Urban District Reform for Equity:
The Case of the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program
in the Toronto District School Board

by

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ABSTRACT

Urban districts have failed to change the schooling and life outcomes of marginalized and racialized students, resulting in persistent educational inequities. This study explores urban district reform for equity through critical pedagogies, by exploring the case of the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) from 2004 to 2014. TDSB is Canada’s largest school district, situated in a highly centralized and neoliberal, provincial education system. The MSIC Program serves 150 elementary schools (over one-quarter of the schools in the TDSB), whose students face the greatest external barriers to success. Using the conceptual argument, Districts as Institutional Actors (Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008), this study explores how the MSIC Program implemented practices and pedagogies aimed at increasing student success, access and opportunities, considering how the reform was initiated and sustained over time, and how participants understood and measured district reforms for equity. This study aims to explain, rather than evaluate the MSIC Program, and describes the tensions in implementing this reform in an era of accountability. Data was triangulated using two sets of interviews with fifteen participants and twelve key documents using discourse analysis. Participants have been actively connected to the program for a minimum of two years and include three from each of the following stakeholder groups: district leaders,
MSIC Program staff, key principals, community partners, and elected officials. Documents include: program documents, district-level policy documents, professional articles, and program data. Findings suggest that two main ideological discourses for closing opportunity gaps (charitable and social justice) significantly influenced reform efforts. Reforms were further influenced by politics within and outside of the reform, and mediated by the leadership of key decision-makers. Ideological, political and leadership influences impacted three major tensions: accountability and responsibility; centralization and decentralization; and when and how to scale up reforms for equity. Key findings from this study highlight the need for: a focus on transformative, social justice approaches to education; critical democracy and civic engagement; and training in social justice leadership. This study informs future research and/or implementation for similar district reforms for equity.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In order to meet democratic responsibilities to the children of color and children from low income homes who persistently have been and continue to be under-served by U.S. schools, broader academic success for all children is essential. What is needed are entire school districts and, ideally, regions and states in which all schools, not just isolated campuses, are places in which children of color and children from low SES homes experience the same kind of school success that most white children and children from middle- and upper-class homes have always enjoyed. (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000, p. 1)

Reform has been a topic of great debate in educational administration literature at every level of schooling. These debates center on key themes such as the purpose and nature of reforms, the modes of implementation, the power of those who create the reforms, those they are intended to impact, and whether they in fact fulfill the desired result. The first wave of reforms in the early 1980s focused on top-down initiatives aimed at increasing inputs and focusing on mastery of basic skills (Smith & O’Day, 1991, p. 233). In the late 1980s, the second wave of reform focused on the change process and prioritized decentralized, bottom-up reforms (Smith & O’Day, 1991, p. 234). The third wave of reform aimed to blend lessons learned from top-down and bottom-up approaches to scale up change from a few schools to entire systems of education (Smith & O’Day, 1991, p. 235). This wave started in the 1990s and continues today (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008, p. 309).

In all three waves of reform the role of the district has been underrepresented, with the “research emphasis directed toward the efforts of schools, teachers, state and federal policy-making bodies, private groups and industries, and even university schools of education” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 309). Levin (2013a) argued that the legitimacy of school districts are continually questioned because they are often seen as large, bureaucratic structures that do not add value to
schools and do not actually represent the voice of citizens as evidenced by low voter turnout rates at local elections.

In addition to an underrepresentation of the role of the district in educational administration literature, there has historically been a limited body of knowledge on the complexities of urban district reform. According to Payne (2008), discussions about education reform policy in the last 25 years have also been disconnected from the daily realities of urban schools and school districts, and therefore have not translated into increased achievement, positive experiences, and engagement for racialized and marginalized students. Racialization in this context refers to “the set of practices, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements that are both reflective of and simultaneously help to create and maintain racialized outcomes in society” (Powell, 2008, p. 785). The Education for All working group of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines marginalization as “a form of acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 1).

In 1996, Noguera made the following comments on the state of research on urban schools and schooling:

The connection between the social environment and urban schools is generally ignored in most school reform initiatives. The unwillingness of policymakers to confront the environmental aspects of the problems facing urban schools is due to the often-unstated belief that nothing can actually be done to address the plight of urban areas. In many of these communities, the urban public school is one of few social institutions that provide a degree of stability and social support to the individuals and families that are served. As the only public agency charged with serving all young people regardless of their status, the urban school has the potential to play a leading role in the revitalization of urban areas. (p. 1)

Overall, scholars and practitioners alike have concluded that urban school reform has not yielded the intended results (Anderson, 2006; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Trujillo, 2012a). Furthermore, Trujillo (2012a) noted that the accountability movement that underlies much of the
reform efforts has led to “racial and socioeconomic segregation, organizational instability, and a shift in the locus of control from local actors to far-removed experts” (McNeil, 2002, p. 335).

More recently, there has been an increased emphasis on the role that districts play in advancing equity and achievement (Anderson, 2006; Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Childress, Elmore, Grossman & King, 2007; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Trujillo, 2012b; Turner, 2015). Rorrer et al. (2008) added to this discussion with a synthesis of evidence-informed research on district reform over the past 20 years. They concluded that the disjointed and varied nature of research on district reform has not allowed for the development of a solid theoretical research base on the role of districts on school reforms, nor has it adequately addressed the components necessary for districts to promote equity-minded reforms and improve educational achievement and experiences for all.

In this study, I examined an equity-minded district reform known as the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest urban district in Canada. The MSIC Program aims to serve schools whose students face the greatest external barriers to success and is intended to improve the achievement, school experiences, and engagement of students in these schools. There is tremendous variance in the literature about what constitutes ‘equity-minded district reforms.’ In the TDSB, equity is a named priority in the Board’s five strategic directions (TDSB, 2004) and is conceptualized as “identifying disadvantage and intervening effectively.” Equating equity with disadvantage in this way can serve to further marginalization in a number of ways. For one, it promotes deficit thinking, which places the blame and responsibility for change on students, families, and communities. Second, it reinforces notions of a pre-determined standard or norm to which students are compared, and the values and interests of those in power often determine those standards. Third, it silences the role that the education system plays in reproducing historical
and current power imbalances both within and outside of the schooling system, which manifest in differential treatment of students and subsequent differences in experience, achievement, and well-being. Finally, too great a focus on disadvantage often disregards and/or silences the abilities, experiences, contributions, and agency of the students, their families, and their communities that have experienced marginalization at the hands of the education system.

I contend that a district initiative for equity must acknowledge the interests and needs of particular groups and not impose a one-size-fits-all approach to equity reform. In the context of this study, I define urban district reform for equity as: (a) acknowledgement of the need for a strategy to identify educational inequities amongst entire populations of students and the intent to do so; (b) implementing pedagogies and practices aimed at interrupting the individual and systemic educational inequities that exist within a historical and current socio-political and economic context, for the purpose of ensuring greater access, opportunity, and equitable treatment that fosters greater experiences and engagement for all students; (c) a large-scale reform that is supported by the district as evidenced by structural and system changes (e.g., the creation of new policies and procedures; changes to the content/process of professional development; the reallocation of funding, resources and staff; changes to hiring and promotion practices, etc.); (d) the inclusion of multiple voices and stakeholders in decision-making and ongoing monitoring, especially those most marginalized by the system and society and those for whom the reforms are intended to impact; and, (e) an ongoing process rather than an endpoint, which involves an evolution of both personal and collective meaning making about issues central to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Using the conceptual argument ‘Districts as Institutional Actors in Reform’ advanced by Rorrer et al., (2008), I explored how the MSIC Program was constructed in the effort to implement equity-minded district reforms. Rorrer et al. (2008) argued that districts are key institutional actors in education reform because they
“provide instructional leadership, reorient the organization, establish policy coherence and maintain an equity focus” (p. 314). I explored the role of ideology and politics in influencing these four elements over time, in one specific case. I used the lens of critical pedagogy throughout this study, because understanding and reforming education from this perspective is most beneficial to students, families, and communities that have been marginalized and racialized within schools and in the larger society (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007). One of my central aims was to understand and explore the role of context (i.e., people, policies, places, time, etc.) in relation to multiple and shifting ideologies. Unlike most studies that critique current, neoliberal and neoconservative systems from critical perspectives, my interest was in understanding the purpose, benefits, and limits to multiple and intersecting ideologies of education.

Rationale for the Study

Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy supports student achievement and well-being by helping the education community identify and address discrimination and systemic barriers to learning, as well as providing a framework and ideas for intervention. The strategy envisions an education system in which “all students, parents and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected, and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 10). The evidence-informed movement in education has been presented in many arenas as an opportunity to increase the educational outcomes of all students, thereby supporting equity in education (AERA, 2012; Leithwood, 2010; Levin, 2008). Others would strongly argue that the evidence-informed movement has done nothing but undermine efforts to create a more just and humane education system for all students (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2006).
Ontario has seen consistent increases in educational outcomes as measured by provincial, standardized test scores, otherwise known as EQAO (Educational Quality and Accountability Office) scores. In the following quote, Fullan (2012) described the impact of sustained efforts at capacity building in Ontario:

Improvements began within a year, and now some eight years later its 900 high schools have shown an increase in graduation rates from 68 percent (2003-04) to 82 percent (2010-11), while reading, writing, and math results have gone up 15 percentage points across its 4,000 elementary schools since 2003. Morale of teachers and principals is stronger (fewer teachers leave the profession in the first few years), and achievement gaps have been substantially reduced for low-income students, the children of recent immigrants, and special education students (although not for "First Nation" students). In short, the entire system has dramatically improved. (p. 1)

International test scores paint the same picture of Ontario. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has had a huge impact on standardizing education globally through its assessment products, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Both assessments are designed to test skills identified for the 21st-century worker in a knowledge economy. According to a report on the 2009 PISA results, Ontario was ranked amongst the top of OECD jurisdictions in achievement and equity, as measured by differences in achievement scores between students in the upper and lower quadrants of the socio-economic index (OECD, 2010).

In comparing large Canadian cities to large U.S. cities, Gaskell and Levin (2012) explained that a variety of factors, both within and outside of education, have led to higher standardized test scores and lower variation across districts:

Canada certainly has issues of poverty, racism, intolerance, and urban segregation to overcome, but they have very different causes than their counterparts in the United States. Diversity in U.S. cities predominantly refers to relations among whites, African-Americans, and Hispanics; a legacy of slavery and mass—and often illegal—immigration from Mexico. In contrast, Canadian cities are much more diverse and no single ethnic group dominates across the country. Canadian urban municipal government
and financing are also different, and school district funding is much more equitable. Canadian provincial governments exercise more power in education than do most U.S. state governments. The Canadian federal government has almost no power over schooling, while the U.S. federal government exerts a significant steering effect through financing and policy directives. Canadian teachers’ unions are stronger, and school districts do not have the same difficulties in finding qualified teachers for their urban schools. (p. 33)

EQAO scores in the TDSB, the largest and most diverse urban school board in Canada and the fourth largest school board in North America, show a similar trajectory of consistent improvement over the past several years (Toronto District School Board, 2013). However, gaps continue to persist when student achievement data is disaggregated by social demographic indicators such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, and first language. Despite commitments to reforms for equity, EQAO achievement data demonstrates gaps as high as 35% between populations on the basis of race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Brown & Sinay, 2008). Moreover, males in lower socio-economic groupings of Aboriginal, Black (African heritage and Caribbean), Hispanic, Portuguese, and Middle Eastern backgrounds are amongst the populations most impacted by the achievement gap, as evidenced by standardized test scores, report card data, credit accumulation, and dropout rates (McKell, 2010). These students are also more likely to have lower rates of attendance and higher rates of suspension (McKell, 2010).

While the achievement gap is one indicator of systemic and institutional inequities, one has to go beyond the narrow, instrumental and technical view of education as achievement scores in order to more fully understand the implications of educational inequities (Apple, 2006; Ross & Gibson, 2006). The student experience for students who are not white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male is significantly diminished because they are more likely to face discrimination, harassment, and exclusion (Ryan, 2010). TDSB data reveals similar trends and correlates school experiences with student demographics for students in grades 7 to 12. For example, Zheng (2009) found that while a greater percentage of female students feel
comfortable in TDSB schools, male students indicated higher levels of class participation. Furthermore, Black, Latin, and Mixed students’ levels of school satisfaction were the lowest of all racial groups. Zheng (2009) also found that students from lower socio-economic groups felt less comfortable participating in class than students in higher socio-economic groups and that students who self-identified as LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) were significantly less comfortable in school compared to self-identified heterosexual students.

The TDSB results mirror the racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps that are also heavily documented in districts with great diversity in the United States (Banks, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Valencia, Sloan & Foley, 2001) and New Zealand (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). How do we make sense of these seemingly different results? Provincial and international standardized test scores paint the picture that Ontario is a jurisdiction committed to equity. However, TDSB achievement data (report card and EQAO scores) suggest that the school system does not adequately serve racialized and marginalized students. One explanation is that, relative to other jurisdictions, Canada and Ontario are more equitable in their practices and learning outcomes but despite this, student success continues to be impacted by environmental and external barriers.

It could also be that measures of equity on international test scores do not (or cannot) account for a wide-enough variety of social identities (such as race, gender identity, etc.); the intersections between multiple and changing identities; and/or the larger socio-political, economic, and historic realities of each context. According to Noguera (2006), large-scale system reforms, and the standardized tests that inform their progress, fail to account for the socio-political, economic, and historical inequities that plague urban and rural districts. In this age of accountability, large-scale testing initiatives mask the reality that reform efforts have
worked against social justice and have disproportionately disadvantaged racialized and minoritized students (Noguera, 2006).

Perhaps the differences are a question of scale. Studies on large-scale reform efforts inadequately account for the diversity that exists within specific urban contexts. When the state or province is used as the level of analysis, the effects of individual and systemic inequities, and their subsequent impacts on student achievement, engagement, and experience, are masked. Districts, on the other hand, are large enough to credibly discern trends and patterns in educational inequities among and between demographic populations, yet small enough to capture the nuances and diversities within the student population. Recent literature shows promise in using large-scale reform for achievement and equity by focusing on the district as the unit of analysis (Leithwood, 2011; Rorrer et al., 2008). With districts being the local governance structures in many schooling systems, they are perfectly poised to balance top-down initiatives for increased achievement and equity with bottom-up innovations that allow for local adaptability, civic capacity, and community mobilizing (Levin, 2013a).

However, in order to identify and respond to the complex and contextual nuances of educational inequities for racialized and marginalized students, focusing on the district as the unit of analysis is only part of the solution. Perhaps the differences in test scores can be further understood upon examination of the different purposes behind standardized tests in the evidence-informed movement. In commenting on the education system in England, Gillborn (2008) described the means by which ‘Gap Talk’ creates the illusion of reforms for equity, thereby negating the more fundamental and structural changes needed to overcome educational inequities:

Whenever policy-makers are challenged about their record on race equality, they typically respond with ‘Gap Talk’, that is, they assert that an ethnic inequity is getting better, that a gap (in attainment, retention, exclusion or some other measure) is getting
smaller. This assertion is usually (but not always) supported by the use of statistics. This ‘Gap Talk’ serves a particular strategic and political purpose: it reassures that things are improving and, therefore, operates to silence calls for radical dedicated action on race equality. After all, why consider radical change if things are already improving? …by selectively citing a one- or two-year period in isolation, ‘Gap Talk’ provides the reassuring official verdict that the system is moving inexorably towards greater equality. But this is a fiction that hides the truth about the deep-seated nature of race inequality: if we take a longer term view and compare Black/White improvements over a period of 6, 10 and 15 years, then the statistics suggest that, in practical terms, the Black/White inequality is a permanent feature of the system. (p. 237)

I ideological and political differences in approaches to equity-minded reforms have tremendous influences on the purpose, process and outcomes of reforms. Educational reforms must be rooted in critical and anti-colonial discourses. It is often argued that the evidence-based movement itself is constructed on principles of injustice, social sorting and stratification, and domination. Gorski (2008) commented on evidence-based education by stating, “despite overwhelmingly good intentions, such a perspective on evidence-based education accentuates rather than undermines existing social and political hierarchies’ in education” (p. 516). Perhaps the discrepancy in the pictures about equity painted by provincial and international test scores in Ontario and the TDSB can be explained by how data, evidence, and research are conceptualized. As Grande (2004) suggested, “Unless educational reform happens concurrently with analysis of the forces of colonialism, it can only serve as an insufficient Band-aid over the incessant wound of imperialism” (p. 179). Furthermore, Shahjahan (2011) claimed that the current evidence-based movement in education is rooted in, and perpetuates colonial discourses in the following ways: creation of unequal binaries; objectification of the ‘other’; monocultures of knowledge and evidence; and, social/cultural/political hierarchies supported by paradigms of accountability and efficiency that promote order and control to legitimize domination.

**Personal Connection**

In order to make overt how power relations permeate the construction and legitimation of knowledge, the question of the researcher’s location and political commitments,
which are obscured by methodological claims to objectivity, neutrality, and gender and race-blindness, must be taken up. (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 10)

Patty Lather speaks to the importance of researchers acknowledging how their ‘invested positionality’ shapes their approaches to and understandings of research (Lather, 1991, p. xvii). Thus, it is important that I acknowledge my location in relation to this research and how, through a self-reflexive process, it may permeate the work.

As a student in the Doctor of Education degree program in Educational Leadership at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, and a former Inner City Lead Teacher in the MSIC Program, I have had a unique opportunity to both engage in systemic and critical inquiry about what is required to close achievement and opportunity gaps and explore equitable and innovate practices in urban education. I bring to this research nine years of experience as an urban educator, five of which have been as Lead Teacher in the MSIC Program. I began my doctoral journey in my third year as an MSIC Lead Teacher and decided to study district reform for equity, using the MSIC Program as a case study. Throughout my academic career as a doctoral student, I have engaged in the Freirean notion of praxis, which is described as "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1986, p. 36).

Conducting insider research calls into question its reliability and validity, especially by researchers who ascribe to more traditional, positivist stances. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) purported that “researchers do not need to choose exclusively between an insider and outsider role because in order to truly understand the other, we have to understand the similarities that exist between the self and other” (p. 60). In speaking about the dash between “insider-outsiders,” Aoki (1996) suggested, “This hyphen acts as a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction” (p. 223). It is
from this third space that this thesis is written. Ethnography was not chosen as a research method because it usually requires “long periods of time in the field with and emphasizes detailed, observational evidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 15) and I did not have access to extended periods of time in which I could be both a participant and an observer. As such, gathering the detailed field notes required in an ethnographic study was not possible. Having said that, this research is as much an analysis of the MSIC program as it is a self-analysis; I was heavily involved and committed in the program as a Lead Teacher between 2009 and 2014.

In naming my invested positionality, it is important to note that I support the MSIC Program and am committed to its growth and success. As with all personal and professional matters that I care about deeply, my approach as an MSIC Lead Teacher in the MSIC Program, and my approach with this research is one of sustained, critical honesty for the purpose of deep and genuine growth. I believe that prioritizing students, identities, power and privilege, difference, and social justice at the centre of our work requires us to constantly question, critique, centre, decentre and re-centre, disrupt, name, and disinherit, in attempts to shed ways of knowing and being that are violent, harmful, and inherently unjust. As such, I see the MSIC Program as an initiative that has achieved significant success in redressing inequities and providing tremendous opportunity for growth to truly create the transformative environments required to change educational outcomes for all students. It is important to note that I was not working in the MSIC Program during the significant phases of data analysis and writing for the findings and discussion sections of this research. This is important as I felt that I needed space from the program to be able to engage with the analysis in ways that were true to the voices of the participants and the analysis, and less influenced by my daily working realities in the program.
It is also important to note that my aim in this study was to build bridges and not deepen ruptures. Too often in education circles, the language and terminology used among scholars and practitioners committed to supporting transformative education excludes the very people with whom critical dialogue is necessary in order to change mindsets and deepen understandings. It is safe and comfortable to speak a language that is common among people with similar values, views, and ways of knowing and being. It is uncomfortable and more challenging to dialogue with others who have different worldviews and are equally convinced of the merits of their ways of knowing and being. To do so involves sustained and strategic dialogue that encourages cognitive and emotional dissonance, a clear understanding of how differences in theoretical understandings impact practice, and bold and courageous conversations centered on all students. In working with practitioners and academics with varying theoretical frameworks, I have opted to focus on how thinking and practice change across different theoretical frameworks. I have had greater success in mobilizing for social justice by being able to ‘speak different languages’ and ‘translate’ from one language to another.

I also have a deep respect and admiration for the participants in this study, who have demonstrated unparalleled levels of devotion and commitment to improving the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program and for improving the life options, chances, and choices for some of the most marginalized and racialized students in the TDSB. In considering my relationship to the participants in the study, I reflect on this passage from herising (2005):

The threshold is both the entryway and the marker for the spaces that demarcate the boundaries of inside and outside, of belonging and un-belonging. By attending to thresholds of passageways, the borders that exist between the researcher and the research participants are contested; it is essential to continually turn to negotiate these borders given the cultures and knowings that exist and are produced in relationship to each other. (p. 130)
Furthermore, I have a deep, personal connection with many of the families and students in MSIC schools, which has enriched my life in powerful ways and has helped me to become a better educator and a better human being. My deep admiration and respect for them brought such richness to my personal and professional life for many years, and I am forever indebted to them.

Finally, it is important to note that this is an explanatory study and not an evaluative study. As such, my role as an insider researcher allows me to understand the complexity and nuances of the case when answering the research questions, without evaluating the effectiveness of the program. My goal in conducting this study was two-fold: to provide other districts (nationally and internationally) with an in-depth analysis of the practices, ideologies, and politics needed to initiate and sustain a district-wide equity program like the MSIC Program, and to support recommendations for furthering equity-related work in the MSIC Program and TDSB at large. Further, obtaining access to participants within the TDSB may have proven difficult if the study were evaluative in nature. Having said that, many of the participants commented on their views of the effectiveness of the MSIC Program and those views were captured in the analysis. Further, the documents were analyzed using discourse analysis. Some of the documents included in this study are studies by the TDSB Research Department that analyze the effectiveness of the MSIC Program with respect to student well-being, engagement, and achievement of students in MSIC schools.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based... To do criticism is to make harder, those acts which are now too easy. (Foucault, 2003, p. 172)

This chapter begins with a description of the research question and sub-questions, followed by the six major sections of the literature review. It concludes with a description of the conceptual framework, both in its original and revised versions.

Research Questions

To address the research gap on the role of districts in advancing equity-minded reforms identified by Rorrer et al. (2008), I explored the following research question: How does the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program in the Toronto District School Board implement equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access, and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities? This research question was supported by an investigation into the following sub-questions:

1. How does the MSIC Program in the TDSB understand equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access, and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

2. How did the MSIC Program in the TDSB initiate equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access, and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

3. How does the MSIC Program in the TDSB measure equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access, and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

4. How does the MSIC Program in the TDSB sustain equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access, and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?
These questions were explored by considering the MSIC Program and its relationship to the TDSB at large. In this study, student success is defined broadly to include student achievement, well-being, experience, and engagement in schools and schooling experiences. Opportunities are defined as the four components of opportunity gap discourses that will be described in Chapter 5: redistribution, recognition, representation and re-education. Access speaks to the ways in which schools and school systems respond to inequities in opportunities among student populations.

**Literature Overview**

The literature review is divided into seven major sections as described in Table 1.

Table 1

*Overview of Literature Review*

<table>
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<th>SECTION</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theoretical Approaches</strong></td>
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| 1. Theoretical Approaches to Reforms for Equity and Social Justice in Educational Administration | ▪ An ideological map for understanding conceptions of equity within the reform literature at large  
▪ Includes neoconservative, liberal, neoliberal, and critical discourses |
| **Key Concepts** | |
| 2. Urban Communities and Urban Schooling  
3. Achievement Gaps, Opportunity Gaps, and Education Debt | ▪ Description of key terms and how I conceptualize these terms |
| **Literature on District Reforms for Equity** | |
| 4. Why Districts as a Unit of Analysis in Educational Reform  
5. Literature on District Reforms  
6. Literature on District Reforms for Equity | ▪ Background information in an increasingly narrow fashion, to set the context for this study |
| **Current Tensions** | |
| 7. Current Tensions in the Literature on District Reform for Equity | ▪ A context for tensions in district reforms for equity to be explored throughout this study  
▪ Includes accountability and responsibility, centralization and decentralization, and how/when to scale up initiatives |
This study speaks to an analysis of research on districts over the past 20 years in very broad terms. It includes both studies focused on closing achievement gaps scores and other studies of district reforms for equity that use different measures.

**Theoretical Approaches to Reforms for Equity and Social Justice in Educational Administration**

The challenges faced by students in urban schools have led to different interpretations that explain lower levels of achievement and a rhetoric of risk. The way risk is constructed is closely tied to interpretations of equity and achievement. Differences in theoretical frameworks lead to dramatically different interpretations of concepts and approaches to research design and findings. Research on educational reform is no exception and this has led to very different findings and recommendations for schools, districts (to some degree), and larger educational systems. This is evident when we examine who creates the reforms and for what purpose, as well as who is impacted by the reforms.

**Neo/Conservative Discourses**

There are many approaches to understanding differences in achievement and schooling experiences for ‘in-risk’ populations. Neoconservatives emphasize the role of the state and have an idealized vision of the past that glorifies the traditional values of the dominant group (Joshee, 2009). As Joshee (2009) put it, “This version of inclusion re-inscribes a ‘we/they’ dichotomy, where ‘we’ represents a dominant, English-speaking, White group that is hard-working, decent, and virtuous, and ‘they’ represents those who do not fit the dominant norm, including Indigenous peoples, immigrants, certain women, and the poor” (pp. 96–97). Similarly, Apple (2006) explained how neoconservatives construct concepts like ‘they’ and ‘us’:

‘They’—usually poor people and immigrants—are very different. They are lazy, immoral, and permissive. These binary oppositions act to exclude indigenous people,
women, the poor, and others from the community of worthy individuals. The people whom schools should support now are no longer those groups who have been historically oppressed but are the “real citizens” (usually people who are doing fine in these difficult economic conditions) who embody the idealized virtues of a romanticized past or who consistently act in an entrepreneurial way. “They” are undeserving. They are getting something for nothing. Policies supporting them are too expensive and are “destroying our way of life,” most of our economic resources, and creating government control of our lives. (pp. 22-23)

Against the backdrop of “what is public is bad and what is private is good” (Apple, 2006, p. 23), a focus on character and values is a significant feature of neoconservative ideology (Pashby, Ingram & Joshee, 2014).

With regards to equity and social justice in education, neoconservative discourses place little value on diversity; individuals who are different from the ‘norm’ are seen as the problems or potential threats to society (Pashby et al., 2014). From this perspective, students who are different from the ‘norm’ should be integrated into the existing structure instead of changing the unjust and exclusionary system (Pashby, 2013). Furthermore, inequities are constructed as individual issues, distracting attention from how power is embedded within social structures (Pashby et al., 2014).

