Learning from the women’s movement about educational change

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The women’s movement in the 1970s and 1980s was a global phenomenon that achieved significant educational change. More analysis of how it developed and had an impact on education can inform our understanding of the possibilities for change today. This paper explores how the women’s movement changed schooling in Vancouver in the 1970s, using a framework based on the idea of building civic capacity. The movement arose from a global politics, coalesced locally around new ideas, and created new relationships and institutional forms that drove school reform. Although the particular institutional forms that were created did not last, the impact of changed ideas and a new politics of equity have persisted, albeit in contested forms. The metaphor of building civic capacity for educational change is useful in focusing attention on ideas and institutions, but must be understood as contingent, shifting and fragile.

Keywords: feminism; educational change; civic capacity

Introduction

There is a large literature on the process of changing or reforming schools. Much of it is directed at those inside the schools, providing advice on goal setting, clarifying values, producing collaboration, negotiating conflict, building capacity. There is also a literature focused at the level of the educational system, be it ministry or board level, discussing policy directions, structural innovations and accountability systems, among other things. But school change also comes significantly from groups outside the educational system, from social movements, business interests and reform minded citizens who see education as the key to changing society. The civic coalitions that arise to initiate and support educational change can be viewed as building civic capacity for education. This capacity has been seen as critical to changing the way schools approach poverty and social class issues (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedesclaux, 2001; Shipp, 2006; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). This paper explores the general framework in relation to the women’s movement and the way it translated its new social power into educational change.

The women’s movement in the 1970s is an example of a successful attempt to change schooling from the outside. It was a movement in which I participated, and one that shaped my intellectual and political commitments, as well as those of my friends and colleagues. It also brought about changes in the curriculum, enhanced teachers’ careers and increased the achievement levels of young women, among other things. Although many feminists were frustrated with their slow progress and their lack of formal power, the 1970s was a time when equality between the sexes became a legitimate policy issue, debated in schools, school boards, ministries and teachers’ federations. Textbooks were rewritten and screened for their portrayal of women. Women’s history and novels by feminists, even

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ISSN 0159-6306 print ISSN 1469-3739 online
© 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/01596300802410169
http://www.informaworld.com
the occasional women’s studies course, were added to the curriculum. Girls learned to play soccer, women’s athletics received new funding, and female teachers were able to wear pants to school. Women dramatically increased their representation in positions of educational leadership. Sexual harassment was named as a problem. These changes and others like them were hard fought and represent one of the most far-reaching and enduring educational changes of the century. We can learn from closer attention to how it happened and what its lessons are.

Stone et al. (2001), Cuban and Usdan (2003) and Anyon (2005), among others, have argued that community mobilization is necessary for educational change; their focus has been on changing the way schools educate children from poor families. Stone et al. (2001) write that

... local initiatives, sustained by local coalitions, must generate the capacity to get things started, and draw in resources from the outside ... When a wide alliance develops enough of a common understanding to work in concert to reform urban education, civic capacity has been activated. (p. 4)

Stone et al. have written about community attempts to reform urban schools in 12 urban school districts in the USA in terms of ‘building civic capacity’ through aligning interests, mobilizing ideas and changing institutions. Focusing attention on mobilizing the community, their framework emphasizes ideas as a means to frame issues so they can be approached by several groups, and institutions as the nexus of the politics that is needed to bring about change.

Using this framework to understand the impact of the women’s movement in an earlier era is useful for thinking about the politics of educational change. The women’s movement in Vancouver built a large and multi-faceted community with an interest in advancing women’s wellbeing through schooling. It developed and circulated new ideas and had a major impact on policy and practice. The institutional changes it brought about were fragile and difficult to sustain, but the ideas permeated deeply enough to continue their impact on educational discourse. The relationship of gender and class politics has been a focus of feminism. Using the concept of civic capacity, but substituting the politics of gender for the politics of class, allows us to examine how the mobilization of people and ideas is similar and different in each case. I will argue that the mobilization of diverse groups and the spread of new ideas are common to both, but the centrality of ideas in the women’s movement distinguishes the politics of urban school reform, and accounts for its more lasting success.

