

Educators for Gender Equity

Organizing for Change

by Rebecca Priegert Coulter

Cet article examine le travail des Educators for Gender Equality (EDGE) un groupe de professeurs en éducation, des enseignantes, des agents pour l'égalité et d'autres personnes engagées dans le combat pour une école non-sexiste.

Teachers are the most important change agents in the struggle for gender equitable schooling in Canada (Julien; Coulter). Too often, however, individual teachers toil in isolation, accomplishing much with their own students but feeling alone and isolated in their schools and in their school systems. In some cases, however, teachers have moved beyond the classroom in order to achieve their goals and have built coalitions that include not only teachers, school board administrators, and education professors but policy-makers, femocrats, students, and educational consultants in the private sector. An Ontario group called Educators for Gender Equity (EDGE) is one example of a coalition that works both as an organizing strategy and as a site for self-education. As equity work becomes increasingly difficult in Ontario schools as a result of both the Conservative government's ideological opposition and the concomitant decline in resources, the work of EDGE becomes even more imperative.

EDGE arose out of the work of a group of London secondary school teachers. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) District 4 Status of Women Committee approached the London Board of Education in the early 1990s and proposed that a joint committee be set up to develop gender equity materials and projects for the schools. At the time, the policy context in Ontario supported, indeed required, the active pursuit of equity in schools and with the support of key players in

leadership positions with the federation and the board, the Gender-Balanced Resources Committee was born.

As one of its first tasks, the Committee decided that it should gather

with them and seen a lot of their work. I remember bringing back the work, like the information on the parallel retreats from the Toronto Board, and all sorts of other material. I was just so excited about



Gail Geltner, "New Values and Choices," 1988.

and compile existing materials that had already been developed by teachers and boards around the province. Several members of the Committee were sent on a research trip to Toronto to meet with staff doing equity work in the Toronto and North York boards. It started to become obvious that a considerable amount of work was being done on gender equity in many boards but the knowledge and materials remained localized. According to Patricia Dalton, an English teacher at Clarke Road Secondary School and an OSSTF activist who co-chaired the Gender-Balanced Resources Committee,

We had met all of these different people and spoken on the phone

what was going on in these other boards. And, you know, said to the group basically, well, why can't we do this in our board? (Personal communication, 9 April 1996)

In the end, the Committee did produce a substantial curriculum document for use in the schools (London Board of Education). However, as Dalton notes, this "project also brought about the EDGE group" because teachers working for gender equity wanted to find a way to network, to share resources, and to provide mutual support and to do this independently of the federations and the boards.

At the first meeting held in London on June 4, 1993 about 30 people

were present. Many boards from Toronto to Windsor were represented by teachers, administrators, or equity officers. Two universities and the Ministry of Education sent delegates as did the London Family Court Clinic. In the first example of what has become common at many of EDGE's three meetings a year, a group of students also participated as part of the agenda. They spoke about their work with the Gender Issues Committee in their high school and offered advice to the assembled educators about strategies for reaching students.

Altogether, between June 1993 and October 1994 four networking meetings were held. Early efforts to develop a formal organization with a constitution were fairly quickly abandoned when people attending the second meeting expressed a desire for a more informal network without a firm structure and elected executive. At the September 1993 meeting a planning committee was struck and empowered to work on a model for EDGE. It concluded that the structure should be simple and efficient and that it should allow for "the scope and flexibility to address the issues and concerns the membership deems to be the most pressing and relevant at any particular time" (Planning Committee Minutes, October 14, 1993).

