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What Shapes Inner-City Education Policy?

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger study looking at the issues involved as two large urban Canadian school boards, in Winnipeg and Toronto, responded to the demands of poor, inner city areas over the last thirty years of the twentieth century. In this paper we focus our attention on the broader stage on which education policy takes place. We draw from our data three overarching themes that we believe are critical for understanding change in inner-city education over this period. These are:

1) The diminishing role of school boards, as provincial governments took more control of education policy and limited the scope of school boards,
2) The importance of unique, and sometimes unexpected local events, and
3) The powerful implications for schools and education policy of increasing population diversity in cities.

What Shapes Inner-City Education Policy?[1]

Introduction

The first strong empirical evidence that socio-economic status was a powerful predictor of education outcomes was presented some forty years ago, although the belief that poverty affected educational outcomes is much older than that. Still, forty years later, socio-economic status remains the single most powerful predictor not just of education but of all life outcomes (Levin, 2006). Despite this reality, attention to poverty has only intermittently been a prime area of attention in education policy or education research.

This paper is part of a larger study looking at the issues involved as two large urban Canadian school boards, in Winnipeg and Toronto, responded to the needs and demands of poor, inner city areas over the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Previous papers emerging from the study, which is described more fully a little later, include Levin, 2005 a, b; Levin, 2007; Gaskell & Kearns, 2005; Gaskell & Levin, 2006. These papers describe actors and events in the two settings, illustrate some of the factors at play, and analyze some of the dynamics that have affected the way schools have responded to poverty issues in each city.

Our conceptual frame for this study sees the challenge of urban education as rooted in larger and long-lasting social inequalities built around class, ethnicity, language and gender. Education is one specific arena in which larger issues around the appropriate constitution of society, including the distribution of power and resources, get played out.

Our analysis focuses on the substantive decisions and policy choices made, on the social and political conditions that shape those choices, and on the broader climate of ideas in which issues and choices are articulated and decisions made.

We situate educational policy in its broad social context, understanding it as being shaped both by dominant ideas that travel internationally and by political battles that tend to be local. Our approach draws on a rich body of literature both in education (e.g. Silver & Silver, 1991; Manzer, 1994) and in public policy more broadly (e.g. Edelman, 1988; Lindblom, 1990; Stone, 1997).

Ideas about poverty and education are created and reflected in the social science literature and also in the political world. Conceptions of what causes poverty, what its effects are, and how education can make a difference have been examined by researchers in many disciplines, and have an impact indirectly on education, as they are taken up – or not – by policy entrepreneurs, educators, community groups and political parties. In education these debates have been going on for at least forty years, involving competing ideas such as the relative unimportance of schools (e.g. Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks, 1972), the effective schools movement (e.g. Rutter, et al., 1979; Edmonds, 1979), critical theory approaches (e.g. Ball, 1997), and, more recently, ideas of social justice in education (e.g. Griffiths, 2003). These ideas shape public discourse but it is political processes that determine which ideas are translated into policies and practices in schools (Levin, 2005a).

However, we are interested not only in ideas, but in material social conditions. Politically, who holds office and who votes in elections matter. The senior officials, elected and appointed, in school districts and related organizations are important (Stone et al., 2001). So are events in the larger community that lie outside the education system, such as changes in employment patterns, migration, urban housing, and social policies, since these can have huge effects on the issues facing urban educators. In fact, there is evidence (Anyon, 1997; Levin & Riffel, 1997) that schools are more deeply affected by these social forces than they are by decisions on educational issues such as curriculum.

In this paper we focus on that broader stage on which education policy takes place. We draw from our data three overarching themes that we believe are critical for understanding change in inner-city education over this period. These are

1) The diminishing role of school boards, as provincial governments took more control of education policy and limited the scope of school boards,

2) The importance of unique, and sometimes unexpected local events, and

3) The powerful implications for schools and education policy of increasing population diversity in cities.

