

The Council of Ministers in the 1980s: Education Policy Innovator or Broken Cog?

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Abstract

Recent historical studies on the topic of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada looked mostly at the era of the 1960s and the 1970s. Some work has also been completed on the institution's role in international education and its responsibilities during the economic crises of these decades. This paper proposes to take this research one step further and now look more specifically at the decade of the 1980s. This paper will argue that in this era the CMEC found its *raison d'être* in several fields. These included official languages, and oversight of the testing programs run by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It also found its niche, to a lesser extent, through refining its connections to international education organizations. Finally, the decade saw the CMEC experimenting with a national agenda for education in conjunction with the provincial premiers and ministries of education.

Keywords: education, governance, Canada, innovation, policy

Introduction

The question of governance in education systems in Canada is one that remains very topical. Clearly, the issue of who rules and to what extent is of critical importance. One of the organizations involved in this is the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). Originally created in 1967 by then Ontario Minister of Education Bill Davis and his provincial colleagues, this organization had as its aim

to be a forum to discuss policy issues; a mechanism through which to undertake activities, projects, and initiatives in areas of mutual interest; a means by which to consult and cooperate with national education organizations and the federal government; and finally an instrument to represent the education interests of the provinces and territories internationally. (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2017)

Recent new historical studies on the topic of CMEC have looked mostly at the era of the 1960s, 1970s, or contemporary times (Allison, 2006, 2007, 2016; Ungerleider, 2004; Wallner, 2014). This paper will take this research one step further and look more specifically at the decade of the 1980s. It will also be looking at this organization primarily with the topic of "education" meaning K-12 education in mind. What was the role of the CMEC in this decade? Was the CMEC an education policy innovator or was it a broken cog in the system? This paper will argue that in the era of the 1980s, the CMEC continued to pursue the role of policy innovator but often, its initiatives had a record of mixed results. It successfully innovated in the field of official languages. Moreover, it also developed relationships with Statistics Canada and helped provide national oversight for testing programs initiated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Additionally, it worked to refine its connections to international education organizations. This however continued to be a contentious area of endeavor. Lastly, in conjunction with

provincial premiers and provincial ministries of education, the decade saw the CMEC experimenting with a national education agenda. The Council's roles do not "begin" or "finish" with any year or time-period. Highlighting the specific issues associated with the 1980s acknowledges the ongoing character of these questions into contemporary times.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this paper is historical and follows the arguments of Tyack and Cuban (Tyack & Cuban, 2009). In their view, history of education provides us with a longer time frame to examine and appraise the issues of the day, whether it is school reform, or in the case of this study, the appearance of a new education-related organization on the scene (Tyack & Cuban, 2009, pp. 8-9). Also, as noted by Axelrod (1996) and Bruno-Jofre (2014), Canadian history of education has a diverse historiography; political and policy history being one of the strands of the broader and vibrant field. McCulloch and Richardson (2000) speak to the fact that the history of education looks for subtleties, complexities and the sometimes contradictory relationships between education and society (pp. 43, 49-51). The political history of education and the ways in which governance is undertaken are central to this.

The policy process at the national or "inter-provincial" level is one that needs critical analysis, particularly with regard to Canadian education. The Canadian system, if not unique, is very close to being so as there are very few countries that have no federal ministry of education and largely provincial or state/Land responsibility over this field (Kultusministerkonferenz(KMK), 2017).¹ The needs of the governors and the governed are very often different and these deserve to be explored in educational settings, something that American historians of education have consistently written on for a long period of time (Labaree, 2012; Ravitch, 2013, 2016).