Methodology

The women’s movement is global and has existed over many years. This paper explores the way it manifested itself in British Columbia, and particularly Vancouver, for a few years in the 1970s. I was part of this milieu, and knew many of the actors and their environment. However, the research was not designed as nostalgia. It revisited the experience to critically examine the process of change, since the change seemed so profound and important. The approaches that were taken, the energy that was found, and the relationships that were fostered were remarkable, and transformative. Does the current literature on educational change deal with it adequately? Was the experience unique, or are there more general conclusions we can draw about how to reform schools?

This paper provides a local case study of how activists in the women’s movement changed ideas, institutions and politics in one province in Canada as the second wave of
feminism got underway. It recognizes the achievements of these activists; it also tries to look in detail at how they worked with the educational system. The study began in a comparative framework, proposed by women who were active in the women’s movement themselves (Gaskell & Taylor, 2003). In British Columbia, the researchers examined documents and newsletters available in the archives at the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation and the British Columbia Status of Women Office as well as personal collections of papers held by those who participated in the struggles of the time.

Formal interviews were carried out with 16 of the key players, identified through the archives and through snow-ball sampling. These women worked with the Ministry of Education, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, the New Democratic Party and various women’s movement committees that had education on their agenda. Each woman we interviewed suggested others who were active and who might be interested in the history we were compiling. Each woman was asked to tell the story of how she came to be involved and what happened as she pressed for change in education. In several cases, shared experience added to the comfort of the conversations. The interview emphasized questions about the meaning of the women’s movement, the relationships it fostered, the resistance encountered, and the resources available. Each interview followed its own pattern, and took from one to two hours.

The interviews were transcribed and sent to the interviewee for editing and approval. The text was corrected on the basis of her comments. Interviewees were promised their names would not be used, and reasonable efforts would be made to conceal their identities. Although several women were not concerned about anonymity, no names have been used in this article. Some will be identifiable to the knowledgeable reader, and other texts about the same events have used real names. In some cases, historical details and names have been left out in order to conceal identities, while illustrating general processes.

Ideas and interests

In urban school reform, analysts have used the shifting interests of various groups, most notably business, parents, and governments, as the starting point for analysis. At some times, in some places, an interest in improving schooling becomes paramount; at other times other interests are more important. Ideas are the glue that defines problems and links coalitions so that they can work together. For urban school reformers, ideas like community control or school choice can mobilize coalitions and challenge the status quo.

A social movement like the women’s movement differs from an interest group trying to advance a social agenda in that it is driven by its ideas (Mellucci, 1989, 1996), rather than just using ideas to advance change. Chronicles of the second wave women’s movement point out that its major impact was in germinating, exploring, circulating and making public a new set of meanings and practices around gender relations (Baxandall, 2001). This radical rethinking set the ‘new’, second-wave women’s movement in the early 1970s apart from the more mainstream women’s politics of the past (Rosen, 2000). It was preoccupied with new names and new issues that opened up new debates challenging the schools, the teachers and the state. It was often reluctant to engage in mainstream politics, worrying about compromising personal commitments and acting in ways that were antithetical to movement ideas.

But the women’s movement made common cause with a much more mainstream articulation of equal rights for women. In Canada, this mainstream set of ideas gained legitimacy through a Royal Commission on the Status of Women, headed by journalist Florence Bird (named Mrs John Bird in the terms of reference). This commission was
appointed by the federal government in 1967. Its commissioners came from among older, middle-class women and men with ties to the government. The resurgent post-war politics of equality informed its work. Its 1970 report focused on increasing women’s access to power. Because education was seen as the institution that developed capacity and provided opportunity, the Royal Commission highlighted inequalities in education. It produced several compelling research studies that documented the ways textbooks portrayed men and women, boys and girls, in fundamentally different ways. It compiled enrolment statistics, showing that women were less likely to go to university, and less likely to study math and science. It looked at how women dominated in elementary teaching, and were under-represented in secondary teaching and educational administration jobs in Canada. It critiqued career counseling and called for more opportunities for aboriginal women. Its 32 recommendations took on most areas of the educational system, arguing for fundamental change in the way gender was treated.