Some scholars discuss the links between neoconservative and neoliberal (discussed below) discourses and deficit ideologies (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Apple, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Deficit discourses blame the lack of achievement on the culture of individual students, their families, and their communities (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Swadener, 1990; Valencia, 1997). This perspective essentializes the experiences of marginalized and racialized people and blames them for their oppression (Alonso et al., 2009; Delpit, 1995; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 1997). From the deficit viewpoint, intellectual, cultural, and linguistic differences are constructed as deficits and pathologies in need of a cure, similar to the medical model complete with diagnoses and
treatments (Shields et al., 2005). Those who do not fit within the pre-defined parameters (determined by the behaviours and attitudes of white, middle-class males) are treated as problems to be solved (Hixson & Tinsmann, 1990; Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). Reformers interested in reforming for equity fail to account for the larger socio-political, economic, and historic barriers to success and rarely involve those most marginalized by the education system in their research (Portelli et al., 2007). The assumption here is that the most marginalized are not capable of contributing to the literature on reforms aimed at improving their experiences and outcomes.

**Liberal Discourses**

Liberal discourses are predicated on two fundamental beliefs: individual human rights and the freedom of choice (Portelli et al., 2007). Success and failure are constructed on the basis of individual meritocracy and resilience, but by failing to account for the social, cultural, political, and historical forces that affect individuals, the source of failure continues to be located in the individual and not the institution (Portelli et al., 2007). Unlike deficit discourses, liberal discourses hold the child in high esteem and place the blame for low achievement on unskilled teachers (Portelli et al., 2007; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Similar to deficit discourses, the ‘child’ is understood from the vantage point of white, middle-class males who tend to value independence and autonomy, rational thought, and pursuing self-interests while cooperating with others (Kelly, 1997; Portelli et al., 2007). In failing to account for differences in values, experiences, and ways of knowing that are based on multiple and intersecting social identities, Liberal discourses promote the myth of ‘neutrality’ (Portelli et al., 2007).

This myth confuses equity with equality by claiming that everyone experiences failure or hardship at one point or another and failing to acknowledge the additional barriers experienced
by marginalized and racialized students (Portelli et al., p. 12). Rottmann (2007) noted that educational reformers largely represent the cultural and corporate elite and therefore maintain social inequities by promoting the myth of neutrality and confusing equity with equality. As such, liberal reforms for equity are based on a one-size-fits-all model that is aimed at sameness in outcomes, dispositions, and attitudes (Dei, 2010a).

**Neoliberal Discourses**

Neoliberal discourses suggest that achievement gaps result because of the incompatibility between learning styles and behaviours of marginalized students and the curriculum goals and expectations of the school system (Portelli et al., 2007). According to this discourse, students should be shaped to fit the school system and learn the necessary skills to navigate it; little attention is paid to how the system fails the student (Deschnes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001). The current educational discourse is deeply entrenched in the neoliberal perspective and aims to prepare the learner for a global, competitive market and workforce (Ross & Gibson, 2006). As such, neoliberal practices occupy educational settings in very instrumental ways, such as: standardized testing, the commodification and narrow understanding of literacy, ascribed curricula, and preparing students as both workers and contributing members to the economy (Apple, 2006). From this perspective, marginalized students at the lower end of the achievement gap are viewed as “untapped resources to support the market economy” (Anderson, 2001, pp. 327-328). Reforms aimed at closing the achievement gap are intended to build a qualified workforce and reduce social services, both associated with increased graduation rates (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2006). Rottmann (2007) reminded us that in this discourse, “nations are constructed as being ‘at risk’ not when large numbers of children are living in poverty, but rather when students’ standardized numeracy and literacy scores cease to be
internationally competitive” (p. 6). When economic policy is privileged over social policy, efficiency and economic competition have more power than social justice and economic redistribution (Apple, 1998) and closing achievement gaps only matters if it privileges market productivity (Rottmann, 2007). Furthermore, neoliberal multiculturalism focuses on social cohesion as a corrective measure that can help to increase social solidarity and “restore faith” in the institutions of government (Joshee, 2009).

**Critical Approaches**

Critical discourses question how constructions of reality, their selection, and their organization legitimize the knowledge and culture of the dominant group and result in the elevation and ensured continuity of its’ body of knowledge, at the expense of others (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). Critical discourses challenge the notion that success and failure rest with individual students, families, communities, or teachers by examining how power and privilege are produced and reproduced in schools due to larger social, cultural, economic, and political forces (Portelli et al., 2007). As such, critical discourses aim to disrupt, rather than reinforce, the current social order (Rottmann, 2007). In this view, a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of schooling where educational inputs and efforts are aimed at equalizing educational outcomes is not the answer to reforming for equity (Portelli et al., 2007). Critical theory is not a new idea. Of the emergence of critical discourses in the 1960s, Kincheloe (1999) wrote:

> Critical theorists want to promote an individual’s consciousness of himself or herself as a social being. An individual who has gained such a consciousness understands how and why his or her political opinions, worker role, religious beliefs, gender role, and racial self-image are shaped by dominant perspectives. (p. 72)

In the emancipatory context of critical democracy, educators seek to work *in solidarity* with marginalized groups to expose privilege and to disrupt the power relations and structures that undermine and exclude them (Kincheloe, 1999). Without this consciousness, it is naive to
believe that schooling can facilitate socioeconomic mobility, or provide a politically neutral set of skills and objective body of knowledge (Kincheloe, 1999). Furthermore, in this discourse, students who do not meet pre-defined and narrow standards of achievement are not pathologized; instead they are constructed as “resourceful and agentic” (Portelli et al., 2007, p. 15). Moreover, students should be encouraged to understand themselves and others as politicized, historicized, socialized, and cultured beings and critique systems from these perspectives (Kincheloe, 1999) so as to become agents of change towards justice and liberation (Freire, 1998). Teachers are also seen as having the agency to interpret, disseminate, and act on the information presented in such accountability policies (Ball, 2003; Sloan, 2007).

Critical perspectives view knowledge, cultures, and identities as being socially constructed and mediated through language, power, critical self-reflection, and action, known as praxis (Freire, 1998). Furthermore, critical theory sees democracy, and critical democracy, as a way of life, and not simply a form of governance (Kincheloe, 1999). According to Kincheloe (1999), “democracy is a value system, a method of associating with one another, a way of confronting problems together within the boundaries of solidarity, and a means of validating human dignity” (p. 73). From this theoretical framework, urban district reform must account for the economic, political, and institutional constraints that constitute the complex context under which racialized children and children living in poverty are educated (Noguera, 2006). Therefore, education for justice should “enable citizens to participate in the creation and recreation of a critical democracy” and center the issues of difference in cultural and political identities as being central to democracy and democratic representation (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, pp. 2-3). Consequently, education that is founded on the democratic principles of equality and social justice must involve an emancipatory vision of all segments and members of the
community and go well beyond pedagogical skills for economic and citizenship requirements to include ethical and moral issues that will work towards human freedom (Giroux, 2002).

One major critique of critical theories is its inattention to historical analysis, and sole focus on current conditions of oppression and injustice (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). Feminist critiques of critical theories dispute the notion that emancipation only happens through reason, employed by singular and self-conscious individuals, as this notion negates the realm of emotions and the importance of learning in community (Maclure, 1994). Critical theories are also critiqued for their insistence on binary relationships between the oppressed and the oppressor and a lack of complexity in understanding that at any given moment someone can be oppressed and simultaneously oppressing (themselves or others) (Guthrie, 2003).

In response to the critiques of critical pedagogies, post-structural discourses have emerged to legitimize all forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. Maclure (1994) described post-structuralism in the following quote:

…it (a) takes some kind of skeptical position towards the relationship between language and reality; and/or (b) understands discourse/language not just as a reflection of 'the social', but as deeply implicated in the constitution of the social and cultural world; and/or (c) considers 'meaning' to be ambiguous, contested, shifting, and never finally resolvable by recourse to an 'external' world of objects and certainties. (p. 291)

According to Ghosh and Abdi (2004), “the most important pedagogical knowledge/power deconstructions and reconstructions would involve: (a) the delegitimization of metanarratives or overarching philosophies that are meant to represent universal truths; (b) the emphasis on cultural politics of differences; and, (c) a new and apparently sustainable focus on identity, culture, and power” (p. 18).

I largely assumed a critical approach in the conceptualization, design, and analysis of this study, although efforts were made to historicize concepts and the case. Post-structural
approaches were used in the discourse analyses of the document study and participant interviews in order to attend to the relationships between language, power, and knowledge.

To summarize the ideas put forward in this section, neoconservative logic uses binary ideologies (good/bad, inferior/superior) to justify discrimination and inequity by constructing ‘Others’ as deviant and deficient. Liberal and neoliberal logics recognize difference, but are blind to the unequal power relations and systemic discrimination that maintain the values and worldviews of white, heterosexual, able-bodied men as the norm (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). Critical or radical pedagogies are interested in challenging social constructions of identities and changing the very foundation on which inequity and oppression are based.

**Key Concepts**

**Urban Communities and Urban Schooling**

The terms ‘urban’ and ‘inner-city’ have a diversity of meanings, both within and outside of academia (Milner, 2012). Urban sites have often been described as problematic and constructed as sites of deficiency and deviance (Walker & Gutmore, 2002). Furthermore, ‘urban’ is often used as a euphemism for high concentrations of racialized and poor students, complete with challenges of truancy, lack of motivation, parents’ lack of involvement, behavioural challenges, low academic performance, etc. (Milner, 2012). Historically, urban communities have been characterized as having high density, high diversity, high migrancy and transience, limited job opportunities and high unemployment, limited social services, assisted housing, and depleting wealth (Solomon, 2007). Urban education for equity, diversity, and social justice reconceptualises urban communities as wealth generating, culturally rich, and potentially transformative. It highlights learning needs and strengths related to the acquisition of new language and literacy skills, the development of cultural competencies, and critical thinking and literacies needed to explore factors giving rise to racism, ethnocentrism, classism,
homophobia, sexism, and ableism, which are often more concentrated and visible in urban spaces (Solomon, 2007).

Milner (2012) echoed the idea that there is a rich array of excellence, intellect, and talent among the people in urban environments, and that these folks “make meaningful contributions to the very fabric of the human condition” (p. 558). To this end, the discourse on urban schools and social capital presents an important paradigm shift from “essentializing urban communities as ‘spaces of pathology’ to sites of social capital development” (Solomon & Sekayi, 2007, p. 10). Putnam (2000) described social capital as the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). The interpersonal relationships developed in neighbourhoods can have significant impacts on productivity and prosperity, health and safety, and overall quality of life (Solomon, 2007). However, these relationships are raced, classed, and gendered (Trujillo, Hernandez, Jarrell, & Kissell, 2014). As such, schools need to be creative in helping students develop skills to reach across social difference and form strong connections with the cultural, academic, and social institutions needed for community growth (Solomon, 2007).

Connected to the pathology used to describe urban spaces, urban schools are often referred to as sites of crisis and hopelessness (Noguera, 2003). Crosby (1999) described the state of confusion, failure, and inequity that plagues urban schools in the US, much of which applies to urban schools in Ontario. He noted:

- high levels of bureaucracy that are self-generating, self-regulating, self-perpetuating, and resistant to meaningful change
- failing physical infrastructure including buildings, limited technology, etc.
- educators and school personnel that are overloaded and are called to perform academic duties as well as provide a host of other social, emotional, health, and other services
• constantly changing demographics as newcomers and refugees settle and the White, middle-class population relocates to the suburbs

• shifting finances from educating students to securing safety in schools

• the inadequate number of school personnel, and the turnover rates, social isolation, and fatigue experienced by competent staff

• limited political courage and will to transform urban schools by those who benefit from the status quo. (pp. 298-303)

Solomon (2007) stated that traditionally, urban inner city schools have reproduced low-level assembly line workers at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, and not what is required “to prepare students to maximize their potential to acquire meaningful, productive occupations within and beyond their community” (p. 122). Despite this grim picture, Noguera (2003) proposed that:

Public schools are the only institutions in this country charged with providing for the educational needs of poor children. Given the role they play, it would be a mistake to allow them to deteriorate further or to become unsalvageable…public education, even in the poorest sections for the inner city, constitutes a vital public resource. (p. 7)

From this perspective, Noguera (2003) suggested our attention be turned away from decrying the failures of urban schools and toward offering critical support, which he defined as: recognizing that good education is a right for all children and their families; identifying and calling attention to the failures in the system; actively supporting change, improvement, and innovation; and, avoiding the embrace of every new fad. He went on to say that reform should be evaluated and assessed on the basis of academic and social outcomes for students.

Anyon (1997) and Noguera (2003) posited that we will not be able to confront the challenges in urban schools until there is social, economic, and political reform in the urban spaces in which these schools are located. Furthermore, Solomon (2007) put forward that “the
development and use of community knowledge as legitimate and authentic, which represents the lives and experiences of those who construct it, is fundamental to transforming urban education” (p.121). This pedagogy of community moves away from competitive individualism and standardized approaches to education and embraces inclusivity, collectivist ideologies, and interdependent learning (Solomon, 2007).

**Achievement Gaps, Opportunity Gaps, and Education Debt**

All students deserve the best possible educational opportunities and outcomes regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, gender, abilities or disabilities, citizenship, religion, sexual orientation, or any other demographic variable. Differences in achievement (standardized test scores, graduation rates, test scores, dropout rates, etc.) on the basis of race, class, and gender have plagued the education sector for decades. Ladson-Billings (2006) reminded us that in the 1960s, many scholars such as Deutsch (1963) and Hess and Shipman (1965) explained achievement gaps using cultural deficit theories. Historically, differences in achievement and academic performance have been attributed to innate differences in intelligence and genetics (Hernstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969). Since the 1960s, explanations of variance in school performance have centred on cultural differences. Some have explained the gap using “stereotype threat” (Steele, 1999) or a culture of ‘victimology’ among African-Americans (McWhorter, 2000), while others focus on cultural mismatch (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 2003; Lee, 2004).

In addition to reinforcing stereotypes, cultural explanations of academic ability fail to account for the diversity and changing nature of culture, as well as the relativity and intersectionality of identities in connection to positions of power and privilege. A culture of poverty has also been used as an explanation for achievement gaps, pointing to high rates of
mobility and lack of preparedness for school (Turner, 2015). More recently, the conversation has shifted to exploring the nature of what is happening in schools, such as the ways in which broad notions of curriculum are taken up (Apple, 1990; Banks, 2004; Gay, 2004), and how it is that certain pedagogical practices can support or hinder the success of racialized and marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2001). Turner (2015) noted that a teacher-deficit frame is also evident in the research that examines the inability of White, middle-class teachers to respond to students of different races, ethnicities, and social classes.

Many scholars draw our attention to the fact that achievement gaps are caused by opportunity gaps, which speaks to the uneven distribution of resources and learning opportunities (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Milner, 2012; Noguera, 2006). Theories of educational opportunity and its distribution vary widely. Jencks (1998) suggested that the way we approach equal educational opportunity depends on whether we believe in free will or determinism. She proposed that from the perspective of free will, educational opportunity is founded on principles of moralistic justice, which rewards virtue (e.g., effort) and punishes vice. This requires moral judgment on the part of decision-makers and a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality. Those that prescribe to determinism believe in a more humane justice approach to educational opportunity, which assumes that the environments in which children find themselves determine their choices. The idea here is that because we have committed ourselves to economic (and other) systems that produce and maintain inequalities, we have a collective responsibility to minimize the effects of inequalities on children (p. 523). Jencks (1988) also noted the difference between humane theories of justice which center on fairness for those who are most marginalized and theories of utilitarianism which try to maximize the average level of well-being in a society. With regards to educational and opportunity gaps, humane justice advocates
aim to reduce the variation around the mean, whereas utilitarians try to maximize the mean level of welfare.

An example of attending to opportunity gaps is a campaign, known as the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, put forth by a number of education researchers and activists. This approach asserts that there are impediments to learning such as the lack of high quality early childcare, high quality after school and summer programs, and full-service health clinics in schools. Here, education is defined more broadly and includes extended learning in different ways such as through nutrition programs, health services, tutoring services, etc. This approach recognizes the needs of the whole child in order to ensure that each child is engaged and challenged by bringing together:

- scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to promote a set of policies that help all children arrive at kindergarten prepared to learn, ensure their access to nutritious food and health care so that they can absorb all that school has to offer, and out-of-school enrichment to sustain those gains. It demands accountability systems that: focus on improving instruction rather than firing teachers; reliably identify excellent teachers, and those who should move out; and broaden, rather than constrict students’ educational experiences. (Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, 2008)

Ladson-Billings (2006) extended the argument of opportunity gaps and suggested that these gaps are a logical consequence of the education debt—a collection of the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral debts accrued against marginalized and racialized peoples and children. According to Ladson-Billings (2006), a focus on the achievement and opportunity gaps centres on short-term solutions, whereas a focus on the education debt calls us to recognize the accumulated sum of all previous deficits in education (p. 4). Fraser (2005) added that “opportunity gaps can be conceptualized in terms of three dimensions of inequality: inequality in the material conditions of children’s lives, denial of cultural belonging or equal social status, and inequitable voice in decisions that affect one’s well-being” (p. 31). With this understanding of opportunity gaps in mind, Fraser encouraged district policymakers to “pursue policies that
invest resources in students, schooling, and social equality; recognize and institutionalize equal status for the particular groups of children and families in their districts; and promote equitable relationships between families and schools so that all families have meaningful participation in district decisions about their children’s schooling” (p. 32).

Shifting the focus from achievement to opportunity gaps and the education debt needs to be understood in the context of critical discourses. This study examines the complexity of equity-minded district reforms from critical perspectives.

**District Reforms for Equity**

**Districts as a Unit of Analysis in Educational Reform**

This section documents the literature on district reform from the ‘innovation implementation’ era in the 1970s and 1980s to the effective schools movement in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently to the standards-based reform movement in the last 20 years (Anderson, 2006), and provides reasons for why it is important to study reform at the level of the district. While the role of the district has traditionally been underrepresented in the reform literature (Rorrer et al., 2008), and there is scepticism about the role of districts being anything more than large bureaucracies (Levin, 2013a), there has been an increasing emphasis on the role that districts play in advancing equity and achievement.

In the early 1980s, the ‘innovation implementation’ era (Fullan, 1985) saw an increase in research on the role of the district in educational change, with a focus on the district’s role in promoting government and district policies and practices (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Some studies noted that districts with problem-solving orientations saw higher levels of implementation and institutionalization of innovations compared to districts with different orientations (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978; Louis, Rosenblum and Molitor,
Anderson and Togneri (2005) suggested that these studies make a focus on the role of the district important because they shed light on how policies and practices are implemented. However, the primary dependent variable in all of these studies was teacher implementation of new programs and practices (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Louis, Rosenblum & Molitor, 1981), and as such, researchers ascribing to positivist orientations could not deduce clear links between a leader’s actions and student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). From more critical perspectives, these studies were also problematic because examining complex notions like educational change and policy cannot be reduced to linear, cause-effect relationships focused on one dependent variable (Trujillo, 2013). Therefore, findings from the ‘implementation innovation’ do not adequately capture the complexity of district reform, and limit external validity because of an over-reliance on a single dependent variable, perhaps to the exclusion of other variables.

In the late 1980s, the School Effectiveness Movement largely focused on the role of the school and failed to account for the role of the district in advancing student learning (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 307). Given that this was an era of greater decentralization, Anderson and Togneri (2005) suggested that examining the different ways that districts manage change is an important reason to study reform at the district level. For example, Louis’ (1989) characterization of district responses to change identified differences based on the uniformity of results, the procedures for implementation, relationships between districts and schools, and organizational coupling (e.g., levels of shared decision-making) (Anderson & Togneri, 2005).

There were a number of studies listing the characteristics of academically effective school districts in the School Effectiveness era, such as Murphy and Hallinger’s (1988) study of 12 high performing California school districts and LaRoque and Coleman’s (1990) study of high performing districts in British Columbia (Leithwood et al., 2004). However, Trujillo (2013)
stated that studies focused on what high-performing districts do, in order to extrapolate lessons and apply them elsewhere was in large part a response to reports like the 1966 Coleman Report. She explained that these reports “found that the effects of school characteristics on student achievement paled in comparison to the effects of socioeconomic status, race, and other family background variables” and resulted in scholars trying to discover ways in which schools, and later districts, could influence student performance (pp. 427-428). Trujillo (2013) also pointed out that a variety of scholars have raised a number of conceptual and methodological concerns related to this overly technical-rational approach of the school effectiveness movement:

These scholars called for more holistic school effectiveness studies that explicitly examined the political, social, and normative factors that shape schools’ capacity to be judged effective (Slee et al., 1998)... Critics also interrogated many school effectiveness studies for the lack of theoretical rationales behind their design and analysis (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). The result, in their view, was a literature whose validity and reliability were fairly limited, whose conceptualization of schooling and its outcomes were rather narrow, and whose explanations of student performance in poor, urban contexts were under-theorized. (Trujillo, 2013, p. 428)

Positivist researchers also negated the findings of this era, characterized by a decreased focus on districts and an increased focus on site-based management (as part of the School Effectiveness Movement) for the following reason: ‘meta-analysis of research on the impact of site-based management (SBM) on student outcomes and teaching quality found little evidence that SBM produces much if any improvement in the quality of education in the absence of both pressure and support from district and state levels of education (Leithwood & Menziers, 1998).

A focus on the district resurfaced as part of the standards-based, accountability movement of the 1990s. In the early 1990s, there was increased focus on reforms that aligned each level of the educational structure from the school, to the district, to the state (Smith & O’Day, 1991). This cast the light on districts as being potential links in large-scale reform efforts (Elmore, 1993) and the larger socio-political contexts that shape reform outcomes
(McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). From this perspective, Levin (2013a) listed some benefits of districts as sites for reform. First, districts can be effective at scaling up centralized initiatives that are proven to increase student learning by reducing the number of entry points for reform. In fact, the highest-achieving countries as measured by PISA tests have strong national and/or regional approaches to education (Mourshed, Chijoki, & Barber, 2010). Second, Levin (2013a) stated that districts can be sites of innovation that inform state/provincial and national policies on education from the bottom up. Third, democratic public education systems need to have regular checks and balances to adopt, adapt, and resist central initiatives that may or may not work in their contexts (Levin, 2013a; Rorrer et. al, 2008; Trujillo, 2012).

In challenging the standards-based accountability movement, critical scholars have listed different benefits to studying the role of districts. Districts play an essential role in ensuring an educated citizenry and preserving local, democratic control of public education (Trujillo, 2012). Rorrer et al., (2008) suggested that balancing local innovation and flexibility with central accountability for equitable outcomes strategically positions districts as key institutional actors in educational reform. Trujillo (2012) also put forward that focusing on school districts is important because school-by-school reforms are ineffective in producing large-scale sustainable gains in student performance, challenging the status quo and furthering equity-oriented goals, and approaching change systemically.

**District Reforms in an Era of Accountability**

The following sections will present and critique studies on district reform for increased achievement, district reform for equity, and urban district reform in the current era of standards-based accountability.
Analysis of Studies on District Reform for Increased Student Achievement

District reform is a topic of growing interest in the accountability era, as evidenced by an increasing number of studies that examine what districts do to advance achievement as measured by standardized test scores. These studies have produced lists of characteristics of successful districts in advancing achievement on standardized tests, such as the importance of a shared vision and clear leadership focus, evidence-informed decision-making, a strategy for implementation, capacity building at all levels, developing social networks and internal/external partnerships, and creating a culture of learning (Anderson, 2006; Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2011; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

These characteristics contribute to a partial understanding of the role of districts in promoting a culture of teaching and learning through targeted goal setting, coherent strategies, effective accountability systems, and the alignment of structures necessary to make this all possible. However, there are several limitations to the validity and reliability of these studies from both empirical and normative perspectives. Empirically, these studies largely focus on outlier districts based on a single dependent variable—districts with high scores on standardized tests or districts with standardized test scores that rose quickly. This reduces external validity by minimizing the similarities and differences between outlier districts and those representing the norm (Trujillo, 2013). Relying on a single dependent variable also limits external validity by reducing the ability to generalize these findings to districts with different contexts and histories. Furthermore, these studies fall prey to ‘gap talk’ identified by Gillborn (2008) as the misrepresentation of the sustainability and stability of gap closing efforts when change is examined at a single point (or short period) in time, as opposed to a longer period of time, which limits the reliability of the findings.
In reviewing 50 primary documents on district effectiveness, Trujillo (2013) noted three key findings about the implications of district effectiveness literature on research and practice. First, she noted that technical correlates of district effectiveness heavily outweigh other correlates, which risks promoting a very rational approach to district effectiveness that does not account for the social, political and normative contexts in which districts are embedded. She concluded that a largely rational approach oversimplifies the roles of district leaders, relationships and political manoeuvring, connections to the larger community, etc. Second, Trujillo noted that the oversimplified notion of district effectiveness as being equated to student success on standardized tests scores narrows the purpose of education and distracts attention from social and civic goals. She therefore encouraged the use of multiple forms of assessment (school experience, well-being, engagement, etc.) including a school’s civic effectiveness, all of which can be disaggregated by race, income, and language. Third, Trujillo argued that decontextualized explanations of educational inequity plague the literature on district reform, because a primary focus on the technical aspects of district reform leads one to conclude that student outcomes are largely predicted by within-district factors. Hence, this type of research can easily lead to unfairly blaming schools and school districts for inadequate results. Trujillo further asserted that, without also acknowledging the predictive power of contextual factors related to poverty, race, or distinctive historical realities of particular district communities, some of these studies shift attention away from the broader institutional, systemic inequities that shape districts’ capacity to enact certain changes and achieve particular outcomes. Furthermore, these studies conceptualize districts as district leaders, failing to recognize other significant actors in reform efforts and the influence of the relationships among these stakeholders in effecting change.
Some studies have accounted for contextual influences on reform efforts. For example, portfolio reforms “encourage districts to allow a diverse set of service providers to operate schools so the district can observe the performance of various educational approaches and make decisions about the future selection of school operators” (Marsh, Strunk, & Bush, 2012, p. 502). Here, the role of the district is to increase high performing providers and eliminate low performing ones, which includes aspects of “market-based reform, standards-based reform, and context-aligned differentiation of schools” (Bulkley, 2010 in Mark, Strunk and Bush, 2012, p. 503). Although offering a more complex strategy that considers context alignment, success continues to be solely measured based on one dependent variable—standardized test scores. Furthermore, this model illustrates another challenge with the reform literature, which is that one-dimensional accounts of the cause of poor performance lead to simplistic, ‘silver-bullet’ solutions, which can be “corrosive and counterproductive” to real, sustainable change (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999, p. 274).

Other studies have considered political influences on district reform. For example, Spillane’s (1996) study described districts as mediators between the state (or the province in the case of this study) and the school. He stated that “district administrators were not simply implementing or carrying out the state’s policy directives; rather, district administrators took a proactive policy-making stance, defining policy problems, and developing their own instructional policies” (Spillane, 1996, p. 83). As such, districts can engage in “policy mediation that enhances policy implementation through adaptation” (Spillane, 1996, p. 83). Spillane went on to argue that on the other hand, districts can undermine state policies, influence state policymakers, influence instructional reform at the school level, and influence the state’s ability to increase coherence of instructional signals sent to schools. Childress et al. (2007) developed the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework to help district leaders
understand the interdependence of various aspects of school districts—its culture, systems and structures, resources, stakeholder relationships, and environment—and accounts for environmental contexts. However, this framework does not describe the complexity and interdependence of factors that influence district reform. Furthermore, like all of the other studies described above, the importance of reforming for equity is not made explicit. In the following section, district reforms for equity will be discussed.