Further, theoretical issues and historical frameworks associated with the dynamics of Canadian federal-provincial relations in education/K-12 schooling and with provincial jurisdiction, are many. Manzer in his 1994 work on educational public policy and the provinces outlines some of the most important theoretical issues in this regard. He examined the ideological traditions of Canadian public policy at the provincial level, the role of central state authorities, the impact of the church in nineteenth-century schooling, and the rise of mass education. Moving into the twentieth century, he also examined questions of provincial community and language, changing governance and fiscal issues at the provincial level and finally, the rise of a technological society with education at its center (Manzer, 1994). All of these questions speak to provincial jurisdiction and the autonomy of provinces to make decisions in their own house. Work on the theoretical issues regarding provincial collaboration is a rarer bird. Tomblin (1991) points to it in his historical analysis of the Council of Maritime Premiers and the need to ensure Maritime boundaries through inter-provincial collaboration. Passivity, in the face of federal jurisdictional competition, as Cairns (as cited in Tomblin, 1991) notes, was not and is not an option. Lessard and Brassard (2005) characterize maintenance of provincial control, and collaboration as being on a convergent path with reference to CMEC (p. 8).

Further to this, the question of the ideological or philosophical implications of education policy developments deserves more analysis along the lines of Dunn (2015) and Wiseman's (2015) work. Debates within the CMEC about the implications of standardized testing remain unseen and behind the veil of corporate secrecy. Only hints of this come from the archival materials studied thus far.² The points of convergence and divergence between the provinces, vis-à-vis the adoption of global educational reforms and accountability measures, are also sometimes cloaked and on other occasions overtly debated topics. These often reflect the different ideological and federalist/nationalist orientations of various provincial governments in the post-war era. Over-arching this remains concern about federal incursion into provincial jurisdictional space.

The literature of the history of educational governance in Canada is multi-dimensional and continues to grow (Gidney, 1999; Hayday, 2005; Joshee, 1995; Manzer, 2003; Sears, 1997; Viczko & Tascón,

¹There are other notable and interesting federal systems that do education differently. In particular, the German system with its Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK)(The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany) is one notable example. See; Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK). (2017). Information in English Retrieved Thursday March 9th, 2017, from <https://www.kmk.org/kmk/information-in-english.html>

²The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada is a corporation under the laws of Ontario. It has no need to share its archival materials or open its archives as such. Copies of primary source documents for this research come from provincial archives. That there are additional materials in the CMEC Secretariat archive that give further illumination to provincial differences is a definite possibility.

2016; Widdowson & Howard, 2013). The contributions of Sears (1997), Joshee (1995), Hayday (2005), and Gidney (1999) have fleshed out some of the different fields that link to federal-provincial relations and education. Literature on national politics and provincial politics also documents changes in education policy. Politically, 1984 was a watershed in Canadian politics at the federal level. The long era of Liberal rule came to an end, a rule that made deep and positive changes to Canadian education through the implementation of national policies on bilingualism and multiculturalism (Duke, 2008; Petrovic, 2010). The election of the Progressive Conservatives under the leadership of Brian Mulroney brought new leadership and different perspectives. This was significant because for a time, at least, there was a notion of greater congeniality between the two levels of government, federal and provincial; something that had implications for education policy. This did bear fruit, as evidenced by the Mulroney government's 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Wright, Singh, & Race, 2012). This cooperation quickly broke down however, with the constitutional imbroglios of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords (Russell, 2017). This was also the era of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In terms of the literature of education, this agreement was also interesting, significantly in the area of minority language education, and it additionally served to provide background and a foundation for discussions of education in the North American market (e.g., educational purchasing of desks, equipment, etc.) (Noonan, Hallman, & Scharf, 2006).

Lastly, there is the question of the CMEC and gaps in the literature. The literature on this organization is not extensive as was noted in the introduction. Hayday notes that there is much that remains to be written on this topic (Hayday, 2015a). In his review of Wallner's work, he underlines that there are extensive holdings on this organization in the Archives of Ontario and thus, much work yet to be done (Hayday, 2015a). Filling this gap is, in part, the rationale of this paper. The CMEC was formed in 1967 as a corporation. Originally, it was made up of the ten provincial ministers of education under the leadership of Ontario's Bill Davis, as noted in the author's earlier work (Allison, 2006, 2007, 2016). It existed and continues to exist in its corporate form under the laws of Ontario and Canada. Its purpose was to provide a forum or platform for concerted and coordinated provincial action in the field of education but, as Vergari (2013) notes, it is an organization that remains unable to enforce policy choices. Subsequent history since 1967 has been an ongoing test of and challenge to the CMEC's capabilities. Some authors, such as Cappon (2014), a former director-general of the CMEC, argue that it has continued on its self-defined mission to exclude the federal government from intruding in any way in the field of education.