These three developments should be seen as interactive. It is striking that a diminution in local governance seemingly coincides with the development of a more egalitarian idea of

schooling. Provincial oversight has increased because of increased public awareness of the shared economic and social consequences of education (Levin, 2005a). The growth and increased diversity of large cities has challenged received ideas of what should happen in schools, as parents articulate what their children need to thrive. The fact that the work of schools could be negotiated and changed in this way has supported education as an engine of urban growth. Diminution of local board power, combined with an increased awareness of the importance of local parent power has created a governance system that allows more flexibility at the school level, and increases the importance of principals in discerning the local environment and responding creatively to it. On a macro level, these developments support the notion that schooling is key to developing a "global city" where diverse communities can coexist in enough harmony that immigration and economic growth continue.

Description of the study

The research involved case studies of the development of inner-city education policy and practice in Toronto and Winnipeg. In each city, we trace these developments over the last 30 to 40 years. The design and conduct of our study was influenced significantly by other studies of urban education and by a broad review of literature on education and poverty, as outlined in more detail in Gaskell & Levin, 2006. Consistent with normal practice in historical case studies, our primary sources of data included analysis of documents and interviews with key participants such as trustees, students, parents, board employees, principals, teachers and community workers. We sought to understand key developments in each city and how these developments were influenced by a range of forces in the school system and in the broader society. In addition, we engaged in discussions with academic colleagues in other countries whose knowledge about urban education issues could inform our thinking and analysis.

In Toronto, interviews have been carried out with former and current Toronto public school board employees and trustees.[2] We began with people who had played key roles in the inner city department of the former Toronto Board of Education, and "snowball" sampling followed. Twenty-seven interviews have been taped and transcribed with several other informal interviews conducted to provide context, contacts, and locate key documents with regard to

urban youth, poverty and education. Many interviewees had filled more than one role over the course of their careers. Five (four men and one woman) were Directors or Associate Directors of Education. Eight elected trustees were interviewed; three men and five women. Ten participants – four female and six male – held various roles within the board in areas such as inner city schools, race relations, multicultural programs, school community relations, and so on. Four other educators who had played active roles in various ways – two female and two male – also participated in the study.

A similar process was used in Winnipeg. Persons known to have had an active association with inner-city education were approached and asked to participate. One person declined, but 22 people have been interviewed – eleven men and eleven women, including three former board members, 4 central office senior officials, 7 principals, 6 community activities, and 3 people who played important roles in the provincial government. Some of those interviewed had more than one such role over time. In addition, [one author] was actively involved personally in many of these events and knew almost all of those interviewed through his own work in the education sector.

In both cities, interviewees were invited to tell the story of their involvement with urban education in their own way. The interviews, which lasted from 45 to 90 minutes, largely followed the chronology of each participant's involvement, but with frequent digressions on issues that respondents felt were important. The interviewers – almost always the primary investigators but occasionally a graduate student - intervened as needed to keep the focus on the story of how each district understood and responded to issues of urban poverty and education, what strategies were adopted, what political dynamics were at play, what challenges arose and how they were handled. For almost all our respondents their involvement in urban education remained a central part of their lives and identities, even decades later. They were very willing to participate – as noted by our having only one request to participate declined out of 50 – and told their stories with great energy. The 49 edited interviews comprise in total approximately 350,000 words, or the equivalent of about a thousand pages of print.

Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The text of each interview was edited to remove duplication and to read as a coherent narrative rather than including the

fragmentation that is typical of speech. This was done to improve coherence and focus on the narrative rather than on its oral expression. The 'clean' text was sent to each interviewee for approval; while some participants approved the text with few or no changes, others made substantial changes to ensure that the final version did capture what they really wanted to express. Although we are attempting to keep our respondents anonymous, given the public nature of the positions some of them held, knowledgeable readers might be able to identify some individuals. All interviewees are aware of that risk and have consented to the use of their accounts; most of them are quite happy to be associated publicly with anything in their account as reflecting deeply held values and commitments. We owe many people a debt of gratitude for their participation and want to honour their work as part of this project.