The membership also agreed that the main aim of EDGE would be to establish and maintain a network to promote gender equity policies and practices in elementary and secondary education and that membership would be open to anyone who supported this aim and paid the annual dues. However, despite some preliminary discussions about ways to include educators from the whole province, EDGE has remained very much a creature of the south. As EDGE has evolved, the sharing of information and the exchange of materials has remained a primary function of the group. Part of every meeting is set aside for this purpose and, as a result, a much wider dissemination of ideas and materials about gender equity in

the schools has occurred. Students continue to play an important role, too, through talking about and/or demonstrating school-based activities they have successfully completed. For example, four students attended an EDGE meeting in Toronto to discuss the anti-sexist retreat they had participated in while at a meeting in London five students showed a video of and talked about an anti-racist play they had produced in their school. The May 1994 meeting at the Simcoe County Board of Education Office featured a significant input from students who discussed their organizing activities around sexuality, anti-violence, and global equality.

Resource sharing, workshop presentations, and student-led sessions initially focused heavily on classroom and school, on curriculum and pedagogy in an applied setting. During the first two years of its existence, EDGE was supported by a provincial policy framework on equity which led participants to concentrate on implementation issues. The June 1993 meeting, for example, examined the equity implementation plans in the London and Waterloo Roman Catholic Boards and considered implementation challenges and possibilities. At the October 1994 meeting, debate around the purposes of EDGE confirmed a curricular focus and a preference among most members to look at "curriculum ideas, strategies, lessons, and especially how to work with colleagues" (Minutes of EDGE Meeting, October 20, 1994). Attention also has been given to school climate issues with sessions such as the one led by Sandie Barnard, an educational consultant, on the kit, "The Joke's Over: Student-to-Student Sexual Harassment," a project funded by the OSSTF, the Ontario Women's Directorate, and the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. The May 1996 meeting included a presentation by Zoe Hilton of the Penetanguishene Mental Health Centre on the "Research Study on Violence and Aggression" conducted in cooperation with the Simcoe County Board of Education.

The March 1995 meeting at the Etobicoke Board offices confirmed this direction by offering a workshop on the Vancouver SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project, a collaborative research initiative of the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Education and the Vancouver Board of Education which seeks to develop and assess innovative pedagogies, curricula, and resources that promote gender equity. At the same time, this meeting marked a watershed for EDGE because it began to move beyond strictly teaching and learning issues to exploring backlash against the women's movement. This meeting also made a foray into direct political action when it was decided to write a letter of protest to the Minister of Education about the failure of the recent Ontario Royal Commission on Learning to consider in any serious way the question of gender equity. Several other lobbying initiatives followed.

Increasingly, EDGE has moved to a more activist stance in which networking has been joined to educating and organizing around the implications of globalization and economic restructuring for girls and women. The strong anti-equity ideology of the provincial government has made glaringly apparent the inadequacy of an analysis that isolates curriculum issues from the broader social context. Recently, then, meetings have included sessions that addressed topics such as the gender politics of outcomes-based education and standardized testing with Diane Meaghan of Seneca College as speaker, the female face of poverty with Marion Boyd, MPP, and the social impact on working people of educational restructuring and the commercialization of schooling with Rick Witherpoon, president of the London and District Labour Council, Sandi Ellis from the Canadian Labour Congress and Reverend Susan Eagle an anti-poverty activist and United Church Minister with the East London Outreach Cluster.

The attacks on public education and teachers by the provincial gov-

ernment have created a much harder political edge to EDGE. The minutes of meetings reflect a growing emphasis on dealing with cutbacks and with the backlash against equity work. A presentation by Dr. Jane Kenway from Deakin University in Australia served to illustrate the international nature of educational restructuring and the de-emphasis on equity as a purpose of schooling. The October 1997 meeting focused on the equity dimensions of attacks against teachers and public education through Bill 160 and the types of strategies that are and can be used to defend the cause of social justice.

Gender is increasingly considered in ways which take race, class, and

sexual orientation into account, thus widening the ambit of EDGE's mandate and moving it from networking to a more conscious coalition politics. At the October 1995 meeting, Myra Novogrodsky and Vanessa Russell of the Toronto Board of Education presented a workshop entitled "Linking the Isms" which dealt with heterosexism, ableism, ageism, racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and religious persecution. Concerns for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, cutbacks in social services and their impact on single mothers, adult education and child care options, and anti-racist programming are now discussed regularly.