The Royal Commission’s recommendations were controversial and well documented. They were not, however, rooted in or connected to the new ideas of the women’s movement. They did not define women as a group oppressed by men and they did not reference the notion that the ‘personal is political’. As the researcher for the commission wrote later,

The commission did not benefit from discussions generated within the women’s movement because we did not know what was going on, except through rare public demonstrations (which) were often quite radical and difficult to understand from outside the movement. (Begin, 1993, p. 21)

The women who were most active in educational change in Vancouver were well aware of the Royal Commission report, and they worked with its recommendations. However, it was not the impetus for their activism. All of those interviewed for this research spoke about the impact of texts and discussions rooted in the women’s movement, and what a radical impact they had had on their understanding of their own lives. A middle-class mom with small children found the movement ‘opened up my eyes to all of these issues which niggled in the back of my mind in the years previous, but had never really come together’. Another woman said: ‘It was an epiphany. It was so incredibly enlightening, I thought I had found a new religion’.

Movement ideas were complex and sometimes contradictory, but they highlighted the importance of gender as a social category linked to power. The literature of the movement named ‘women’ as a group oppressed in both public and private space. Public issues like equal pay and equal political representation were linked with personal issues like sexuality, housework, dress, language, media representations and child-rearing. A radical political analysis which valued consensus and equality over hierarchy and efficiency was widely circulated and endorsed. The movement was inventing new ways of living and new forms of decision-making, while it also pushed for equal representation and pay (Brownmiller, 1999; Rowbotham, 2000; Taylor & Whittier, 1995).

These ideas served the interests of women, providing arguments for raising wages, sharing housework and child raising, allowing new sexual freedoms and decreasing discrimination. But our respondents did not describe their experience as starting with an interest in personal advancement; rather the ideas illuminated their own experience, allowing them to understand why their husbands would not clean the toilet or do the dishes, or why their principals would not let them wear pants to school even though very revealing miniskirts were allowed.
Most of these women had some connection to and irritation with left politics, which was preoccupied with social change, but focused on class, at the expense of women's issues. The women's movement changed their ideas about how they should do politics as well as how they should live their personal lives. They wanted a less hierarchical, more collaborative approach.

Movement ideas circulated through discussion groups, publications, personal relationships, public demonstrations, and lectures. There were important international connections in local sites like Vancouver. ‘We brought in Kate Millet, she stayed at Jane Rule’s house. We brought in Germaine Greer. We brought in Gloria Steinem, we brought in Susan Brownmiller... later on those names were such big names, but then...’

The ideas involved in the women's movement were complex, often contradictory and always debated. Women were a new social category of oppressed people, but class, race and nationality continued to mark important differences among women. Views about sexuality changed less quickly than views about housework, so debates about the ‘lavender menace’ were divisive. Feminism was aligned with the left, in a general way, but feminists believed their ideas could appeal to even conservative governments. Social mobility was not the goal, but a thorough-going critique of discrimination allowed many women to move ahead in the organizations they participated in.

Women who had found meaning in the new women’s movement rallied around the Status of Women report not only because it made gender equality a legitimate public issue, but also because the public opposition it aroused laid bare the radical nature of its demands. One of our informants recalled a newspaper editorial that outraged her.

It said ‘That kind of thing is alright over the back fence, but it’s an embarrassment when it’s public’. I can remember how angry I felt when I read that editorial because it was so demeaning. (Interview)

Articulating in public ideas that had been confined to private space was central to the movement.

Political organizing joined personal and political understandings. A member of the New Democratic party described her work in the party:

... [we felt] that in order to be able to put an issue [of a newsletter] together, or to look at an issue, we had to discuss it in the light of our own experiences. So, for example, if we were to talk about women’s medical issues, naturally we were going to talk about our own experiences with birth control, abortion experiences, date rape, and all these things that didn’t even have names at the time. Sexual harassment didn’t have a name. Date rape didn’t have a name... So there was a lot of strengthening and re-enforcing of each other. (Interview)

They argued for equal representation of men and women in executive positions and equal pay. But they were also committed to changing the codes of everyday life:

One of the things that made us very unpopular was that we refused to make the coffee and bring the cookies. That got to people more than any policy debate. [Laughs] The men were absolutely, utterly offended. When tea and coffee break time came, we would all just be sitting there... waiting. And one of the older women would get up and go hustle and bustle in the kitchen. That part was really hard. We would say, ‘For every man that goes in the kitchen, a woman will come too!’ Parity was a big, big issue for us on every level! ... But it was also hard because we alienated the older women, who we did not want to alienate, because they didn’t understand. They just thought we were very rude and selfish. (Interview)