In addition to the interviews, various documentary sources have been used, including census and other demographic data, minutes of school board and committee meetings, reports on education issued by the boards or by other relevant bodies, and reports and policy documents of provincial governments and other associated agencies. In total thousands of pages of documents have been reviewed. In the case of Toronto, we have also used a recent book that discusses many of these events (McCaskell, 2005). Based on the documents and the interviews, we constructed a detailed chronology for each city that links developments in the schools with provincial education policy and puts both in the context of other important events in each city, province, and the country as a whole, further linking those to broader international developments and zeitgeist.

Analysis of these data is still continuing. We have used a highly interactive approach to analysis, first reading and re-reading the evidence, then discussing it within our research team (the principal investigators and graduate students). We have sought external critique by presenting tentative findings at various conferences and sharing our emerging ideas with others working in the same general area. We have had four international partners (two from England and two from the US) who responded to and critiqued our ideas and results, and we have created an international e-mail list of about 60 people in a dozen countries who have an interest in inner-city education issues.

Three Themes

As noted earlier, this paper focuses on three issues or themes that we have identified from our data. These issues have been chosen for this paper because they seem to us to have important implications for understanding policy around urban education in Canada and because they are not the typical themes found in the literature we have examined. Each theme is discussed below in relation to each of the cities.

The role of school boards and the balance of local and provincial governance

Over the period of our study, provincial governments have gradually increased their control and impact on schools, and the role of local school boards has changed significantly. Thirty years ago, it could be argued, school boards were the most important policy actors in education in Canada; today in most provinces, boards have much diminished authority and are uncertain about their role (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2007). For large, urban boards the change in their authority and autonomy is critical.

Since approximately 1990, all Canadian provinces once again reduced the number of school boards, continuing a trend that has been ongoing for a century, as Canada moved steadily from local governance of education to provincially-controlled systems. The previous big wave of reductions took place in the 1950s and 1960s when most one-school districts were replaced by larger administrative units. The more recent set of reductions and amalgamations further reduced the number so that there are in Canada today only about 420 school boards, compared to the thousands that were in place in the early part of the last century. In comparison, the United States, with about 10 times the population, has 15,000 districts, nearly four times as many per capita (Ungerleider & Levin, in press).

The recent changes in school boards, however, were not limited to numbers. Provinces also increased their powers in most areas of education – for example around assessment of students, relations with parents, special education, and facilities. Since 1997 all provinces except Manitoba and Saskatchewan have provided essentially all the funding for schools, ending the

long tradition of funding education from local property taxes at rates set by local school boards. Of course once provinces determine the budgets, they are also much more able to determine the ways in which money is used.

These changes are part of larger developments in education policy. In the last twenty years, education has become more important on provincial and national political agendas (Levin, 2001, 2005). Governments are increasingly aware of the key role of human capital development in shaping societies' economic and social future. Interestingly, the importance of education is supported both by the political left – which tends to connect education to social mobility and citizenship – and the political right – which tends to emphasize the role of character and of skilled workers in economic growth. The net result is that education is now a key area of political attention in most jurisdictions. One easily thinks of George Bush Senior's claim to be 'the education President', or Tony Blair's 1997 mantra of 'education, education, education.' But it is also the case that most Canadian premiers make frequent public avowals about the importance of education.

Both the amalgamations and the budget controls have significantly limited the ability of local school boards to move very far from the mainstream. Our two case studies illustrate these dynamics well. Until the mid 1990s, the Toronto Board of Education, which was responsible for education in central Toronto, but not suburban areas such as North York or Scarborough, prided itself on its unique approach to education policy, and especially to inner-city and urban education issues. As described in Gaskell & Kearns, 2005, trustees, board staff and political activists working in Toronto felt that they had built something very different from other boards, with much more community input and a much stronger commitment to equity goals.

Although the process of creating these policies and programs was often full of conflict, there was enough consensus to move the system in a particular direction over quite a few years. Toronto, to provide just a few examples, put substantial resources into promoting parent involvement, paid enormous attention to issues of gender, parent involvement and ethnic equity, and tried to build integrated social and recreational services into the fabric of schooling to a greater extent than other Ontario school boards.

