to file a freedom of information (FOI) request, which eventually resulted in each school's DSO sending them several hundred pages of documents both to fulfill the information request, and from the opinion of the authors, to make it difficult for the researchers to truly see how these policies and guidance documents were used (Shanouda and Spagnuolo, 2021).

This absolute inability to gain access to information which is crucial to disabled students unless a FOI is filed gives insight into how disabled students are viewed within a post-secondary setting and explains the problem of poor advisory experiences. Disabled students are expected to funnel all questions through the DSO, locking them out of the full post-secondary experience. The additional factor of staff who are specialized in assisting disabled students also being warehoused solely in the DSO and not being spread throughout the academic departments further disenfranchises disabled students and does not create an environment where our needs are met or even addressed in a fair fashion. Due to this lack of expertise outside of DSOs, the advisor that I spoke with made the assumption that the course he had advised me to take was appropriate since its content dealt with disability. I was badly advised and had to prolong my education at the undergraduate level. This forced me to find additional accommodation at my own expense to assist with my son's care in a time that I assumed I would have been able to care for him myself. As I had entered this environment understanding the struggle that individuals such as myself face, I attempted to stand up for myself and begged the department to make an exception,

however they advised that “school policy” prevented them from accepting the course that I was advised to take as suitable for meeting my degree requirements. I was told that I should have validated the advising. This shows that the system is considered flawless by the policy makers and those in power until an error is made, and then the responsibility is transferred entirely onto the student, with no exception being made to the policy dictated by ministry manuals that disabled students are not even entitled to access.

The Diem et al., analysis of Disabled students’ accommodation policies within an Ontario Post Secondary Educational Environment

I had hoped to compare the DSO policy manual on funding regarding the administration of disabled students funding and bursary access, however as mentioned by the authors above, these documents are simply not made public, contrary to what the expectation may be. However, in order to ensure that a critical policy analysis of post-secondary institutional policy can be done, the following section will use the model developed by Diem et al., to review the Academic Accommodations policy of my undergraduate institution in order to highlight the neoliberal and elitist bias contained therein.

1) The difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality.

The academic accommodation policy of the undergraduate institution that I attended makes great effort to explain that students should feel supported and that extensive supports are in place to meet the needs that they may face.

Some of the key points of rhetoric found in the document are found at the beginning under the guiding “Principles,” section. Within this section it immediately lays out that the university abides by AODA, the key guiding law within the province of Ontario which guarantees the rights of disabled students and individuals. It closes off the introduction paragraph

by saying “The University Strives to make its academic programming accessible to all students” (Ryerson Accommodations Policy # 159, 2016).

The guiding principles section declares right at the outset that the University is “Committed to preserving academic freedom and high academic standards,” and that “the University will provide academic accommodations to assist students with disabilities to fulfill the academic requirements of their programs without alteration in academic standards or outcomes,” (Ryerson University Accommodations Policy #159, 2016).

The policy continues to make grand claims regarding the level of support that students will receive include guarantees that: Academic Accommodation Support Will:

- a) *Partner with students, faculty, instructors, staff, and other professionals to facilitate academic accommodation*
- e) *assist students in obtaining documents regarding disability, as reasonably required*
- g) *Consult with instructors and faculties/schools, as needed, on crafting academic accommodations to enable students to satisfy the essential requirements of their program of study*
- h) *provide problem-solving support to students with disabilities when applicable*
- n) *educate, when appropriate, students, faculty, and administrative staff as to their rights and responsibilities under this policy (Ryerson University Student Accommodation Policy, 2016)*

Literally none of this has ever been extended to me, discussed with me, or provided to me during my entire time in my undergraduate career unless I specifically and repeatedly requested and pursued it. Again, a world of broken promises exists for disabled students.

Here the Diem et al.'s model of comparing rhetoric to reality becomes a crucial policy analysis tool (Diem et al, 2014).

