Insights into Being the Minister of Education

Education is a significant portfolio in any provincial or territorial cabinet. The Education Minister makes decisions and works with others to accomplish specific functions that affect individual students and society as a whole. They are widely seen to have a key role in shaping the future, and as such the pressure on them to perform well and succeed is immense. Surprisingly, for such an important position, new appointees often find they are unprepared for all that is expected of them. In this article, the author, a former territorial Education Minister, summarizes his doctoral research into education leadership. Employing interviews with other former education ministers from across the country and the political spectrum, he endeavoured to develop an interpretive understanding of the position through the lens of identity. Four common themes were developed from the stories of the former ministers: changing identity, voicing identity, educating identity, and trusting identity. He concludes by expressing hope that his analysis and research will help us do a better job of preparing people who assume these positions to understand their roles and responsibilities.

Patrick Rouble

W hen I made the decision to retire from office, I decided to return to school, as a student, to continue my education. Having been Yukon's Minister of Education, I thought that it would be fitting to study education leadership.

In conversations with students and faculty alike, I was surprised at how little understanding there was of the role of Minister of Education. Perhaps they had as little understanding of the role as new ministers have of education? Attempting to address this situation would form the basis of my doctoral dissertation.

Creating a better understanding of the experience of being a Minister of Education proved to be a thought-provoking academic project. The position is complex and multifaceted. It involves being a politician, a representative, a decision-maker, and a leader. And, it involves operating in the contentious, emotional field of education. Revisiting the experience through a researcher's lens was interesting, frustrating, and

Patrick Rouble served as the MLA for Southern Lakes in the Yukon Legislative Assembly from 2002 to 2011. He was the territory's Minister of Education for five years. He is currently Principal Consultant at Transom Frame Consulting.

rewarding. It was an opportunity to study various philosophical perspectives, examine political science theories (something I had not done before entering politics), and carefully consider how others had experienced the position. This article briefly summarizes my doctoral research, findings and insights. The full dissertation, *Anxiety, Authority, and Accountability: The Experience of Being a Minister Responsible for Education*, can be found online.

I began my study with an examination of what was known about being a Minister of Education, including the legislated duties, the mechanics of the position, and the conventions of the office. There were varied perspectives on what it means to be a politician, a member of the legislative assembly, and a cabinet minister, and current thinking on leadership in education. Even though I had been in the position for five years, this research activity was a bit of a revelation. When I took office, I had next to no training or orientation for what I was about to experience. Other than an afternoon with the Clerk, a day with a communications specialist, and a stack of briefing books, there was very little preparation for the position. It seems that many of my colleagues found themselves in similar positions. As several researchers have noted, including Loat and MacMillan, newly elected officials, cabinet ministers included, tend to have a poor understanding of the role that they are about to undertake.

Comparing and contrasting provincial Education Acts, researching the concepts of ministerial responsibility and cabinet solidarity, and examining leadership theories provided a theoretical understanding of the position. However, I was interested in trying to explain how people actually lived the experience of being the Minister of Education. To this end, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological methodological approach – in plain language, I interviewed other former Ministers of Education from across the country, analyzed their comments, and presented a nuanced thematic understanding of the experience.

Some interesting statistics emerged when I examined who had been a provincial Education Minister. About 81 different individuals had been provincial Education Ministers between 2000 and 2016. The average time holding that office was just under two years. Only 34 people (42 per cent) had held the position for more than two years. The breakdown by gender was 62 per cent male and 38 per cent female. And, 52 per cent of the ministers had a substantial background in education (either having been employed in the field or having received postsecondary education in the field). This finding is inconsistent with the typical practice of premiers of not putting a subject matter expert in charge of a portfolio.

In order to hear from a fairly broad spectrum of people and to gather good stories, I interviewed five former Ministers of Education. The participants included men and women; former representatives from five different provinces in the West, the Prairies, Central Canada, and the Maritimes; members of Conservative, Liberal, and New Democratic Parties; and people from a variety of professions (including former educators). I kept the names of the participants in the study confidential. In addition to this being a condition of the university's ethics review board, I believe that keeping the identity of the participants confidential encouraged frank and open discussion.

The participants in the study were generous with their time and forthright with their comments. I conducted two interviews with each participant. Some of the topics I set out to discuss included: the process involved in transitioning from being a concerned citizen to becoming the Minister of Education, the duties and actions of the office, the constraints that the Minister of Education is under, the role and influence of stakeholders, and the impacts of being a public figure. Thankfully, the methodology allowed for some deviation from my prescribed path; as one

participant commented, we ultimately had some cathartic conversations. I believe that when we are in office, we are often too focussed on the important issues and crises that we face daily to reflect on the experience holistically. These interviews were an opportunity for some of the participants to revisit situations that they had not thought about for some time and to reflect upon them. I appreciated hearing their stories, lessons learned, and insights.