Toronto was and remains unlike any other school board in the province. Although the former Toronto Board was not the largest in the province, Toronto is the provincial capital and also home to many important national as well as local media. It is also a highly politicized city with a large number of organized and active interest groups who are quick to mobilize around issues of concern to them. Political events in Toronto therefore are highly salient in Ontario politics, and the Toronto Board has a capacity shared by no other board to command the attention of provincial politicians and civil servants.

Ontario had a Conservative government for some forty years until 1985, but this government generally left a great deal of power in the hand of local school boards. For example, Ontario had only a very general provincial curriculum and little or no provincial assessment of students through most of this period. At the same time, Ontario's system of school finance meant that the Toronto Board generated most of its own revenue and so had little concern about what the Ministry of Education might think. The provincial government gradually exerted more leadership during the 1980s. But it was only under the Rae NDP government from 1990 to 1995 and then the Harris Conservative government from 1995 to 2003 that the province took dramatic steps to centralize power. The two governments, although with widely different orientations and priorities, both moved towards a more centralized education system. They did this through a variety of means, including, initially, much more prescription of curricula and a program of provincial student assessment with public reporting of school by school results.

Even more directly, the Harris government amalgamated many of Ontario's school districts in 1997 and at the same time took away all their local taxing powers by moving to 100% provincial funding and reducing the amount of money provided to school systems. By 1998, the old Toronto Board of Education was no more, having been merged with five other Toronto school boards to form the new, 280,000 student, 600 school Toronto District School Board. (This story is told more fully in Gidney, 1999).

As a result, our interview respondents told us with great feeling, much of what had been slowly and painfully built in Toronto disappeared quite quickly. Key people, both political and educational, left. Those who remained were a minority in the new, much larger system which was itself swamped with the problems of amalgamation. In 2002, when the Toronto Board

refused to accede to the provincial requirement to balance its budget despite reductions in provincial funding, the Province installed a supervisor to manage the affairs of the board, taking away control from the elected trustees. Hallmarks of the old Toronto system, such as community workers for particular ethnic groups, widespread adult education, and extensive recreation programs were cut.

The Winnipeg story is quite different. Winnipeg School Division's enrolment has been in the area of 30,000 for many years – about 15% of the provincial total of 200,000. The boundaries of the Winnipeg School Division still follow the old 'city of Winnipeg' that was eliminated in 1971 when the new City of Winnipeg was formed through amalgamation with suburban areas. It is by far the largest school district in the province and also tends to dominate the Winnipeg media, which dominate the provincial media scene. The board of trustees of Winnipeg School division, however, with nine members rather than 20 as in Toronto, was never able to generate consistent strong direction. Control of the board swung from one political position to another and quite often rested on the votes of one or two non-aligned, and sometimes quite eccentric, trustees. Like Toronto, the Winnipeg School Division often resisted efforts at control by the provincial Department of Education – and was able to do so because of its substantial local tax base – but it did not generate the same consistent sense of internal direction over a long period as did Toronto.

At the same time, Manitoba governments were never as laissez-faire about education as were those in Ontario. Until 1997, the Manitoba government was paying a much more substantial share of education expenditures – around 80% - than was the case in Ontario. The Manitoba Department of Education had been, at several points in time, a more significant source of innovation than any school district. Manitoba had elected several NDP governments, which had significant commitments to equity and inner-city education. In the early 1970s and again in the early 1980s, as described in Levin, 2005a, the Manitoba Department of Education worked hard to create more innovation in the Winnipeg School Division (Levin, 2005c). However despite friction in the relationship, Manitoba has not moved to 100% provincial funding, so Winnipeg retains a substantial amount of local budget autonomy. When Manitoba amalgamated

its school divisions in 2001, Winnipeg School Division was left untouched, in part because of its distinct responsibility for inner-city issues (Levin, 2005a).