As shown by Childs, Finnie, and Martinello (2017), nearly 25% of students with disabilities in certain post-secondary settings drop out or discontinue their program within the first year of their study. Further to this, they report that students change programs at a rate of 10-15% within their first year (Childs, Finnie, and Martinello, 2017). Combined, these statistics show that students with disabilities are withdrawing from their programs at a substantially higher rate than their non-disabled counterparts. Schools are not provided the required support, even though the institutional policies contain robust rhetoric to make them appear as such.

The authors go on to show that disabled students who attend institutions often associated with lower socio-economic status (such as part-time college or community college type post-secondary educational institutions) have a graduation rate 25% lower than students who enroll in Universities (Childs, Finnie, and Martinello, 2017). As a disabled woman from a challenging socioeconomic background, this reflects the reality of my situation: regardless of how much the school's policies on support tout the vast assistance, which is available, the reality of that rhetoric is quite different. Students who struggle are not supported in the manner that the policy claims, and when accommodation is required, it is the student who must drive the process, often due to lack of DSO staff and chronic underfunding.

A good example of the cruel reality that disabled students faced was highlighted in the work by Easterbrook et al., (2019) which examined the reality of seeking accommodation. Most schools within Ontario and Canada as a whole, use similar rhetoric as the undergraduate institution mentioned above where an artificial idea of support is washed away when investigated.

The researchers show that while strong rhetoric exists, disabled students are often judged based on outdated notions of what it means to be a stable and productive member of society. Here “stable,” and “productive,” simply mean that every student has the ability to reach capitalist goals of earning an income, and it is within that income-earning view that students should be judged (Easterbrook et al., 2019). The article goes on to show that many staff reported a rigid and almost total lack of desire to augment critical components of classes since they felt that it would “compromise” the integrity of the education that they were providing to their non-disabled students, or that it would somehow give the disabled students an unfair advantage if they were provided with accommodations relating to work requirements or mandatory hours (Easterbrook et al., 2019).

How is a student expected to succeed when the very faculty which the policy above speaks so highly of, do not have an unbiased understanding of the needs of the student? When these biases are brought in, they poison the rhetoric and make it impossible for a student to feel that they will be completely supported, counter to the point claimed in the policy.

3)The distribution of power, resources, and knowledge to which the policy speaks⁴.

Academic institutions have always been areas of great capitalist and neoliberal privilege where students are expected to succeed on “their own merits,” and the responsibility for that success by and large lays with the student. However, this becomes more challenging when attempting to create a supportive, accommodating post-secondary environment.

Within the accommodation policy of the undergraduate institution that I attended; it lists

⁴ Step 2 of the model speaking to the history of the development of the policy was skipped as this policy closely reflects those present in other schools.

the “responsibility” that the disabled student faces when under the protection of the policy. These include:

- a) *Following academic accommodation procedures*
- b) *Meeting the essential academic requirements of a course/program*
- c) *Discussing with Academic accommodation support, their instructor, their department, any concerns they may have about whether or not they would be able to meet the essential academic requirements of a course/program prior to enrolling in a course/program*
- d) *Must register with the academic accommodation support office (Ryerson University Student Accommodation Policy 159, 2016)*

At face value these requests do not seem obstructive or difficult, however the power dynamic that they reveal is vital.

The student is immediately responsible for identifying themselves as disabled by registering with the accommodation office in order for any kind of accommodation to be discussed. This creates an undue burden on the student whose disability may not be permanent, or who may in fact only be experiencing a momentary disability based on mental health.

The power dynamic here means that the student must stream themselves out of a regular post-secondary experience and into the control and purview of the DSO where they must declare the nature of their disability for consideration prior to being provided service. Note that the first obligation of the student as stated above, is to be compliant with the accommodations process and its procedures.

Secondly, the student must be able to “project” if they will encounter difficulty in the course *before* they have even taken the course (requirement c in the list above). Here the student

is expected to be a psychic of some kind and be able to understand what the course will require, how the professor will teach it, and whether or not their disability will hinder their ability to keep up, all without having taken the course. As shown by Smith and Miller-Kahn (2005) in the section speaking to my son's experience, disabled individuals are automatically moved to the "outside group" in the event that they wish to seek accommodation. The student is robbed of power and put on the backfoot where they must undergo the assessment process and acknowledge their disability without having any exposure to the challenges and limitations that they may face.