**Literature on District Reforms for Equity**

While the above-mentioned studies are important in raising the bar as defined by neoliberal discourses, they do not directly address what districts do to reform for equity. Many of the studies on district reform for equity conceptualize equity as closing the achievement gap. While closing the gap is rooted in a one-size-fits-all mentality associated with neoliberal ideologies, it is the dominant conceptualization of how reforms for equity are understood and measured. For example, Leithwood (2010) examined districts (predominantly in the United States) that had significantly closed the achievement gap and while there were many parallels to studies of Ontario districts that have successfully raised the bar, there were also explicit references to practices and initiatives that promoted change through the lens of equity (i.e. the role of the district in countering deficit discourses, supplementing government initiatives to increase local impact, etc.).

In another case, Skrla et al. (2000) examined four Texas districts that have successfully narrowed the achievement gap in a strong accountability policy environment, and spoke to the role of equity in setting a shared vision, balancing centralized and decentralized initiatives, and actively involving local equity catalysts (i.e. community organizations that hold districts
accountable for equitable outcomes). Perhaps most interesting is the fact that they found that there was a moral response of district leadership to reveal past inequities:

It is important to note that these superintendents (in the four study districts) did not choose to try to explain away the poor performance of groups of students. They did not endeavor to baffle their critics with confusing, jargon-filled explanations of low achievement. They did not blame low performance on parents, social service agencies, or anyone outside the district. They did not attempt to finesse the system by finding quick-fix substitutes for real improvements in student learning. They responded both to the state accountability system and to their local constituents with a sincere commitment to improve the learning of all students. (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 329)

A further example is Cawelti’s (2001) study of six urban districts that were successful in closing achievement gaps. Findings from this research demonstrated that these districts overcame the ‘all students can learn’ rhetoric by: engaging an equity-focus in its planning, programs and policies; promoting teaching strategies and assessments that led to increased achievement; decentralizing management and budgeting decisions; and committing to evidence-informed planning for academic improvement. In a similar study, Rorrer (2001) studied two urban districts that successfully narrowed the achievement gap for students living in poverty and found:

Central to these districts’ evolution was the role of district leadership in disrupting inequity. Using a window of opportunity created by leaders with a commitment to equity, district leaders exercised a sense of agency, created a culture of equity coupled with excellence, and implemented a calculated process to achieve equitable opportunities and outcomes. In these districts, district leaders, who often recounted stories that described the source of their commitment, insisted that equity was at the forefront of instructional and policy discussions and of decision making. (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 330)

Also central to the work of districts that maintained an equity-focus was an ability to recognize and intentionally draw attention to inequities, and then respond in ways that did not hide the issue or ignore the problems—recognizing that equity work is political and potentially contentious (Rorrer, 2006).
Several other qualitative case studies focused on urban district reform explored complexities such as the tension between decentralization and centralization (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002; Massell & Goertz, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Snipes, Dolittle & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Many of these studies focused on a single point in time, which limits their reliability by overestimating the stability of the reform. As with the studies listed in the previous section, using a single measure of effectiveness (standardized test scores) and one dependent variable limits the exploration of relationships between factors in urban district reform and negates entire factors altogether. Furthermore, many of these studies do not explore the historical and contextual factors that must be acknowledged and accounted for in urban district reform.

Other studies of urban districts did account for historical and socio-political influences. For example, Gaskell and Levin (2012) cited Anyon’s study of Newark, New Jersey (1997) and Grant’s study of Raleigh, North Carolina and Syracuse, New York (2009), highlighting the impact of city planning and city policies, such as housing policies and tax rates, on the success of school district reforms. They also discussed Cuban’s study of Austin, Texas (2010) revealing that desegregation initiatives, accountability systems that were introduced and changed, philanthropic investments, and micromanaging school boards all yielded some success, but that the underlying social inequalities limited the impact of school districts to effect change.

These studies, while very informative in addressing the complexities of district reform as well as the historical and socio-political contexts, are largely influenced by political and education contexts in the United States. This includes greater decentralization, greater federal as opposed to provincial mandates, greater funding inequities compared to the Ontario education system, more difficulty securing qualified teachers, and less powerful teachers’ unions.
In *Making a Difference in Urban Schools: Ideas, Politics and Pedagogy*, Gaskell and Levin (2012) explored the complexity of urban district reform while also considering the political/environmental factors in district reform. In this work, Gaskell and Levin (2012) also speak directly about urban reform in the former Toronto Board of Education, including the role of ideology, politics, and curriculum and learning. Their findings are closely aligned with the findings in this study and their historical account of the former Toronto Board of Education also provided excellent background knowledge into the people, ideas, and activities in Toronto’s education system from the late 1960s until the turn of the century. However there are many differences between our studies.

First, in this study, curriculum and learning was influenced by politics and ideology and was not seen as a third driver for change. Instead, leadership was seen as an important driver for change in this study and was not identified as such in the Gaskell and Levin study. Second, there were differences in how politics and ideology were conceptualized in each study, with a greater focus in this study on exploring equity from a critical perspective by analyzing opportunity gap discourses in the context of the education debt. Mapping ideological differences across time and connecting them to political influences was a significant component of both studies. While the work of Gaskell and Levin contributed to a larger conversation about education in Toronto (past and present), it did not explore differences in ideology from critical perspectives in ways that might serve the MSIC Program and other district reforms for equity.

While Gaskell and Levin’s study provided important insight into the historical and contextual factors informing this study, I was interested in finding a theoretical framework that incorporated more critical methodologies and ideologies. As such, I used the conceptual argument known as ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ put forth by Rorrer et al. (2008), in order to understand the various contextual and, at times, competing roles of school districts. Rorrer et
al. (2008) noted that cause-effect relationships have undergirded the literature on organizational change and has led scholars to essentialize elements of change. This has resulted in a misrepresentation of the change phenomena using linear explanations. Further research, they argued, needs to be conducted to “explore the complexity, interrelatedness, and nonlinearity of the district’s roles and the ways that together these roles position the district as an institutional actor in reform” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 342). As well, the authors suggested that further research is needed to explore the relationships between the elements of their conceptual argument and the influences of the external environment on the district. Finally they argued that “to fully understand and appreciate the potential of districts as institutional actors to disrupt inequity and serve in roles that, instead, promote equity and social justice, future research must be addressed from and embedded in multiple, critical perspectives and broad methodological approaches” (p. 343). As such, I adopted Rorrer et al.’s (2008) conceptual argument and used it as the basis for the conceptual framework for this study to examine the complexity of equity-minded district reforms from critical perspectives. In addition to examining the complexity of equity-minded district reforms, this study addresses the normative and conceptual challenges of the literature on urban district reform. First, it provides a robust account of the historical and current context of the case (the MSIC Program; the TDSB; and a social, political, and economic account of the city of Toronto), and thereby increases the external validity for districts to draw comparisons to their own contexts. In addition, this is a study with a longitudinal perspective, which means that its reliability is increased by reducing the likelihood of overestimating stability.

Second, this study contributes to a gap in the literature on the role of districts in advancing reforms for equity beyond the notions of closing achievement gaps. This includes broadening notions of equity to move beyond equitable student outcomes as measured by standardized tests to include other outcomes such as student experiences, engagement, and well-
being, coupled with system responses to these inequitable outcomes (i.e. opportunities to learn, changed cultures, new policies, etc.).

Third, this study adds to the knowledge on change and reform from different theoretical frameworks, with a focus on highlighting the complexities and nuances between and within various frameworks. This study foregrounds critical discourse in its conceptualizations, design and methodology, and identifies the competing ideas, constructs, and approaches within critical discourses (Rorrer et al., 2008).

Fourth, this is not a study of an outlier district that has closed the achievement gap for racialized and marginalized students, nor a study of a district with excessively high standardized test scores. However it studies a district that has sustained a commitment to equitable experiences and various student outcomes for 10 years. As such, it increases the external validity of the study to similar districts and/or contexts.

Prior to examining the methodology, it is important to further situate this study within the tensions that currently exist in the literature on urban district reform. These tensions have caused considerable debate within communities of academics who subscribe to critical theories and will be explored in the following section.

**Current Tensions in the Literature on District Reform for Equity**

This literature review has explored, from a critical discourse, the possibility of district level reform to advance achievement and equity for traditionally marginalized students. While there is considerable debate within the literature on how to advance district reforms for equity, it is clear that these reforms need to account for the current political climate if they are to be sustained. As such, the sections below demonstrate a more complex understanding of the tensions arising in the literature on district reform. Each of these tensions is explored through
various theoretical frameworks and will be revisited in the final chapter in light of the findings from this study.

**Accountability and Responsibility**

The accountability movement in education calls into question who is being held accountable, for what purpose, and to whom. Reforms for equity have largely been understood and measured based on their ability to close or narrow achievement and opportunity gaps (standardized test scores, graduation rates, test scores, dropout rates, etc.) on the basis of race, class, and gender. This particular way of conceptualizing reforms for equity has caused much debate and disagreement in education circles.

Advancing equity from critical perspectives is difficult for many educators in the current neo-liberal climate, so they are more likely to “challenge current trends through their everyday acts on an individual, collective or discursive level than to propose or mandate large scale educational reform” (Rottmann, 2007, p. 7). However, if large-scale reform for equity from a critical discourse were the aim, then gaining widespread political support would be a prerequisite to initiate and sustain change (Levin, 2008). Therefore, the accountability movement has a limited, but necessary role in advancing reforms for equity.

Scheurich and Skrla (2001) argued that standardized tests serve to expose the achievement gap, less than desirable teaching practices and inequitable resource allocation in poor schools, and are a means of increasing public and political awareness and pressure for change. They acknowledged that differences in tests scores actually reveal differences in opportunities to learn (OTL), such as differences in class size, school size, teacher quality, and turnover. Moreover, they argued that exposing the connection between inequitable student outcomes and inequitable OTL might actually secure funding for schools with inadequate
resources and infrastructure. They also contended that equity reforms do not gain wide-spread prominence without some level of centralized focus and that leaving equitable reforms to decentralized, bottom-up initiatives makes the unfounded assumption that those on the ground are all operating from a mindset of equity and social justice. Furthermore, standardized test scores have been used to ascertain what teachers, schools, and systems could learn in order to better serve traditionally marginalized students in traditionally marginalized communities, raise awareness about inequities in schooling, and make more equitable decisions around resource allocation (Darling-Hammond, 2004). From this perspective, equitable outcomes speak to much more than achievement scores measured by standardized tests; they also refer to levels of student agency, choice, and engagement (Munns, 2007), positive schooling experience (Ryan, 2006), and a wider array of educational assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Having said this, there are serious limitations in using achievement gap data to advance reforms for equity. Critical theorists are strongly against using standardized tests scores because such measures assume a classed, raced, and gendered norm against which all students are measured, and also frame difference as deficiency leading to remedial, gap-closing, and ‘fix it’ approaches for those who do not meet dominant standards and norms (Guo, 2010). They are also strongly against using standardized tests scores that have direct and negative impacts on students (i.e. tracking, graduation), teachers (i.e. merit pay, dismissal), or schools (extra funding for higher scores and threats of closure for lower scores) (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Discourses that blame the individual, the teacher, or the school as the cause of the achievement gap without adequately accounting for the larger socio-political, economic, and historical inequities, place undue responsibility on individuals, teachers, and schools to deal with larger, societal ills.

Those who are staunchly opposed to using high-stakes testing to inform equitable reforms have questioned the validity of research on district reform in states such as Texas,
where there is a high value placed on standardized tests. Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, and Foley (2001) argued that high-stakes testing is an example of a top-down reform effort that adversely affects minority students by de-skilling teachers, providing a less challenging curriculum, increasing retention and dropout rates, and increasing labelling effects of schools by publicly sharing school results. Darling-Hammond (2004) reported that the Centre for Research and Evaluation on Testing and the Intercultural Development Research Association noted retention and dropout rates (as early as the ninth grade) have increased considerably since the 1980s when the reforms started. They have also disproportionately affected students of colour. Furthermore, Texas students have made nominal gains on national standardized tests and college entrance exams. Darling-Hammond concluded that in order to guard against ‘teaching to the test,’ creating a depoliticized citizenry, reinforcing deficit thinking, and placing far too great an emphasis on preparing students for the workforce, there must be limits to the use of the accountability movement when advancing equity reforms,

High-stakes tests do not encourage differences in knowledge(s) and experiences, and assume a ‘one-size-fits all’ model of education, guaranteeing lower results for poor and minority students and thereby reinforcing deficit thinking (Valencia, Sloan & Foley, 2001). For example, Anderson (2001) pointed out that a focus on standardized tests places the sole responsibility for equitable outcomes on the school, which ends up serving as a scapegoat for larger socio-political and economic inequities. Anderson (2001) also drew attention to the hidden motivations of the accountability movement that are rooted in the human potential discourse and a part of the larger neoliberal movement. He claimed that Texas chose an industrial model of reform in a high-tech era because of the 1998 research by Derber, which found that only 20% of new jobs required professionals with creative and intellectual abilities while the remainder of the workforce needed to be “depoliticized and literate workers” (p. 327). Anderson went on to
suggest that the accountability movement has been engineered to prepare poor and minority students for this fate, instead of developing in them the kind of skills required to be strong workers and active agents of change. Anderson (2001) also suggested that the accountability movement is an “attempt to save public schooling from private entrepreneurs by creating legitimacy of public education” in turn placing undue importance on the role of standardized tests and insufficiently addressing larger, social, economic, and political inequities (p. 329). This is supported by Gillborn’s (2008) notion of ‘Gap Talk’.

The accountability rhetoric, steeped in the neoliberal ideals of efficiency, productivity, and measurable outcomes does not account for notions of responsibility in education. Vibert (2007) discussed the difference between responsibility and accountability, suggesting that responsibility is a morally and ethically nuanced term that preserves the dignity and complexity of the work in education, whereas accountability is a misleading appearance of integrity and quality. In the same vein, Weiner (2007) noted “an ethos of responsibility parallels the reconfiguration of professionalism to mean service to children, communities, and citizens” (p. 58). Therefore, while notions of accountability are gendered, classed, and raced, notions of responsibility allow for more equitable and holistic notions of our commitment to all students, families, and communities.

Educational reforms, in part, should be evaluated on the basis of whether they promote higher quality teaching and learning and for whom (Darling-Hammond, 2004). If accountability is viewed as responsibility, it should be viewed as a means to improve student learning and outcomes, engagement, and experience, as well as teacher and system learning. This includes varied standards for learning and varied assessment strategies (Darling-Hammond, 2004); measures of schools’ and districts’ abilities to create systemic opportunities for students to learn, i.e., resource allocations, teacher qualifications, teacher turnover, teachers teaching in their
specific subject areas, enrichment classes, hiring practices, social/emotional/physical supports, professional learning in pedagogy and curriculum to mobilize social justice, etc. (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Skrla et al., 2001); stakeholder satisfaction data about the experience of parents, students, and community disaggregated by social demographics (Skrla et al., 2001); and, the degree to which culturally responsive parent engagement strategies are employed to connect meaningfully with hardest to reach parents and families (Skrla et al., 2001).

Furthermore, Anderson (2001) suggested that quantitative data could also be supported by qualitative data to provide richer accounts of whose interests are being serving and whose interests are being overlooked. Additionally, Datnow (2002) argued that accountability needs to flow in multiple directions and can include self-assessments and checks and balances at all levels. This should involve multiple stakeholders, especially those who are most impacted by the reforms. Finally, Noguera (2006) advised that governments need to be held accountable for efforts at reducing the impacts of larger socio-political and economic inequities that prevent equitable outcomes.

In this study, I view educational inequities as being the result of both the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and opportunity gaps (described above). However, I also recognize the important, however limited, role of using achievement and opportunity gap data to expose educational inequities and garner political support to create opportunities for pedagogical change.

**Centralization/Decentralization**

Researchers also differ, depending on their theoretical stance, in their response to who should create reforms, how they should be created, and who they should be created for. In traditional educational discourses, highly centralized reforms are correlated with increased
student achievement. For example, based on research citing practices of the highest-performing school systems in the world, Marzano and Waters (2009) called for districts and schools to be tightly coupled relative to student achievement. In this model, district leaders, policy makers, and researchers have the knowledge and power to inform effective practices aimed at increasing student achievement and the opinions and expertise of students on the lower end of the achievement spectrum are rarely solicited. For example, Levin (2008) spoke to the Ontario experience that balanced top-down, non-punitive approaches with bottom-up innovations in ways that involved educators and system leaders at all levels in reforming the system. In part, this was achieved by winning widespread public support from teachers’ unions, the public, and educational administrators.

Gaskell and Levin (2012) noted that cases of increased centralization in school boards do not sustain changes in the long run, nor do they result in increased student achievement. Moreover, they argued, bottom-up support from teachers and principals is necessary to the success of long-term reforms. Examples of such centralization efforts that they cited included the appointments of Superintendents of Education by the Mayors of Boston and New York, mandated professional development for teachers in San Diego, and the subsequent firing of those who did not comply. Efforts such as these, they pointed out, have not resulted in increased achievement for students in marginalized communities, and have often returned to more centralized control. Gaskell and Levin (2012) concluded “the data is inconclusive on whether these initiatives have had any impact on student achievement” (p. 31).

Exploring the benefits and disadvantages of both approaches provides additional information on district reforms. In studying high-poverty districts in Texas, for example, Anderson and Togneri (2003) found that when central offices played a role in providing a framework of instructional supports and redefining leadership roles, there was increased
productivity in schools and capacity of principals and teachers to act within them. In another example, the Chicago school system was heavily researched as it changed from more decentralized efforts in the mid-1980s to more centralized control in the 1990s. Researchers found that the relationship with local businesses, as well as social capital and community support, were shown to have positive impacts on school reforms (Lipman, 2004; Shipps, 1998); however there remained significant challenges for the Chicago schooling system (Hess, 1995).

Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2012) drew on studies demonstrating that decentralized efforts yielded positive results in reorienting the organization. For example, Kirp and Driver (1995) noted that organizational alignment is achievable through decentralized decision-making because it allows professional leadership in an environment with less fear of constant ‘second-guessing’ and the development of ideas from principals, teachers, and parents about how to improve individual schools. Similarly, Firestone (1989) agreed with notions of decentralization, especially in relation to teachers, because it promotes upward communication, builds ownership, and develops capacity.

Critical scholars have traditionally promoted greater democratization of urban districts (Trujillo, 2012a). For example, a recent report released by the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education at the University of Illinois, suggested that after 20 years of mayoral control, Chicago Public Schools, should move to an elected and representative school board (Lipman, Gutstein, Gutierrez, & Blanche, 2015). The report also suggested greater transparency and public accountability; structures to strengthen democratic public participation in district initiatives and decisions; the need to draw on research and the educator, student, and community knowledge to develop, propose, and evaluate policy; and, the commitment of boards to prioritize equitable educational opportunities and outcomes in all actions, policies, and decisions.

Stone (1998) added to this discussion with findings from studies of several of his
colleagues that examined education reform in 11 U.S. cities, from a political science perspective. The studies concluded that since education is inextricably linked to larger social developments, the political context must be in place in order for reforms to be established and secured over time. Ultimately, he concluded that neither a school board nor a Director of Education (known as a Superintendent of Education in the United States) could sustain education reforms—this depends, rather, on factors in the larger political context and the level of civic capacity (Stone, 1998).

Democracy and Civic Capacity

The answers to questions, such as who should be part of the decision-making process, whom they should impact and for what purpose, depend largely on the specific notion of democracy being put forward. Gaskell and Levin (2012) provided ideas and solutions based on democracy as a form of governance and suggested, “the problems of politics cannot be evaded with an alternate governance structure” (p. 187). They offered several solutions to this end: Recognize that education is a political activity and organize so that the political positions of those running are clearer and more evident, by increasing funding for campaigns and political parties with political platforms for education; make a closer link between school and municipal governance that seeks a richer dialogue with constituents, and provide regular public reporting on factors affecting student achievement, wellbeing, engagement, and experience; and, establish new forms of third-party accountability measures, such as independent organizations or unpaid citizens that have no decision-making power, but can provide independent views and share them publicly. Clearly, these suggestions involve reforms to not only recognize the political nature of education, but to create conditions to make education more political in nature.
The Role of School Boards in District Reforms

Adjacent to this study, but of worthy mention, is the role of school boards in influencing district reforms. In recent years, the effectiveness of school boards has come under attack and their relevance to public education has been questioned (Beckham & Klaymeier Wills, 2011; Saatcioglu, Moore, Sargut, & Bajaj, 2011; Sheppard, Brown, & Dibbon, 2009), with some calls for their dissolution in place of other governance mechanisms (Hess & Meeks, 2010). There has simultaneously been increased support for the role of school boards in contributing to successful public education systems (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, Honig & Coburn, 2008; Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2010; Saatcioglu et al., 2011; Sheppard et al., 2009).

Despite contextual differences, there has been a trend among many countries towards increased government centralization and the subsequent reduction of power, or complete dissolution, of local school boards (Ainscow & Tweedle, 2001; Connolly & James, 2011). Canada is not immune to these changes. Over the past 20 years, there has been a reduction in the number of school boards largely through district consolidation, which has also resulted in fewer trustees (Salter, 2012). This has been accompanied by an increase in the role of provincial governments to intervene and at times overturn school board decisions, which has weakened and decreased the political legitimacy of school boards (Lessard & Brassard, 2009). At the same time, there have been attempts to increase parent involvement in educational governance through school councils (Levin, 2005).

A report by Sheppard, Galway, Brown and Wiens (2013) called School Boards Matter: A Pan-Canadian Study of School District Governance, concluded that school boards contribute greatly to the success of public education systems in the following ways: Local representation; independent decision-making (i.e. identifying local priorities at the policy table and ensuring that the resources of the district are deployed to respond to these priorities); accountability and oversight;
accountability for student learning; advocacy; and, negotiation and mediation. They also concluded the following about the importance of school boards:

Another significant finding relates to the value placed on local representation and the widely held belief that decisions about education should be commensurate with the local needs and values of those in the communities served by the school district. It appears, therefore, that school boards are committed to aligning their operations with the general goals and direction of the provinces, but believe that the education of children is best served when the diversity of community local needs and aspirations is taken into account. They are convinced that this community orientation can only be maintained in a governance model that is based, in large part, on local democratic authority. (Sheppard et al., 2013, p. 42)

Furthermore, school boards allow policies to be debated and struggled over to ensure that they meet the needs of students and communities, instead of imposing a one-size-fits all model on educational reform (Sheppard et al., 2013). Others have argued that the accountability agenda has “severely limited local discretion in policy making and has pushed the central governing function of local boards towards overseeing ever-growing local bureaucracies and monitoring compliance” (Danzberger, 1994, p. 371). Greater centralization, standardization, and accountability for student performance has simultaneously limited participatory democracy in the system (Lessard & Brassard, 2009; Salter, 2012).

School boards serve many purposes in increasing democratic participation. However, what is absent from much of the literature on the role of the school board in district reforms is their role in supporting, resisting, subverting, and/or ignoring equity-minded district reforms. While this is not the purpose of this study, district reform cannot be understood in isolation of school boards. Recommendations for school board officials on reforming for equity are provided in Chapter 7.

**Political Influences on Democracy in Education**

Trujillo (2012b) cautioned that while public education makes space for both private goals (to provide individuals with skills and knowledge for economic and social attainment),
and public goals (to prepare an engaged citizenry and improve community and social spaces), many scholars argue that the imbalance towards private aims to the detriment of public ones is highly possible within an environment of high-stakes testing and competition-driven accountability. In her study of an urban district’s experience under the accountability movement, Trujillo (2012a) noted:

district leaders eschewed democratic governance processes in favour of autocratic behaviours. They possessed narrowly defined goals for teaching and learning that emphasized competitive, individualized means of achievement. Their decision-making was private; opportunities for local input were missing. They promoted centrally determined, standardized instructional and administrative practices, not locally driven ones. It concludes that accountability policies that are framed in terms of their potential to further democratic aims by granting greater liberty in exchange for results, and by holding all districts to the same high standards, may disproportionately reduce democratic control in urban settings. (p. 334)

Trujillo (2012a) also found that in this case, decision-making processes were highly autocratic (e.g., policy setting as a private activity requiring the art of persuasion, the superintendent’s heavy-handedness, not reflective of public input, unclear motives/reasoning, etc.) and rejected a more “transparent, reasoned discourse” (p. 347). Furthermore, members of the district operated within a culture of fear connected to a heavy reliance on tests scores. Based on the pressures of a high-stakes accountability movement, and to protect their own ability to govern, the Ignacio board uniformly called for greater centralization and a focus on standardized tests and alignment of resources to boost test scores. Trujillo (2012a) determined that the unique, historical legacies that culminate in racial, language, and socioeconomic diversities and inequities will make adherence to local control, deliberative decision making, and representation of diverse, local interests much more difficult in light of the accountability movement. This, she acknowledged, differs from suburban districts that serve more privileged communities and do not face the same challenges. She concluded with the following statement:
Accountability policies that are framed in terms of their potential to further democratic aims by granting greater liberty in exchange for results, and by holding all districts to the same high standards, risk exacerbating the same racial and socioeconomic segregation that they presumably exist to transform. Policy making that does not account for powerful contextual differences across more and less privileged districts leaves urban school boards disproportionately vulnerable to reduced democratic control and participation. (p. 354)

**Other ideas put forth to increase democracy in educational settings**

Mediratta (2007) stated that organized community groups are initiating reforms in urban schools in the following ways: “bringing new resources, introducing equity-based policies, and transforming educator conceptions of who they teach and the skills necessary to teach diverse student populations effectively” (p. 194). One idea to build a stronger civic and political base among a variety of actors in urban districts is to have advocacy groups speak on behalf of parents (Warren, 2011, p. 485). Warren stated that these alliances and collaboratives could consist of parents, local businesses, community agencies, and universities, and be either top-down (advocating for students) or bottom-up (advocating with families and students). However, Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi (2001) noted that the organized collective lacked the participation of the very people they were intended to serve, that is parents from low-income communities whose children attend the district’s schools. Warren (2011) suggested, therefore, that organized communities need to follow a twin strategy: “They need to work ‘externally’ to demand change and hold systems accountable as well as work ‘internally’ to collaborate with educators to strengthen the internal capacity of schools to improve” (p. 486).

**Ideological Influences on Democracy in Education**

Ideologically, the degree to which democracy is enacted in urban settings is influenced by individual and collective understandings of socio-political forces and social identities (Turner, 2015). In her study of how district leaders make sense of increasing diversity through
demographic changes, and in drawing on the literature from Critical Race Theory (CRT), Turner (2015) stated:

CRT’s concept of interest convergence suggests that school district policies addressing racial injustice are the result of political arrangements in which policymakers, who are typically White and members of advantaged social classes, interpret their own interests as aligned with those of working-class and poor people of color. A guiding premise of CRT is that race is a historical and contemporary system of oppression constituted by cultural understandings and institutionalized structures that reflect and perpetuate racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Derrick Bell (1980), who developed the concept, argues that this convergence of interests explains policymaking that advances racial equality—or appears to do so—in a context of racial oppression. As in CRT, politics of education approaches conceptualize district policymaking as taking place within a set of relationships that are characterized by unequal resources and power relations; actors operating within broad political, social, and economic contexts; and complex racial interests that only occasionally converge around increasing equity and justice. (p. 7)

Turner (2015) further suggested that “as in Critical Race Theory, politics of education approaches conceptualize district policymaking as taking place within a set of relationships that are characterized by unequal resources and power relations; actors operating within broad political, social, and economic contexts; and complex racial interests that only occasionally converge around increasing equity and justice” (p. 9). Turner also claimed that some researchers understand district policymaking as taking place within a ‘zone of mediation’ that sets up a “contested context around a given issue or reform that establishes limits on educational policy and practice” (p. 9).