The two cases illustrate the critical importance of provincial governments in shaping the larger context in which inner-city education policy is made by local boards. Many in Toronto saw the moves by the Harris government around taxation as specifically intended – at least as one of their purposes – to punish central Toronto, which elected mainly non-Conservative members to the legislature. In Winnipeg the NDP government draws much of its support from central Winnipeg, so has a strong political connection to inner-city issues, but the Filmon Conservative government that was in office from 1988 to 1999 also did little to interfere with the Division's work. In the end, even the most powerful school board cannot protect itself from its provincial government, but it does take a determined government with a strong agenda to take on the political challenge of a large school board.

Local Matters and Surprises

While provinces have been playing a more active role in Canadian education policy, it is also the case that local context remains very important. Understanding the evolution of inner-city education in each city requires knowing something about the demographics, history, and culture of each city. The earlier discussion of the impact of amalgamation is one illustration of how political events changed the state of inner-city education. Other features of local context were also important to events in each city.

Over the last thirty years Toronto has seen its high poverty areas shift out of the urban core into more suburban parts of the city as central neighbourhoods have been renovated by workers wanting to avoid the long commute in to downtown. The old inner-city is no longer the poorest part of the city. Toronto has had very high levels of immigration and an increasing visible minority population. It is now one of the most diverse cities in the world demographically, but its various minority groups, and the poverty often associated with recent immigrants, are spread across quite a few parts of the city and the surrounding areas. Immigrant groups are very active politically and have elected many members at all levels of government.

Toronto's local politics have been hard fought and colourful. Ontario politics have been and remain a three party affair, with Conservatives, Liberals and the NDP all involved locally as well as provincially. Elections in Toronto, even for school board positions, can be hotly contested. Prior to the 1997 amalgamation the Toronto Board tended to have a left-wing or 'progressive' majority (as described in Gaskell & Kearns, 2005; McCaskell, 2005), although always with a significant minority opposition. Toronto has always provided a substantial share of Ontario's political leadership, but the fluid political environment and three-party system, plus the existence in Ontario of several other large urban centres, has meant that there has not been an 'inner-city caucus' with substantial political influence in Ontario provincial governments. As noted, the Conservative government from 1995 to 2003 had very few seats in central Toronto.

In Winnipeg, the 'north end' has been the home of successive waves of immigrants, most recently Aboriginal people moving to the city from reserves across the province. Aboriginal people are now the fastest growing part of the city and provincial population. Much of the city's poverty has also been concentrated in this area for many years. With a few exceptions, such as the 1988 provincial election, the Liberals have not been a significant factor either in local or provincial politics. City politics have tended to split along north-south lines, with many areas consistently electing the same party time after time. Provincial elections tend to be close-fought, decided by small swings of votes in a few seats, and the government has alternated between Conservative and New Democratic governments with consequent rapid swings in education policy. In total in the nine elections between 1969 and 1999, the NDP and Conservatives won almost exactly the same number of seats (Levin, 2005, p.11). However inner-city ridings in Winnipeg have been consistently held by the NDP, and every NDP government has had a powerful group of MLAs and cabinet ministers from central Winnipeg. The Conservatives, on the other hand, rarely elect members from these areas.

Although Aboriginal people have made up an increasing share of Winnipeg's population, they have not exerted very much political power as yet. Only once did the Winnipeg School Division have as many as two Aboriginal trustees out of its nine members. Other visible minority communities have been represented on the Board quite regularly and some, such as Filipinos and Portuguese, are very active politically. Some of these immigrant groups are quite

conservative on matters of education policy, which has led to more brokerage politics in the Winnipeg School Division than in the former Toronto Board. An interesting point of speculation is the possible impact of the existence in Ontario of a publicly-funded Catholic school system, which might be thought to provide an option for some parents and communities who may want a more traditional education system. One cannot safely draw generalizations about the Ontario Catholic school system, which enrols some 600,000 students and is itself, within an overall Catholic viewpoint, quite diverse in its approaches and orientations. The very existence of a second English-language public education system however undoubtedly has some effect in providing more alternatives with a lower degree of political conflict.