Some of the stories were reminiscent of the ones shared in the lounge following a Council of Ministers of Education Canada meeting. Many of the comments and stories could have been the basis for dissertations on their own. Some conversations were wide ranging. The participants and I discussed topics such as: how the minister is not omnipotent and cannot change everything all of the time; the challenge of making decisions when one is not an expert in the field; the challenge of finding trustworthy advice; and how politics often trumps evidence. We also discussed some personal issues such as how staying true to everything, including oneself, can be challenging; how ministers have to play by the rules whereas other stakeholders do not always seem to have to; and how people seem to treat the person who is now a minister differently than they did prior to the appointment. The analysis of conversations with these former Education Ministers proved to be fascinating. I focused on developing a more interpretive understanding of the position. I tried to make explicit some of the ideas that insiders take for granted, and in other cases I needed to delve deeper to extrapolate a point.

I found that the concept of identity was an important one. Identity, and the politics around identity, has recently become a hot topic. It is not my intention to fuel this fire. Nevertheless, being the Minister of Education is a human experience. It involves someone—not some impersonal edifice—making decisions; a real person with his or her own experiences, beliefs, values, and frailties; a person with a unique identity.

Identity can be defined as the fact of being who or what a person is. Some academics suggest that our understanding of who we are and how others perceive us is strongly influenced by people's experiences, social interactions, and group memberships and that identity is not fixed. When someone gets involved in politics, gets elected, and becomes a minister, that person certainly has significant experiences and interactions, and belongs to new groups. I suggest that the person is changed by the experience.

The role of identity was further considered as I developed four common themes from the stories of the former ministers: changing identity, voicing identity, educating identity, and trusting identity. I then examined the experience of being a Minister of Education, not by how the participants had experienced the activities of the office—the plot—but through the important points—the themes—that had emerged. My methodological approach also required that I look at these issues from various perspectives: from the micro to the macro, from the near to the far, and from the present and the past. Yes, this approach was a stretch for this middle-aged, white, conservative man with an MBA, but that is what going to school is all about, and the conclusions that I ultimately presented were different from what I expected to find.

The first theme, changing identity, came through in several different perspectives. There is the micro changing identity of the individual in the position and the macro intention of changing the identity of people in the province. The former involves the transition from concerned citizen to Minister of Education. This process involves several steps and influences what the individual can say, do, and act upon. Ministers often start out as concerned citizens who demonstrate some sort of capacity in their community and who join a political party that aligns with their personal views and values. When they join a party, they accept the party's philosophical perspectives, positions, and platforms—even though they might not agree with everything. When they are selected as candidates, they are responsible for carrying this platform forward and explaining why they, their party, and their leader are best suited for the job of governing. As elected representatives, they become responsible for carrying the voice of their constituents into discussions and debates. Again, this is not always a consistent, homogeneous voice.

When these concerned citizens become ministers, affected by the Oaths of Office, ministerial responsibility, and cabinet solidarity, they become the voice of the government. No longer can they muse about what the government should do. What they say is now taken to be the position of the government. Additional changes occur; for example, often moving to a new city, being in a new organization, wearing a new wardrobe suitable for the position, and becoming accustomed to being addressed as Minister, rather than by their given name. My small sample also suggested that becoming the minister also includes changing habits. Almost all said that while in office, they took less personal care. Most said they gained weight and got out of shape. And some, unfortunately, said they became more cynical and insular.

Changing identity also relates to macro considerations of why people become involved in politics in the first place. The purpose of my study was not to determine why people become politicians, but it became apparent from my discussions that the participants got involved in politics to make changes and to "change the direction the province was going in." In other words, they wanted to change the identity of the province. By changing legislation, policy, and budget expenditures, governments affect the people in the province, and these changes influence opinions, behaviours, and cultures. Beliefs that were once common evolve over time. Political leaders, including Ministers of Education, are often arbitrators and instigators of such change, both following and leading the views of the public.