3) Social Stratification.

This section of the Diem et al., model speaks to the difference in social influence and power between those that make the policies and those that have to abide by them (Diem et al., 2014). The clear bias under which this policy was constructed is highlighted in the schools poorly constructed attempt to leverage a quote from the World Health Organization.

Within the accommodation policy, it states the following pertaining to the drive for "inclusion" that the policy is designed to speak.

"The University is committed to fostering an inclusive educational environment that 'Recognizes that disability refers to the negative aspects of the interaction between individuals with a health condition and personal and environmental factors...the disability experience resulting from the interaction of health conditions, personal factors, and environment factors varies greatly,'" (Ryerson University Accommodation Policy 159, 2016).

Here the University, in an almost comical fashion is appealing to the authority of the WHO in an attempt to make it appear as if they have relied on the expertise and prestige of a global health

authority in order to craft its policy. However, in doing so they reveal their true opinion of disabled individuals and the social status which they hold.

The above statement clearly shows that disability is viewed as negative, even though it may be nuanced by the experiences and racial, sexual, socioeconomical biases and differences that the disabled person may have faced. Disability is staged as a negative, literally using the word “negative,” and is shown as being simply defined as the limitations in the interaction that a disabled person may have with their environment, regardless of how varied that environment may have been.

Disability is negative. Disability is limitation. Those are the two overwhelming ideologies which come out of the above policy segment.

5) Policy and Resistance

The fifth and final analytical component of the Diem et al., (2014) model speaks to policy resistance, or methods and actions currently underway in order to combat policy failure or policy bias.

Within their work on reviewing overcoming barriers to education, Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa (2018) detail a series of resistance measures which can be undertaken by the individual student and by the University itself to combat policy failure. They believe that three main forms of resistance would yield the greatest results. Firstly, the university must provide more robust funding which can be spread across a wide array of areas in order to build champions for students in various areas within the bureaucracy of the university. Secondly, universities must make more of an effort to create an open and informed system in which students can be made aware of the different types of accommodations which they are entitled to and the method in which they can be accessed. The gatekeeping that is seen by introducing a

level of secrecy around the ministry provided manuals shows that this second point remains of vital importance. And finally, students must be taught self-advocacy measures. Many students arrive within post-secondary institutions and expect a similar experience to what they had at the high school level where they received more one-on-one support. By teaching students how to advocate for themselves, they become the foundation of resistance and can work productively with the respective university administrative areas to improve their own outcomes (Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa, 2018).

While the above is a good example of positive resistance, it is important to harken back to some of the faculty mentioned above who saw accommodation of any type as negative and detrimental to the integrity of the course they were teaching. Though this is a negative when viewed from the perspective of disabled students seeking accommodation, it is a form of policy resistance which should be touched on in this section. What about the faculty that believe that these accommodation policies provide an unfair advantage?

In an article written for *The National Post*, Queen's University law professor Bruce Pardy laid out his beliefs of the unfair advantage given to students with mental disabilities in the accommodation process (2017). Pardy compares the provision of additional time to complete an exam to giving an Olympic-level athlete an unfair advantage in a race by allowing them to begin the race before others. He also states that even though Human Rights bodies, such as the Ontario Council on Human Rights, has mandated that additional time be granted, he believes *“These commissions are not neutral investigative bodies but advocacy agencies with expansive agendas and wide powers to interpret and apply human rights code provisions. On this subject, their directs are inconsistent with prevailing principles of human rights law.”* (Pardy, 2017)

A professor and respected member of faculty is clearly stating that even though these rights may be rooted in widely accepted human rights forums, that the interpretation is inaccurate and that students are provided with an unfair advantage due to their disability (Pardy, 2017).

