

Book Review

Making a Difference in Urban Schools: Ideas, Politics, and Pedagogy

Jane Gaskell and Ben Levin

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In a critical and well-written undertaking that adds significantly to the historical understanding of educational policy evolution, Gaskell and Levin trace the major educational changes that the Toronto, Ontario, and Winnipeg, Manitoba, city school districts undertook over the past 50 years. The book is a critical addition to students of educational policy, as well as educational history, who are examining the role of urban school reform efforts in two of Canada's largest cities. The authors divide their work into seven chapters, each focusing on a specific subtext of the reform plans launched within the case studies. The final section of the book provides students with a methodology that will assist future researchers in replicating the study in other cities experiencing reform movements.

In the introduction, the authors acknowledge the demographic changes that urban areas were undergoing and "efforts to address poverty in the late 1960s and early 1970s were only one part of a broader effort to change schools and school systems" (p. 5). The authors ground their work in research studies that highlight poverty and ethnic diversity, which specifically includes the "increasing number of visible minorities, linguistic groups, and Aboriginal people in cities" (p. 17). By doing so, the work contributes for students of educational policy a specific understanding of the needs of groups traditionally marginalized in urban education. The final section of the first chapter reviews the work available on urban education. Gaskell and Levin provide a rich description of the major research studies available, using an international perspective that includes studies from the United Kingdom and the United States. This chapter would provide a good starting point for a graduate seminar in urban educational reform.

My only criticism of the literature review is in their omission of Jonathan Kozol's work on poverty and race in educational settings. For readers in the United States, Kozol's (2006) *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* is a standard reading assignment for many educators seeking to study urban educational systems. This inclusion would have provided contextual background for readers who may not be familiar with Kozol's writings.

Gaskell and Levin then turn their attention specifically to the two school settings under study, Winnipeg and Toronto. The second and third chapters of the book provide a constructive counter balance as the history of the two urban education systems is detailed. The authors, using a series of semi-structured interviews with key figures in the two systems, richly weave illustrative quotations into a narrative of tensions faced by the two boards of education as the

political leadership of the schools' host cities and the economic realities changed and, in some instances, derailed reform efforts. A description of the relationship between the provincial education bureaucracies in both communities highlights the federalist tensions of schooling in Canada. This is very illustrative for researchers who wish to study the relationships between state/provincial educational agencies and local educational agencies in light of the increased role of accountability in education in the era of high stakes testing.

A vivid picture emerges of a Winnipeg divided between upper middle class families and families in poverty. This division carried over into the school system. The chapter on Winnipeg contains a powerful case study of the increasing number and political power of Aboriginal people in the city and their desire for better and fairer treatment of themselves and their children by the school system. The book describes the introduction of the Winnipeg Education Centre, which was designed to assist Aboriginals entering the teaching profession and provide teachers in the city's school system with professional development for effectively educating Aboriginal youth. A second initiative included introducing Aboriginal language instruction in the elementary schools. The 1990s, however, saw Aboriginal advocates calling for a separate school system financed by Winnipeg's board of education and administered by Aboriginal leaders. A separate elementary and high school was created in response to the community's desires. The authors conclude the chapter with an assessment that contemporary Winnipeg still suffers from the urban decay and divisions aggravated by poverty.

Toronto's educational reform chapter focuses on the role that activist members of the district school board played in changing the organizational structure of the administration to promote educational equity in an economically and ethnically diverse setting. The chapter focuses on the especially difficult time facing the implementation of reform efforts that would ensure that students in all parts of Toronto would receive a proper education. As the Toronto area faced a recession in the 1980s, the district school board felt that it was necessary to promote reform efforts and that equity among races and equity in gender be ensured within the school system. The 1990s saw the system dramatically shocked by the creation of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which, at the time was a municipal amalgamation of the city of Toronto and four surrounding regional municipalities: Durham, Halton, Peel, and York. Especially important in the educational reform movement was the creation of alternative schools for the GTA's "black, Aboriginal, and gay and lesbian youth" (p. 93). The authors use this as the capstone to their examination of the high school system within the GTA. It is especially important for scholars researching tracking or streaming to use the material in this chapter for their comparison studies.