Education Ministers are also expected to represent the voices of numerous different perspectives or identities. Briefly stated, the minister is expected to be the voice of the people to the department and the voice of the department to the people. But the position is much more complex than this summary suggests. Ministers carry their own voice, based on their own education, experiences, and beliefs; they also carry the voice of their party, and they are the elected voice of their constituency. They are expected to stand behind the platform and implement it. They are often expected to be the voice of people dissatisfied by the system: "I just got this letter. What can we do to fix their problem?" appears to be a common refrain. In cabinet, budget, and policy meetings, they are expected to be the voice of the department and to strongly present the department's needs and perspectives. In departmental meetings, they are often the voice of the government explaining the final government position—one that may be different from the one the department suggested the government take. And, in the legislative assembly and in the media, they are often a synthesis of the voice of the department; they must explain or defend why the department did certain things while reconciling this stance with the positions and actions of the government.

The Minister of Education is expected to voice a complex identity and perform a complex role. Before ministers speak, they must consider the position of the government, the capacity and position of their department, the philosophy of their political party, the platform they committed to implementing, the opinions of people in the province, and their own

personal knowledge and beliefs. Being trusted by others to be their voice is a profound responsibility that significantly influences the minister. When I asked participants whether they were often presented with speeches to deliver that had been written by others, some commented that they never delivered a speech exactly as written: the information in the prepared speech was often incorporated into what they said, but, ultimately, they decided what to say and how to say it. I found this to be an important concept. The Minister of Education is often expected to be an interpreter, or a bridge, between various groups.

Being the Minister of Education involves being selected by others to make decisions and then working with others to accomplish specific functions that affect students and society. Trust is an important consideration in this position. The minister needs to be trusted and needs to trust others. Trust has a variety of definitions and interpretations. In some cases, someone who is trusted is expected to act in the best interests of the other; in others, trust involves believing or accepting something without seeking verification or evidence for it.

Education Ministers are involved in a diverse array of relationships that involve trust—relationships in which they are expected to take another's perspective into account when making decisions. They are trusted by party members, constituents, and the premier in the process of becoming the Minister of Education. They have relationships with cabinet colleagues that are influenced by the concept of cabinet solidarity. As appointed leaders, they have relationships with their department and other people involved in education, including subject matter experts, administrators, and teachers. As participants in the provincial budget process, they have a relationship with taxpayers. As the person ultimately responsible for the education system, they also have a relationship with students. And, they have relationships with staff, the media, and other stakeholders.

The issue of whether an MLA is a trustee or a delegate—one who votes as constituents direct or one who exercises his or her own judgement—was discussed with some of the participants. Several said that even though they felt that it was vital to represent their constituents, they often found themselves in complex situations that required situational and contextual consideration. They had time and resources to study issues in more depth than most constituents could, and they had the responsibility to look at an issue from multiple perspectives. But, at the end of the day, they had to make a decision that they could personally live with.

In addition to trusting the premier and other cabinet ministers, the Minister of Education must also trust the staff of the department. When asked about this situation, one participant said that when she first started in the position, she questioned who these people were, who they held allegiances to, and if they were aligned with another political party. However, she soon realized the professionalism of the public servants that she worked with and trusted them. Conversely, another participant shared a story of how a person in his department who had been at the centre of an embarrassing issue for the government later campaigned for an opposition party. It seems that the minister is required to trust the department for information, and except for the most exceptional circumstances, that trust is well placed.

This is not to say that ministers do not test or question the advice that they receive. One participant made a point of asking specific questions about briefing materials to test the quality of the information presented. Another participant suggested that although it was important to trust the system, it was also important to test the system. She put forward the position that people needed to have solid evidence so that they could have trust in the system.

Participants shared stories of overturning decisions made by others, including: decisions of teachers, principals, school boards, department staff, and former governments. Even though others in the system were trusted to make decisions, these Education Ministers involved themselves in situations and directed different courses of action. Reasons for overturning decisions included: the belief that the decision was not consistent with the good of the public; the belief that the decision was inconsistent with legislation; strong public opinion against the decision; strong personal beliefs that the decision was wrong; and to satisfy other stakeholders in the system. In our hierarchical governance system, it seems that leaders often trust others to make decisions that they will agree with.

In education systems, duties are frequently delegated to others. Additionally, the concept of academic independence comes into play in the field of education. Nevertheless, in our system of governance, the minister is still held accountable for the outcomes of decisions delegated to others and for the actions of those in the department. Participants shared stories of

situations where others in the system did something that certain citizens did not agree with. In some cases, the minister defended the actions of the individuals; in others, the minister overturned the decisions. People in the system were trusted to carry out their duties; but, if they did not carry them out in a manner that was satisfactory, the minister (either directly, or through subordinates) was expected—trusted—to become involved.