This is the other side of policy resistance that disabled students have to confront every day. Post secondary educational policy proclaims that it will create a mutually beneficial environment where staff and administration will work together for the student's success. However, when the faculty itself believes that accommodation is somehow unfair, how is a student to believe that any kind of request for support will not be met with derision from those who hold power, such as the allies of faculty they are disagreeing with.

Policy resistance is possible, I myself have resisted post-secondary accommodation policy, and would like to look at this MRP itself as a form of resistance against these policy failures. However, the success of the resistance, and the difficulty in continuing it, may be sufficient to discourage many students from meaningful self-advocacy.

Conclusion

Fear is the guiding emotion for many disabled individuals. Fear that their disability will automatically lead to segregation. Fear that accommodations which are vital for the success of our education will be absent. Fear that we will continue to be looked upon as second class citizen. Fear that a system which is supposedly in place to help us will turn on us. And fear of a continued discontent and let down by the bureaucracy we are all dependent on.

Beginning with the advocacy that was required to ensure that my son did not lead the life of a sweatshop worker, performing the same repetitive task without regard for his aspirations and desires, the innate socio-economic, cultural, and anti-feminist bias that is baked into our post secondary system has been extremely evident. Students like my son are simply thrown to the

outside world, with little to no support. Their parents, if they are lucky to have them, are expected to become overnight experts that can navigate any situation, even within a system that is built to abuse and use them to the utmost maximum.

Post-Secondary accommodation can quickly warp into a constant and unyielding battle against accommodation requirements, overworked and inattentive staff, and the machine of administration that is designed to push you through the system, regardless of real and nuanced need.

Within the post-secondary educational system, there is an overarching belief that simply providing support policies is a sufficient enough display of inclusivity towards the disabled community, with no actual follow through to ensure that the policy is productive or workable for all members of society. This is why the “rhetoric versus intent” component of the Diem et al., (2014) model is so vital to the policy analyses which have been undertaken. This component lays bare the fact that post-secondary accommodation policy often only serves a select group of already privileged people who have not had the same disappointing and derogatory experiences faced intersectionally marginalized individuals. Simply providing the policy is insufficient – a need for follow through and creating equity within these institutions is severely lacking.

Thankfully, the recent past has seen the rise of the disability justice movement, which includes several key principals which may be useful in fighting back against the racial, financial, and gendered discrimination that policy failures have perpetuated. Within their work outlining the 10 key principles of disability Justice, Sins Invalid (2015) shows that a strong foundation is being built to combat inequality within policy. The principle of “recognizing wholeness” includes an acknowledgement that a disabled person is not simply another worker who may not

be able to carry their own weight, but rather a full and whole human being with life experiences that may make them hesitant to accept policy (Sins Invalid, 2015).

Sins Invalid (2015) also includes Collective Access within their key principles. This refers to the fact that though minority voices may not be part of the power-holding group within society, these individuals' experiences bring a unique set of nuances to the disability rights and policy discussion that is often dominated by heteronormative, White, male assumptions (Sins Invalid, 2015). I am one of those voices, and I truly hope that this MRP shows how forgetting that diversity exists within the disability community can lead to unnecessarily difficult challenges to minority individuals.

My own experience in achieving my education has been one which has been greatly enlightening and has taught me that extensive policy failures can only be combatted through policy resistance. Writing this MRP is in of itself an act of resistance, for within here is the truth of my experience, and that of my son. It shows that even through adversity and extreme, unnecessary difficulty, many disabled students do achieve, and do go on to pursue further studies. My earnest hope is that my struggle acts as a reminder to continue to fight against policy failures which have sustained neoliberal bias and continues to oppress women and racialized individuals with disabilities.

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Appendix

Afterword – MRP Discussion

Hello and thank you very much for joining me today to discuss my major research paper. I am truly grateful for all of the assistance that each of you have provided throughout this process and am overjoyed at the opportunity to be able to be here today.

