



Urban Education Policy in Canada and the United States

Jane Gaskell, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

Canadian and U.S. educational policies in relation to the challenges of urban education have diverged dramatically since the 1960s. This article points to some of the ideas and political processes that lie behind the divergence, and suggests that more comparative analysis of educational policy is both enlightening and important.

have been struck recently by how different the current approach to urban education is in the United States compared to Canada, even while both countries emphasize the importance of raising the achievement of students from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. The fact that the American government has a democratic president, while Canada has a Conservative prime minister, makes the difference even more remarkable; this is not just about left/right ideology.

In the U.S., a bipartisan consensus supports merit pay for teachers, charter schools, high stakes standardized testing, mayoral control of education and closing poorly performing schools and firing their teachers, despite the outrage of teachers' unions. The dominant rhetoric is about scaling up innovative programs and finding alternatives to a hide-bound traditional system. In Canada, teacher unions remain powerful and opposed to merit pay; there are virtually no charter schools; standardized testing is primarily focused on grading the system, rather than grading students or teachers; and underperforming schools get help, not further disruption. Canadian rhetoric is about supporting the public system in its efforts to raise student achievement, and increasing parents' confidence in the school system.

I am highlighting the overall differences, when there are important nuances by province and state and school board. But the differences are pervasive, despite the fact that both countries have what Manzer (2003) describes as educational regimes based in the political traditions of Anglo-American democracy. I much prefer the Canadian approach (and students in Canada perform better on international achievement tests), but I wonder why the two countries have moved in such different directions. It is an interesting case study in the sociology of educational systems.

There are certainly some enduring social and economic differences between the two countries that can be called upon to account for the current educational divide. Lipset (1990) notes the origins of the U.S. in revolution, and Canada in counter-revolution, or continuing loyalty to Britain. The “organizing principles” of the two nations were different, he claims. One is Whig and classically liberal or libertarian, distrusting the state, with optimism for the future; the other is Tory, accepting the need for a strong state, with respect for authority and hierarchy, and a cautious attitude towards the future. The constitutional commitment to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” in the U.S. contrasts with the commitment to “peace, order and good government” in Canada. The symbol of the cowboy contrasts with the symbol of the mountie.

These differences map onto the current differences in educational policy. But over time, differences between the two countries change, and they take different forms in different spheres of activity. Manzer (2003) traces in great detail the political ideas that animated educational change and the educational institutions that have managed it in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom from the early 19th century.

The period that I have been writing about in a study of the Toronto School Board starts in the 1960s. At the time, the rhetoric and the policy initiatives in education were very similar across our borders. The civil rights movement, the feminist movement, President Kennedy’s war on poverty, and activism around urban renewal all inspired rethinking equality of educational opportunity. In both countries, there was research on and concern about the effects of poverty and the impact of racism on students. The Coleman report, John Porter’s *Vertical Mosaic* (1965), the Toronto school board’s “Every Student” survey and Christopher Jencks’ (1972) analysis of educational inequality were required reading in faculties of education; they were also discussed in newspapers, magazines and policy circles. Urban school boards were committed to increasing community involvement, and teachers’ unions were gaining power. There were conflicts among these agendas, most openly displayed in the New

York City debate about the merits of a community control initiative that allowed a largely black school board in Ocean Hill Brownsville to fire a Jewish teacher over the objections of the union (Podair, 2002; Perlstein, 2004). But the debates about unions and community involvement, alternative curriculum and literacy programs resonated in both countries. Canadian magazines like *This Magazine Is About Schools* circulated new ideas across academic and educational borders.

The challenges of poverty in urban areas across North America have grown over the past quarter century. Increasing wealth has been concentrated in the hands of those who were already relatively well off (Green & Kesselman, 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). The diversity of both the U.S. and Canada's urban population has increased, and the resulting linguistic, cultural and religious differences interact with economic inequality, leaving aboriginal, racialized and new immigrant populations at a greater disadvantage than they have ever been. In this context, both governments recognize that the challenges of educating all children with the intellectual and social capacities they need to participate as citizens and make a living is critical. And the difference in approach has never been as marked.

Education is only one social policy, among many, that differ in Canada and the United States. Canadian cities have avoided the worst urban decay observed in American cities and Canadian government policies have provided a social safety net that is less available in the U.S. Higher taxes, public health care and more generous government programs have mitigated the effects of economic inequality and supported relatively strong public systems in many spheres of activity in Canada.

But education policy has its own structure and dynamic. We need to make sense of how both the ideas and rhetoric that are appealing, and the political structures through which educational decisions are made, have diverged so markedly in the two countries over the past 40 years.

Much of educational policy is about defining educational problems, for education is a complex and poorly defined intellectual space (Stone, 1998). While there is wide agreement that education should be improved, and more people should be educated to higher levels, the specifics of what this entails are by no means agreed upon. It is here that prevailing political ideas about justice, governance, accountability and democracy come into play.