Local context is important, but so are unexpected events. In his classic book on governance, *Governing Under Adversity*, Yehezkel Dror (1986) wrote, "at any given moment there is a high probability of low probability events. In other words, surprise dominates" (p. 168). Dror's aphorism draws attention to an often-neglected feature of politics – sudden and unexpected changes that can have large consequences. Political events in Ontario and Manitoba give evidence of this. In Manitoba, the NDP governments under Ed Schreyer from 1969 to 1977 and Howard Pawley from 1981 to 1988 were very supportive of inner-city education. The Schreyer government was responsible for much of the innovation in urban education in the early 1970s, often facing opposition from the Winnipeg School Division (Levin, 2005c). The Pawley government set up a Core-Area Training and Employment Agency to support innovation in the inner-city, provided special grants to the Winnipeg School Division, created compensatory education funding in higher poverty areas, supported multicultural and Aboriginal education, and generally took a number of steps to support inner-city education issues.

However, the Pawley government was defeated unexpectedly in 1988 when one of its backbenchers voted against its budget. This unexpected development – there is still controversy over just how it happened – led to the election of a Conservative government led by Gary Filmon that then held power for 11 years. This government was far less interested in urban education issues given its political base in rural Manitoba and suburban Winnipeg. Accordingly, many provincial initiatives around urban education disappeared or at least declined in importance. The equation between electing members and government action is rarely absolute; all governments

give some attention to areas in which they do not hold seats. The Filmon government did, for example, continue to fund, albeit at reduced levels, some of the NDP initiatives. But the reality is that those areas do not have advocates in caucus or Cabinet and usually end up the losers in the horse-trading that inevitably marks the setting of government priorities. Although it was never as bold as the Harris government in Ontario – since Manitoba is generally a more cautious place – the Filmon Conservatives were generally true to their colours in reducing spending on education and other public services.

One could make a similar argument about political surprises in Ontario. Nobody expected the election of the Rae NDP government in 1990 – including, by his own account, the new Premier (Walkom, 2002). Had the Rae Government not taken office almost coincidentally with a major recession, it might have done much better and had a chance to be re-elected. In both 1990 and 1995, the Liberals started the election campaign as front-runners yet failed to win. In 1995 the election of Mike Harris and the Conservatives was also a surprise to many Ontarians. Yet the Harris government, which received 45% of the votes cast, introduced a series of dramatic measures not only in education but throughout the public sector. The Harris government decisions in its first term to move to 100% provincial funding of schools and to shift a number of spending responsibilities between provinces and municipalities were unexpected by many Ontarians.

Surprises also take place at a more modest level. Education politics in Ontario were importantly affected by a statement attributed to Harris's first Minister of Education, John Snobelen, about the need to create a crisis in education as a vehicle for change (Gidney, 1999). These words became a rallying cry for opponents of the Conservative changes. In Manitoba, the NDP government elected in 1999 decided to reduce the number of school districts – something it had not made part of its campaign promises (described more fully in Levin, 2005a). Within school boards, as well, surprise can matter. In 1977 the Winnipeg School Division elected a majority of more conservative trustees, which, together with the election of a Conservative provincial government that year, brought to an end many of the developments in inner-city education of the previous years.

Unexpected developments are, as Dror notes, normal. While one can expect a surprise; one cannot, of course, know what the surprise will be yet people in organizations need to be prepared to cope with the unexpected. As indicated, inner-city education policy is also shaped by unexpected developments that shift emphasis to education and within different areas of education. Moreover, as central government plays a larger role in education, school boards become more susceptible to these changes.

Diversity and the Role of Cities

Both Winnipeg and Toronto grew in diversity over the period of our study, becoming global cities with, in the case of Toronto, more than half the population born outside the country. The shift to a diversity of cultures and languages has changed the way educators in both cities approach their task, slowly forcing a more locally responsive pedagogy and a more community oriented approach. These developments are fragile and contested, yet also appear irreversible.