I would like to start with a land acknowledgement. "Toronto is in the 'Dish with One Spoon Territory'. The Dish with One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous Nations and peoples, Europeans and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect." The "Dish", or sometimes it is called the "Bowl", represents what is now southern Ontario, from the Great Lakes to Quebec and from Lake Simcoe into the United States. *We all eat out of the Dish, all of us that share this territory, with only one spoon. That means we have to share the responsibility of ensuring the dish is never empty, which includes taking care of the land and the creatures we share it with. Importantly, there are no knives at the table, representing that we must keep the peace.

In addition to the above, I would like to take time to acknowledge women, specifically women of colour who have been subjected to years of oppression and whose stories, similar to mine are just starting to be told. As I mentioned at the end of my MRP, I would like this paper to be thought of as a formal act of policy resistance. Policy has failed women, disabled individuals, and all of us who face marginalization on a regular basis, and it is important to acknowledge this.

While I am not bitter or resentful of my experiences, I am saddened to know that other women and disabled individuals continue to experience them. I hope that by adding my voice to the chorus will enable us to sing just a little bit louder and with a little more understanding.

To be very honest, writing this paper allowed me to really understand the gaps that exist in the world of disability policy today. Many groups are never exposed to the idea that policy is really there to protect them and to create a society where we can all have equal access.

Within the transition from high school to University – I still see parents being told that their children should aim for nothing higher than a menial, low earning future. University or College is often still not discussed based on the conversations that I have with the many parents that I continue to support. My son’s experience of having his music lessons, which he loved more than anything in the world, taken away so he could sort screws and nails into different boxes, may not be exactly what occurs today, however students are still presented with “community opportunities” which are limited to stocking shelves in grocery stores, or greeting customers as they enter a Wal-Mart.

Instead, my experience with many disabled individuals is that they are capable of providing love and support in a non-traditional fashion. Why is it that when we say, “community inclusion” with respect to disabled children transitioning from high school, we really mean “working low end jobs to make someone who is already rich, even more wealthy?” My son is a highly social individual who projects love and kindness into every situation. A good placement for him, for example, would be as a “Professional friend,” or a volunteer who spends their day in a retirement community speaking with and interacting with elderly individuals who are often themselves marginalized and forgotten.

But no – the rhetoric of transition policy is one which makes it seem as if this kind of community inclusion is the key goal of post-secondary accommodation for students. However, the reality is that the intent of the policy is truly to simply pass the community responsibility of creating a positive experience for disabled individuals on to the next “institution,” with no real focus on the best possible outcome. Yes, many disabled individuals do go on to university, however it is those who are less privileged that we must focus our attention on in order to truly fill the gap of policy failures.

A question I would like both of you to consider as education and disability scholars is: To quote the great Nobel Prize winner Dr. Linus Pauling how do we “remember our common humanity and forget the rest?” How do we, in a safe and protected fashion, open the conversation to deal with some of the incredibly difficult and abusive educational experiences faced by students?

One of my darkest moments caused by policy failures arose when I nearly lost my child. My MRP goes into great detail about the experience that I had when I approached his school asking for support with his care. I was advised by the school that they were always there for me, and that they would always support me with my son’s care, knowing that as a disabled mother, I sometimes needed a little assistance.

Their response, driven by their rigid and inhumane interpretation of policy was to include the Children’s Aid Society, who attempted to covertly get me to sign over my parental rights. As a woman of colour, an immigrant, and a disabled individual, I had no idea what I was about to do, until my own mother stepped in and stopped me from making a mistake that could have destroyed my family.

Not only did this break my trust to the point where I sacrificed my own mental health in order to keep my family together, but it also set a tone of enduring distrust. How could I ever trust a system whose answer to my scream for help was “we can help, all you have to do is give up your child.”

The problem here is that many women and primary caregivers suffer in silence. I come from a culture where women’s opinion often comes second to a man’s and that a woman is simply expected to produce children and keep a home. However, my father, who in his own way resisted the unspoken, gendered policies that ruled our society, empowered me to know that my voice matters, and that my opinion, particularly when it comes to my family, should never remain silent. However, I am one of the privileged few.