Their radical attempt to change the culture and meaning of daily life separated them from the leadership:
The leadership thought we were nuts ... thought we were completely crazy. For example, [in] his standard convention speech, [the leader] would start off by describing what his wife looked like in the morning. It was his big joke. The first time he did it we all started hissing. Well, he wasn’t used to being hissed at his own convention, on his own platform. [Laughs] (Interview)

It also alienated leaders from the majority of party members:

The [typical] response was, ‘There was something wrong with us. We were frustrated,’ or ‘I know what she needs. I know what she hasn’t had.’ We had to deal with that constantly.

In the 1970s, the teaching force in British Columbia was young, expanding, and unhappy with the provincial government. A one-day teachers’ strike in 1969 solidified a group who saw teachers as part of a movement for social change in Canada. Many women in the movement were educators. Their views about education were shaped by their own experience, international movement texts and the extensive research in the Royal Commission Report.

A group called Women in Teaching (WIT) grew from the staffroom discussions of a few teachers. They were concerned about a wide range of personal and professional issues: being able to get a bank loan without their husband’s signature, whether to change their name when they were married or divorced, how to teach children about gender stereotypes. The women carried out a study on the bias in the textbooks they were using, and they published research documenting the traditional attitudes of students in their classes towards male and female work. They circulated a reading list for parents and teachers, recommending, among other authors, the movement classics of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan. They did research, visited classrooms and set up a speakers’ bureau, with faith that the new ideas would quickly be persuasive.

As soon as we explained to somebody where the problem lay, [we assumed] they would, of course, go, ‘Oh, wow, right!’ When it became clear that this was not true, speakers went in pairs, rather than alone, supporting each other and building relationships. (Interview)

The women’s movement mobilized new ideas in the educational community. It brought together a disparate group who saw themselves, and were seen by others, as sharing a set of concerns, although there were substantial differences among them. This alliance depended on ideas and relationships rather than on a formal organizational structure. The new ideas that the women’s movement introduced redefined the way women saw their interests, uniting them while separating their wellbeing from the wellbeing of men in a way that was quite startling to many.

Institutions

In urban school reform, coalitions of active citizens mobilize resources for reform within a variety of institutions. As successful builders of civic capacity, women activists drew in resources to build institutions and move their ideas forward. This began with the federal government, which made resources available to implement the recommendations of the Status of Women report. The University Women’s Club

... got all kinds of funding to bring in women from all over the province [to press for adopting the recommendations of the report] – they had about 300 women representing every women’s group you could imagine. There were some radical women’s liberation groups in Vancouver at that time. (Interview)
Aboriginal women, antipoverty groups, black women and Asian women were involved, though middle-class white women dominated. Everyone was ‘absolutely inspired’ by the conference, and ‘we had a windup session at the end where everybody voted unanimously to set up a new organization called Status of Women Council, or something along those lines’. The conference organizers subsequently got a ‘Local Initiatives Project’ (LIP) grant from the federal government to carry the work forward and set up what became the Status of Women office in Vancouver.

New feminist institutions were created. The Vancouver Status of Women was formed with support from the YWCA, the Council of Women, the federal government and the Unitarian Church. Women’s studies programs were formed at several universities and colleges, and an umbrella group linked them across the province. Rape relief centres and women’s centres and media groups grew.

Feminists also formed groups and caucuses to change the leadership of existing institutions, especially educational institutions. Education in British Columbia in the early 1970s was a field where women were well represented, though not in leadership positions. A large bureaucracy headed by the Ministry of Education controlled educational resources and regulated the curriculum, the professional development priorities of teachers and the rules governing the work of educators. One teachers federation (the BCTF) united teachers in a struggle against the provincial government that had been in power for many years.

The teachers federation was sympathetic to movements for social change and it provided a base for the women’s movement. After the Royal Commission report was released, it created a task force on the status of women.