In the fourth chapter, Gaskell and Levin examine how the reform movements in the United States affected Winnipeg and Toronto. They lay out the ideological underpinnings that influenced reformers in both cities and examine how those ideas were communicated to the staff of the school systems. The authors point out that "[s]hared and personally compelling beliefs about equality, and the role of schools in creating it, were the foundation for reforms" (p. 112). Staff, especially in Toronto, would undertake or find research that would support these beliefs and assist in implementing the change within the system. As the authors relate, the implementation of reforms was not always successful, especially in light of political changes that occurred at the provincial levels.

The fifth chapter explores the role of partisan politics in the election of trustees to the Winnipeg board of education and the Toronto district school board. It considers also interactions among staff, especially teachers and administrators, in the Winnipeg school

division. It can provide scholars of Canadian political parties with insight into the educational policies of the time period. In light of how frequent boards of education and superintendents in urban communities change, these two case studies provide reflective evidence on two critical areas of system reforms for urban school settings. The authors point out that the New Democratic Party at the provincial level played a significant role in the electoral politics of the Winnipeg and Toronto boards of education. While many trustees reported a desire to stay nonpartisan, political parties can assist office seekers with resources and name brand recognition. Politics influenced the relationship between the school, the provincial government, and the community. Each of the areas is discussed using data collected from members of the boards and community organizers at the time. These relationships and the relationship between the central office staff and the boards are examples of how attempts to reform are often affected by politics. In both cities, the administrators dealt with board members who expressed impatience with the districts' governance. The research contained in this fifth chapter provides a strong narrative for examining the interplay of community, politics, and government and the relationships between political and professional leadership in urban schools.

The sixth chapter examines policy and reviews efforts that teachers and principals made to change their systems from within. The authors provide five themes that were significant to implementing reforms within the two school systems. The first theme pinpoints the islands of success where staff created an environment for children who felt left out of the traditional city education system. A second theme of the chapter is the changes in curriculum that sought to provide students with learning materials that were better aligned with the economic and ethnic diversity of the communities. This part of the chapter provides local examples of trends that have emerged across the literature on curriculum provided to urban systems that do not reflect the diversity of the students. The third theme that is addressed is the role of literacy in Toronto, where a major initiative was implemented to use literacy as a "tool for learning across the curriculum" (p. 155). The fourth theme is the implementation of formal policies on streaming and high school reform. This section discusses the end of vocational schools in Toronto and streaming or tracking of minority and challenged students in Winnipeg. The fifth theme discusses the role of testing and assessment in the two school systems. Both school boards did not support widespread use of testing as measures of student growth. Decisions by the Toronto district school board actively discouraged widespread testing. Finally, the chapter discusses the relationship with teachers and the unions and describes the tension between the teachers' unions and the school board members in efforts at reform. The evidence shared by a leader in one of the school districts portrayed the teachers as blocking reform efforts in the GTA because of beliefs that the efforts would not be successful.

One of the weaknesses of the book is the over-representative sampling of administrators and board members. In the methodology section, the researchers indicated that they interviewed 50 people, of which four were teachers. As with any educational system, teachers represent the majority of staff, and it is no different in these two school settings. While the administration and members of the boards may be the most visible, teachers have the most responsibility for implementing changes in class. The study would have gained in strength if more teachers were interviewed. While it is understandable that the researchers were looking at the key strategists of the reform efforts and needed to ensure that there was a manageable data collection set, interviewing additional teaching staff may have given a different view of the reform efforts in Toronto and Winnipeg. However, this omission provides further research opportunities to explore the role of reform from the perspectives of teachers in the same communities.

The final chapter summarizes the major findings of the book and provides a series of questions for researchers and administrators to contemplate for the future of school reform efforts in Canadian communities. The major findings are in line with international research concerning urban education reform over the last 50 years, such as stronger links between school districts and provincial governments, more public debate on data, improved quality of the workplace, a central and sustained focus on teaching and learning, strong community engagement, and better use of research and supporting infrastructure. I would recommend the use of this text in its entirety for graduate level seminars in urban educational reforms and international education seminars. Certain sections of each chapter, as noted in this review, could find their place in seminars in other disciplines, including Aboriginal studies, history, political science, and sociology. The authors have provided a valuable study for students interested in exploring the background of urban reform movements in two important Canadian cities.

References

Kozol, J. (2006). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York: Broadway Books.

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