I was lucky enough to receive a post-secondary education, fraught with difficulties, but still an education. There are countless disabled women who approach the system for help and who are abused in that moment, yet they are meant to simply look at that specific experience of policy failure as existing in a vacuum. These individuals are almost mandated to “forgive” the system for failing them in each situation and treat each new policy interaction as an independent experience. This is impossible. Asking this of disabled individuals is like asking someone to bring no life experience to the table.

So, when it comes time to seek accommodation for a disabled individual such as myself within a post-secondary institution, it is impossible to expect us to simply trust that we will be supported, when our entire lives have been filled with repeated and abusive policy failures. While the school and its administration may truly believe that the policies they have in place help those with disabilities, that is because they are simply not listening to the disabled.

We are lumped together as one group with one umbrella policy that involves throwing money at us and telling us to talk with each individual professor and find some kind of middle ground that is meant to enable our ability to learn with no considerations of the trauma we have experienced in the past.

As my paper shows, the rate of disabled individuals dropping out of post-secondary education clearly shows that these policies do not cater to many individuals, and in fact when they do create a positive environment for people such as myself, they only create that environment in a very limited way, with a limited number of opportunities available to students' requiring accommodation.

For example: I have never been treated by a doctor in a wheelchair, or by a nurse who was blind. That is not because disabled individuals are not capable of performing these tasks and activities, but it is because with all the policies in place, marginalization and stigma still underpins the post-secondary educational experience and limits the future potential of disabled students.

My Question here is: How do we remake a system for disabled students which is truly equal and takes into account the horrendous experiences that many of us have suffered as a result of poorly constructed and poorly accommodative policies. How do we blend experience and success to create a positive environment?

I do not want you to walk away from this experience believing that I am bitter or angry and never trust what those who hold the power say or create. I believe we are making great strides towards creating a better future, however there is much more which can be done.

Throughout my entire time of supporting my son, before I started my post secondary education, I did not realize that I had the ability to challenge policy. I come from a culture where what the government says goes, or what the school says is the final word. I did not realize that I had the ability to stand up for myself and say THIS IS NOT RIGHT. I tried and was silenced on many occasions, however I never fully understood that my voice has equal weight to those who create and craft this policy and that I have every right to push back when I feel abused.

However, it took decades and formal education for me to learn this. Many disabled women and other individuals never have that luxury, so I believe that it is a responsibility of ours as academics, students, administrators, and policy makers to listen and engage those who policy is intended for in the policy making process.

We live in a world where a pandemic has shown us that we do not truly need to be in person in order to contribute and be heard – all it takes is a cellphone or a computer and the world can be informed of your opinion. And yet, I have never been invited to a policy discussion, my feedback has been requested but often only to make sure that a box can be checked by an uninterested individual in power. I am asked to vote, because my vote is extremely important, but I am never asked to comment in a meaningful fashion about what I am voting for.

In fact, I had the displeasure of running into Doug Ford at a Tim Hortons before he became the Premier of Ontario. I told him that I was the mother of a disabled son and that I expected that he would protect disabled individuals and the funding they desperately need. He smiled and informed me that he certainly would make sure disabled individuals were taken care of. I obviously did not believe him, and he certainly did not get my vote, because I knew it was nothing more than empty rhetoric. He immediately cut autism funding after becoming premier.

We are constantly told that we must all play an active role, but how are we to play that active role if our opinion is never taken into account, when our voice is constantly ignored, and when our resistance is met with nothing more than a few kind words and a smile from a lying politician or policy creator?

This is why resistance must be taught and encouraged at every level. Students must be made aware of their rights to resist, and institutions must be open and receptive to the criticism that they receive. Because until those changes and real meaningful resistance is accepted, we will continue to have mothers being asked for bribes, we will continue to have schools wrongfully advising their students, and we will continue to have families broken apart by a system riddled with policy failures that go unacknowledged.

Thank you very much. This is a dream come true for me.