Ironically, changes in EDGE membership over the last 18 months also reflect the new anti-equity regime in Ontario in horribly concrete ways. The school boards' employment and educational equity officers, once active supporters of EDGE, have all but disappeared from the membership as a result of Bill 8, the 1995 legislation that axed employment equity programs. Attendance at meetings has dropped somewhat because boards, strapped for financial resources, are reluctant to pay for supply teachers, especially for equity functions when it is clear that equity is no longer a high priority with the Ministry of Education and Training. Finally, many EDGE members who have exercised leadership roles such as Dalton and Joe Wilson, EDGE co-founder, are finding it necessary to devote more and more of their time to the fight to save public education and this leaves less time for direct gender equity work. Nonetheless, they and their colleagues remain committed to the struggle for equity in the schools and continue to see EDGE as an important strategy for change.

The importance of organizing through EDGE was well-voiced by Karen Ball, a teacher activist who works at Oakridge Secondary School in London. She believes that,

The only way to be able to continue doing equity work is to know that other people are doing it as

well, and to find out how other people are dealing with the issues and the different strategies that they are using ... knowing that you're not alone ... and you don't have to feel like you're inventing the world by yourself every time.
(Personal communication, April 16, 1996)

In other words, EDGE provides support to individual activists through developing a collective sense of purpose and possibility.

EDGE, then, provides the necessary link between teachers working away at gender in their classrooms and the wider community of like-minded government and board officials and consultants (however small that number is growing), education professors, students, social activists and others with a commitment to equity in education. It provides access to resources and to much-needed support but more importantly, it develops the sense of power born when individuals band together to take action in the cause of social justice.

To join EDGE contact Joe Wilson, c/o OSSTF Dist. 4, 427 William Street, London, Ontario, N6B3E1. Tel: (519) 642-7016. Fax: (519) 642-7905. Email: OSSTFD4@WWDC.COM

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LILA LERNER

I Am All

When we met
I was fragile

In the past the face
that mirrored wore
puzzlement

But now after you
your understanding
your faith in me

I hear clearly
I'm worthy of your trust
I'll be all that I can be

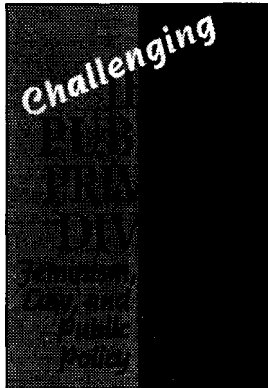
I am moon, I am the sun
I'm a forest, oceans steady
roaring hum

I am stars, consumed with light
I bring brilliance to the night

I am earth, am one with sky
I am the wind with voice I cry

All who roamed the earth before
I am as they, I am much more!

Lila Lerner is a retired grandmother in Willowdale, Ontario, who started writing in 1993.



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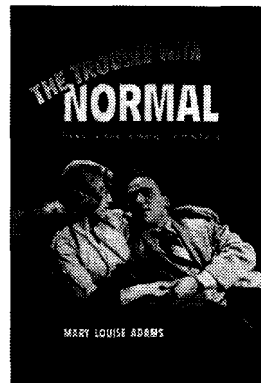
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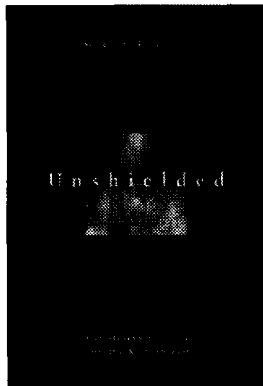
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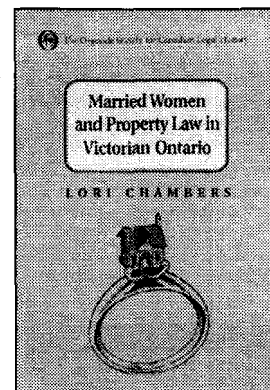
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