Methods and Data Sources

This paper is not only historical in its approach, but it will also use as its primary research technique, historical method (Bombaro, 2012; Howell & Prevenier, 2001). McCulloch and Richardson (2000) lay out a discussion of historical research methods in educational settings in their work (pp. 79-80). Collection of primary source documents, journals, reports, government documents, and newspaper articles is central to data gathering when using this methodology. Critical analysis and triangulation of these sources with secondary sources assists in the reconstruction of the past (Evans, 2000). This paper uses archival material primarily from the Archives of Ontario. It will also rely on national Canadian newspapers and scholarly literature from secondary sources.

This paper will also be limited in its scope as it only covers some of the CMEC's activities; there are many other fields in which this organization was and is active including First Nations education, Special Education, and more. In the case of First Nations education, this is a very big territory worthy of its own in-depth discussion. Ron Phillips has written extensively on the topics of the absence of a First Nations minister of education on the Council, and the international implications of First Nations education (Phillips, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2014). When looking at Special Education, it too is deserving of its own treatment as the depth and complexity of this subject is significant. Winzer in her works, provides the background to special needs education in Canada (Winzer, 1990, 1993). McBride in her work looks at the interaction between special needs education and the policy environment, including the CMEC (McBride, 2013). Also, Axelrod and Ellis give a sense of the policy environment for special needs in post war Ontario (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016). The CMEC gave consideration to some of the other main innovations of the decade, including the early introduction of computer technology into schools, innovations in multicultural curriculum, and the adoption of the community school model in many provinces. These are extremely important topics, but will not be covered here due to considerations of space and the significance of these

topics. Additionally, it was also decided not to conduct oral history interviews regarding some of the subjects under discussion here, despite the fact that many of the principals involved in these issues are still alive and their personal insights could shed significant light on the subjects under consideration; that is a bigger project for which more funding and resources would be required.

Early Role and the Challenge of Collective Action, 1967-1980s

The early years and even the second decade of the CMEC were characterized by the search for a *raison-d'être* by the organization. Common effort emerged as a persistent theme and a sometimes-unattainable goal. Through the formative era of the late 1960s, the international OECD Country Education Review of 1975 with its searing assessment by external examiners, and many other events, the Council struggled to differentiate itself from provincial ministries of education as well as guard against federal incursions into the field (Allison, 2016; Hamm-Brücher, 1981; Wallner, 2014). When push came to shove, individual provincial governments retained power over education in Canada (Allison, 2007). Despite this, the provincial ministers could see that common effort or collective action was important in helping their colleagues beyond their own jurisdictions, and in addressing outside foes and opportunities. The challenge of institutional memory and sustained leadership in provincial ministries sometimes made this type of action difficult and the structure remained cumbersome as Atkinson et al, note (Atkinson, Marchildon, Phillips, Béland, & McNutt, 2012). White (2011) also notes the impermanence of provincial cabinet ministers across Canada (pp. 32, 37, 74-75). Witness the case of Ontario and the number of ministers of education (five) from the mid-1980s to the end of the 1980s.³ Ongoing fluidity in the education portfolio, and so many changes in the minister in four years made focus on anything other than day-to-day political survival an ongoing challenge. This revolving door of ministers was now a commonality in education ministries across Canada as Levin (2005) points out (pp. 16, 44-45). For the CMEC, orienting new ministers, finding a stable identity, and avoiding being upstaged by its individual members remained a daily challenge throughout this period.