In the 1960's, Toronto's School Board minutes reflected agreement on the value and meaning of education, and reflected attempts to bring poor children into the system. The school board was relatively progressive, but made up almost entirely by white, relatively affluent, and well educated males. The board minutes included references to special programs for "downtown schools," attempts to increase vocational programs, and increases in "child adjustment services." "Social problems" could be alleviated through education; hot lunches, transit passes and milk were to be distributed to "needy' "maladjusted" or "disadvantaged" children. There was a will to include, but a fairly dim view of poor and immigrant families.

This confident and paternalistic approach was challenged by vocal community activists and parent groups during the 70's and 80's (Gaskell & Kearns, 2005). Their politically lively leaders put the onus for change on the system, not the children and their parents. Trustees who worked closely with poorer and immigrant communities were elected, and worked to maintain their political base by shaking up the status quo. They were more likely to be women, and to be from immigrant groups. They put pressure on the school system to become inclusive, to welcome newcomers, to teach languages other than English and to start new programs with a community-oriented curriculum and a politically engaged teaching force. This was a time when

governments had money, and the idea that taxes were too high was not politically popular. Schools changed, gradually, and more at the elementary level than the secondary level. The expectation that all children should succeed, and that the school system had to ensure this success, became much more widely accepted. Schools added social functions, research, outreach, and alternative programs. This more expansive school system laid the foundation for urban growth, as poor, immigrant, and aboriginal families found a place in the new metropolis, albeit not a completely comfortable one.

In Toronto, several key debates illustrate this change. The "Trefann Court mothers" made school board history when they wrote an indictment of the ways their children were streamed into occupational classes and failed by their teachers (Martell, 1974). The result of their efforts was the Every Student Survey, which tracked the progress of students by their ethnicity and income every year, "project schools" which modelled community engaged education in the inner city, and a myriad of curriculum reforms, particularly targeted at language teaching.

The Heritage Language Program was another hot button issue. Parents wanted the schools to teach in languages other than English, and other language programs were eventually introduced. Curriculum change in other areas also galvanized the board. The women's movement, translated into educational space, meant promotions for women teachers and a rewrite of elementary reading texts as well as secondary history and English curriculum. The board hired staff to work on employment equity and on developing new materials for schools. Anti-homophobic initiatives were more controversial (McCaskell, 2005) but also changed, very gradually, the formal and informal curriculum of Toronto schools.

Anti-racism initiatives were also supported and staffed at the board level. School based community coordinators went door to door to meet parents, engage them with their schools, and put pressure on the board and the schools to change.

In Winnipeg, the school population also became more diverse over 30 years. The city had always had many immigrants but the patterns changed so that many more newcomers were visible minorities. Even more importantly, and quite unlike Toronto, Winnipeg also experienced a dramatic increase in its Aboriginal population as people moved from rural or northern

reservations to the city. Whereas 70 or 80 years ago many north-end Winnipeg schools were 80% or more Ukrainian or Jewish or German, and 30 years ago might have been heavily Portuguese or Italian, these same schools are now often 80% or more Aboriginal. There is an important difference between immigrants, most of whom come to Canada voluntarily and accept some need to adapt to Canadian life, and Aboriginal people, who are the original inhabitants of Canada and see themselves as having been dispossessed and colonized with disastrous results for their wellbeing.

In both cities, the dominant view for many years was that the education should prepare and assist immigrants and Aboriginals to fit into Canadian society. However by the 1960s, there was growing recognition in both the Winnipeg School Division and the provincial government that student success rates in urban schools were not satisfactory. Large numbers of students were failing and dropping out at a time when this was considered less and less acceptable.

The initiative for change came first from a newly elected provincial NDP government, which created a Planning and Research Unit headed by Lionel Orlikow, a respected and innovative educator with close ties to the NDP. Orlikow's unit, under the direction of NDP education minister Saul Miller, immediately began to plan and implement a range of programs many of which were intended to address problems of the inner-city. Among these were initiatives to train inner-city residents as teachers, to strengthen parent involvement in schools, and to address some of the issues facing immigrant and Aboriginal children. More broadly, the government made a number of efforts to improve the situation of the poor through higher minimum wages, better social assistance benefits, more public housing and others.