**How do social identities and current and historical political contexts influence these zones of mediation?**

Turner (2015) suggested that district leaders’ decision-making is largely influenced by individualized notions of inequality, which manifest in both cultural deficits of racialized, low-income and newcomer students, as well as in explanations of prejudiced White, middle-class parents, community members, and teachers. Turner found that what was missing from their
explanations was how ideological differences mediated the role and need for systemic structures that allow for more equitable laws, policies, and structures to create the conditions for greater, large-scale equity. Connected to this was a predominant focus on the diversity discourse, which centered largely on differences in language and set up status hierarchies between White and English-dominant families and other families. According to Turner the result was that “the diversity discourse substitutes a celebration of the culture, language, and ethnicity of children of color for attention to race and inequality” (p 31). Turner also noted that a shift away from framing the problem as an achievement gap to an opportunity gap and an education is very important to move from individual responses (cultural deficits) to collective responses that focus on systemic inequities and sociopolitical contexts that give rise to further inequities. In studying the politics of a school district’s instructional policy formation, Trujillo (2012b) also warned that equity-minded district leaders need to contend not only with top-down neoliberal forces from above, but with bottom-up neoliberal ideologies:

However, this case shows how bottom-up, school level resistance triggers political pressure for leaders to regulate only the most superficial, least sensitive features of instruction. As such, details of urban district instructional policies may be subject to negotiations that are not necessarily explained by instructional or organizational forces, but by political ones...consequently, top-down district instructional policies, as products of political negotiation, may contain inherently weakened directives about curriculum, instruction, leadership, or professional learning. Studies that concentrate narrowly on the technical implementation of these top-down policies or their effects on test scores overlook a key factor in their design. Their conclusions may discount the political forces that compel district leaders to trade controversial, top-down policies for challenging the status quo, for top-down policies that minimally prompt continuous growth on state tests; they may overestimate the potential of “effective” district policies as catalysts for fundamental changes in teaching and learning; and they may fail to explain why these policies flounder on more ambitious, equitable goals for improvement. (p. 552)

It is also important to understand how different stakeholders (those creating the reforms, those being impacted by the reforms, those belonging to both groups, etc.) interact with and interpret policies for district reform. In examining the Oakland Unified School District’s full-
service community policy, Trujillo et al. (2014) noted that individuals with different positions in, and connected to the district, may or may not support or have trust in a seemingly democratic, community-based equity reform, depending on their prior experiences and sociopolitical positionalities. They found that those participants who were farthest from the district’s formal decision-making processes in the past “appeared to be most skeptical of the community schools’ potential to achieve their stated aims” (p. 925).

Trujillo et al. (2014) also asserted that urban district reform research must move beyond the macro-level research to “micro-level politics that investigate how single stakeholders interpret, support, or oppose particular policies and their stated objectives” (p. 923). They also spoke to the importance of recognizing, accounting for, and working with the historical legacies of political and racial tensions, because despite wide support for an equity-minded, community-based reform, “the familiar narratives of distrust, racialized marginalization, and limited opportunities for authentic community engagement and inter-race dialogue seemed to repeat themselves even as the central office intended to eschew old ways of relating with its communities” (p. 924).

**Scaling Up Equity Initiatives**

Given that equity reforms in the current neoliberal education system often take place at the periphery (Rottmann, 2007), efforts at district reform for equity must account for whether local innovations for equity can be scaled up. As a critical theorist, Rottmann (2007) categorized reform initiatives by centering those who have been disadvantaged by reforms instead of those who are reforming. She described change efforts in three categories: actively maintaining the status quo, following current trends, and resisting educational inequity. Additionally, Noguera (2006) argued that urban district reform aimed at capacity building and sustainability must
account for the economic, political, and institutional constraints that constitute the complex context under which racialized and poor children are educated.

Given that equity initiatives aim to resist educational inequity and account for the larger socio-political and economic contexts, this study will explore if equity initiatives should be scaled up in ways that avoid a one-size-fits-all mentality, and if so, how. Rottmann (2007) argued that scaling up reforms for equity requires a real structural shift from centralized decision-making to local and communal responsibility, as well as an ongoing and sustained commitment to challenge social and systemic inequities. However, the question one might ask is: Which mindsets, skills, and dispositions should be centralized and perhaps standardized to create the conditions for communal responsibility and local decision-making in order to increase the life opportunities, choices, and outcomes of students who have been traditionally marginalized by the system?

Elmore’s (1996) study on scaling up good educational practice revealed that reform efforts are only weakly related to the ‘instructional core’ (the relationship between the teacher, the learner and the curriculum) and rarely influence change in large numbers of classrooms or schools. He (1996) asserted that institutional, political, and individual factors are important in large-scale change efforts. This sentiment was echoed by Datnow and Park (2009) who suggested that the dominant logic in understanding educational policy has focused on technical-rational approaches to change and has failed to account for normative and political influences, thereby limiting the influence of educational reforms. Furthermore, in speaking of the limitations of scaling up large-scale reforms, Rincon-Gallardo and Elmore (2012) stated:

Although spaces such as communities of practice (DuFour, 2004; Little, 2002; Wenger, 1998) and professional networks (Elmore, 2007; Huberman, 1995; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992) can create opportunities for teachers and/or administrators to share resources, discuss problems of practice related to their own classrooms, and develop new understandings of teaching and learning, they face the challenge of maintaining the level
of commitment and capacity of their original promoters when expanded to larger numbers of schools (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992) and struggle to survive in the wider institutional environment where—and often against which—they operate (Datnow et al., 2002; Elmore, 2004). (p. 477)

As well, educational reform efforts have failed to account for the contextual and cultural factors in determining whether and how teachers decide to ignore, resist, adapt, or adopt policy recommendations and mandates (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996; McLaughlin, Talbert, & Bascia, 1990).

A report by Levin (2013b) for the National Education Policy Centre accounted for some of the limitations listed here and included five requirements for scaling up educational innovations: cost, human capacity, specialized tools, political acceptability, and non-school factors. While cost, specialized tools, and non-school factors are important, this study focuses on political acceptability, human capacity, and non-school factors. The role of garnering support from stakeholders with different political ideologies cannot be underscored when reform efforts are aimed at challenging and changing the status quo. Rorrer (2006) stated that districts committed to maintaining an equity focus understand that political navigation and conflict are inevitable in the process. Rorrer (2001) claimed that one way to garner support for equity reforms is to build widespread awareness of the degree of inequity in outcomes, as well as system policies and practices. Given that the general public has conservative views of what schooling should look like, a significant effort is required to change perceptions about the need for reforms if they are to be sustained over time (Levin, 2013b).

Human capacity, which is defined as the level of educator skill and commitment, is the most important resource available to schools (Levin, 2013b). Scaling up is a challenge if the difference between the current level of skill and commitment is far less than the level demanded by the innovation (Levin, 2013b). Ladson-Billings (1995) described three tenets of culturally
relevant teaching that have resulted in increased achievement scores for poor and minority students in the United States: academic success (high academic and behavioural expectations and high-yield instructional strategies); cultural competence (using students experiences and cultures as the basis for classroom instruction and practice); and, critical consciousness (teaching students to question the status quo and the inequities in the world around them).

Scaling up culturally relevant teaching can be difficult when one considers the barriers to scaling up innovations. Furthermore, the skills and knowledge required by teachers may be well beyond their ability and commitment level (Levin, 2013b). Additionally, it may also require a significant increase in time spent on instructional practice, or elicit negative emotions in teachers (Levin, 2013b) as deficit discourses and deeply entrenched stereotypes are challenged.

What is missing from Levin’s (2013b) analysis of scaling up reforms is commentary on how to scale up reforms from the margins that challenge the very system they work within. In building on Elmore’s (1996) study, Rincon-Gallardo and Elmore (2012) stated that educational reforms can learn much from social movements, which often maintain high levels of commitment, develop effective mobilization structures, and work to transform the very systems they operate within. Social movement theory involves three main factors that help explain the how actors in the margins help transform large-scale educational reform: collective motivations (shared meanings by collective actors and reasons for participating in the movement), mobilizing structure (vehicles to mobilize and engage change), and political opportunities (both political constraints and opportunities that influence the movement) (Rincon-Gallardo & Elmore, 2012). Rincon-Gallardo and Elmore (2012) concluded:

Seen from the perspective of social movements, the endeavor of large-scale instructional improvement is to consolidate and expand an effective, countercultural practice by triggering and capitalizing on the individual and collective motivations of teachers to make a tangible difference in their students’ learning. In addition, it requires creating and taking advantage of mobilizing structures and political opportunities to disseminate the
practice and create spaces to struggle toward transforming the institutional environments where—and often against which—this countercultural practice operates. (p. 486)

To summarize, this literature review was divided into seven major sections. The first section (Theoretical Approaches to Reforms for Equity and Social Justice in Educational Administration) provided an ideological map for understanding conceptions of equity within the reform literature at large. The next two sections (Urban Communities and Urban Schooling, and Achievement Gaps, Opportunity Gaps and Education Debt) provided a description of how these key terms are conceptualized in this study. The subsequent two sections (Why Districts as a Unit of Analysis in Educational Reform?, Literature on District Reforms, and Literature on District Reforms for Equity) provided background information in an increasingly narrow fashion to set the context for district reforms for equity. Finally, the last section (Current Tensions in the Literature on District Reform for Equity) provided the context for tensions that will be explored throughout this study, namely: accountabity and responsibility; centralization/decentralization; democracy and civic capacity; and, when/how to scale up initiatives.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I use Rorrer, Skrla and Scheurich’s (2008) conceptual argument “Districts as Institutional Actors in Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity” as a starting point for the conceptual framework. Rorrer et al. (2008) described districts as uniquely positioned to initiate and sustain reforms for equity because of their ability to balance top-down reforms with bottom-up innovations and opportunities for real, democratic education. Districts are positioned as the unit of study (or institutional actor), which is “bound by a web of interrelated roles, responsibilities, and relationships” (p. 333). The construction of ‘district’ in this conceptual argument is similar to notions of transformative leadership. Ryan (2006) and Shields (2010) identified leadership as involving both the individual and collective where “transformative
leadership is an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy and the dialectic between individual accountability and social responsibility” (Weiner, 2003, p. 89). Ryan (2006) stated that leadership extends beyond what particular people know and do. It is an “organizational quality that goes beyond individuals in positions of power; it is distributed across individuals and the contexts in which they interact, intertwined with such things as language, theories in action, interpretive schemas, organizational structures and various material resources” (p. 100).

This conceptual argument is based on a synthesis of research on district reform over the past 20 years and includes the following interdependent, co-evolving and variably-coupled themes: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 307). Providing instructional leadership involves generating will (attitudes, motivation and beliefs that underlie the response to implementing a policy’s goals/strategies) and building capacity (the ability and capability to enact the will, such as coordination, communication, alignment of resources, monitoring goals, etc.). Reorienting the organization involves refining and aligning organizational structures and processes as well as changing the district culture (norms, expectations and values). Establishing policy coherence involves mediating federal, state and local policy (alignment of internal and external demands and the implementation, adaptation and resisting of policy mandates) and aligning resources (with identified needs). Maintaining an equity focus involves owning past inequity, including highlighting inequities in system and culture and foregrounding equity, including increasing availability and transparency of data.
In this study, I position districts as “an organized collective constituted by the superintendent (Director of Education in Ontario), the Board, the central office-level administration, and principals, who collectively serve as a network and critical link to uniting the district and the schools in ways to both develop and implement solutions to identified problems” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 333). In this study, I added to the definition of ‘district’ to include outside partners and frontline staff in the MSIC Program. In this conceptual argument, there is a focus on the relationships between district actors and the nature of the institutional status of the district itself, as a large, complex organization (Rorrer et al., 2008). From this perspective, districts are more than ‘hosts’ for reform. As such, they can expand and escalate reforms for equity “where equity becomes both a defining, explicit value and a desired outcome” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 334).

These categories of the conceptual argument informed the interview questions and the initial focus, but participant responses and document study guided the final conceptual framework for this study (Merriam, 2009).
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In speaking to marginality, my focus is on the positionality of the researcher. Regardless of our relative distance and location between “insider” and “outsider,” the position of researcher has its vestments in power. A central component of critical research practice within marginal communities is to interrogate and challenge the various fields of power, authority, and privilege that are embodied and practiced by researchers. In order to engage our research with politicized ethic and integrity and to attend to the nuances and specificities of our work, it is necessary to attend to the varying plexus and intersecting trajectories of power, authority, identity, difference, subjectivity, agency, dissent, resistance, and suspicion. Accordingly, we trace the nuances of the politics of location as a means of dislocating the researcher from the threshold. (herising 2005, p. 133)

This section begins with a description of the research design, including a description of the case, and the design for participant interviews and document study using discourse analysis. This section is followed by a discussion on the data analysis that includes a description of the case study database and chain of evidence, as well as a description of the analytic tools used in this study. This chapter concludes with a description of the ethical considerations for this study.

Research Design

In this study, I used qualitative research methods and analysis to answer the question “How does the Model Schools for Inner Cities School Program in the Toronto District School Board implement equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?” Equity and reform are both highly complex terms and when brought together in the context of a study, other dimensions of complexity are added. As a result, I chose to use qualitative methods to “work with and through the complexity, rather than around or in spite of it” (Schram, 2003, p. 6). Qualitative research uncovers taken-for-granted assumptions and poses questions that highlight complex, subjective realities over providing definitive, objective ones (Schram, 2003). Rorrer et al. (2008) intended
for future studies to make use of their conceptual framework that highlight the complexities and nuances of district reform for equity reform:

In addition, we believe the field would be well served to avoid the “single solution” nature of inquiry that has been characteristic of a large portion of previous inquiry on districts. Consistent with the framework for systemic reform presented, we suggest that future research explore the complexity, interrelatedness, and nonlinearity of the district’s roles and the ways that together these roles position the district as an institutional actor in reform. (p. 341)

I used an embedded case study approach (Yin, 2009), to answer the research question and sub-questions, with the larger unit being the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the sub-unit being the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program in the TDSB. Within the broader theme of district reform for equity, this case study focused largely on the sub-unit (MSIC), with an exploration of its relationship to the larger unit (TDSB). I chose the case study method specifically because it is the preferred method of investigation when the research question is explanatory (in that it is a “what” or “how” question) and it focuses on a current phenomenon in a natural, real-life setting (Yin, 2009). While a distinctive feature of the case study approach is its bounded nature, it requires the researcher to explore multiple variables from multiple perspectives that may be interrelated (Yin, 2009). I triangulated data collected from both rounds of interviews, and conducted a document study using discourse analysis.

Bias cannot be avoided in any form of research (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). My former position as a Lead Teacher in the MSIC Program likely led to a greater depth of analysis and precision of focus because of my in-depth knowledge of the practices and history of the Program, the key players, areas to explore in greater detail during interviews, and sources of information to access. However, to ensure that I achieved my aim to continuously explore district reforms for equity rather than evaluate the TDSB or MSIC Program, and to ensure that I was honouring the voices of the participants (instead of allowing my voice to speak for them), I engaged in what Kirby and McKenna (1989) refer to as the ‘self-interview’ to uncover the
conceptual baggage (i.e. thoughts, feelings, personal history and experiences) that I brought to the research question and process throughout the study. Part of this process included answering the interview questions in depth, prior to conducting any interviews.

The self-interview process was invaluable. I was able to answer the questions in the first round of interviews to some degree. I had more difficulty answering questions related to mediating board and federal policies and questions about the influence of the MSIC Program on the TDSB and vice versa. Having some distance from the program while analyzing the data was very helpful. I had some interesting insights about how I was constructing the program and how this construction might have mis/under/over represented certain influences on efforts to initiate and sustain it. I realized that I was constructing the program as a separate and discrete entity, outside of the context of a larger school board and ahistoricized from a tradition of equity work in Toronto’s education system. There was a huge gap in my understanding of the program prior to 2009 when I became a Lead Teacher, a time marked by a significant increase in the number of schools and levels of centralization in the program. I had not been a part of the initial, somewhat grassroots social movement that initiated this reform and so there was also a gap in my knowledge of the historical context of equity initiatives that had largely influenced the design and conceptualization of the MSIC Program in the former Toronto Board of Education.

This likely influenced my interpretation of the MSIC Program in four significant ways. First, it likely led to an overestimation of the strengths and benefits of the program and limited my ability to identify opportunities that existed to further develop the program. Second, I likely underestimated the role of ideology, and in particular, the slow, sustained, and collective ideological changes. Third, it is quite possible that I underestimated the role of macro-politics (ruling political parties) and the role of civic capacity in initiating and sustaining reforms. Finally, it is probable that I underestimated the cyclic dimensions of reform that becomes apparent when considering reform efforts within a larger, historical context. This awareness was
at the forefront of my mind as I conducted interviews, analyzed that data, and communicated the results.

In reflecting on my emotions towards the program, there were two major realizations. First, I felt a tremendous sense of pride towards the program and I had to consciously reflect on how my pride (both personal and collective), largely rooted in an ahistoricized and decontextualized understanding of the program, was overestimating its strengths/benefits and underestimating the areas of improvement. At the same time, I was very frustrated with myself and with the literature on district reform. I knew there was something problematic about conceiving of and measuring the success of educational reforms for equity from within the constructs of achievement and opportunity gaps, but I did not know how else to conceptualize reforms for equity. This frustration grew as I realized that the current literature on urban district reforms for equity inadequately captured the normative and political aspects of reform that were so present in my daily reality as an Inner City Lead Teacher in MSIC. The frustration turned to hope as I realized that I was interviewing 15 people who were directly connected to a district reform for equity that initiated itself, against political and ideological odds, and has sustained itself for 10 years.

As stated earlier, I employed critical perspectives in the design and analysis of this study. I drew on my understanding of critical theories as focusing on the experiences of marginalized groups and inequities in educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes (Furman, 2012) for the purpose of addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools and transforming inequitable power relations beyond (Theorharis, 2007). In this study, I made a deliberate effort to understand and challenge the power structures that create and maintain social inequities. Being aware of the critiques of research processes from critical and other paradigms helped me to engage with this ‘self-interview’ process in deeper ways.
One of the major critiques of critical methodologies is in their failure to problematize research relationships, because of a strong concern with ‘false consciousness’ that reinforces the idea of an aware researcher and an ‘unconscious’ research participant (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 7). Another concern with critical approaches to research is that “historically, the knowledge creation process has been separated from concerns about praxis: theorizing about the political nature of knowledge creation has rarely been translated into transforming our research practices” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 9). Third, in distinguishing from traditional critical research, Brown and Strega (2005) clarified what accounts for research from the margins:

Research from the margins is not research on the marginalized but research by, for, and with them/us. It is research that takes seriously and seeks to trouble the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced, and who is entitled to engage in these processes. It seeks to reclaim and incorporate the personal and political context of knowledge construction. It attempts to foster oppositional discourses, ways of talking about research, and research processes that explicitly and implicitly challenge relations of domination and subordination. It is grassroots in the sense of considering as “legitimate” what we have to say about our own lives and the lives of others, and how the conditions of those lives might be transformed. (p. 7)

Conducting research with a variety of stakeholders connected to the MSIC Program, and valuing the voices of community partners alongside senior administrative board staff, I centered the questions of whose interests are served not only by the research produced, but by the process itself. This offered a basis for multiple perspectives that, hopefully, led to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the program and allowed for greater insights into political action. As an insider researcher, my intent was to blur the lines between researched and researcher. My hope was to account for, and respond to the critiques on the literature for district reform that is hyper-rationalized, overly simplistic in its reliance on standardized testing as a measure of success, and the degree to which it is decontextualized from political, social, and normative contexts (Trujillo, 2013).

One major methodological limitation of this research is that it does not position those who have traditionally been the objects or respondents of research as equal collaborators or co-
Researchers (Brown & Strega, 2005). In the context of this study, this included interview participants, and the students, families and communities that are impacted (positively/negatively) and served/underserved by the MSIC Program. Having said this, this study does speak to research for the marginalized, including members of districts who have greater decision-making power in determining the opportunities and responses to a broad range of inequitable schooling processes outcomes. Furthermore, for purposes of clarity and ease, this study uniformly positioned students and families in MSIC school communities as having less privilege than students and families in non-MSIC school communities. This limitation largely underestimates the diversity within MSIC and non-MSIC schools and creates a false distinction between less/more, have/have-nots among the top 150 schools on the TDSB’s Learning Opportunities Index. As stated throughout this study, poverty in Toronto exists in non-MSIC schools and there are many students and families not living in poverty that attend MSIC schools.

Focusing on a single case study has benefits, such as depth of analysis and the ability to explore complexities and nuances. However, Yin (2009) cautioned researchers considering single case study designs to clearly state why only one case was chosen. This caution was addressed in that I considered this to be a critical case in testing a conceptual framework (Yin, 2009). As well, a thick, rich description of this case allows for transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) to other districts with similar dynamics and structures or what (Stake, 1995) referred to as ‘naturalistic generalizations’. Naturalistic generalizations are described as “conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life’s affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to them” (Stake, 1995, p. 85). Yin (2009) also cautioned about the vulnerability of a single case that may turn out to be something other than initially perceived. This concern was allayed because I have a sound knowledge of the TDSB and the MSIC Program after having worked in the TDSB for nine years and the MSIC Program for five years.
A robust account of the context (the MSIC Program, the TDSB and a social, political and economic account of the city of Toronto) adds to the significance of this study for districts in that they can draw comparisons to their own contexts. Rorrer et al. (2008) suggested that future research on districts will need to use “longitudinal and comparative case studies including the creation of data-rich case studies that capture the social, political, and economic contexts of districts” (p. 341). This study, while limited in breadth, will provide a rich account of a diverse, urban school district looking to initiate and sustain large-scale reforms for equity. This is not a longitudinal study per se (as data was collected and analyzed over a period of 1.5 years), however it provides a longitudinal perspective in that the collection of participants represents a range of experiences and connections to the program from pre-inception to present day (December, 2015). Kennedy (1979) asserted that the range of generalizations from a single case study that is not replicated is a matter of judgment on the part of those wishing to apply the findings, not those conducting the research; it is the role of the researcher to produce and share information and it is the role of the receiver to determine whether it applies to their situation. Additional data-rich cases and comparative studies are also required to develop the breadth and depth of research on district reforms for equity.

I selected this case for several reasons. First, the TDSB is the largest urban school district in Canada and is therefore fitting for a study on urban district reform. There is little research in educational administration on the TDSB and this case might well illuminate gaps in the literature on district reform. Second, the TDSB collects achievement and engagement data and disaggregates it by various social identifiers (e.g. race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual preference, ability, etc.), which provides regular feedback about whether reforms for equity are closing the opportunity, achievement, and engagement gaps for marginalized students. Third, the MSIC Program has been in operation for ten years, which is a significant amount of time to explore its reforms for equity, from inception to present day. Fourth, unlike other programs that
are studied entirely based upon successful, large-scale achievement on standardized test scores, the MSIC Program has shown slower growth in this regard, yet has had success in many other areas. Trujillo (2013) encouraged the exploration of multiple forms of assessment on district reforms and districts that have varied results on standardized tests in order to avoid a hyper-rationalized, technical approach to district reform for equity.

Merriam (2009) stated that “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study,” which is a bounded system or single entity (p. 40). While the context of the larger unit is important for the overall context, I largely focused on the sub-unit—the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program. The boundaries of the larger unit (TDSB) included the following:

- Time: 1998 to 2014. In 1998, seven predecessor boards amalgamated to create the TDSB. Using this timeframe to bound the larger unit of this case study allowed for an analysis of the collective notions of reforms for equity that represent the needs of children in the entire City of Toronto.

- Space: The physical boundaries of the Toronto District School Board post-amalgamation and the electronic boundaries of the TDSB public (external) and private (internal) websites.

- Content of Analysis: Interviews and document study.

The boundaries of the sub-unit (MSIC) included the following:

- Time: 2004 to 2014. In 2005, the MSIC Task Force Report was drafted, which was approved by the Board of Trustees in the TDSB and was the foundation of the program. Beginning the analysis from the year 2004 allowed for greater depth into the context required for this program to be initiated.
• Space: The boundaries of the Toronto District School Board post-amalgamation with a specific focus on the MSIC Central Office and the 150 schools in the program and the electronic boundaries of the TDSB public (external) and private (internal) websites.

• Content of Analysis: Interviews and document study.

Case: Education in Ontario, The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program

Education in Ontario

Education is governed provincially in Canada, and as stated previously, Ontario has a reputation of having a highly successful education system, both nationally and internationally. In 1996, in the wake of the accountability era, the ensuing Conservative government introduced Bill 160, or the Education Quality Improvement Act, which:

…mandated the development of a standards-based provincial curriculum, with common content and performance standards for student learning outcomes defined by subject and grade level, K-12. Bill 160 also mandated the creation of a provincial accountability bureau, the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), and authorized that Office to manage the development and implementation of provincially developed standardized tests of student learning in reading, writing and mathematics at specific intervals (grades 3 and 6 in all subject areas, grade 9 mathematics, grade 10 literacy). The tests, aligned with the curriculum standards, are defined at four levels of performance. (Anderson & Rodway-Macri, 2009, p. 197)

With the incoming the Liberal government in 2003, steps were taken to institutionalize the standards-based curriculum movement in Ontario, by defining acceptable performance measures, providing support to schools that did not meet these measures, and holding the government accountable for meeting these targets (Anderson & Rodway-Macri, 2009). Most important was the introduction of provincially mandated targets for student performance that included: 75% of students reaching the provincial standard in grade 6 by 2008, and a secondary school graduation rate of 85% by 2012 (Anderson & Rodway-Macri, 2009). The Ministry of Education introduced a new branch in—the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat—
mandated to provide support to school boards to reach provincial targets, which “essentially held schools and school boards accountable for measurable indicators of aggregate student performance” (Anderson & Rodway-Macri, 2009, p. 198).

From the mid-2000s until 2013, the mandate of the Ministry of Education was to increase the achievement of students in literacy and numeracy, to close the gap between populations of students, and to increase public confidence in a publicly funded education system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). From 2014, the goals have been slightly modified to include:

- **Achieving Excellence**: Children and students of all ages will achieve high levels of academic performance, acquire valuable skills and demonstrate good citizenship. Educators will be supported in learning continuously and will be recognized as among the best in the world.

- **Ensuring Equity**: All children and students will be inspired to reach their full potential, with access to rich learning experiences that begin at birth and continue into adulthood.

- **Promoting Well-Being**: All children and students will develop enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills to make positive choices.