Official Languages Education as a Breakout (OLE)

The Languages Niche

One of the first areas in which the CMEC found its *raison d'être* as a policy innovator was with the question of official language education and bilingualism. This developed a niche for the organization, as it was able to obtain agreement amongst its members on this question. This issue has been treated elsewhere by many different authors, in particular, Matthew Hayday (2005, 2015b). In Hayday's (2005) analysis he argues that the Council of Ministers increased its prominence overall in the field of second language education in Canada starting early on in the 1970s with the Official Languages in Education Program (pp. 30, 156). Hayday (2005) states,

the provinces adopted a two-pronged strategy. The first was to increase the role of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, which became the visible face of the common front of the provinces. Throughout the negotiation phase from 1977 to 1983, the CMEC provided the forum for interprovincial discussions. Its secretariat drafted texts for the provinces to consider and served as intermediary between the provinces and the federal government. In this manner, the provinces pushed for an interstate agreement in which the CMEC and the federal government would meet as equals in a one-to-one relationship, rather than permitting the federal government to play a game of divide and conquer with the provinces. (p. 177)

He also notes, however, that any agreement coming out of the CMEC had to have the agreement of all ten provinces prior to going forward. The 1983 agreements around the official language education program (OLEP) were significant with regard to the state of federalism in Canada. Hayday (2005) argues and Vergari (2010) also notes however that neither the federal government nor the provinces achieved overall dominance in this field through this negotiation process. It should also be noted though that tensions between different provinces over support for bilingual initiatives remained. The interests of Ontario and

³ Keith Norton became Minister of Education in Frank Miller's government on February 8th, 1985 (Matas, 1985, p. 4). Norton was followed in quick succession by several other ministers of education, including Larry Grossman, Sean Conway, Chris Ward and then again Sean Conway all before the end of the 1980s (Wikipedia, 2017).

particularly a Toronto-centric bureaucracy were and remain substantially different than those of Prince Edward Island for example. The CMEC served as a mediator of these tensions by providing a forum of peers to air grievances and to come to some accommodation of those worst impacted.

Statistics in Focus – More Roles

Educational Indicators

Another field in which the CMEC made successful inroads as a policy innovator in the decade of the 1980s was that of education indicators and education statistics. This direction arose in part out of the OECD's changing approach to countries' education systems in the West. Rather than simply provide a country examination and confrontation meeting as had been past practice, the OECD's new approach was much deeper and provided for longer term analysis of countries' education systems (Papadopoulos, 1994). Rizvi and Lingard (2010) speak to the struggle within the OECD and its education committees regarding the direction of the organization (p. 129). On one side of this tug-of-war were those who felt strongly that the OECD's mission was about social dimensions and the purposes of economic growth and development (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 129). On the other side, were those who felt it was absolutely important to focus the organization's policy in a neoliberal direction (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 129). By the 1990s, as Rizvi and Lingard argue, these tensions had largely been resolved in favour of education being an instrumental supporting actor to the principal actor: economics. "Economic efficiency" remains the modus operandi of the OECD up until contemporary times and this has paid off handsomely for the OECD with the PISA testing regime (Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 129).

Links between the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada and Statistics Canada existed throughout the Council's existence and provided the pathway for this effort. Early 1980s correspondence and memorandums hint at the possibility of a closer relationship. In a letter from WEP Fleck, Director of the Special Projects Branch to Joan St. Rose-Haynes, the Manager of Statistical Information Services (both were Ontario civil servants), in August 1984, Fleck attempted to characterize the relationship between Statistics Canada and provincial ministries of education. The issue of including elementary and secondary sector statistics in existing statistical surveys and reports had come up. These surveys had previously focused exclusively on post-secondary education (Fleck, 1984). Statistics Canada noted in a memorandum, as well, their ongoing and long-term relationship with provincial ministries of education. This dated back to 1921 and continued to the present day (Statistics Canada, 1984). Another memorandum from the acting director of the CMEC, George Demetra, stated

Recent indications from representatives of Statistics Canada suggests that the agency is looking to the provinces, through CMEC, for guidance in improving the relevance and utility of its education statistics. It appeared to be in the interest of the provinces to pursue this opportunity, initially at least, through the expanded liaison group. (DeMetra, 1984)