The Royal Commission Report created an enormous stir … The BC Teacher’s Federation has always looked upon itself as being progressive, in the vanguard. So, of course, [they] had to have their own little commission looking at this area. (Interview)

The first task force report emphasized getting more women into administrative positions in the educational system, including the teachers’ federation. Its report reflected the interests of women as defined by the Royal Commission report, but it was at odds with the non-hierarchical views of those who identified with the women’s movement. The WIT member on this task force produced a quickly written minority report that led the executive to strike a second committee made up entirely of members of WIT. This second task force brought new ideas into play, while still referencing the Royal Commission to provide legitimacy.

The task force was a combination of consciousness-raising group and a task-oriented group. We would start every meeting basically debriefing about our private lives and what we were going through with our respective husbands, and how unhappy we were, and how little was changing, and on and on … We would beat up for about an hour or something and then we took the Royal Commission Report and we started work. (Interview)

The task force report (Goulden, Neuberger, Shuto, & Glass, 1973) outspokenly criticized ‘gross inadequacies’ and ‘discrimination’ on the part of the department of education, the teachers federation, the school boards and individual teachers. Quoting the Royal Commission, it called for concerted ‘awareness-raising’ as well as changes in educational structures and policies, all to be coordinated through an institutionalized program at the teachers’ federation.

We were quite clear that forming a women’s program or secretariat was what we wanted, and we wanted a full time staff person. That was our first priority. (Interview)
When the report was presented to the annual general meeting, the reaction was hostile and personal.

People were getting up and making awful jokes, and awful sexist remarks, I’d never seen anything like this in a meeting. It was actually quite scary . . . (Interview)

But a calculated floor strategy and willingness to jettison the recommendation about preferring women for administrative positions won the day. The teachers’ federation hired a status of women coordinator on a two-year, rotating basis and she set about ‘raising consciousness’ throughout the province. The incumbent had a budget and a great deal of autonomy to shape her work in light of movement ideas.

I felt very optimistic and very encouraged by the work we were doing and the number of people, and the women who were involved, and the commitment and the dedication, and a really growing sense of solidarity. It was exciting. It was wonderful. (Interview)

She traveled, finding sympathetic teachers, spreading movement ideas and providing personal and professional support for women who were involved. She remembers, ‘I started pouring over research and documentation and things I could bring to people.’ She assembled an advisory committee composed of one woman in each school district in the province. ‘We had all kinds of social activities when women came to Vancouver.’ ‘We shared experiences . . . We built in all kinds of emotional support.’ A yearly conference and a newsletter were the public face of relationships that deeply affected the women involved.

WIT’s relationship with the BCTF leadership and staff started as a mutually supportive one. The executive helped with strategy and provided resources for the task force.

Our staff person was this very kindly kind of older man. We thought he was quite old, but he was probably 48 at the time. But we were all 23 or 24 . . . The first time he came in, he had Danish pastries and coffee and just said, ‘Well, I don’t know how to support you but if you need anything – like more coffee or something – just let me know.’ (Interview)

As the Status of Women program grew, it worked to maintain support from the federation. The committee nominated candidates for elections and brought forward motions at the annual meeting to endorse its activities. It developed women with the capacity to work effectively within the organization.

We did public speaking workshops so that women got confidence. The expectation was that, if at all possible, you were to run for political positions, whether it be on your staff committees at school or the local executive committee or staff representative or, ideally, right to the Federation’s highest levels. (Interview)

At the same time, movement activists worked for what they believed in. They established a women’s caucus. ‘We didn’t ask permission, we just did it.’

We were really bold and quite undemocratic at times, really seriously undemocratic as far as [the BCTF] went. But when it came to decision-making amongst the women it was very democratic – everybody had a say and things were voted on. (Interview)

By 1975, International Women’s Year, the program was going well, keeping support institutionally, pushing the edges politically.

We had money from the Secretary of State to initiate a couple of community programs. We had students hired to develop curriculum for working with high schools. We had our contacts conference; we visited all of these locals. We met with the Minister, the Vancouver Status of Women, the Federation of Labour, the Human Rights officers, parents groups in a number of
places, Status of Women resource centres, Vancouver Resource Board. [The university] was initiating conferences at that time; we were part of all of that. And then, because we were bringing forward recommendations that dealt with physical education, we had a number of meetings with the Sports Association, department heads, the teacher representatives, athletic reps. And then we were at conferences with the Federation of Women, Federation of Labour, Manitoba Teachers, Canadian Teachers Federation. We were developing curriculum with Canada Studies Foundation ... I mean, the work was just incredible. (Interview)

The women’s movement had a much harder time getting support from the provincial government than from the federal government or the teachers’ federation, and it was in the provincial government that real power over educational policy and resources lay. But in 1972, a social democratic (NDP) government replaced the previous government at the provincial level.