- **Enhancing Public Confidence**: Ontarians will continue to have confidence in a publicly funded education system that helps develop new generations of confident, capable and caring citizens. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014)

The focus on equity was further supported by the introduction of Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy in 2009, the purpose of which is to provide a vision for an equitable and inclusive education system, focused on respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education, and identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ learning, growth, and contribution to society. These barriers and biases, whether overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional, need to be identified and addressed. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009)

The document outlining this strategy included the following eight areas to accomplish this vision: Board policies, programs, guidelines and practices; shared and committed
leadership; school-community relations; inclusive curriculum and assessment practices; religious accommodation; school climate and the prevention of discrimination and harassment; professional learning; and, accountability and transparency.

Despite the introduction of the language of equity, reform literature and policies in Ontario are still deeply rooted in neoliberal ideologies and have yet to make any meaningful shifts towards critical discourses. For example, there is extensive research on education in Ontario that describes what leaders, schools, and systems must be, do, and have to create 21st-century learners who are capable of positioning Ontario and Canada as global, economic leaders (Fullan, 2010, 2013; Leithwood 2010, 2011; Levin, 2008, 2010, 2011). In lessons learned from Ontario and other high-performing jurisdictions (as measured by PISA scores), Fullan (2011) stated that high performing systems focus on the human, social, and professional capital of teachers and collectively engage teachers in “instructional improvement with peers” as opposed to the improvements of individual teachers. He conclusively stated that a systemic approach to change is necessary, which recognizes the complex connections of all elements and stakeholders to one another within a system. Furthermore, these approaches aimed at building capacity at all levels to develop 21st-century workers, have led to sustained and substantial changes in literacy, numeracy, and assessment practices while maintaining teacher morale and satisfaction (Levin, 2008). However, while professional learning opportunities have been offered to all schools by the province to increase higher-order thinking skills, the Ontario Ministry of Education has not demonstrated a consistent, large-scale, and specific focus on the inequitable policies, practices, and mindsets underlying the relationships between educator, students, families, and the community in urban settings. Some would also argue that the standards of teaching in more marginalized parts of the TDSB are lower, due to less parental pressure, and lower expectations of students.
In response to Fullan’s (2006) article *The Future of Educational Change: System Thinkers in Action*, Noguera (2006) argued that the challenge in urban and rural districts with a significant number of poor students is “not just the sustainability and adaptability of effective educational practices, but rather how to contend with the manifold effects of poverty within the social context and within the organizational apparatus of the districts themselves” (p.130). Noguera claimed that by failing to address the social and racial inequities that permeate schools and school systems (resulting in unequal access to health care, housing, and above all, a quality education), and the subsequent impacts on achievement and social immobility of marginalized students, “Fullan inadvertently contributes to the narrow, de-contextualized, ‘blame-the-victim’ thinking that characterizes much of the scholarship and policy in the field of education” (p. 131).

Scholars in Canada would argue that the context for accountability in the United States is considerably different from the accountability movement in Ontario. For example, in Fullan’s (2011) comparison of reforms in Ontario, the United States, and Australia, he stated that unlike Ontario, the United States is largely focused on accountability and “uses standards, assessment, rewards and punishment as its core drivers” (p. 3). He argued that in contrast, Ontario focuses its efforts on the learning-instruction-assessment nexus that produces the desired accountability by building capacity at every level and increasing the intrinsic motivation of teachers to engage in professional learning. Fullan also noted that among other differences, the United States takes a decentralized and fragmented approach to reform, while Ontario has taken a more centralized and systemic approach in which “all elements of the system are interconnected and involved, day after day” (p. 6).

Despite these differences, it is still argued that reforms in Ontario, like those in the United States, are deeply rooted in a discourse of accountability and neoliberalism (Joshee, 2008; Portelli et al., 2007). The equity of outcomes discourse in the Ontario Ministry of Education document aims to provide equal outcomes for all students without challenging
existing notions of success or outcomes and assumes that all students want to achieve and learn the same things (Joshee, 2008). Joshee (2008) referred to Ministry initiatives, such as providing additional resources to disadvantaged schools, as being constructed through a limited understanding of success in literacy and numeracy achievement, namely how they relate to economic success. Furthermore, a study by Anderson and Rodway-Macri (2009) noted that while many district officials in four Ontario districts were found to have framed student learning in broader ways (i.e. educating the whole child), the dominant way in which student learning was measured was through provincial standardized tests, curriculum, and targets. Even so, these district officials felt it was their responsibility to advocate for a broader notion of public education than that which was promoted by the Ministry of Ontario.

As such, Ontario reforms have failed to affect real and lasting change in closing the achievement gap for racialized and marginalized students in the TDSB. What is missing from the reform agenda in Ontario is a commitment to equity and social justice from a critical discourse: reductions in achievement and opportunity gaps for systems serving students of colour from low-income families are most likely when critical discourses are employed (Dei, 2010a; Freire, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Portelli et al., 2007). Students in the TDSB and elsewhere would be better served if all facets of schooling (i.e. curriculum development, leadership, capacity building, goal setting, etc.) were approached from critical discourses.

The following sections will explore why a focus on districts, aimed at increasing the levels of achievement, experiences, and engagement of traditionally marginalized students, is imperative to achieving equity reforms from critical perspectives.

**The Toronto District School Board (TDSB)**

Toronto is the largest city in Canada with more than 2.5 million people and it is among the most diverse cities in the world with regard to language, culture, religion and faith, gender
and sexual diversity, and many other social identities. Today, more than 50% of the city is born in another country, making it a large immigrant-receiving centre that includes many non-status immigrant families and their children (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2004). As Solomon, Singer, Campbell, and Allen (2011) pointed out, this diversity is increasingly reflected in agencies, institutions, government bodies, working groups, and non-governmental organizations, commissions, and laws related to diversity at the local, municipal, provincial, and federal levels: “Canada also has a multicultural policy that is legally embedded in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Canadian Human Rights Act, The Employment Equity Act, the Official Languages Act, the Pay Equity Act, and the Multicultural Act” (p. 33). And, as was stated earlier, the Ontario Ministry of Education (provincial-level) introduced the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy in 2009 to support all students in educational contexts.

Despite policy aims to increase equity, diversity, and multiculturalism in Canada, inequities are rampant throughout the country and especially in urban settings like Toronto. Hulchanski (2010) noted that between 1970 to 2005, Toronto’s middle-income population shrank dramatically while at the same time there was a slight increase in the upper-income population and a dramatic increase in the low-income population. Hulchanski also noted that these persistent and long-term trends are continuing and deepening and that poverty has moved from the centre of the city to the edges, creating what is known as inner suburbs. These trends, however, are not irreversible, nor inevitable, and can be both slowed and reversed. Hulchanski also reported that the areas in the city with higher concentrations of low-income people also had increased rates of newcomers, unemployment, and crime as well as lower rates of education. Inequitable income distributions (i.e., housing, employment, health, etc.) and spatial distributions (i.e., lack of mixed neighbourhoods, highly dense pockets, etc.) encourage the rhetoric of urban spaces as pathologized, deficient, and deviant.
Similarly, Social Planning Toronto (2014) noted that homelessness in Toronto has increased since the 1990s with the largest growing homeless population being families with children (mother with children in particular). Further to this, Wilson (2009) argued that many families, particularly newcomer and racialized ones, struggle with poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and the lack of affordable housing. Johnston, Queiser, and Clanfield (2013) found that in fact, one in four Torontonians live in poverty, with poverty becoming increasingly racialized. The following ratios outline the number of children who live below the Low Income Cut-Off (the indicator for living below the poverty line) among various racial groups: approximately one in ten European (white); one in five from of East Asian groups; one in four from Aboriginal, South Asian, Caribbean, South & Central American groups; one in three from Arab and West Asian groups; and, one in two for children of African heritage (Children’s Aid Society of Toronto, 2008, p. 12). Social Planning Toronto (2014) found that living in poverty impacts on children’s’ experiences in school ranging from emotional (e.g., stigma, stress, unresolved emotions, exposure to violence, etc.) to physical (e.g., inadequate nutrition, limited places to study, etc.).

Recognizing that some forms of opportunity gaps do not question the larger goals of the education system, and even expect students to fit within pre-defined norms, a focus on how the TDSB conceptualizes opportunity gaps will provide useful information into how systemic injustices are understood and addressed. In recognition of the impacts of opportunity gaps on the educational outcomes for racialized and marginalized students, the Ontario Ministry of Education has been providing the Learning Opportunity Grant (LOG) since 1998 to help improve the chances of success for these students by supporting breakfast programs, after-school programs, homework programs, etc. This is in addition to regular per-pupil funding and the extra allocation for students designated with Special Education exceptionalities (Johnston et al., 2013). As well, the government has also provided additional money for English Language...
Learners to develop English skills as part of the English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD) allocation within its Language Grant to school boards. In their report titled *A Triple Threat to Equity: Changing Priorities for Toronto Schools*, Johnston et al. (2013) argued that the TDSB is using far less than the full complement of these two pockets of funding for their intended purpose and instead are using the funds for operations and to fund the mandated Full-Day Kindergarten Program. Having said this, it is also within this context that the MSIC Program receives close to $9 million of funding to support closing opportunity gaps.

The TDSB is home to almost 260,000 students in close to 600 schools, making it the largest school board in Canada and one of the largest school boards in North America (TDSB, 2014a). The TDSB website states that 27% of its students were born outside of Canada and that there are over 75 different home languages spoken by its student body. Furthermore, 43% of its’ students learned English as their first language. This makes the TDSB one of the most diverse school boards in the world. At the same time, not all students have the same educational outcomes. An internal TDSB study indicated that some of the biggest discrepancies in students’ educational outcomes and school engagement are among different racial groups and family socio-economic status (SES) (Sinay, Zheng, & Anastaskos, 2012).

**The Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program**

To address the growing income and achievement gaps in the TDSB, the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program started in 2006 and was considered an equity-minded reform in response to the growing income gap in the city of Toronto. The original Inner City Task Force was comprised of senior administrative board staff, school trustees, parents, community partners, education activists, and the local university professors. It has now become a large-scale program that involves over 25% of TDSB schools in areas with the greatest levels of poverty (TDSB, 2014b). In 2006-2007, the first three schools were introduced to the program, with an
additional four schools added in 2007-2008. Progressively, the program grew from 50 schools, to 112 schools, to 150 schools. In 2008, in recognition of the MSIC Program and related initiatives, the TDSB was awarded the prestigious Carl Bertelsmann Prize in Germany, under the category “Integration through Education—Fairness for All.”

Currently, the MSIC Program serves the students, families, and communities in 150 elementary and middle schools (and at one point seven secondary schools) in the TDSB. TDSB uses a measure known as the Learning Opportunities Index to rank its schools according to levels of external barriers to student success. This index is based on internal and external data sources and research. The 150 schools whose students face the greatest external barriers to success (i.e. family income level, single-parent households, etc.) are part of the MSIC Program and receive additional financial and human resources, internal and external partnerships, and support to implement initiatives aimed at increasing the achievement, engagement, and opportunity of students living in Toronto’s inner cities. The Learning Opportunities Index is recalculated every two years to account for changes in social demographics in the city, as well as new research and findings that link different external barriers to student success. As such, there have been some changes in the schools that are part of the program over the years as the schools at the top of the index change and shift. All decisions related to the program are guided by its’ five Essential Components (listed below) and aligned with the TDSB’s five Strategic Directions (TDSB, 2014a).

The 150 elementary and middle schools serve approximately 75,000 students and are divided into seven clusters (approximately 20 to 23 schools per cluster). There are approximately 50 staff members supporting the seven clusters. For a couple of years, efforts to broaden the program to the secondary level resulted in the inclusion of seven secondary schools in inner city areas with one attached to each cluster of schools.
Over the years, there have been changes to staffing in the MSIC Program. Between 2008-2014, each cluster was supported by a combination of a central superintendent of education, a central coordinating principal, a central lead teacher and a program coordinator. In addition to central program staff, each cluster included a combination of superintendent of education, three administrators that play a leadership role in guiding the direction of the program, one lead teacher responsible for supporting administrators in implementing the five essential components (although this position has been phased out), three community support workers who strengthen the home-school-community partnerships, two teaching and learning coaches to support training, professional learning, and capacity-building among the schools, and a learning classroom teacher in each of the 150 schools to build the teaching and learning capacity at the school level.

In 2014-15, the program saw increases in school-based staff positions to support program initiatives, such as one to two learning classroom teachers and one early years iPad lead teacher. As of 2014-2015, superintendent of education, a central coordinating principal, a coordinator, two central lead teachers and two central community support workers oversee program operations in consultation with senior administrative board staff and trustees. See Appendix A for a summary for program funding and funding changes over time.

The five essential components of the MSIC Program include:

1) **Innovation in Teaching and Learning.** Creation of MSIC interdisciplinary units of study focused on social justice; summer school opportunities for students in grades 1 to 8 for 3.5 weeks in July; monthly professional development with learning classroom teachers; exploration classrooms in which teachers can see best practices in action; and, the integration of new curriculum initiatives such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs and innovative problem-solving.
2) **Support Services to Meet the Social, Emotional and Physical Well-Being of Students.** Hearing and vision clinics; paediatric clinics in schools (one school per cluster); nutrition programs in schools; access to information on the social determinants of health by neighbourhood; social-emotional curriculum for middle school students (grades 6 to 8); resource packages with educational and developmentally appropriate materials, offered to students and parents in Kindergarten; and, greater access to recreational activities throughout the city at highly reduced costs.

3) **School as Heart of the Community.** Parent Academies (networks “by parents for parents” from schools within each cluster); an annual Parent Academy Conference led by parents and supported by MSIC staff; community/faith walks for educators led by parents and community leaders; and, expanded opportunities for parents to develop entrepreneurial skills, participate in volunteer training, and participate in training required to broaden workforce skills.

4) **Research, Review and Evaluation of Students and Programs.** MSIC staff/parent/student perception surveys; student resiliency surveys; CAT4 Testing (national standardized testing) for students in grades 2 to 8; use of the Early Development Instrument to assess student strengths and gaps in Junior and Senior Kindergarten; the delivery of reports to schools each year with all of this information; and, ongoing program monitoring and evaluation with the use of data.

5) **Commitment to Share Successful Practices.** Monthly cluster meetings with school principals and staff; regular showcases and carousels to share ideas, best practices and information between MSIC schools; hosting national and international visitors; the ongoing development of a technology hub to share information and best practices; and, sharing best practices in MSIC to the larger TDSB through monthly Family of Schools meetings (organizational structures for groups of schools in the TDSB).
The MSIC Program also works closely with, and receives advice and feedback from, the Inner City Advisory Committee. This is the political arm of the program and includes parents, trustees, senior administrative board staff, MSIC staff, representatives from various community agencies, university professors, political and social activists, and the like. As for other advisory committees in the TDSB, this group serves to ask questions, hold the program and Board accountable, generate ideas for next steps, take political action when needed, etc. Many members of the Inner City Advisory Committee were original members of the Inner City Task Force in 2005, prior to the start of the MSIC Program. There are often questions about whether the MSIC Program has been ‘effective’ in closing achievement and opportunity gaps. While these questions can be interpreted in different ways, and while different questions might be asked, the following excerpt is from a 2012 TDSB longitudinal report that was based on data collected from and about the MSIC Program:

a) All seven model schools reduced the opportunity gap over time—in terms of meeting students’ physical needs (e.g., basic nutrition, vision and hearing conditions, physical ailments); enhancing their social and emotional well-being (e.g., resiliency and developmental conditions); enriching their out-of-school learning experiences (e.g., field trips); increasing family involvement; and expanding community partnerships (e.g., with the health sector)

b) All seven model schools narrowed the achievement gap—moving from below the CAT4 norm in reading, writing and math basic skills at baseline, to at or above the expected level and building important foundations for continuous learning. In addition, the EDI results have indicated increased readiness for schooling among young children attending the model schools. Furthermore, data have shown reduced school absenteeism and lateness, and improved school atmosphere for learning. (Yau & Branco, 2012)

These excerpts demonstrate a gap-closing, ‘fix-it’ approach to students’ contexts for learning and their achievement levels, consistent with deficit ideologies. Further information about the MSIC Program will be provided in the remaining chapters.

This case study included two rounds of interviews and document study using discourse analysis. All data collection “was guided by research questions, educated hunches and emerging
findings”; my role as a researcher was to use skill and intuition to uncover new leads and insights, even within the systematic and structured process of data collection (Merriam, 2009, p. 150). The following section will outline the design methods for each of the data collection methods, along with an explanation of the approach to sampling (for interviews) and criteria used (for documents). In order to stay focused and anticipate any problems that may have arisen, a case study protocol was developed as a preliminary component of the research design using the framework put forward by Yin (2009), which included an overview of the case study project, field procedures for document study using discourse analysis and interviews, case study questions, and a guide for the case study report (see Appendix B).

**Interviews**

According to Rorrer et al.’s (2008) conceptual argument ‘Districts as Institutional Actors in Reform,’ districts are defined as units that are “bound by a web of interrelated roles, responsibilities, and relationships” (p. 333). Therefore, I conducted interviews with a variety of key stakeholders as conversations with a purpose (Merriam, 2009) in order to explore this web of relationships. Interview participants had all played a key role in the inception or endurance of the MSIC Program over the previous nine years. MSIC was founded as a partnership between bottom-up and top-down pressure for change, in order to meet the needs of underserved communities in Toronto. Consequently, I interviewed the following groups of stakeholders: senior administrative board staff in the TDSB (two participants), trustees (three participants), key administrators (three participants), key partners (three participants), and MSIC staff (four participants). I made attempts to include three in each of the above stakeholder groups during the interview process, in part to protect the identity of the participants. The 16 interview participants were considered based on the following criteria: they had been actively connected to the program for a minimum of two years between the years 2004 to 2014; they represented one of the key stakeholder groups; and, others would agree that their involvement in the
program had demonstrable impact on its initiation, stability, and/or progress. Participants were chosen on the basis of maximum variation in experience and perspective, so as to capture core experiences and central, shared dimensions of district reform for equity (Merriam, 2009). Two key informants were requested to provide ideas for the selection of participants (Merriam, 2009); I also considered myself a key informant in this process, given that I had worked in this program for five years and was involved in multiple aspects of its development.

Merriam (2009) stated that interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe how people feel or how they interpret the world around them. I requested that each participant participate in two interviews. The first set of interviews was semi-structured, in that the interview started with a specific set of questions and probes related to the theoretical framework (see Appendix C) that were used flexibly and as needed throughout the interview (Merriam, 2009). I used a case study protocol to guide the inquiry with a focus on what Yin (2009) referred to as Level 1 and Level 2 questions. Level 1 questions were asked of the interviewees directly and Level 2 questions were asked of the case itself (Yin, 2009). The second set of interviews further explored prompts and ideas that emerged out of the first set of interviews. It became evident after the first set of interviews that participants’ understandings of equity differed greatly and directly influenced how they understood the purpose, history, and potential of the program. Essentially, the second interview explored conceptual understandings and frames of thinking about equity, opportunity gaps, program responses to inequities, the MSIC Program itself, and the connections between MSIC (schools and program) and the TDSB at large (see Appendix D for a list of the second interview questions).

During the interviews, I probed for in-depth insights, opinions, and facts from participants (Merriam, 2009) and sometimes extended beyond the designated time for the interview. However, for participants who could only offer a specific amount of time, I used more of a structured approach to ensure that the basic questions were answered (Yin, 2009).
also used a transformative interview method to “intentionally challenge and change the understandings of participants” (Merriam, 2009, p. 92); many of the participants remarked that the interview process itself encouraged them to think and question key elements of the program, challenge the purpose and direction of the program (as well as their particular role in that process), and create and brainstorm ways to make their reflections a reality.

As an insider who has significant knowledge of the program, it was important that my data collection and analysis honour the voices of the participants. Therefore, prior to conducting the interviews, I answered all of the interview questions as though I was being interviewed myself to ensure that my interpretation of participant responses would not be clouded by my own answers to the questions. I also audio-recorded the interviews for later transcription and took notes during the interviews to gather initial thoughts, inferences and hunches.

**Document Study**

Documents are important because they may reveal goals, decisions, and the underlying thinking that cannot be observed or discovered in interviews (Merriam, 2009). Documents are useful for a number of reasons: they are accessible and free; they provide description; they may verify emerging theories or hypotheses; they may provide historical understanding; they may track change over time; and, they offer stability as a data source, unlike interviews or observations (Merriam, 2009).

I analyzed 12 documents in a systematic manner guided by the conceptual framework, the research problem, and the research questions using discourse analysis as described below. I chose documents for analysis based on the following criteria: they supported answering the research question and were linked to the literature review (Butin, 2010, p. 99); they were significant MSIC Program documents between 2004 and 2014, or TDSB documents that had impacted MSIC initiatives and directions; and, they focused on the program philosophy, history,
and its applications in day-to-day activities. I made a deliberate effort to note changes in foundational documents over time.

Most of the analyzed documents and websites were available publically or on internal websites that are accessible to staff members of the TDSB. I asked interview participants and the key informant to provide access to some of the older documents connected to the program that have been archived over time. Some of the documents were prepared by the TDSB’s Research Department and summarized findings and outcomes of the program over a given period of time. I also analyzed changes over time in some of the structural and organizational documents in order to identify differences in ideas and discourses. In addition, some of the documents were other people’s accounts of important aspects and lessons learned in the program, providing data on how others understand, interpret and learn from the program. Appendix E provides a listing and summary of the 12 documents used, as well as the TDSB Equity Foundation Statement and the TDSB Opportunity Gap Task Force Report.

Merriam (2009) noted that most documents have not been developed by a researcher for research purposes, which can lead to several limitations: the process of development may not have been systematic; the sample may be under representative; the notes may be inconsistent; and, the documents may be written for a particular purpose and audience. As such, I only used my findings from the document study as I developed my larger findings related to the research question, and not as a corroborative means to test the validity of the findings (Merriam, 2009). To ensure easier access to coding data using qualitative research software, all notes were converted to word processing software (Butin, 2010).

**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis was used to analyze the collected documents. Pitsoe and Letseka, (2013) described the relationship between language, knowledge, and power:
…discourse is interwoven with power and knowledge to constitute the oppression of those “others” in our society, serving to marginalize, silence and oppress them. They are oppressed not only by being denied access to certain knowledge, but by the demands of the dominant group within the society that the “other” shed their differences (in essence, their being, their voices, their cultures) to become “one of us”. Control of knowledge is a form of oppression—only certain groups have access to certain knowledge. Those in positions of power are responsible for the assumptions that underlie the selection and organization of knowledge in society. The task for the educator is to discover the patterns and distributions of power that influence the way in which a society selects, classifies, transmits, and evaluates the knowledge it considers to be public. Thus, discourse ultimately serves to control not just what but how subjects are constructed. Language, thought, and desire are regulated, policed, and managed through discourse. (p. 24)

Maclure (1994) noted that discourse takes on characteristics of post-structural theory if:

(a) it takes some kind of skeptical position towards the relationship between language and reality; and/or

(b) understands discourse/language not just as a reflection of 'the social', but as deeply implicated in the constitution of the social and cultural world; and/or

(c) considers ‘meaning’ to be ambiguous, contested, shifting, and never finally resolvable by recourse to an ‘external’ world of objects and certainties. (p. 284)

In more contemporary forms of critical pedagogy, Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) offered a reconceptualised critical theory of power that included discursive elements. They suggested that whereas before, critical theorists saw language as a neutral and objective description of the ‘real world,’ critical theory now sees language as an opportunity to construct the world, instead of simply describe it. Maclure (1994) reminded us that taking texts apart might be a powerful weapon of critique when directed ‘outwards’ at public policy, politics, media, etc., but that there is a need to apply this critique ‘inward’ to our own truths, models of representation, discourses, and understandings of education. Positioned as an insider-researcher, I had a greater ability to blur the lines between outward (actual policies, documents, texts) and inward (truths, discourses, understandings, etc.) critiques.

Analyzing Data

For the purpose of this study, I analysed 12 documents connected to the MSIC Program
at different points, as well as one foundational document connected to the TDSB. During the analysis, I looked for words, combinations of words, ideologies (present and absent), as well as connections between ideologies and documents, using the discussion on theoretical frameworks and notions of social justice, equity, and achievement that were presented earlier in this paper.

**Case Study Database, Chain of Evidence and Member Checking**

As suggested by Yin (2009), I used a case study database to store all data gathered from interviews and document study. The case study database contained four sections: notes, documents, tabular materials, and narratives. I also used a chain of evidence as an overall strategy of analysis (Yin, 2009). Although this strategy is often used to increase the reliability of a study (Yin, 2009), I used it as a tool to increase the transferability of this study to other settings. Interview participants were invited to engage in member checking after their second interview to ensure that their thoughts and ideas were captured concisely and so that any changes, additions, or deletions to the data could be made at that time (Stake, 1995).

**Analytic Tools**

I coded the data in multiple stages. I inputted all notes from the document study into a word processing document so that all data could be coded and catalogued. I then coded and catalogued the data within each of the three data sources, and then triangulated the data in an iterative process that gradually built more complex categories of codes (Merriam, 2009).

After the first set of interview responses, it became clear that what began as a deductive reasoning exercise in analyzing participant responses based on questions related to the theoretical framework would soon become an inductive reasoning process in thinking about the patterns in participants’ understandings of the equity and opportunity gaps. This led to the explanation of opportunity gap discourses in the MSIC Program.
In the deductive reasoning process, I relied on theoretical propositions to guide the data analysis by connecting data to the conceptual framework. Since I had tested, modified, and extended Rorrer et al.’s (2008) conceptual argument ‘Districts as Institutional Actors in Reform,’ I used grounded theory as the method of data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). I used open and axial coding methods to understand causal conditions, strategies, and contextual and intervening conditions/consequences, which then led to a deeper understanding of the relationship (or lack thereof) between the four aspects of this conceptual argument (Merriam, 2009). This, then, led to selective coding that described the relationship between and among categories (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

I used time-series analysis as a secondary analytic tool to tell a story over time, alongside relying on theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009). I attempted to determine causal events and to compare the themes and findings from a chronological analysis with an explanatory analysis that relied on theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009). The specific indicators that I traced over time were the four components of the conceptual framework, as well as specific stakeholders and discourses with more or less influence at different points in the history of the MSIC Program. I analyzed the data for the following temporal patterns: sequence of events; one event being contingent on another; some events being contingent on others after some time; and, time periods that were important to the case (Yin, 2009). This analysis formed the basis of Chapter 6.

The inductive reasoning process relied largely on coded data from the second set of interview responses and the documents. In trying to make sense of the different conceptualizations of equity and opportunity gaps, I generated and refined themes several times and I returned to the literature in which reflecting on the work of Nancy Fraser (2005), Turner (2015) suggested that opportunity gaps be conceptualized according to Fraser’s (2005) Tripartite Theory of Justice. In reviewing Fraser’s (2005) theory, there were strong connections to the findings that emerged in the data. Therefore I used this theory as an initial starting point to
understand participant responses, which became more of a deductive reasoning process over time. In fact, there was a constant interplay between deductive and inductive reasoning processes, which led to the re-coding of data.