General efforts to make statistics and surveys more relevant in education in Canada and the United States progressed throughout the 1980s (United States & General Accounting Office, 1993, p. 42). The decision to go forward with standardized testing in Canada came in 1989. At this point, the CMEC decided to investigate alternate approaches and the costs of Canada wide assessment (United States & General Accounting Office, 1993, p. 42). This decision was taken as a response to provincial interest in effectiveness of education systems (United States & General Accounting Office, 1993). As Manzer notes, the Council then ratified the Scholastic Achievement Indicators Project (SAIP) (Manzer, 2003, p. 264). It was subsequently launched in 1990 with several key objectives:

1. To provide data to each province from the project.
2. To collect information on 13 to 16-year-olds to ascertain effectiveness of the project.
3. To report on the project to the Canadian public in the areas of mathematics, writing, and reading.
4. To provide information for discussions around issues of curriculum. (United States & General Accounting Office, 1993, pp. 42-43)

The rollout of the SAIP in the early 1990s was followed by the first round of assessments in 1993 (Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2008). There was ongoing discussion regarding the utility of the testing as Moll (2004) notes. McEwan (1995) in her *Canadian Journal of Education* (CJE) article speaks further to the account-

ability side of the SAIP rollout and its subsequent execution on a yearly basis. Despite these concerns, the effort that started with the CMEC to gather more education statistics and provide a broader statistical picture of education in Canada can be seen as a relative success and was significant in this regard.

Restating the International Role?

Conversations with the Secretary of State for External Affairs

For the CMEC, the period of the mid-1980s was additionally an era of attempted consolidation in the area of international education. The questions of who attended international conferences on behalf of Canadian educational authorities, who vetted and signed international treaties and conventions concerning education were, amongst others, ones that continued to be constitutionally vexing as well as contentious for both levels of government. As noted elsewhere, it was only with the Memorandums of Understanding (1977 and 1982) between the federal government and CMEC concerning international education that things moved forward in this area (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 1988). There remained irritants, however (Allison, 2006, 2007, 2016). The federal government retained the preeminent role with regard to foreign policy and international relations, and the provinces continued to be the masters of the house of education. At this point, Brian Mulroney and the Progressive Conservatives were in power and Joe Clark was the Secretary of State for External Affairs (SSEA) (Clark, 2013; Nossal & Michaud, 2011).

An exchange of letters from January to March 1985 between the chair of the CMEC (David King) and the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Joe Clark) shows the ongoing positive dynamic between the two organizations with regard to international education. These letters also showed however that there were still differences of opinion on this issue (Clark, 1985b). In a January 14th letter to David King, regarding OECD delegations, Clark reprises an earlier discussion by seconding the notion that education is a provincial responsibility; “I heartily agree with you and your CMEC colleagues that education in the provinces is clearly within the provinces’ jurisdiction and therefore provincial representatives should be included on Canadian delegations to meetings dealing with education matters” (Clark, 1985a). Clark also deftly notes, however, that there are broader issues of education that fall under federal as well as provincial jurisdiction. Notably he lists “Educational Challenges facing Western Industrialized Democracies” (Clark, 1985a). Clark goes on to state and defend federal participation in international education meetings while supporting Dr. David Cameron (a federal civil servant) as a full delegate to an OECD meeting,

Quite apart from the pure foreign policy dimensions or other international aspects of education, there is solid ground in terms of the subject matter under discussion for the presence of federal representatives as full members of the delegation. Thus we consider that legitimate federal interests are served by listing Dr. David Cameron, Assistant Undersecretary of State, Department of Secretary of State, as a delegate. (Clark, 1985a)

Clark closed his letter on an upbeat note by stating that frank and open discussion, positive dialogue, and cooperation was essential for continued success in this area (Clark, 1985a).