By the mid-seventies, the Winnipeg school division was engaged in its own initiatives: nutrition for children, parent involvement, early childhood programming, alternative programs for struggling students, Aboriginal (then called Native) education, curriculum revisions and more. Those involved described it as a time of tremendous energy, excitement and optimism.

In 1987 the Division created, not without some internal conflict, the position of Superintendent of Inner-City Schools, setting in motion a deliberate effort to address inner-city education issues in a distinctive way. The leaders of inner-city schools have gradually developed a distinctive shared approach based on a common set of principles to guide inner-city

education. The changes can be linked to changes in the broader political environment. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Aboriginal and immigrant communities in Winnipeg became increasingly organized and powerful politically. The growing number of Aboriginal people with higher levels of education provided much stronger leadership to the community, which became increasingly adept and articulate in its political participation. The same is true of visible minority communities which have been increasingly successful in electing candidates to office at all levels. Recent immigrants and visible minorities have been elected regularly to the Board of the Winnipeg School Division and in the 1980s the Division had its first two elected Aboriginal board members. The provincial cabinet has also had a significant visible minority presence, including since 1999 two powerful Aboriginal ministers.

One of the clearest examples of these changing dynamics, and one that led to a very heated debate, was the proposal in the early 1990s by several Aboriginal community leaders to create Aboriginal focus schools within Winnipeg School Division. The initial proposal was to have these schools staffed by Aboriginal teachers and governed largely by representatives from the Aboriginal community. The schools, while open to all, would place considerable emphasis on Aboriginal languages and culture. The issue was highly contentious, yielding both fervent support and strong opposition. Eventually the Division did create two Aboriginal focus schools, one elementary and one secondary, although they were much less independent than had originally been envisaged by their advocates.

There are many limitations to the work that was done in both urban school boards. In Winnipeg, many of the activists and advocates found the mainstream system conservative and unresponsive, so tended to work around it through special projects or by putting a certain people into leadership roles in schools and the Division administration. The result was that the system as a whole was not affected or changed at a deep level. When the special programs disappeared later due to funding cuts, or when the key activists moved on, the system reverted back in large measure to its previous state, although the Aboriginal focus schools remained. In Toronto, activists worked closely with the board, finding support and resources there. However, the amalgamation of the Toronto board with the surrounding boards was a setback; many saw their reforms being swept away by a conservative provincial government which reallocated resources

away from those most in need. Recently, some of the initiatives are being reborn, as funding trickles back into the system.

Despite the political volatility of school boards and the lack of consensus on change, expectations for schooling have shifted, slowly but dramatically, as Canada's population has changed and as schools have increasingly come to be seen – and to see themselves – as agents for diversity instead of agents of assimilation. In today's cities and with today's sense of a small and increasingly interdependent world, cities and their school boards have to see themselves much more as part of a national and international polity. Political conflict is reduced as particular schools adapt to particular communities; recognizing diversity within boards and provinces has made Canadian cities more responsive to the families that have arrived in their neighbourhoods. The changes remain controversial and fragile, but there can be no going back to an education policy that treats students and families as undifferentiated.

Conclusion

This paper examines some of the larger social forces that affect urban school systems by focussing on changes in institutional and cultural power in two boards over thirty years. The ability of local school boards to manage issues of urban education and poverty are deeply affected by factors beyond the control of the boards themselves. Three such factors are the changing relationship between local boards and provincial governments; the accidents and vagaries of political and other events as they play out in particular contexts, and the impact of growing population diversity in urban areas. Those interested in improving education in poor urban areas need to pay attention to these forces.

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[2] In 1997 the former Toronto Board of Education and five other Toronto area school boards were merged into the Toronto District School Board. Our study focuses on the former Toronto Board, not the new Toronto District Board.