Chapter 6 largely speaks to coded data from the first set of participant interviews and the documents and includes direct engagement with the theoretical framework. Chapter 5 largely speaks to coded data from the second set of interviews and the documents, and is adapted from Fraser’s (2005) theory. However, it is important to note that these boundaries are not absolute, given the continuous interplay between the two types of reasoning. It is also important to comment on the order of Chapters 5 and 6. During the coding process, it became clear that an understanding of the different perceptions of equity and opportunity gaps in Chapter 5 was an important foundation to understanding the political dimensions discussed in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 presents the study’s overall findings resulting from an iterative process of coding and re-coding based on the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

Ethics

In this study, I abided by the University of Toronto Ethical Review Process, with an understanding that case study research requires further protection for human subjects because it is examining “contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 73). As such, the following practices were conducted with great sensitivity:

a) **Informed Consent.** All participants were required to sign a letter of consent prior to the interviews that clearly stated that their participation was completely voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time (Yin, 2009). It clearly asked for participant consent to share findings with interested stakeholders in the TDSB community and for findings to possibly be published in an academic journal.

b) **Privacy and Confidentiality.** Given the nature of this study, participants may be able to guess the identity of other interviewees. Therefore, all efforts were made to ensure that
participants were not put in an undesirable position. For example, I assigned pseudonyms to each of the participants and maintained confidentiality between participants for the interview component. If other participants continuously referred to one participant, that participant received a second pseudonym for the interview to ensure greater anonymity. Securing three participants in each of the stakeholder groups also increased the level of privacy for participants. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The interview data was secured (electronically) and kept under lock and key (notes and tape recorders) for the duration and up to three years following the completion of the study, at which point it will be erased and destroyed. All participants were provided with a transcript of their interview to ensure comfort with the transcription and its accuracy. Participants will also be provided with a final copy of the final research report upon completion of the study.

c) **Protection of Vulnerable Groups.** I made special efforts to protect vulnerable people or groups in this study, such as MSIC staff. In particular, the key informant was not involved in suggesting MSIC staff to be interviewed. Given the nature of the data, there were certain times when they pseudonym was not included if the data could be harmful to the participant.

d) **Document Study Using Discourse Analysis Considerations.** Merriam (2009) noted that document study as a method of data collection must account for consent issues such as ownership of *intellectual property*, copyright, and free speech. In particular, there must be informed consent to use the documents, confidentiality must be ensured, and there should be a clear distinction between private and public documents.

e) **Ethical Review Process.** In addition to following the procedures outlined in the University of Toronto’s Policy on Ethical Conduct in Research and getting approval from the University of Toronto’s Ethical Review Board (see Appendix F for the ethics
approval letter from the University of Toronto), I also received approval from the TDSB External Research Review Committee. The case study protocol was included in this application and outlined how I planned to interact with those being studied, the protocols and data collection instruments I planned to use, and how I ensured such protections as informed consent and confidentiality (Yin, 2009).
CHAPTER 4

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE FORMER TORONTO BOARD OF EDUCATION
(LATE 1960S – AMALGAMATION)

Taking a school district as the unit of analysis, placing it firmly in its context, and tracing its changes over time is the most useful way of understanding how reforms do or do not come about and how they make a difference. (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 34)

In this study, I attempted to tell the story of the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program, from my interpretations of the insights of the 15 participants, as well as my analysis of ten important program documents. However, prior to sharing an analysis of this data, this chapter will provide the historical context for reform in Toronto. This is critical to increasing the complexity and depth of understanding regarding how, why, and under what conditions change and political agency occurred to initiate and sustain the MSIC Program, and to imagine further change. Providing a historical context, although limited, speaks to the political and historical agency of the communities, parents, staff, and trustees who worked tirelessly in the former TBE and the TDSB to create more equitable spaces and outcomes for students most marginalized by the system. According to critical research methodologies, Mohanty (2005) claimed that to capture the varied accounts of (O)ther as political and social agents, political agency needs to be contextualized and historicised to avoid universalizing oppressions and struggles.

Education in Toronto has a history of reforms for equity across multiple and changing social identities, only one of which is the MSIC Program. The TDSB was established in 1997 when six independent boards in the greater Toronto area amalgamated into what became one of the largest school boards in North America. One of these six boards was the Toronto Board of Education, which largely influenced commitments to, and understandings of, equity in the TDSB. This chapter chronicles changes over four decades of schooling in Toronto, from the late 1960s to the 2000s, and provides a brief account of changes that led to an increased focus on
diversity in education in the 1940s. It provides a high-level account of the politics, ideology, policies, and pedagogy of the time, with a focus on issues pertaining to equity and education in Toronto’s inner cities. In particular, there will be a focus on policies and initiatives aimed at changing the schooling experiences and outcomes of marginalized students, as well as the ideologies and political influences that supported them. Chapter 6 provides a more in-depth historical account of the initiation and continuation of the MSIC Program from the perspective of the participants interviewed in this study.

This analysis, while limited in scope, depth, and breadth, will draw largely from two texts that provide different, yet complimentary historical accounts of the TBE and the TDSB. These texts are significant to this study because they focus on the relationships between ideology, politics, and practice. They also provide a comprehensive and historical account of the TBE (from the late 1960s to amalgamation in the late 1990s), which heavily influenced the ideologies and politics that informed the TDSB and the initiation of the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program in 2004. Race to Equity (2005) was written by a front-line equity worker and advocate in Toronto schools, Tim McCaskell. McCaskell’s insider portrayal of schooling in the TBE, from 1983 to 2001, focuses largely on: the individual and collective identities of key players at the time; the opportunities, tensions and challenges of the changing pedagogical and theoretical understandings of equity; and, the relationships between these understandings and their influence on policies and board initiatives. Education researchers and activists, Jane Gaskell and Ben Levin, wrote the second text titled Making a Difference in Urban Schools (2012). This book provides an outsider perspective of the TBE and TDSB and chronicles the ideological, political, and pedagogical changes of district reforms for equity in Toronto, Ontario and Winnipeg, Manitoba.
1940s

The 1940s saw an increased focus on diversity in education for a number of reasons (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). This was largely influenced by Canada’s desire to distinguish itself from the intolerance of the Nazi regime in WWII, especially since Canada wanted to ensure support for war efforts from the 20 percent of the population that was of neither French nor English origin (Joshee, 2004). A number of activities designed to build relationships of equality between ‘new stock’ Canadians (i.e. those of neither French nor English origin) and ‘old stock’ Canadians led to diversity programs in education being equated with citizenship education (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). Eventually, these programs became part of the Citizenship Act of 1947, and many stakeholder groups used the citizenship agenda to further diversity both inside and outside of education (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). In Toronto, seminars and workshops were held through the Race Relations Institutes of 1948 and 1949, which brought together “citizens from a cross section of society to address problems of racial and religious discrimination”, including “action projects” in Toronto schools (Joshee & Johnson, 2005, p. 61).

Toronto’s Diversity—Then and Now

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Toronto had a wide spread of socioeconomic diversity and growing cultural and racial diversity. Socioeconomic changes in Toronto between 1970 and 2005 have demonstrated a significant decrease in the middle class and significant increases in both higher and lower classes, as measured by average individual income (Hulchanski, 2010). Since the 1970s, there has been a steady increase in diversity in the city based on race, language, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). The foreign-born population in Toronto, for example, grew from 30.9% in 1951 to 43.6% in 1971, compared to a 3% increase nationally (Masemann, 1984). As Joshee and Johnson (2005) pointed out, “one of the key policy changes in Canada during the 1970s was the introduction of a new point system as part of the
immigration selection process, which resulted in an increase in the numbers of immigrants of color” (p. 66).

To some, the Canadian cultural fabric, and more so Toronto’s cultural fabric, is constructed as a cultural mosaic, in which the acknowledgment and support of different languages and cultures are encouraged (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007). To others, multiculturalism in Canada has had a greater focus on inclusion, which “transfers attention onto those who ‘need’ to be included and away from practices of exclusion” (Lee & Cardinal, 1998, p. 225). Today, Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in world. According to Statistic Canada’s 2011 National Household Census, almost 50% of Torontonians identify as a visible minority, with over 50% born outside of Canada (City of Toronto, 2013).

**Toronto Board of Education (Late 1960s to Late 1970s)**

In the 1950s and 1960s, the TBE was considered a progressive board for several reasons, including: a focus on child-centered pedagogy; the establishment of arts, music and health initiatives; the importance placed on education as a means of promoting democracy, intercultural understanding and citizenship; and, trustees who expressed concerns about the schooling experiences of disadvantaged and immigrant students (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). The TBE, while progressive, could also be described as a hierarchical and paternalistic organization, focused on cultural assimilation, and sorting and raking students based on their perceived intellectual abilities (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

The TBE included 11 electoral wards and 24 trustees between 1969 and 1995 with two per ward and two from the separate Catholic school system (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). The 1969 trustee elections significantly impacted the direction of the TBE as it ushered in a number of reform trustees (McCaskell, 2005). According to Gaskell and Levin (2012):

The 1970s ushered in a new era of policy initiatives focused in equity. Newly elected reform trustees challenged the system, its administrators, its principals and its teachers. They wanted more attention on the experience of students growing up in poverty, more
involvement of local communities in decision-making, the teaching of languages other than English, and a system-wide critique of racism, sexism, homophobia and class bias. This equity-focused direction prevailed from 1969 to 1998, despite political turmoil and gradually declining resources. (pp. 72-73)

McCaskell (2005) also noted that during this period, there was also an increased focus on de-streaming working-class students into vocational programs, implementing a sex education curriculum, and the call for full-time trustees.

Ideology and politics in the TBE were influenced by larger ideological changes in Canada and worldwide. The increased focus on equity mirrored a more global sentiment in the 1970s of anti-colonial liberation movements and the Canadian government’s introduction of more progressive policies (McCaskell, 2005). In the early 1960s, several federal policies were introduced to reduce various forms of prejudice: the Canadian Bill of Rights (1960), a policy to grant the franchise to people of First Nations origins (1960), and the first Canadian immigration policy (1962) that prohibited racial discrimination (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). As well, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963) resulted in the Official Languages Act (1969) as a response to the demands of francophones for political and cultural equality (McCaskell, 2005).

In 1971, Canada was the first country to implement a multicultural policy, and in doing so, “affirmed the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens regardless of racial or ethnic origins, language or religious affiliation” (McLeod, 1984, p. 31). This policy resulted from the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963) and cultural pluralism within a bilingual framework. It would later become the official Multiculturalism Act of 1988, an important part of Canadian distinctiveness that provided the basis for positive struggles for identity and voice among ‘visible minorities’ and the broadening of the multicultural mandate (Goonewardena & Kipfer, 2005). However, the policy and later the Act, were often criticized for promoting a surface-level understanding of culture (e.g., foods, traditional dress, etc.), that were seen by
many as a neoliberal approach to “sell diversity” and sell Toronto as a city with competitive advantage (Goonewardena & Kipfer, 2005, p. 672).

In Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Education adopted its first multicultural education statement in 1977; *Multiculturalism in Action* laid the foundation for further work in schools and for a reputation that positioned Ontario as one of the leaders in multicultural education (Tator & Henry, 1991). Practitioners and policy makers within the TBE were also influenced by external education reform efforts, such as the left-leaning Toronto newsletter *Community Schools* and the national publication *This Magazine is About Schools* (McCaskell, 2005). Most of the reform trustees, also known as reformers, were associated with Canada’s most left-leaning political party, the New Democratic Party. With the reformers in place, the role of the trustee was no longer about easily approving recommendations from staff, which “troubled some staff and excited others” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 77). As such, the TBE became a district of intense ideological debates, resulting in the restructuring of staff positions and board foci, as well as new avenues for relationships between staff, trustees, and community partners, which led to increased political and community mobilization (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

One landmark example of political and community organization occurred in 1968, when the Treffan Court Mothers, a group of parents from a public housing development, presented a brief to the TBE titled “Downtown Kids Aren’t Dumb” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 73). With the support of some education activists (who later became trustees in the TBE), this brief suggested that educators in the TBE were inadequately serving students from lower-income households by failing to see the strengths of their children, failing to connect the curriculum to the lived realities of families from lower-income households, and streaming their children into Special Education classes and vocational programs. The Treffan Court Mothers had a tremendous impact on school reform in Toronto with regard to both educating children from lower-income households and district reforms at large (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).
As a result of the work of the reformers and landmark initiatives like the brief by the Treffan Court Mothers:

new staff positions and departments were added to focus on research, community relations, equity, and the inner city. The relationships between staff, the trustees and the community were restructured, and the voice of parents from marginalized communities who previously lacked political influence were actively involved in dialogue and decision-making. (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 79)

Gaskell and Levin argued that this focus on relationships was so strong that it blurred the boundaries between board senior administrative staff, trustees and community partners and called into question the hierarchal bureaucracy of the TBE.

Data and research were also explored through new lenses. The ‘Every Student Survey’ was conducted for the first time in 1970, which correlated student success with social class, race, language, and ethnicity (McCaskell, 2005). The survey was conducted again in 1975 and every several years after that. Gaskell and Levin (2012) reported, “the analysis showed that being born outside of Canada, speaking a language other than English, and having low socio-economic status reduced the likelihood that a student would be in a high-status academic program” (p. 81). This data and other data sources were used to rank schools based on the degree of external barriers to success—namely family income, rental housing status, visible minority status, single-parent families, education levels, employment, mobility, non-English language spoken at home, and immigration status—in order to provide additional and different resources to particular schools and students (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

In partial response to the ‘Every Student Survey,’ the Inner-City Department was established in 1971 and focused on equipping schools with more culturally relevant materials, after school tutoring programs, expanded daycare, arts and cultural performances, and parenting programs (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). The TBE was actively committed to improving the
schooling experiences and choices of students in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

According to Gaskell and Levin (2012):

The TBE identified the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, allocated additional staff and resources to schools in those neighbourhoods, and provided staff committed to curriculum innovation with opportunities to do things differently. It actively mobilized parents and involved them in choosing principals and making policy. It restructured its staff and created equity advisers, inner-city coordinators, and community liaison officers who reported to the TBE, rather than to local principals. These advisers were activists who developed close working relationships with ward trustees, felt protected by those relationships, and worked informally with trustees to develop new policies. Work groups composed of trustees and staff, often with differing politics, produced some of the most effective and progressive policies, as they made provisions for implementation as well as overall policy direction. (p. 73)

The result was the creation of a few schools called ‘Inner City Project Schools’ that included more culturally relevant curriculum, weekend professional development for staff, parent and community involvement, and collective decision-making (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). This program attracted some of the best teachers to inner city schools and provided opportunities for educators to receive extra funding to “become both experiments and exemplars’ in curriculum initiatives” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 82).

In addition to inner city initiatives, the reformers were also interested in opening up alternative schools in the system and ending streaming in schools. The notion of equity expanded to include race, gender, and sexual orientation, which was evident in the hiring of new staff, the creation of new curriculum, the establishment of working groups, and changes in policies (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). A series of studies, reports, and community consultations on multicultural education began in 1972 (McLeod, 1984) and eventually resulted in the establishment of the Multicultural Task Force in 1976, and the release a report outlining how the TBE should respond to cultural difference, including the creation of culturally sensitive curriculum materials, heritage language classes, and reception centers for newcomers (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). McLeod (1984) noted:
In the process of reorienting the Toronto school system to multiculturalism, the committee found varying understandings among the educators and community as to what multicultural education should be. Some saw it as the maintenance of language and culture, others as a means of dynamically developing a Canadian culture through a combination of different ethnic cultures, while another group saw it as a means of assimilation (IMTEC, 1976, p. 90). The interpretations mark the significance of having clearly stated Board policies and the importance of involving the teachers in the process so that they orient their thinking rather than just place a new label on what they have always done. (p. 43)

Some of the most dynamic changes occurred in the realm of school-community relations. The School Community Relations (SCR) Department was established to “act as a liaison not only between the school and the community but also between the curricula and programmes and the needs of the community” (McLeod, 1984, p. 44). SCR forged connections between the Board and newcomer groups in the city by hiring community liaison officers and community service personnel with the ability to speak different languages (McLeod, 1984). This department actively worked to place increased power in the hands of parents and community members by giving them a voice in the selection of school principals and by sitting on various working groups in the Board that were directly involved in policy-making (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

Both the North York Board of Education and the Toronto Board of Education built on national policies and worked with community activists to develop policies and programs in Race Relations and Bilingual Education (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). In 1977, the Work Group on Multicultural Programs established a subcommittee called the Race Relations and Multiculturalism Committee to address the disproportionate number of Black students in vocational schools (McCaskell, 2005). This committee distributed issues papers to the system, students, and the community and translated the documents into 15 languages to mobilize parents to bring forward their concerns. Several public consultations were held and the input gathered formed the basis of the 159 recommendations of the Draft Report of the Subcommittee on Race
Relations; the TBE had encouraged input from the community and actively created opportunities to hear different perspectives (McCaskell, 2005). By 1979, the report was ‘softened’ to include 119 recommendations that included changes to curriculum and texts, professional development, and a policy to deal with racial discrimination, but it did not include changes in hiring practices (based on seniority and term appointments) to make more room for visible minority staff (McCaskell, 2005). This report, which many thought was ground breaking, became the Board’s race relations policy (McCaskell, 2005).

The ‘Every Student Survey’ equipped the SCR and parent groups (formed largely on the basis of language, race, and ethnicity), with the information to influence policy and hold the board accountable for assessment, curriculum, and other initiatives (McCaskell, 2005). Parent advocacy was very strong and resulted in parent conventions that led to recommendations for changes in foci, increased funding from the Ministry of Education, and better initiatives to support all students (McCaskell, 2005). The reform trustees managed to spearhead progressive changes in the Board because of their strong connections to the community and their strategic ability to support progressive policies and obtain the necessary funding (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

**Toronto Board of Education (1980s)**

According to Joshee and Johnson (2005), the multicultural work in the 1970s brought to light competing ideas within the multicultural policy discourse:

The idea that Canadians needed a strong, and by implication singular, national identity was at odds with the recognition of cultural diversity inherent in the multiculturalism policies. Additionally, some scholars and advocates of multiculturalism quickly began to disparage the focus on cultural identity as ‘just song and dance.’ (p. 64)

Kehoe (1984) added to this discussion by listing the limitations of multiculturalism and asking educators to question unfounded assumptions, such as students feeling greater empathy for the “victim” than the “assailant,” as well as moving from descriptive to analytical
understandings of discrimination in order to elicit the moral outrage necessary for change (p. 144).

These ideological tensions led to several federal and provincial policies and initiatives that set the stage for anti-racist work in the 1980s. Federally, these policies included: The Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), the establishment of the Race Relations Unit within the Multiculturalism Program, the Special Parliamentary Committee on the Participation of Visible Minorities in Canadian Society (1983), the Royal Commission of Equality of Employment Opportunity that led to Canada’s Employment Equity Act (1986), and the replacement of the Multiculturalism Policy (1971) with the Multicultural Act (1988) (Joshee & Johnson, 2005).

Provincially, these policies and initiatives included a statement on Race, Religion and Culture in Ontario School Materials (1980) and a conference on race and ethno-cultural equity that eventually formed the basis of Ontario’s Policy/Program Memorandum 119 (PPM 119), “which required all school districts in Ontario to develop and implement policies on antiracism and ethnocultural equity by September 1995” (Tator & Henry, 1991). Tator and Henry (1991) also pointed out that, “Despite the election in June, 1995 of a Progressive Conservative government with a decidedly neoliberal agenda, which included the dismantling of employment equity and multiculturalism programs, PPM 119 has not been rescinded” (p. 67).

The 1980s were marked with a change in ideology from Multicultural Education in the 1970s toward Anti-Racist Education in the 1980s and beyond. Multicultural educators acknowledged and valued differences and issues between identity groups, such as distinctions in understandings, forms of communication, and worldviews (McCaskell, 2005, p. 74). Anti-racist educators, on the other hand, focused specifically on issues of: power and privilege; structural, ideological, and systemic inequities; and, worldviews underlying systems of oppression (McCaskell, 2005). They supported a worldview that categorized people on the basis of race, imperialism, colonialism, and racism (and by extension, sexism and classism) (McCaskell,
In this approach, “the teacher was an active participant and guide in the construction of knowledge through collective and cooperative strategies” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 75). The 1980s saw a tremendous focus on curriculum that connected students’ lived realities to larger social, historical, economic, and political realities, and supported students in becoming agents of change in their communities and the world (Carr & Klassen, 1997). The role of the teacher was to engage in critical pedagogies that focused on the students’ lived experiences, connected to the community, uncovered the hidden curriculum, and challenged racist ideologies through dialogue (Carr & Klassen, 1997).

At the same time, the economic recession of the 1980s resulted in more neo-conservative politics that supported a free market (i.e. less government intervention and taxation), a strong state, the privatization of state corporations, and fewer social programs (Apple, 2006). In Canada, under the rule of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, “Provincial and federal governments were interested in education as an economic lever for global competitiveness and national prosperity, while its role in local community-building and providing equal opportunity became less salient” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 85). This resulted in changes to the political and economic autonomy of the TBE due to increased cutbacks, as well as increased focus on raising standards and ensuring quality education throughout the country (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). This increasingly conservative politics also influenced the municipal and school board levels in Toronto (McCaskell, 2005), which led to new political and ideological divides between school trustees and staff (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

These differences in political ideologies were evident in the board’s focus on inner city initiatives and community engagement, with the left wanting more radical changes and the right wanting greater accountability and less spending (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). Based on the ‘Every Student Survey’ and international research on language, effective schools and early childhood education, a report was submitted by board senior administrative staff to the inner-city
committee of the Board (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). The unit of analysis was the school, and the report concluded, “effective inner city schools need a strong emphasis on leadership, with on-site curriculum assistance, an emphasis on academic achievement, high expectations of pupils, a calm atmosphere, and a belief in and responsibility for local improvement” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 87). Gaskell and Levin (2012) explained that the focus on innovation meant that activist teachers with great ideas for curriculum and programming could meet the needs and connect to the lived experiences of their students with additional funding as support. Furthermore, teachers hired in these schools were committed to social and political change, had high expectations for students and did not hold deficit mindsets, and had a strong understanding of literacy (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

While the focus and scope of equitable programs and policies was limited and strongly debated, McCaskell (2005) argued that the following gains still occurred: the inclusion of sexual orientation in the anti-discrimination policy; an anti-apartheid conference for students and other student initiatives focused on issues equity; increased parent and community mobilization on the education of Black students; and, an increased commitment to affirmative action and employment equity (although more widely supported on the basis of gender than race).

The Hitner Starr report of 1985 clearly commented on the system’s inaction on issues of race relations since the approval of the Race Relations Report in 1980. McCaskell (2005) claimed that this was largely influenced by lack of accountability and implementation of the 119 recommendations in the report. While there were some gains in bias-free curriculum, not enough was done to address racial streaming into Special Education and vocational programs, incidences of racism, race relations training for staff, and equal opportunities in the employment of staff. For example, streaming on the basis of race into Special Education and vocational programs continued in the 1980s and involved intense debates between teachers’ unions, reformers, more conservative trustees, the Board, and parents (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).
McCaskell (2005) noted, “the impetus from the Board’s anti-racism efforts largely came from outside the institution—communities concerned about what was happening to their children in schools” (p. 111). Carr and Klassen (1997) argued that several factors slowed the Board’s race relations policy, including: a lack of monitoring, accountability and evaluation by senior board staff; the over-bureaucratization of the board and the low-level positions of those charged with implementing the reforms; and, the under-representation of minority teachers despite the policy recommendations.

Parents connected to the SCR Department and the Board openly debated making heritage language programs part of the school day. After a drawn out struggle, heritage programs were offered in schools where a majority of parents requested them (McCaskell, 2005). McCaskell (2005) noted that this struggle created a sense of unity among immigrant groups. Parent advocacy was also evident with inner city initiatives. In reaction to the request from parents and trustees for more teachers to be hired in inner-city schools, the Conservative provincial government introduced Bill 127, which restricted the rights of local boards to raise local taxes above their provincial allocation and limited local bargaining with teachers over working conditions (McCaskell, 2005). Initially, this was an opportunity for the SCR Department to side with the Board against the government, but the battle with the province resulted in a weakened parent base (McCaskell, 2005). In 1985, the TBE saw the election of more right-wing school trustees that dismantled the SCR Department, despite the tremendous amount of public and political mobilization by parents and community groups (McCaskell, 2005).

The election of provincial Liberal leader David Peterson in 1985, saw an age of increased accountability and testing in education, which would come to fruition in the 1990s: “The TBE was arguably responsible for the strong resistance to high-stakes standardized testing
in Ontario, and for the gentler, curriculum-based form it ultimately took in the 1990s” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p 91).

**Toronto Board of Education 1990 to 1997 (Amalgamation)**

The 1990s began with the election of Bob Rae, the first ever Ontario Premier from the New Democratic Party, a left-wing party with a platform committed to equity and anti-racism (McCaskell, 2005). McCaskell (2005) explained that at the time, there was excitement about the possibilities for equity work, as well as immediate public pressure on the new government to deliver on change. Tony Silipo, a former trustee and Chair of the TBE, became the Minister of Education and called for Premier Rae to set up a Royal Commission on Learning to assess education in Ontario (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). The Rae government faced tremendous challenges, including “a severe recession, a taxpayers’ revolt, and teacher strikes” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 91).

The TBE continued to be divided on various policies, but maintained a commitment to equity, inner city initiatives and project schools, the importance of language, and active community engagement (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). For example, alternative schools for Black students, Aboriginal students and gay and lesbian students were developed by the TBE in the mid-1990s, however the battle against streaming students was lost to the teachers’ unions (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 93). Programs for staff and students (e.g., Students of Toronto Against Racism), staff and board working groups (e.g., the Lesbian and Gay Employees Group), parent groups (e.g. the Organization of Parents of Black Children), policies (e.g., the Sexual Harassment Policy), and curriculum continued to flourish until the mid-1990s when there were dramatic changes to politics, Board structures, and funding (McCaskell, 2005).

McCaskell (2005) noted that identity politics played a key role in the understanding of equity and equity-related initiatives in the early-1990s. For some, identity politics meant an opportunity for different marginalized groups to name, resist, and challenge their oppression.
from their own voices, while for others, this form of politics meant reducing everything to constructs of personal identity (McCaskell, 2005). It was a complex conversation about the relationships between the parts and the whole, as well as between and among the different parts.

Changes to funding in education had significant impacts on the TBE. Garcea (2014) noted that education funding in Canada has become increasingly centralized over the last 150 years, moving power and decision-making authority away from local boards and into the hands of the provincial governments (p. 5). From 1867 to 1949, local school boards in Ontario were largely responsible for collecting and spending funds on education from the local property tax base (Garcea, 2014). Then from 1950 to 1980, the Ontario government assumed an increasingly larger responsibility for funding education, and by 1990, Ontario school boards levied local taxes to account for approximately half of their education budgets (Garcea, 2014).

The early recession of the 1990s led to the ‘Quality Education Movement,’ which called for an increase in curriculum standards and student discipline, and decreases in spending, bureaucracy, and influence of Teachers’ unions (McCaskell, 2005). In addition, McCaskell (2005) described that there were calls for a more traditional, back-to-basics curriculum, which was heavily influenced by certain sectors in business and a growing conservative parent movement.