In another letter, dated February 12th, 1985, from David King, chair of the CMEC and Alberta Minister of Education, to Joe Clark, the discussion went in a different direction and was focused on three main topics: a report regarding Nova Scotia Education Minister Terence Donahue’s attendance at the Commonwealth Education Conference in Nicosia in October 1984, a discussion of differential student tuition fees, and the election of a representative to the International Bureau of Education Council (King, 1985). King (1985) was keen to report to Clark that Canadian provinces’ foreign student fees subscribed to the Commonwealth Statement on Student mobility, but that individual provinces remained responsible for fees charged in higher education institutions. In his response dated March 25th, 1985, Clark bypasses completely the Commonwealth/foreign student fees discussion. He instead reaffirms the need for representation on the IBE Council. While Clark’s letter dealt exclusively with the issue of the IBE Council, King’s letter only mentions the IBE Council in an appendix to the main letter (King, 1985). Clark in fact zeros in on this in his response (Clark, 1985b).

Agreement with the IBE

The role that Canada would play in the International Bureau of Education was one of significance. This issue was one of pure diplomacy and the choice of an envoy, and on this occasion, the two organizations

came to some agreement. The IBE was an institution that Canada did have some relations with over a period of decades dating back to the 1930s (Allison, 2016). In the earlier time-period, Canada was not centrally involved with the organization rather it sent periodic reports to Geneva. It was not until the contemporary era that Canada became more deeply engaged with the IBE (Fuchs, 2007; Rosselló & Butts, 1944). The change in involvement can be seen during this era as well. Continuing on with the March 25th, 1985 letter, following Clark's view that there was a need to "hav[e] a Canadian on the Council," Clark supported his assertion (Clark, 1985b, para. 2). He stated that the government would press "Canada's officials and their country's accreditation to facilitate Canada's election to the IBE Council" (Clark, 1985b, p. para. 2). In a supporting document, it was underlined that Canada had never been a member of the IBE Council. The role of the council was to overview the organization and to supervise program budgets. In the 1980s the IBE had four functions

1. Hold an international conference on education every two years.
2. Publish studies on comparative and international education.
3. Document and disseminate information on education.
4. Maintain a library and permanent exhibit on education. (King, 1985)

Eventually the delegate that was proposed for the Council in 1985 was Dr. Harry Fisher, Director-General of the CMEC, and this met the agreement of both parties (Podrebarac, 1985). While these exchanges are a limited sampling of the relationship, it is clear that in some cases the two organizations and their leaders agreed. In others, however, they were talking past each other. In federal eyes, overall federal control over delegate selection, and the need to be present at education meetings were salient issues, while in the provinces' case, overall control of education was the most important priority. There was no further correspondence between these two individuals in this period, but the stage was now being set to put the relationship on a more permanent footing with regard to international education.

A National Agenda of Education and Saskatchewan's Lead

The final area to be examined in this paper is the setting of a national agenda for education. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada and the provinces endeavored to move forward with this policy innovation in the 1980s in part, in the search for a niche, but also in part as an experiment. Serious purpose informed this strategy as a successful national education agenda could define more precisely the policy and jurisdictional border (i.e., of education) with the federal government and also provide a unifying and rallying cry for the CMEC. The idea arose, as is noted in Fleck's memorandum, through a Premiers' conference in August 1987 and with the impetus of Saskatchewan Premier Grant Devine (Fleck, 1987).

The provinces had just signed the Meech Lake Accord and popular pressure against the accord was now beginning to build (Russell, 2004). In this context, Saskatchewan was interested in the creation of a national agenda for education. Premier Grant Devine's speech at the Premiers' Conference of August 26-28, 1987 in Saint John, New Brunswick, provoked a variety of different responses on the part of the provincial premiers and their officials. Theirs was a full plate, as was evidenced by their final communiqué (Premiers' Conference, 1987). Devine (1987a) was extraordinarily keen on provincial collaboration which he called a cooperative effort. Devine's (1987b) strategy included several things. At the outset, he wanted to ensure that provincial responsibility over education was highlighted and that the jurisdictional boundary with the federal government was well defined (Devine, 1987b). In terms of policy objectives, his first goal was that everyone got the basic skills for life. His second goal was post-secondary training that provided "market relevant skills." Third, research and development were significant, as was the establishment of centers of excellence. Moreover, Devine felt it important to link all levels of the education system. To accomplish the five goals, Devine wanted all the education ministers and all the ministries to get together and address them (Devine, 1987a, 1987b).