Some participants also shared stories related to the concept of the public losing trust in politicians. One said, "We've allowed, as a society, the media and the general public to paint us all [politicians] as liars and cheats. And that we are only in it for ourselves and that we can't be trusted." This dichotomy—being empowered by the system, but not trusted by those in the system—frustrated several participants.

The matter of how politicians experience trust—being trusted, trusting others, building trust, and recovering trust—is a large issue. The theme of trusting identities is an important one in understanding the experience of being a Minister of Education. Ministers need to trust themselves and have confidence in their abilities. They need to be aware that they must be trusted by others and take steps to build that trust. They need to be able to trust the roles and systems that they interact with. And they need to intervene when others have a lack of trust or a feeling that their interests are not being served. I think that this broad concept of trust and how it is experienced is worth examining further.

After examining the experiences of several former Education Ministers, I considered how this position is different from leading other portfolios. These points are captured in the title of my paper: *Anxiety, Authority, and Accountability: The Experience of Being a Minister Responsible for Education*. These characteristics—anxiety, authority, and accountability—have an impact on education. I appreciate that they may be contentious topics, especially coming from a former Minister of Education who researched the experiences of other former Ministers of Education, but these points are important to consider.

Our collective anxiety about the future is often held in education. People see the public education system as the answer for preparing people for whatever is to come. The belief that more education is the answer for addressing problems suggests, ironically, that our current education system is to blame for our current situation. Education is often seen as a scapegoat for ongoing problems in society. As the one responsible for education, the Minister of Education is therefore responsible for the problems of today and for solving them for the future. Education Ministers are expected to prepare people for the future and to put in place education programs to ensure that everyone will behave as they should so that individual and societal problems are remedied. With such lofty expectations, it is no wonder that few people want to be in the position and that most in the position last fewer than two years.

The Minister of Education is expected to be an authority on education and to make decisions affecting the provincial education system. The minister has the authority to establish courses of study, approve curriculum, set funding priorities, and exercise other considerable powers. However, expert knowledge of education is not a requirement for being the Minister of Education. Ministers are appointed to the position for multiple reasons. They may therefore face situations in which they lack specific subject matter knowledge to make informed decisions. They rely on the advice of others, consider the other previously discussed forces that influence decision-making, and often "trust their gut."

Education is a contested space with multiple perspectives, beliefs, and positions. It is strongly influenced by personal experience. Education is also political. Elected decision-makers—politicians—at multiple levels, including school councils, school boards, associations, and provincial assemblies, are entrusted with the power to make decisions. Although they use research (often in the form of recommendations from others), they are also influenced by other factors, such as personal experience, public perceptions, and political positioning.

Education is a subject that is widely researched, and this research influences teachers, administrators, and other education professionals. Research is also used to inform practice, assessment, policy, and other issues in education. However, the research is often inconsistent and inconclusive. Additionally, it is often ideologically or politically influenced. Unlike other fields, there is no single, universally recognized authority for education research.

This situation leads to the issue of accountability in education. The Minister of Education is accountable for government expenditures; legislation, regulation, and government policy; and the actions of those

funded by government expenditures. The minister is held to account for the performance of the department. In education, this often relates to the performance of students. There are many actors in education: students, parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, departments, and others. All are expected to perform. But from my research and experience, it appears that the minister, due to the hierarchical nature of the system and the convention of ministerial responsibility, is ultimately accountable for everyone's actions. I was once told by a parent that if his son could not read, it was my fault. Decision-making is distributed throughout the system, but accountability for decision-making frequently is not.

Having left political office, it has been an interesting, enlightening, and rewarding experience to go back and relive aspects of the position through the experiences of other former education ministers. I have had a chance to reflect on their experiences and develop insights into what it means to be the Minister of Education. There were many 'a-ha' moments and times when I wished that I had known then what I know now. Being a cabinet minister, a representative, and a politician is an important position in our society, one too important to be left up to happenstance and political expediency. We need to do a better job, I think, of preparing new people for the positions we entrust them with.

I hope that this analysis encourages further discussion about the role and activities of the Minister of Education. I sincerely hope that it encourages ministers to think about their role and the important issues in education. Additionally, I hope that it encourages others to seek out the thoughts and perspectives of those who have been in positions of responsibility, authority, and power. By better understanding the experience, the expectations, and the underlying systems, we can, I hope, make better, more informed decisions that result in more optimal and intentional outcomes.

Notes

1   Patrick Rouble, *Anxiety, Authority, and Accountability: The Experience of Being a Minister Responsible for Education* (doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary, 2018), Https://doi.org/10.11575/PRISM/33215.

2   Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada's Failing Democracy* (Toronto, Canada: Random House of Canada, 2014)