In 1995, Ontario elected one of its most right-leaning Premiers, Mike Harris of the Progressive Conservative Party. His ‘Common Sense Revolution’ led to the final reforms that resulted, amongst other changes, in the complete centralization of school board funds in Ontario (Garcea, 2014). This government changed the focus from social justice to economic independence, and from equity to equal opportunity (Joshee & Johnson, 2005). To explain the stage for this revolution, McCaskell (2005) noted, “most ominous for the Board was Minister of Education John Snobelen’s candid admission of plans to ‘create a crisis in education’ and ‘bankrupt’ the system to justify dramatic changes” (p. 218).
In 1997, the Fewer School Boards Act (Bill 104) resulted in fewer school boards, fewer trustees, decreased trustee salaries, and the appointment of provincial auditors to strengthen financial accountability (Garcea, 2014). Bill 160, a highly contested piece of legislation, brought further changes to education funding, such as shifting the power from local school boards to the province to set the property tax rates (Garcea, 2014). Bill 160 also called for: limiting the authority of school boards in using some special purpose grants; increased financial accountability for boards; eliminating the ability of boards to operate in deficit budgets; and, allowing the provincial Ministry of Education to take over a board if they failed to balance their budget (Garcea, 2014). In 1996, the province reduced transfer payments to school boards by $400 million (McCaskell, 2005, p. 225); to date, the basic elements to education funding have remained unchanged since the Harris years (Garcea, 2014, p. 17).

The Common Sense Revolution also resulted in the introduction of province-wide testing and changes to teachers’ working conditions as outlined in their contracts (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). As well, the Harris government also called for the amalgamation of school boards as a cost-saving measure. In 1997, despite overwhelming opposition, especially from the TBE and city at large, the TDSB was formed with the amalgamation of six legacy boards (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). The people of Toronto were most worried about “higher property taxes, an erosion of services, and the end of their access to local governments” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 93).

In 1997, Marguerite Jackson (former Director of the North York Board of Education) was appointed as Director to the newly formed TDSB. According to McCaskell (2005), Jackson was not one to ruffle the feathers of the provincial Conservative government and she also filled the top positions in the TDSB with her colleagues from the former North York Board of Education. McCaskell (2005) explained that trustee salaries were reduced to $500, which meant that most of them had to take on a full-time job and so had less time and energy to devote to the
position. As such, power shifted to and was situated with senior Board staff, and not the elected officials.

The new TDSB consisted of 22 trustees (one per ward), more than 600 schools, and 250,000 students (Gaskell & Levin, 2012). Staff and trustees were reorganized and many reform trustees left the Board because there was little support for their initiatives; Gaskell and Levin (2012) described that the focus changed from “poverty, democracy and cultural difference to balancing the budget and working out the logistics of a new internal organization” (p. 94). Amalgamation and the new funding formula resulted in substantial cuts to Toronto schools (Mackenzie, 2001). According to Johnston et al. (2013), the TDSB has experienced massive structural deficits and budgetary shortfalls since amalgamation. In 2011, the TDSB stated that the funding formula inadequately meets the financial needs of the board, with 85% of the budget going towards operational costs alone (Johnston et al., 2013, p. 7).

Increased centralization was also evident in changes to the curriculum in the 1990s. In 1995, the NDP government released ‘The Common Curriculum,’ which was intended to create a holistic, integrated approach to learning with ‘ten essential outcomes’; individual boards and schools had the power to determine how the essential outcomes would be achieved, and this fluid and holistic approach to learning was supported by education systems and researchers across America (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 2012). However, some saw ‘The Common Curriculum’ as more of a ‘production schedule’ because of the list format of outcomes-based expectations that all students needed to master by a certain point (p. 402). Wien and Dudley-Marling (2012) noted that with the introduction of ‘The Ontario Curriculum’ by the Harris government in 1997, the curriculum had been reduced to a list of narrowly defined outcomes with a major focus on literacy and numeracy, which is arguably a back-to-basics approach to education. Furthermore, Wien and Dudley-Marling (2012) argued that the changes in curriculum were closely linked to changes in how the learner was perceived and that an
outcomes-based education removes the agency of the learner and turns learning into a passive activity, whereby the daily lives and cultures of students are obscured.

Parent organizing started off very strong in the early 1990s with the first major parent conference since 1982, with over 1000 parents attending and approving 120 recommendations to strengthen the Board’s efforts at equity and related issues (McCaskell, 2005). However, with increased centralization in the Board and with local and provincial politics becoming more conservative, those who could navigate the law and its provisions did, whereas the majority of families were left behind and “technically disenfranchised” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 204). In response to these changes, equity activists had to resort to using legal documents and language to push for progressive changes, which further marginalized many parents and community members who could no longer engage in the conversation (McCaskell, 2005). As a consequence, equity initiatives became extremely vulnerable to political change at the top—conversations and initiatives intended to promote democracy, equity, and identity would need to find a way to exist within a highly centralized and increasingly capitalist system (McCaskell, 2005).

Amidst all of the economic and political changes, “the TDSB proceeded to create a new equity policy, by establishing an equity department, embarking on a consultative process, established a Community Equity Reference Group, and eventually developing an expansive equity policy complete with implementation guidelines” (TDSB, 2000). In 1993, the TBE passed a policy on class bias that committed the Board to a focus on equity of outcomes (as opposed to opportunities) for all students, and the intersection of class with other social identities (McCaskell, 2005). McCaskell (2005) put forward that notions of class challenged the Board to consider and somewhat clarify its’ understanding of the similarities and differences between equity and social justice. When considering other social identities (e.g., race, gender, etc.), it was clear to all that the actual differences within and between these identities were not
the actual problem; the problem, or the inequity, was in the discriminatory beliefs and oppressive behaviours towards those with less relative power and privilege within and between these identities (McCaskell, 2005). In relation to social class, McCaskell (2005) suggested that the social justice position suggests that the very existence of social classes is unjust in and of itself.

According to the Board, parallels were drawn between social class and different achievement levels. Applying this thinking to student outcomes, McCaskell (2005) suggested that an equitable approach would suggest that people of all races, genders, abilities, sexual identities, faiths, etc. would be represented at all levels of achievement and that therefore, inequalities (differences in achievement levels as they are commonly understood and by extension their relationships to social class) would still exist, but that they would not correlate with other social identities. The social justice perspective would not sort students by different levels of achievement (and by extension social classes) in the first place. The system chose to respond with a version of fairness within an inherently unfair system—creating a more even playing field in which competitive individualism and meritocracy would still determine one’s social standing (despite other social identities) (McCaskell, 2005). The board’s position was to redistribute wealth and resources (based on the belief that no individual should be denied access to education, health care, or housing), as well as to challenge stereotypes and prejudices that limited opportunities for the working class and the poor (McCaskell, 2005).

McCaskell (2005) also noted that these conversations led to questions about whether one’s individual characteristics could be so great that they would allow for such differences in social class between individuals. Conversations also centered on what caused poverty. For some, poverty was caused by a set of internal factors (e.g., morality, self-discipline, intelligence, etc.), which supports the idealist position that one’s ideas and consciousness determines their actions and shapes their reality (McCaskell, 2005). From the idealist position, removing
individual barriers to success is important to achieving equity. For others, poverty was caused by a set of external factors (e.g., government policies, economics, affordable housing, access to health care, etc.), which supports the materialist position that the environment determines the outcomes. From this position, large structural changes need to occur to create more equitable outcomes (McCaskell, 2005).

Despite these progressive conversations, the 1990s saw a decline in initiatives aimed at supporting schools, students, and families in Toronto’s inner cities, such as the Inner City Project Schools. One interview participant noted that amalgamation played a key role in dismantling inner city initiatives in the TBE:

Amalgamation caused initiatives to move to the lowest common denominator resulting in a drought for inner city and equity initiatives. The taking away of the local levy, the right of school boards to raise taxes for education… that paid for Toronto inner city stuff…so that was gone. They systemically I think set up a situation and the conditions whereby it will go to the lowest level, and that's what happened.

However, a major victory amidst these changes to inner city initiatives, occurred in 1999 with the passing of the TDSB Equity Foundation Statement, which included basic principles and the outline of a complaints process for discrimination on the basis of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and gender (McCaskell, 2005). According to McCaskell (2005):

The Toronto District School Board’s adoption of a broad equity policy was the climax of almost thirty years of struggle that had begun in the Toronto Board in the 1970s. It was a dramatic example of how popular mobilization in conjunction with progressive forces inside an institution—in combination with legal imperatives—could force a conservative bureaucracy to bend to community demands. Unfortunately, it would once again demonstrate the limits of such factors in bringing about true institutional transformation in a hostile environment. (p. 272)

Chapter 6 provides a brief historical review of inner city initiatives in the TDSB post-amalgamation, from the perspectives of interview participants.
Concluding Thoughts on District Reform in the Former TBE

According to McCaskell (2005), any strategy that is going to effect change in the education system needs to include political action, education, and rules and consequences, as a concentration in only one area will likely undo your efforts in the other two areas. Reflecting in his book, McCaskell (2005) argued that the way we see and understand certain internal tensions determines our actions and the nature of change. The first tension is whether we see change as occurring as a result of internal characteristics of the person/organization or whether change occurs from outside, environmental pressures. The second tension is one of identity. McCaskell noted that what started as concerns about class with the report from the Treffan Court Mothers, turned into 30 years of struggle, challenge, and resistance of multiple and intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, place of birth, language, etc.). He described the tension between what was initially the aim of socialist politics to create a more egalitarian society with identity politics, which gave voice and agency to other oppressed groups. McCaskell (2005) questioned whether oppressions are inherently so similar that they naturally intersect, or whether a common “enemy” and similar conceptual tools created an unnatural alliance (p. 280). Finally, he explored whether change occurs gradually or whether it occurs in spurts, and concluded that change occurs in spurts because of both internal and external pressures and the relationships that exist between them. To this end, McCaskell (2005) drew the following conclusions:

- Every advance in equity was in response to an internal or external crisis and was never a result of gradual changes
- Most changes occurred from external pressures (community and parent groups), and these external pressures were especially important for issues deeply rooted in systemic injustice (e.g., racism)
- When external pressures existed, the role of equity allies (e.g., staff, trustees, etc.) inside the organization was to create opportunities for democratic participation
- Outside pressures force internal changes to further democratize the system
• When external pressures did not exist, the role of equity allies was to mobilize internally, work cooperatively and seize opportunities for change and increased democratic participation of families and communities

• Cooperation between external and internal allies was key

• In relation to the discussion on socialist versus identity politics, the role of the Board and staff was to navigate equity and inclusion to ensure that everyone had a voice at the table

• When issues of equity are on the margins of system change, an approach of conflict and pedagogy of liberation tend to dominate actions. When issues of equity are embraced by the system, there is a tendency for conversations to become ‘safer’ and actions take an inclusionary approach. Allies and activists need to be cautious of this and continuously push for deeper experiences of justice for all. (pp. 279-285)

Ideological tensions were a key finding in this study; similar tensions to the ones noted by McCaskell (2005) were identified, along with others that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Gaskell and Levin (2012) noted that after 40 years of observing schooling in Toronto, poverty has in fact increased and the school system continues to struggle with gaps in achievement levels and graduation rates, as well as community relations. Nonetheless, key learnings were garnered in their study by focusing on the importance of ideology, politics, and curriculum and learning.

With regards to ideology, they noted that the beliefs and ideologies of people in key leadership positions matter significantly, and that “passionate, articulate and committed spokespeople for ideas of equity, parent engagement and community building” (e.g., trustees, senior leaders, parent and community advocates, etc.), can have a tremendous impact on the system (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 180). As well, there needs to be a recognition that school districts exist in larger contexts of space and time, and that while changing public opinion is possible, it requires “careful, sustained efforts by advocates who bring evidence to bear on public debates” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 182). The authors also noted the importance of gathering and communicating research and data to shifting public and professional thinking—
both as a tool that highlights important information and as a tool for generating public and professional dialogue about possible solutions and ideologies (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

Regarding politics, Gaskell and Levin (2012) asserted that since education is a public activity, debate, dialogue, conflict, compromise, etc. are essential aspects to true democracy when resolving differences. To improve school board politics and governance, Gaskell and Levin (2012) offered the following ideas: make education politics more like provincial/national politics by making the role of elected officials more attractive and offering different political platforms for citizens to choose from; develop a closer connection between municipal governance and school governance; improve communication about the Board’s areas of success and struggle to promote dialogue and idea generation; share data on a range of topics affecting students, staff, and parents (e.g., satisfaction surveys); and, develop third-party accountability measures (p. 189).

Finally, a focus on teaching and learning, which is the core business of education according to Gaskell and Levin (2012), often does not remain the central focus of education given competing demands. They argued that a sustained effort to ensure that innovative and effective practices become widespread practice is essential, as pilot projects are too often dependent on those spearheading them, and are therefore vulnerable to external changes. In order for large-scale change to occur, therefore, the following factors are necessary: a significant number of teachers and administrators who know what changes are required, agree with them, and understand them well enough to implement them; investments in increasing and managing the motivation of educators to make these changes despite competing commitments (which is as important as developing the skill itself); and, leadership that sustains political action, rooted in an unrelenting drive for change despite potential obstacles (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 192).

Gaskell and Levin (2012) noted that “educational improvement is more than policy implementation; it is the outcome of a complex, historically-situated political process that
creates social, economic, and political capital for use in schools” (p. 181). With this in mind, they offered the following recommendations:

- School districts need clear, well-founded plans—long-term plans connected to budget and resource decisions and a clear link from policies to practices that involve all stakeholders.

- There need to be productive links between school boards and provincial governments.

- More public debate is needed based on data on the political controversies inherent in urban public education—public dialogue needs to be seen as essential to sustaining good public education and this can be facilitated with a standing process for public engagement.

- Urban schools need to be good places to work and learn, to attract and retain skilled and dedicated educators—better working conditions for teachers (e.g., strong leadership, clear goals, ongoing learning), and a strong physical environment. Districts also need to make changes to have their most experienced teachers and leaders in these schools.

- There needs to be a central and sustained focus on improving teaching and learning—a network of supports and experts to engage in sustained, large-scale change.

- Strong and consistent community engagement—dedicated practices and systems to engage community agencies that support local neighbourhoods and sustain families.

- Better use of research and evidence—build on research and data for the goal of improvement.

- The necessary infrastructure to support all of the above—additional funding (although additional money does not solve all of the challenges) and staff, and effective leadership. (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, pp. 279-285)

I also concluded that ideology and politics were foundational to the implementation of equitable practices and pedagogies. Where there was a clear demarcation from Gaskell and Levin (2012), however, is that even teaching and learning were influenced by ideology and politics with regards to focus, scope, and timing.

Conversations to initiate the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program started in the early 2000s. Situating the MSIC Program within a larger, historical context provides for a richer analysis of the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats presented by and for the program. An ahistorical description and analysis of the MSIC Program fails to appreciate the
commitment and agency of parents, community partners, trustees, board senior administrative staff, and educators that laid the groundwork and influenced the philosophy and practices of the program. As well, a historical account of the former TBE sheds light on possibilities for greater collaboration and critical democracy in the MSIC Program and inspires a pedagogy of hope for the future.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS—DIALOGUE, DISCOURSE AND A DIALECTIC

When you are looking at the reasons why opportunity gaps exist, and if those reasons have to do with racialization, poverty, discrimination, those are realities that don’t get fixed overnight. Those are realities that are very much about mindsets, so often times, the work of this program is based on how able we are to affect and change mindsets. (Interview Participant)

In this study I asked the question, “How does the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program in the Toronto District School Board implement equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access, and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?” The first sub-question explored how the MSIC Program understands reforms for equity, which also includes elements of how the program measures reforms for equity. Most prominent in both the interviews and the analysis of MSIC and TDSB documents, was the belief of almost every interview participant that the program would benefit from a greater focus on equity, and that mindsets about students, families, communities, poverty, racialization, and charity and social justice, need to be challenged. In considering Rorrer et al.’s (2008) conceptual framework ‘Districts as Institutional Actors,’ understandings and conceptions of equity fall within the element, ‘Maintaining an Equity Focus’. As such, this chapter will explore different ideologies within the program as central to this element.

This chapter begins with a description of discourses in the MSIC Program, followed by ideological differences in participant understandings of district reforms for equity, and a discussion of MSIC as an example of district reform for equity. The chapter ends with concluding thoughts on the role of ideological influences on reform.

From the data, a common understanding of the purpose of the program was that it was founded as a response to inequities in the city and opportunity gaps among groups of students. A spectrum of thinking emerged from the data on opportunity gap discourses, with Charitable
Discourses on the one hand, and Social Justice Discourses on the other. This spectrum of thinking also included four sub-discourses. Three of the four sub-discourses were adapted from the work of Fraser’s (2005) tripartite theory of justice (Redistribution, Recognition and Representation). The fourth sub-discourse, Re-education, emerged from the MSIC document study and participant interviews. Discourse analysis was used to explore this spectrum of discourses in both the documents and participant interviews, with attention to how these discourses interacted within and between participant interviews and documents, as well as how the discourses changed over time. (See Appendix E for an outline of the 12 documents/sets of documents used as part of the document analysis, as well as two foundational TDSB documents.)

While I largely subscribed to critical perspectives in this study, in this chapter I seek to understand and explore the role of multiple ideologies occurring consecutively and concurrently in different contexts, for different purposes, and with different stakeholders. Furthermore, an examination of ideology without a contextual understanding of the political terrain of reform is incomplete. Therefore, I will explore the political forces in and on MSIC and their influence on initiatives and directions in the following chapter.

**Participant Responses: Discourses in the MSIC Program**

Thirteen of fifteen participants described the MSIC Program as an initiative aimed to close achievement gaps. All 15 participants noted that it was the opportunity gap, and not the achievement gap, that was the major focus of the program in response to inequitable conditions and outcomes for children living in high poverty areas, and that by focusing on levelling the playing field with regards to student opportunities, the achievement (and other) gaps would narrow, or close. While there were different opinions about the level and degree of equity and social justice that has permeated the program philosophies and activities over the years, the fact that the program was created in response to growing income inequalities and opportunity gaps
for students who have been racialized and marginalized—both inside and outside of school—suggests that there were key elements of social justice and equity already in place.

When asked about their understandings of equity, all 15 of the interview participants noted that equity is not the same as equality, and 12 of 15 participants suggested that equity is providing a disproportionate level of support to meet disproportionate levels of need. In addition, eight of 15 participants noted that equity is providing more for some, for greater outcomes for all. As one participant explained:

Equity is a destination but you can never quite get there. You can always get better at it. It’s never possible to be as enlightened and aware as needed to be truly equitable and inclusive to everybody who is being disadvantaged in some way, but the goal is to be questioning accepted practices and trying to have a better understanding of who benefits from a certain action and who doesn’t, and question if it is possible to rectify things so that someone isn’t losing so that someone else is winning. My perhaps naive belief is that we can get closer and closer to the goal of having a truly equitable society, but there are systems in place that make it more difficult—and these systems like to sustain themselves, so the attempts to make things more equitable need to be intentional and deliberate, persistent and unending.

While 13 of 15 participants noted that the MSIC Program was established to close achievement gaps between students from mid-high income households and students from low-income households, two participants stated that the program’s goal is not necessarily to close the gap; instead it is to raise the expectations of all students, such that there is improvement for all. This notion lends itself to the continuation of the ‘gap’. This creates an interesting tension in that there were different understandings of the fundamental purpose of the program.

Furthermore, the data revealed that competing and complimentary notions of equity and social justice are enacted differentially in the MSIC Program. In Trujillo’s (2012b) study of ideological differences among different leaders, she noted, “… normative conflicts and political concessions led to a set of diluted, highly rational policies…” (p. 542). Therefore, in order to guard against the dilution of equity-related values and goals, it is more important to explore ideological tensions in notions of social justice and equity that exist within the program than it is
to assess whether or not the program is equitable in design and implementation. Ongoing ideological discussions and dialogue will ensure that district and reform leaders are working towards the same goals by collectively analyzing the strengths and limitations of different theoretical perspectives.

The discourses in the MSIC Program were conceptualized using Fraser’s (2005) Tripartite Theory of Justice, which includes the following three dimensions: inequality in the material conditions of children’s lives (redistribution), denial of cultural belonging or equal social status (recognition), and inequitable voice in decisions that affect one’s well-being (representation). Fraser noted that there are two main approaches evident within each of these three dimensions: affirmative and transformative. While affirmative approaches aim to remedy inequitable outcomes without addressing the underlying frameworks or root causes of the inequities, transformative approaches aim for more equitable outcomes by addressing the underlying frameworks or root causes of the inequities. Understanding opportunity gaps in this very broad sense captures the need to examine educational discourses in a broader historical and socio-political context.

Both affirmative and transformative approaches were evident in the participant responses and documents. In the context of this study, affirmative approaches will be referred to as ‘Charitable Discourses to Closing Opportunity Gaps,’ and transformative approaches will be referred to as ‘Social Justice Discourses to Closing Opportunity Gaps.’ There are several reasons for this. First, Fraser’s theory of tripartite justice is adapted here in order to explore discourses on closing opportunity gaps among students in a district, and provide specific descriptions to this end. Second, for the purpose of usability, the terms charity and social justice are gaining traction in education circles and allow users to draw on a degree of familiarity with these terms. Third, in addition to Fraser’s (2005) three dimensions, a fourth dimension emerged in the data which was inequalities related to schooling experiences, pedagogy, and learning that
will be referred to as “Re-education.” Finally, these two discourses represent opposite ends on a spectrum of thinking in the data. Participant responses were located at various points on this spectrum and often changed over the course of the interview. Documents used also demonstrated elements at various points along the spectrum. Hence, a perforated line in the chart below captures the fluidity in changing ideologies.

Table 2 provides an overview of the spectrum of Opportunity Gap Discourses in the MSIC Program. In addition to providing an organizational overview of key findings in this chapter, Table 2 is intended for use by the MSIC Program, the TDSB and other school districts, for assessment/evaluation and planning/reflection. Appendix G provides a more generalized version of Table 2 for use by districts, as well as a list of critical inquiries for practitioners to explore when using this tool. A general overview of the Charitable and Social Justice Discourses to Closing Opportunity Gaps in the MSIC Program is provided after Table 2, followed by an examination of these discourses within the four dimensions of inequity: Redistribution, Recognition, Representation, and Re-education.

**Charitable Discourse on Closing the Opportunity Gap in the MSIC Program**

Charitable discourses to closing opportunity gaps are most closely aligned with liberal and neoliberal approaches to education. As stated earlier, notions of liberalism and neoliberalism ascribe to the myth of neutrality, which assumes that everyone needs the *same things*, and should have the *same outcomes* in skill, dispositions, and attitudes, which leads to a one-size-fits-all model of education. Liberal discourses also focus entirely on individuals and fail to account for larger socio-political, historic, and economic factors (both within and outside of school) that affect students and schooling outcomes. Those ascribing to neoliberalism comply with these same principles, but for the purpose of serving market forces and being globally competitive. Neoliberalism constructs justice as preparing *all* students for the workforce and critics see their loyalty to the economy as a means to tap into untapped resources (students who
### Overview of Opportunity Gap Discourses in the MSIC Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spectrum of the Opportunity Gap Discourses in the MSIC Program—Adapted from Fraser’s (2005) Tripartite Theory of Justice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourses evident in both MSIC documents and participant interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourses are contextual and change with time, space and stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant responses often moved along this spectrum over the course of the interview, and at times lead to cognitive dissonance and reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charitable Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal and neoliberal approaches to education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notions of: sameness (one-size-fits-all), individualism, meritocracy, neutrality, standardization, apolitical and ahistorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notions of deficit thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Justice Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical approaches to education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notions of: difference, recognition, rights, collectivism, systemic barriers, context (socio-political, economic, historic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notions of strength-based thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses systemic and ideological root causes of marginalization and racialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-racism, anti-classism, anti-sexism, anti-heterosexism, anti-ableism, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Redistribution (Inequalities in the material conditions of children’s lives: economic dimension)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse of sameness (equality) and individualism exists at a school level in the program’s response to addressing socioeconomic inequities between MSIC and non-MSIC schools in order to get all schools to the same level (MSIC Deliverables, Vision and Goals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse of difference (equity) is evident at a system level with regards to the redistribution of funds and staff required to establish the MSIC Program in response to larger societal inequities (poverty) and system inequities (achievement, opportunity gaps)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levelling the playing field with regards to opportunity gaps outside of the school system (e.g., health care, nutrition, access to community resources, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levelling the playing field with regards to the material conditions within the school system (e.g., access to field trips, technology in schools, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Opportunities” are considered broadly and constructed beyond those common to white, middle-class students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognition (Inequalities in cultural belonging or equal social status: cultural dimension)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive notions of multiculturalism that do not threaten the status quo, surface-level recognition that does not require the critical engagement of competing values, and multiple and opposing truths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equitable notions of who and what is considered ‘different’ and why (accounting for socio-political and historic contexts), examination of what constitutes the status quo and how policies, practices and ideologies deny, maintain, or resist the status quo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep and fundamental differences are acknowledged, valued, viewed as strengths and serve as catalysts to change the fundamental structures of schooling practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and families are positioned as agentic, with capabilities, strengths and contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program constructed as a saviour and a tool for empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program constructed as an ally in challenging injustice (individual and systemic)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Charitable Discourse

**Representation (Inequalities in voice in decisions that affect one’s well-being: political dimension)**

- All students, parents/guardians, community members and staff count as equal members of the schooling community in theory

- Increased stakeholder voice in decision-making that does not have the ability to change board/program structures and foci (e.g., Parent Academies)

Social Justice Discourse

**Representation (Inequalities in voice in decisions that affect one’s well-being: political dimension)**

- All students, parents/guardians, community members and staff count as equal members of the schooling community in theory and in practice

- Interventions to increase political voice are created to address the needs of students, families and communities that are currently, and have historically been mis/underrepresented.

- Stakeholder voice has the ability to change board/program structures/foci (e.g., ICAC)

**Re-education (Inequalities related to schooling experiences, pedagogy and learning: educational dimension)**

- Schooling leads to student success (as defined by standardized tests)

- Equity in education constructed as: sameness in outcomes, success, readiness to learn, potential, choices (as determined by school system)

- Excellence (as defined by standardized test scores) leads to equity

Social Justice Discourse

**Re-education (Inequalities related to schooling experiences, pedagogy and learning: educational dimension)**

- Schooling prepares students to take their rightful place in a democratic society and leads to broader notion of student success (choice, opportunity, well-being, achievement)

- Equity in education constructed as:
  - Same rights, recognition, choices (determined in conjunction with students, families)
  - Differences in approaches, resources, opportunities

- Equity leads to ‘excellence’, but that is not the goal of education

(are not meeting pre-determined educational standards) and to reduce social costs associated with income and other disparities.

In the charitable discourse on closing the opportunity gap, the ‘gap’ lies with the student and the family, and comprises school readiness, schooling outcomes and success, and potential for achievement. Like neoliberal and liberal discourses, the gap is considered against a pre-determined standard, which supports a depoliticized notion of education and a focus on the skills required to be competitive in the workforce. In many liberal and neoliberal discourses, deficit thinking arises when the fault or blame for the gap is placed on the student and the family, such as one interview participant who suggested that one of the causes of the gap was “being raised in a broken family.” Notions of deficit thinking did appear in participant
responses and documents when students were constructed based on what they “lacked”—experience, social skills and academic skills, emotional readiness and resilience, and school-recognized vocabulary.