Immediately following the premiers' conference, the CMEC considered the directive of the premiers. It stated, "... the ministers responsible for education and for issues relating to the labor market form a working group to provide a focus for developing education strategies" (Fleck, 1987). At this point there was still some question as to what was the best vehicle for a national education strategy in Canada. This was noted in the letter from Lorne Hepworth, Minister of Education for Saskatchewan, to Chris Ward, then Minister of Education in Ontario (Hepworth, 1987a). In Ward's response, his preference was not to take a position at the outset, rather to discuss the question with his officials and then present the question

at the February 1988 meeting of the full Council of Ministers (Ward, 1987).

The issue also became fairly charged in terms of the dynamics of the Council in the fall of 1987. At this point, Saskatchewan Minister of Education, Lorne Hepworth, issued a news release in which he stated that Saskatchewan was going to take a “lead role” in taking responsibility for the establishment of a national education strategy (Hepworth, 1987b). Chair of the Council of Ministers, Manitoba Minister of Education, Roland Penner, wrote a letter of response to Hepworth, questioning this lead role. He stated:

the attached news release has just been brought to my attention. Let me be frank and state my concerns about the implications of your statement for the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada.... the concept of a “lead province” is not one which in my respectful opinion should become the operational method of the Council. (Penner, 1987)

Penner (1987) also alluded to the challenges of building consensus amongst Council members in his letter to Hepworth. Lorne Hepworth (1987b) responded by noting

at the CMEC meeting held in Vancouver in September, it was agreed that Saskatchewan would coordinate the development of a draft paper for review by the Council in February 1988... We view our role in the process as one of coordinator of the paper which will fulfill the directive from the Premiers. We have no intention of usurping the role of the Council in any way.

Hepworth (1987b) also expressed his concern that all the provinces get behind the national education strategy and support it fully.

In Ontario, there was support in the Ministry of Education for the national initiative. In a memorandum sent from Lorne Smith (1987), Acting Director of the Computers in Education Centre, to Betty Augaitis of the Ministry of Education on December 1st, 1987, Smith’s views on the national strategy for education are laid out. Smith’s position was very supportive of the initiative. Smith recommended to senior ministry officials that there be whole hearted adoption of the national strategy, “I strongly articulate the need to support national priorities and approaches to ensure that Canada retains a strong economic and cultural position amongst its trading partners...” (Smith, 1987, p. 1). Further to this, Smith states “Interprovincial cooperation in areas of mutual interest can begin immediately...” (Smith, 1987, p. 2). He was concerned with regard to federal intervention, “it appears apparent that if the provinces do not initiate cooperation, the federal government will take action to initiate national policies that may interfere with provincial responsibility for education” (Smith, 1987, p. 2).

This discussion between bureaucrats was followed in February 1988 by a discussion paper on a common strategy (Government of Saskatchewan, 1988). In this paper, it was underlined that provincial ministries of education needed to work together. The paper looked in particular at the question of the role of schooling and the funding of higher education (Government of Saskatchewan, 1988, p. 3). It also spoke about “achievement levels” and where “new basics” such as critical thinking and communication skills could be fit in (Government of Saskatchewan, 1988, p. 7). Additionally, the paper addressed the question of high school dropout rates (Government of Saskatchewan, 1988, p. 7). The issue of cooperative action between provinces was also examined; there were a variety of areas in which provinces could work together such as labor mobility and flexibility, and the collection of labor market information (Government of Saskatchewan, 1988, p. 9). Throughout the winter months of 1987 and into 1988, discussion and dialogue between the ministers of education and deputy ministers continued. At the end of the documentary record, the outcome of the National Agenda for Education is not seen.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this study, questions remain regarding the effectiveness of “national” educational governance in Canada in the decade of the 1980s. The question that was initially posed, was the CMEC an education policy innovator or was it a broken cog in the system, remains. What was its true role? Additionally, have the subtleties, complexities, and the sometimes-contradictory relationships between education and society that are central to the historian of education’s mission revealed themselves in this study? This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the role of the CMEC in the big changes impacting Canadian schools in the 1980s. Individually and collectively as a group embodied by the Council, the efforts of provincial education ministers bore some fruit over the decade, in that sense it was an innovator. Cohesion, however, was very hard to sustain and harder to mandate.