The women’s caucus in the NDP, like the women’s caucus in the BCTF, managed effectively to garner power and resources, even though there were important people in the party, including the leader, who were not supportive of feminism.

We developed a very strong floor strategy at the conventions. We would have a number of people designated to speak. We would have backups for them, and we would have women to hold their babies, because a lot of us were having babies at that time ... We got [the party’s] respect because our floor strategy was so great, and they thought we were going to be kingmakers. We did get people elected onto the executive. We certainly were very influential in policy development. (Interview)

When the NDP was elected in 1972, the education minister was a woman sympathetic to legislation about equal pay, the representation of women in positions of power, and the importance of non-discrimination. She did not, however, identify with the new ideas of the women’s movement or become an active member of the Status of Women committee. She described her experience in school board politics where there were many women active as teachers and mothers:

... you just didn’t run into discrimination. We were expected to pour tea, though. I can’t recall the men ever being asked to go out and pour tea. [Laughs] I must say, I accepted that in those years. (Interview)

Pressured by the teachers’ federation and her own women’s caucus, she appointed a Special Advisor and a Provincial Advisory Committee on Sex Discrimination in Education. Two teachers who had been active in the women’s movement were appointed to the advisor position over the three-year term of the government. They kept the tension between movement ideas and practices and the government’s agenda alive. They would not fade easily into the existing institutional structures:

In those days we were very clear that we did not believe in becoming [an] institutionalized staff person. We would decide who our candidate would be and that person would work for two years and then somebody else would do it, because we wanted to share those experiences so people would get leadership training. (Interview)

The bureaucracy was wary.

There were a lot of men who were in positions of power who would say they were supportive but I don’t think they really understood what we were up to. And when we started getting really pushy, you found these very same people were not supportive, or they would be a little bit scared about where this was going and would caution you to take it slowly and be careful what you say ... We got a lot more mileage by being very brash and embarrassing at times. Just putting people on the spot. (Interview)
The advisor and her committee developed guidelines for screening school materials for sexism, professional development workshops and a women’s studies course:

I went around and did workshops all over the province. I had a very free budget for travel and accommodation anywhere I went. Anybody who asked for a workshop, I went ... The superintendents of the 72 school districts were all men ... They had me parachuted into one of their meetings and I was the only woman there and it was just absolutely, very, very scary.  
(Interview with advisor)

The women’s movement opened up new institutional spaces for circulating feminist ideas about education. These spaces were always contested and the women involved were often uncomfortable with the institutional power they sought and obtained. But the result was new mandates for the provincial curriculum, new guidelines for textbooks, and new forms of professional development for teachers and administrators, as the ideas of the movement were spread throughout the system.

**Changing interests and politics**

Over time, the relations between educational institutions and the women’s movement became increasingly difficult as movement activists began to threaten the interests of the elites in the institutions in which they were situated. Coalitions are unstable, in urban school reform and in feminist school reform, as interests diverged.

Debate about a women’s studies course that had been mandated and developed by the government, under pressure from activists in the women’s movement, provides an example of how this happens. The course included sections on rethinking the family, the law and sex roles in some radical ways. The minister, who had supported it, remembers her concern about how it might bring the government down:

As I read some of it I couldn’t help thinking ... what would be the reaction to it? Because I had seen these protests, [these] fundamentalist groups; when I tried to bring in family life and sex education in the 1970s, I was haunted. Everywhere I went there was a small protest group that would be screaming at me ... and they’re the ones who can completely ruin whatever you’re trying to do. So you have to sometimes compromise. (Interview)

In local school districts, activists felt the pressure to modify their views in order to get support, and it did not sit well.