The way these ideas have developed in Canada and the United States support different ways of defining educational problems and solutions. Since the Reagan era in the U.S., a more individualistic ethic defines problems in market terms and applauds entrepreneurial solutions. Charter schools and school choice make sense to Americans, and merit pay rewards individual effort. Unions, on the other hand, are seen to restrict competition. Standardized testing provides an accountability framework that holds individual students, teachers and schools responsible for their own performance. There has not been as dramatic an ideological shift in Canada. Our more communitarian beliefs continue to provide more support for teachers' unions, the public provision of equally funded and provincially regulated schools, and the professional discretion of teachers when it comes to judging students. Inequality is defined as more of a problem in this context than it is in the context of market-justified systems.

Ideas matter, but political institutions translate these ideas into concrete educational policies and provision. As Stone and his colleagues (2001) point out in studying educational reform efforts in U.S. cities, changes in schools take place through politics, not despite it or around it. And the political structures that govern Canadian and American schools have shifted in somewhat different directions since the 1960s.

In the U.S. system, the federal government has taken on increasing leadership in educational policy. The "war on poverty" led to federal funding for Head Start programs and initiatives in poor school districts, while the Supreme Court mandated integration and bussing in relation to racial segregation. The federal presence in education has remained, and strengthened. The Bush legislation called No Child Left Behind pushed all states toward high stakes standardized testing; Obama's new Race to the Top program requires states to bring in merit pay, increase charters and base teacher evaluations at least partly on the test scores of their pupils. Conservative appointments to the Supreme Court have changed the court's decisions on a number of issues that affect integration, equal funding and the use of race in admissions decisions. So changes in federal politics have had a dramatic and direct effect on urban education.

In Canada, the federal government has little impact on education, despite frequent calls for more intervention from interested bodies. Provincial jurisdiction has been protected by claims for the distinct status of Quebec, the historical belief that local communities should make choices for their children and the continued struggles for autonomy that all provincial jurisdictions (especially Alberta) have waged.

Even as arguments about the country's interest in developing educated workers for global competitiveness have gained favour (deBroucker & Sweetman, 2002), Canada's education system continues to lodge authority over schooling overwhelmingly in provincial ministries of education. No major policy change, with a federal mandate and substantial funding, has displaced local politics in Canadian schools.

In the U.S., while states' authority has been constrained, local school boards remain very powerful, embodying the idea of democratic community involvement in education and creating very unequal funding for schools in wealthy and poor districts (Kozol, 1991; Morone, 1998; Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). Large urban school boards in the U.S. have struggled badly, with declining test scores, school violence and erratic governance. Attempts to turn them around have been widely documented (e.g., Stone et al., 2001; Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Shipps, 2006) and not particularly hopeful. Mayors have taken direct control of the schools in a number of cities, including New York.

In Canada, local boards have steadily lost power and influence over the past half century as provincial governments gained it. Only in Manitoba do boards still have the power to raise local taxes; in most provinces they have become largely vehicles to provide some local discretion in how the curriculum and funding policies of the ministry are implemented. This has equalized funding and increased the consistency in curriculum and testing across boards.

While this would generally seem to help urban districts, I have been studying a board (Toronto) that resisted provincial intervention and managed to pioneer innovative approaches to urban education over the last part of the twentieth century. At a time when poverty and immigration, particularly of visible minorities, were increasing, the Toronto Board of Education had the power to raise taxes, to design curriculum and to run programs that explored new ways of approaching the education of poor and immigrant children. Although there is no "hard" evidence that its initiatives improved the achievement scores of students, it maintained its political support in the city and, because it could tax businesses, it spent more than the provincial average on its students. It is a counter-example to the failure of large urban school boards in the United States. In Ontario, it was the suburban boards that had fewer resources and a weaker political mandate to run effective programs for their increasingly diverse school populations.

My conclusions are far from firm. The form and value of local school governance, the appropriate role of federal governments in educational policy making and

the impact of broadly shared ideologies on schooling are matters for our continual inquiry. I am not convinced there is a single best model, but in the current climate, the Canadian approach seems to be working.

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Jane Gaskell is a professor and dean at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She received her doctorate in sociology of education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and has taught at Queens University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto. She has been president of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education and a member of the board of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as serving on many advisory boards, editorial boards and committees.

Dr. Gaskell's research has focused on a range of policy issues in education, including the organization of secondary schooling, links between schooling and work, teacher education, school choice and the meaning of equity in education. She has examined the role of social movements in education and worked with Chinese educators on research projects related to minority and women's education. Her forthcoming book, with Ben Levin, is *Making a Difference in Urban Schools: Ideas, Politics and Pedagogy*.