In two areas, the CMEC established a solid track record and were clearly policy innovators. In both

cases this was in collaboration with the federal government. The mobilization of schools as agents of the federal policy initiative in Official Languages Education was firmly ensconced as a policy success and this remains a pillar of Canadian education into contemporary times. The other case was education statistics and in this role, the Council served largely as a conduit. It also helped accelerate the globalization of schools through the advent of educational reforms and accountability measures driven by neoliberal ideology. This ideology and Educational indicators would come into high vogue in the 1990s. Generally, the Council was beginning to work on the question of educational indicators and statistics in a serious way at the end of this period. The global cult of efficiency was beginning to take hold amongst provincial governments, but the challenges of nationwide testing had not yet revealed themselves in any systematic way.

In terms of the development of connections with international education organizations and other bodies “outre-mer,” the record is much more mixed and “coggish.” There was a recognition that the different levels of government needed to work together collaboratively if they were to achieve results. Joe Clark’s letter to the Chair of the CMEC reveals continuing divergent views on how far federal and provincial responsibility extended in terms of international education and how this should play out with international delegations. Notwithstanding this, in March 1986, the CMEC and the Department of External Affairs oversaw the creation of the Federal-Provincial Consultative Committee on Education-Related International Activities (FPCERIA). This was progress and the CMEC was now in a stronger position to move forward in this area (Allison, 2016). As Geddie notes however, headway on this file turned out in the end to be illusory as in the 1990s and 2000s officials from both levels of government came derisively to call this committee F-Pizzeria (Geddie, 2010).

Lastly, in terms of the National Education Agenda, this had the potential to unify and empower the CMEC. Here was an issue on which all provinces could collaborate more closely. While the initiative originated with Premier Grant Devine and its goals were laudatory, it was perhaps too big of a stretch for the CMEC and the provinces to realize this goal in the 1980s. The challenge they all faced with this was in its implementation. As was often the case, the gap between soaring rhetoric, the proposal, initiatives, and the reality of day-to-day administration of government in thirteen different jurisdictions resulted in this effort being less than what was envisioned. Devine and the other premiers’ idea set the stage for some of the later developments that took place around educational indicators. It also certainly got the provinces thinking about the whole question of national policies and national collaboration on issues of education. Provinces were continually aware that if they did nothing, then the federal government would continue to push the jurisdictional boundaries with education policies of its own.

Certainly, the Council was paying attention to many issues in this era and this paper has touched the surface of events. More research needs to be done on this topic. The difference of views between Manitoba cabinet minister, Roland Penner, and his Saskatchewan colleague, Lorne Hepworth, illustrate that the Council wished to speak with a unified voice and not push one province above any of the other provinces. Here too, however, the lack of a lead province may have done more harm than good. The fundamental lack of agreement on a national education policy also alluded to the other elephant in the room – the fact that both the federal government and First Nations did not have seats at the CMEC table. These questions and others such as attention to students with disabilities whose educational needs had previously been largely ignored would be existential to the CMEC in the 1990s and the new millennium.

In the broader realm of the history of education and the educational importance of this study, the Council’s record in the 1980s is one that is linked to provincial governance, federal governance, and Canada’s international profile. Understanding these connections is critical if one is to grasp the totality of education in Canada.

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