I realized that I never wanted to be hired by any government again. It was just too constricting because there were things you couldn’t say or shouldn’t say or weren’t supposed to say. It was like having tape over your mouth all the time ... My other political work in the women’s movement [was in] such a culture of free speech. [In the government job] I found myself sitting in front of the typewriter, trying to formulate sentences in what I hoped was going to be a tactful yet a euphemistic [style of writing] ... and really thinking, ‘Gee, I hate doing this. Why don’t we just say this didn’t work, it was a dumb idea?’ [Laughs] But you can’t do that, and I didn’t like it. (Interview)

The Status of Women committee in the BCTF also struggled to maintain its support over time. Conflicts arose as men at executive levels felt threatened by movement ideas.

A number of the men on the left were initially very supportive and encouraging and helped us with tactics and ideas of how to strategize, but that shifted as we became very powerful within the organization. We never had the support of the right, but we gradually lost support of the left. (Interview)
The story has been told before (Foley, 1995, 2000; Goldberg, 1995). Abortion was a critically divisive issue. While abortion rights were central to the women’s movement, they were not central to the teachers’ federation. This split the left wing, some of whom did not want to vote on a pro-choice resolution on the floor of the annual meeting. The resolution went ahead, and women ensured that it passed. ‘I think that was when people started saying “they’ve gone too far.”’

Another divisive moment concerned equal funding for women’s athletics. A motion to withdraw from any physical education program that did not represent males and females equally, i.e., most physical education programs in the province, was considered by the teachers federation leadership to be too controversial. The resolution was pulled from the agenda of the annual general meeting, in order to garner enough votes to elect a feminist to the executive. The action split the women’s caucus, because of both the process and the substance involved. ‘It was just sickening’ to those who identified primarily with the movement and the Status of Women coordinator resigned in protest. ‘Something awful happened to the task force at that point. It was like we weren’t one anymore.’

The executive of the federation started to appoint people who did not identify with the women’s movement to the Status of Women committee. They edited its newsletter, queried its political activities and cut its budget:

They knew how to undermine us and they just systematically, step by step, did it – cut the funding, cut the staffing, appoint people that weren’t feminists. (Interview)

In the government, the teachers federation and local boards, the agenda of gaining institutional power to effect change ultimately came into conflict with the agenda of the ideas of the women’s movement. The ideas of the movement and the interests of the institutions in which they were embedded came apart. Those who identified primarily with the women's movement believed that living and arguing for their ideals was the most important thing, ‘For us there was something higher – it was like a calling. You know what I mean? It felt like that’. Institutional elites more pragmatically wanted to protect the power of their institutions and the interests they served.

Civic capacity and the women’s movement

The women’s movement introduced new ideas and practices into the educational institutions of British Columbia. For a short time in the 1970s, it garnered substantial institutional and popular support for its agenda on education. It raised basic issues about the scope and content of curriculum, the gendered nature of interaction in staffrooms, classrooms and playgrounds, and the assumptions of educators about power, decision-making and the goals of education. It formed a coalition with mainstream groups concerned about equal rights, and it mobilized resources from governments and educational institutions, found political opportunities, and brought new meanings to educational discourse. In short, it very effectively built civic capacity around gender equality in education.

Unlike reformers who are concerned to use ideas pragmatically to create coalitions and bring about school reform, most women in the movement were more concerned with spreading new ideas and practices than in conforming to politics as usual. This contributed greatly to the movement’s power and was responsible for a large part of its effect on education. However, as Melucci (1989) puts it, social movements are ‘permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that frame, constrict and enable their
activities’. The resulting change is not stable. It references shifting relationships, fragile coalitions and pockets of activity, and is built on a democratic politics of debate, dissension and difference.

The language of civic capacity can suggest the creation of an entity, an agreement, or even a building. However, coalitions are unstable, whether they are for urban school reform or feminist curriculum reform. The women’s movement did more than mobilize a coalition to change the public purposes of schooling. It gave expression to cultural and political views that had not previously been articulated in education. It connected schools to new concerns and relationships and enriched educational practice. These did not disappear when women’s caucuses and Status of Women programs lost their institutional resources and support. The centrality of the ideas that were circulated lasted longer than any particular institutional forms, and their longevity points to the importance of ideas and theory in any deep-rooted school change.

Acknowledgement

This research was done with support from SSHRC grant 816-99-0010, and was previously analyzed in “Educational change and the women’s movement: Lessons from British Columbia schools in the 1970’s”, in Educational Policy (2004, 18 (2): 291–310).

References