In this discourse, participants noted several causes for the opportunity gap, including abject poverty, cultural mismatch between the school and the home/community, lack of knowledge on how to close the gaps, and the need for families to work with the school system. From this vantage point, the goal of closing the opportunity gap is to get all students to the same level in terms of achievement. This requires taking care of the effects of poverty, such as tending to basic needs (healthcare, nutrition, social-emotional needs, etc.), which are foundational for students to achieve. It also involves providing more resources and more opportunities for students with less social capital and family income, so that they have access to the experiences of students in the dominant culture (white, middle-class). It does not, however, attend to the effects of ideological and systemic causes of marginalization, racialization, and the opportunity/achievement gaps.

There is a focus on individualism in this discourse. As such, there are efforts to support individual resiliency and persistence in students to overcome barriers to success. There are also efforts to highlight and learn from individual teachers and principals who are doing extraordinary things in their classrooms and schools to close opportunity and achievement gaps. The solution to close the gap is also focused on the individual—the individual teacher, the individual leader, and the individual school—in an effort to motivate or encourage school personnel to engage in the program initiatives in a depoliticized nature. If educators do not make attempts to close these gaps in their schools, greater accountability is required to ensure ideological and practical commitments to gap-closing measures. Therefore, closing the gap requires generating political will to convince individuals to care about the plight of individuals, and this means providing significant funding to schools to increase student access to
‘mainstream’ opportunities and choices. Since there are many causes of the achievement gap, the responsibility lies with everyone (educators, families, and community partners). However in this discourse, one is not certain that the opportunity and achievement gaps can be closed, since the environmental factors causing the inequities are so great. One participant explained that as student demographics change, the gap itself will still exist in a different form and with different students, instead of the root causes of the gap being addressed and eradicated.

Charitable discourses often tell partial stories because they do not account for the root causes of inequities, the system’s role in maintaining inequities, and the impact of socio-political, economic, and historical factors on students and schooling processes.

**Social Justice Discourse to Closing the Opportunity Gaps in the MSIC Program**

Social justice discourses are most closely aligned with critical discourses in education. From critical perspectives, equity focuses on how larger socio-political, economic, and historic forces maintain and exacerbate power imbalances in schools, instead of focusing on individual students, families, communities, teachers or leaders. There is a strong focus on understanding how various forms of oppression (individual, ideological, relational, and systemic) influence students, families and communities, and their experiences of schooling. Differences in knowledge, culture, and ideas are valued and continually constructed in fluid and dynamic ways through language, power, and praxis.

In the social justice discourse on closing opportunity gaps, the ‘gap’ lies with the school system itself, as well as socio-political, economic, and historical inequities in the larger society. Rooted in critical pedagogies, this discourse questions how actions or inactions have and continue to further marginalize, marginalized students. The ‘gap’ here refers to: discriminatory and deficit mindsets that educators and society at large have about and towards racialized and marginalized children; ineffective teaching methods and strategies that fail to affirm students, families, and communities; the limited role and responsibility of the school system to challenge
the status quo and provide supports for all students; the absence of strong and caring relationships between educators, students, and families; and, systemic barriers to equality (standardized testing, funding, hiring processes, focus of professional learning, etc.). The ‘gap’ also includes larger socio-political and economic factors such as lack of access and opportunity to material resources; individual and systemic racism and classism leading to mis/recognition of students, families, and communities; and, unequal rights and differences in access to decision-making opportunities. In this discourse, the major cause of the gap has to do with what critical discourses assert is the role of the education system: reproduce societal inequities, preserve marginalization, and protect the status quo. There is recognition in this discourse that education is set up to serve white, middle-class children, interests, and worldviews.

The goal of education from this perspective is to support students in having access and opportunity to unlimited choices in life and career (instead of having choices made for them or having to choose from limited, pre-determined options), and to support the development of engaged citizens who can participate fully in a democratic society. As one participant explained:

The biggest change would be what would happen outside of schools. Closing the achievement and opportunity gaps would change poverty in Toronto. You couldn’t be graduating kids who could do what they wanted to do because they had a successful schooling experience, and not change the community that they were coming from at the same time, socioeconomically.

Schooling experiences can be improved in a number of ways: improving teaching and learning through the lens of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (ensuring that students’ identities are positively reflected and affirmed in the curriculum, student voice, etc.); providing varied opportunities for students to explore interests and skills (and not simply opportunities afforded to white, middle-class children); building strong and caring relationships between educators, students, and families; holding school, program and senior administrative board staff accountable for their decisions and actions; ensuring the voices of the people most affected are
informing the reforms; strong community partnerships and advocacy within and beyond the school system; a system-wide tiered approach to decisions (especially regarding systemic issues); greater accountability (bottom-up, top-down, and multi-directional); and, equity training (or re-education) for all stakeholders in the education system to challenge preconceived biases about students, families, and communities. One participant explained that a system response requires an “ongoing process of dialogue in an open and trusting environment,” in which “the expectation is that everybody will be transformed as a result of engaging in this work—educators, families, students, and communities.”

Therefore, closing the gap requires generating political will to first convince people that there are large societal and schooling inequities, and then to convince them to challenge and change the status quo. In this discourse, the responsibility of closing the opportunity gaps lies largely with the school board (leaders, principals, and teachers), in partnership with students and families. Community partners, governments, and other Ministries also have a key role to play in closing the gap. Interview participants had different opinions on whether it was possible to close the gap. For those who thought it was possible to close the gap, they spoke of a pedagogy of hope, and a moral/ethical obligation as an educator to create a more fair and humane world. Those who thought it was not possible commented on the growing societal inequities in Toronto, limited Board resources, insufficient political will, and the influences of the larger neoliberal system in which the school board is situated.

In summary then, charitable discourses to closing opportunity gaps are situated in liberal discourses (equality of opportunity and condition, supported by meritocracy, and the myth of neutrality) and neoliberal discourses (equality of outcomes that promotes fairness as sameness and promises efficiency, competition, and economic success). Social justice discourses to closing the opportunity gap are situated in critical discourses (valuing difference, equal rights and equitable access, treatment, and opportunities by disrupting ideological, individual,
relational, and systemic forms of oppression). Each of these discourses comprises ends of a spectrum of thinking and is manifested in four dimensions of inequity evidenced in both the participant interviews and document study.

Redistribution

Charitable Discourses to Redistribution

The ideology of sameness as a solution to addressing high levels of poverty in schools is evident in the standardization of programming, initiatives, and resources made available to schools in the MSIC Program. The MSIC Deliverables (on average 15 listed per year) and the MSIC Vision and Goals (on average 15 listed per year, many of which are similar to the deliverables), clearly outlined what every school with a high percentage of families living in poverty should do to create more equitable outcomes for student success. The central question here is what elements of a large-scale reform for equity should be standardized, centralized, and mandated and what elements should be left to the discretion of the local school community? In contrast, equity-minded reforms from a social justice discourse would likely not be centralized and standardized, because they would be highly context-dependent.

Several of the documents and interviews outlined the depth and breadth of initiatives that addressed opportunity gaps based on material conditions and demonstrated both charitable and social justice discourses to closing opportunity gaps. Some of the initiatives addressed systemic gaps in the larger society and aligned with social justice discourses to closing opportunity gaps. The MSIC Deliverables and Year-at-a Glance documents demonstrated a strong, integrated commitment to addressing systemic gaps and barriers to accessing health care and community resources. Nutrition programs in every school, paediatric clinics in seven schools (one per cluster), mental health initiatives, hearing and vision clinics, free eyeglasses and audiological support helped to address gaps in basic health care for students in MSIC Schools. Furthermore,
before and after school programs, early years supports, guides to community resources, newcomer settlement support, parent outreach and education, and extensive partnerships with community agencies addressed the effects of poverty on students and families in Toronto and some of the causes of unequal schooling outcomes (i.e., treatment, experiences, achievement, etc.).

Addressing larger systemic inequities in the material conditions of children’s lives can be an example of a social justice discourse on closing opportunity gaps. However, it falls under the charitable discourse when the fault of the inequities is attributed to individuals, without recognition of larger, socio-political inequities (e.g., lack of funds to purchase foods, food deserts in the city, inadequate resources from social assistance, etc.). Five of 15 participants attributed significant responsibility of material inequities to the poor choices and lack of skill/knowledge of individuals. One participant described it as follows:

Kids always come to school hungry, but we have to stop just feeding them. We have to give them ways to be self-sufficient. It takes time. It’s like families on welfare. It’s not enough to give them money; we have to teach them how to budget their money and not spend it on vices to cope with reality. We have to make sure there are other things they can do.

Several initiatives involving the distribution of resources also focused on systemic differences in access to material goods and student experiences within and between schools. Field trips, co-curricular activities, and a focus on increasing resources in MSIC schools (e.g., technology, texts, programs, equipment, etc.), addressed a commitment to levelling the playing field between MSIC schools and non-MSIC schools. The underlying logic here is that if students have access to the same experiences and the same material goods, we will level the playing field. This logic fails to consider that students and families may not want the same things in the same ways and at that same time, and that a pre-defined standard of what constitutes ‘experience’ or ‘material goods’ perpetuates neoliberal notions of sameness and
neutrality. Six of 15 participants responded to inequities in material conditions from this perspective of sameness. One participant commented:

Part of what MSIC is doing is providing some of the things that are missing from some of the kids’ lives…You’ll see bigger growth because they come with nothing and all they have is what’s at school, whereas in other communities, the potential is there but they have all these other opportunities to grow.

If a lack of opportunity is understood from the perspective of a pre-determined standard, then it renders invisible the opportunities and experiences that students do bring with them to their schooling experiences. This automatically leads to notions of deficit thinking because these students do not often have the particular experiences and social capital that are valued in the school system. Examples of initiatives in the MSIC Program that are provided to all students, included ‘Welcome to Kindergarten’ bags (with various activities and resources for parents to explore with their children in Kindergarten), the ‘Family Passport’ with discounted rates to attractions in the city, as well as large-scale curriculum initiatives. It is unclear how these initiatives support all children in all schools to participate fully and equally in a democratic society, how they protect the rights of marginalized students, or how they promote equitable access and opportunity.

Further, there are also specific deliverables that may perpetuate notions of ‘lack’ and deficiency. For example, the HEROES Program, a “strength-based experiential learning program with a focus on the ongoing development of confidence, character, and integrity for adolescents” (TDSB, 2014e, p. 6) is only offered to students in MSIC schools. Without consideration of the economic and socio-political factors that influence why some students in MSIC schools may face greater social and emotional challenges (this notion itself being problematic with regards to who defines social-emotional challenges and for what purpose), emotional and social ‘deficiencies’ can easily be attributed to individual students, families, and communities. It should be noted that upon review, the MSIC Program identified biases and
culturally irrelevant materials in the HEROES Program and created supplementary curriculum for teachers that included more culturally relevant texts and examples.

From a distance, redistribution in the MSIC Program is evidence of a social justice discourse on closing opportunity gaps. However a closer look at the actual initiatives reveals a combination of both charitable and social justice discourses. In commenting on the future of the program, one participant noted, “Not that you don’t want to have a food program and go to the Science Centre. That’s all nice. But that’s not what I think fundamentally needs to change.” It is important to note that understanding equity and justice from the perspective of redistribution alone is a charitable approach to closing opportunity gaps because it does not account for differences in representation, recognition, and re-education that are foundational to a truly just society and education system.

**Social Justice Discourses to Redistribution**

A spectrum of charitable and social justice discourses to redistribution was evident in MSIC documents and participant interviews. At the start of the program, there was a greater focus on social justice discourses. The MSIC Program was founded on the awareness that there were growing social and economic inequities in the city of Toronto, and that there were significant achievement gaps in the TDSB. The MSIC initiative was intended to channel funding from the Ministry of Education’s Learning Opportunities Grant to schools with the greatest concentrations of poverty, and ensure that additional human and financial resources were in place to support students in these schools. This language is echoed throughout the MSIC Task Force Report (TDSB, 2005) in statements such as, “The goal of public education is to level the playing field for all children regardless of their socio-economic circumstance or cultural background” (p. 4).
The Learning Opportunities Index (LOI) is an instrument intended to identify the differences in degrees of external challenges faced by schools. In the LOI Questions & Answers document (TDSB, 2014), it states:

Public education is designed to give all children an equal opportunity to succeed. The TDSB recognizes that students face varying degrees of challenge, which can impact their ability to achieve high educational outcomes. Educational research has demonstrated that children from lower income families face more significant barriers in achieving high educational outcomes. Because of its commitment to achieving equitable academic opportunities, the TDSB wants to ensure that every student has an equitable opportunity to succeed. This means ensuring all students have access to available resources. The LOI helps to ensure that children who have access to fewer resources at home and in their neighbourhoods have increased access to available resources in their schools. The LOI will assist with steering additional resources to the schools serving students who face greater challenges. (p. 1)

The LOI considers factors such as: median income; percentage of families whose income is below the low income measure (before tax); percentage of families receiving social assistance; adult education levels; adults with university degrees; and, lone-parent families. It is a measure of relative need and provides a comparison between schools at a specific point in time. The MSIC Program includes the top 150 schools on the LOI.

Participant responses also demonstrated social justice discourses in an understanding that differences in student experiences require a differential response at the system level (eight of 15 participants) and recognizing that ‘equity is not equal’ (15/15 participants). One participant indicated:

The Model Schools for Inner Cities Program as an example of a response to community needs was an important development, and an important reform. In my view, of course, any systematic and system-wide response to social characteristics of communities must first recognize that we don't have a situation where a student is a student is a student.

When the MSIC Program first started, a discourse of equity was evident in the recognition of differences in external challenges that students face and the need for a targeted and equitable system response to these differences. However, within the program, a discourse
of sameness seemed to permeate much of the initiatives and responses to poverty, which is affiliated with the charitable discourses to closing opportunity gaps.

**Recognition**

This discourse explores how recognition, misrecognition, or absence of the recognition of identities and power dynamics (Taylor, 1994) surfaced in the MSIC documents and interviews, from both charitable and social justice discourses. This includes differences in ideological constructions of students and families being served, as well as constructions of the MSIC Program with a particular focus on how recognition impacts notions of success in the program and differences between MSIC and on-MSIC schools.

The concept of recognition is intimately connected to the concept of difference. Audre Lorde (1984) stated that it is not the differences in themselves, but the social constructions and conceptualizations of difference that divide people. Ghosh & Abdi (2004) stated:

> Power relations (based on social constructions of difference) invariably denote oppressive consequences, whether conscious (and obvious) or not. Those who are different (conceptualizations of groups based on race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, ability, social class, and other social identities) become the ‘Other’, and their histories, cultures and experiences are denigrated and/or eradicated. (p. 24)

As a comparative, relational, and political concept, difference is enacted to perpetuate dominance and maintain inequitable social structures (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004): “Difference is a process of construction of meanings in the interplay of power and identity, which brings together groups on the basis of their subordination” (p. 25). With this understanding, Ghosh and Abdi argued, the onus is on the ‘Other’ to close the gaps between their realities and the realities of the dominant consciousness. In the context of this study, the ‘Other’ constitutes students and families living in Toronto’s inner cities/suburbs. The recognition, misrecognition of, and absence of recognition of these groups by the MSIC Program and the Board will be explored below.
Positive Representations of Difference

In some of the earlier MISC documents and interview responses, difference was both recognized and constructed positively, and therefore described in transformative ways. For example, the process and criteria for choosing the original ‘Model Schools’ was very intentional in recognizing and valuing the diversity in school communities, as evident in the following quotes: “The ICAC hopes the approach to preparing the proposal will be inclusive and collaborative and would like to stress that schools are not being judged, nor are they being compared to one another” (TDSB 2005b) and “Each proposal will look as different and unique as the school community it represents” (TDSB 2005b). Furthermore, the 3-year report that highlighted the results of the program based on the seven original model schools, described outcomes academically and in multiple outcome areas (well-being, staff/student/parent engagement, community involvement, etc.). The report also recognized the differences in each school community (e.g., degree of external challenges, internal structures and organization, and initial academic baselines). It highlighted the different successes of the seven original Model Schools and painted a picture of how success was constructed in each of these school communities. Over time, there is evidence of both charitable and social justice discourses in the constructions of students, families, and communities in ‘inner-cities’ by the MSIC Program and in turn how it responded to these perceived realities.

Charitable Discourses to Recognition

In the charitable discourse on recognition, students and families were seen as having less than desirable life circumstances and as needing support from external sources. The students and families did not necessarily cause their unfortunate circumstances, but also did not have the resources or expertise to create the opportunities needed for success. Furthermore, notions of success, well-being and engagement were limited and defined by the system, without accounting
for perspectives from students, families, and communities.

The 2010-2012 MSIC Backgrounder described ‘students living in poverty’ as follows:

- Children living in poverty face hunger, emotional trauma and homelessness. They often have limited access to regular health and dental care. These pressures serve as obstacles hindering their ability to learn;
- Children living in poverty have less exposure to mainstream cultural, recreational and enrichment programs, less access to technology and are less like likely to achieve recognition in the arts than middle and upper class children;
- Parents living in poverty often face many barriers that prevent them from taking part in school activities or providing support with homework; a key factor in student success is parent involvement. (p. 1)

Here, the construction of students living in poverty is one of deficit and lack. While some of the points raised here may have elements of ‘truth,’ they tell a single story of poverty and the description fails to recognize the strengths, capabilities, resiliency, and contributions of students and families living in poverty. Three of 15 participants noted that communities have become stigmatized with the label of “Model Schools for Inner Cities”.

In the charitable discourse on recognition, there is also a simplistic understanding of poverty and of the various factors, experiences, and social constructions of individuals in ‘inner-city’ communities. Poverty in Toronto exists both in the inner city and in the inner suburbs; is both generational and new (many newcomers to Toronto are living in poverty); is relational and fluid; can include homelessness; is connected to capitalism; is visible and invisible; is economic, social, and cultural; and, can include experiences for resistance, change, and consciousness-raising. Most notable was the absence of any reference to race and the racial achievement and opportunity gaps, and the deep and complex intersections between social class, race, and gender. These and other complexities/differences related to poverty, social class and subsequently classism, were not acknowledged in the documents that I analysed.

Seven of 15 participants commented that a limited notion of equity exists in the program because of a limited notion of poverty. One participant remarked:
The program doesn’t give the same attention to race, gender, sexual orientation, etc….but I do believe that it's important for all of those areas of equity to find discussion and response because all of those issues exist in inner city communities. It's not just poverty. Poverty may be the characteristic that brings people forward. That may be a common characteristic to most of the students but I think all these other issues, issues of race, gender and sexual orientation, ability and disability are all areas on the equity spectrum that need to be addressed as well. We can't say, ‘No we're just dealing with poverty folks and I'm not touching that other stuff.’

Another participant also shared that it is not a commonly understood requirement for schools in the MSIC Program to address other inequities aside from socioeconomic inequities: “We’ve done a lot more focus in the other areas of equity, but it’s not been an expectation in Model Schools to do that. One of the things we’ve done is focus on gender.”

A simplistic view of poverty, rooted in the myth of neutrality, runs the risk of providing simplistic solutions that are the same for all students, families, and schools. Furthermore, there was no commentary in participant interviews on the role of larger socio-political, economic and historical forces, and systemic inequities—both within and without the school system—that contribute to poverty, the experiences of living poverty, and the solutions to addressing poverty as a school system. Charitable discourses to recognition do not forefront the impacts of historic and current socio-political and economic inequities on students and schooling. In describing the role of parents and community partners in closing opportunity and achievement gaps, one participant noted:

Families need to own it somewhat by identifying their gaps and working with the system at the education level to say this is how much I can do and this is how much I can’t. And they are at the table with us. But if they can’t control their children for whatever reason, maybe I need parenting skills. Maybe I need to learn more about the system. And I understand how hard that is. The parents can’t blame the school only. And sometimes what happens with the opportunity gap is we find these groups that say it’s the Board’s fault. ‘You’re suspending our kids’. But then when we unpack individual cases, some are warranted. If a child brings a gun to school and that child happens to be from that particular group…and the reality is that we have a lot of barriers against us. In some areas, there are large percentages of one demographic of student. If we suspend a student of that demographic group, then it is unfair to be pegged that I only suspend children of that demographic. We have to be realistic about data and unpack it properly. And it is a knowledge gap and we need to bring parents in to be more knowledgeable and invested.
And I’m not saying they’re not invested. They are. They’re doing the best they can. But it’s also their responsibility to work with the school and identify what they can’t do so that we can fill those gaps.

While this perspective was voiced by one participant, and cannot be generalized as a theme in this study, it is worthy of mention because of the absence of discussion on the socio-political and historical impacts on students and schooling. This description suggested that families needed to partner and collaborate in order to identify their needs, instead of working with the system to identify system needs and shortfalls. If parents knew more and had more training, they would better discipline their children, as opposed to (or at minimum in addition to) if system leaders, principals, and teachers unpacked their biases and prejudices that led to unfair treatment and perceptions of racialized and marginalized students, there would be less ‘behavioural issues.’ Furthermore, this description suggested that the fault of behaviour and management lay squarely with the family, without any consideration for how larger socio-political and economic structures, and internal ideological and systemic inequities in schools may influence a child’s engagement and ‘behaviour’. The MSIC Program has used the Joyce Epstein Framework of ‘Six Types of Parent Involvement’ as the major framework for engaging parents and strengthening home-school-community partnerships. This framework has been heavily criticized for its romanticized view of the family, which further marginalizes low-income and minority parents by placing too great a focus on individual families, and insufficient focus on the systemic changes needed to transform unequal power relations between schools and families (de Carvalho, 2001).

In the charitable discourse on recognition, the MSIC Program was constructed as a benevolent support that students, families, and communities needed and could not do without. This discourse is rooted in a deficit mindset that frames the students, families, and communities as needing to be ‘fixed’ or have gaps ‘filled,’ ‘saved’ from environments that are unsafe and
under-stimulating, and ‘empowered’ to be engaged in the schooling process. A problem-fixing and gap-filling approach is taken to close gaps, which includes the description of a problem, an explanation of the cause, a prescription for changed results, and then a reassessment of to what degree the ‘problem’ has been solved. In this context, the MSIC Program is the ‘all-encompassing’ solution to the problem.

The program was described in one document as “providing students with the tools, resources and opportunities they need to participate fully and equally in school and their communities” (TDSB, 2015, p. 1). While this aim for education is promising, students are constructed as passive recipients without any of their own resources, knowledge, or agency to affect change. In an internal document, the program is described as follows:

Being a ‘Model School for Inner Cities’ is primarily a state of mind. When school leaders work together with their communities to provide students with opportunities, students are empowered. When school leaders help parents gain the tools they need to advocate for their children, families are empowered. When the school staff works together to bring innovation to teaching and learning, the school community is empowered.

This statement demonstrates a belief that students, families, and communities are the stakeholders needing empowerment, and that school leaders and school staff are the providers of this empowerment. It is also evident that empowerment is constructed as something that can be ‘given to’ another person, and that ‘working together’ and ‘helping others gain the tools they need’ are mechanisms for empowerment. In this discourse, MSIC is positioned as a ‘saviour’, which was evident in six of 15 participant responses, in addition to some of the documents. As one participant noted, “What happens in situations with lots of poverty and disruption of family support, is schools have come to some degree to take on the role of supports that are missing. And that’s where MSIC comes in. That’s what we’re trying to make up for.” This ideology assumes an inability to self-empower and a lack of recognition of the role that power plays in empowerment. Ashcroft (1987) stated that empowerment involves creating the conditions that
bring a person into a state or ability to act. Paulo Freire’s (1993) notion of *power with*, as opposed to *power over* oppressed peoples, recognizes that people are never actually powerless and can display power through acts of resistance.

Lather (1991) further problematized the “politics of empowerment” and found it troublesome to think of empowerment as “individual self-assertion, upward mobility and the psychological experience of feeling powerful” (p. 3). Instead, she defined empowerment as “analyzing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives” (p. 4). Like Freire, she believes that “empowerment is a process one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone…” (p. 4). However empowering education means that the conditions are created for the transformation of students’ potential power so that they can be forces of change in their own lives and the social conditions around them (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004).

**Social Justice Discourses to Recognition**

In contrast to charitable discourses, social justice discourses to recognition have more to do with what Inglis (1997) refers to as emancipation, rather than empowerment. The central idea is that “empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power” (p. 4). Social justice discourses to recognition are evident in the TDSB Equity Foundation Statement. This document recognizes the contributions of all members of a school community, as well as the inequitable access, opportunity, and treatment of certain groups to resources, programs, services, etc., both inside and outside the schooling system. These inequities result in inequitable schooling outcomes, which do not reflect the abilities, capabilities, and contributions of the student and families.
From this perspective, students are constructed as resilient, agentic, capable, and having strengths and assets that contribute to vibrant communities and school cultures. The MSIC Program and the TDSB are constructed as vehicles that can maintain, disrupt, or perpetuate trends in schooling outcomes. It is the role of the school system to interrogate systemic policies and their implementation; protect the rights of all students and families; ensure equitable access to programs, information, services and resources; and, value and respect differences in identities, knowledges, perspectives, and values. The Board or program is therefore constructed as an ally of marginalized and racialized communities. This relationship is best described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, who stated, “The ‘radical, committed to human liberation’ does not consider oneself as a hero or liberator, but rather a servant that comes alongside the oppressed” (Freire, 1970, p. 39).

The Board or program can also be positioned as a broker of social and cultural capital. In recognizing that some people have social and cultural capital, that “may or may not be recognized by the dominant society as a valid form of currency within certain contexts”, it is necessary to both value the existing social and cultural capital, as well as teach what is valued in dominant field or contexts (Mansfield, 2014, p. 46). This requires that students and families ‘learn the rules of the game’ as well as critically examine their social location based on intersecting identities.

In the following quote from the MSIC Task Force Report, a social justice discourse is presented in the purpose of schooling, however a charitable discourse is evident when explaining the effects of external challenges on student success, which can easily lead to deficit thinking:

The challenge faced by urban schools today is to equip students from diverse backgrounds to participate fully and equally in an increasingly complex Canadian society. Teaching is not limited to the classroom but is embodied in every aspect of the school experience and student learning is impacted by disparate social factors. Poverty, culture shock, family status, and youth violence increasingly play roles in the lives of our
students and are especially significant in the lives of our inner city students. (TDSB, 2005, p. 2)

The 2013-2014 MSIC Backgrounder marks a clear deviation from the 2010-2011 version in stating:

The Model Schools for Inner Cities Program is fundamentally rooted in a strength-based approach aimed at increasing access and opportunities for all students. When students, teachers, families and communities work collaboratively to create positive change, student achievement, well-being and engagement are increased.

This change in construction of students, families, and communities notes the presence of shifting understandings and conceptualizations, including six of 15 participant responses that demonstrated social justice discourses in closing the recognition opportunity gap. One participant stated that the system is creating the achievement gap because it does not account for differences in culture and lived experiences:

There were many unhappy and understandably angry Somali moms whose children had been labeled slow or Spec Ed., when in fact, they simply hadn’t had a formal education or very little of it within a different, very stressful context at home. They came here and they had neither the language nor the traditional educational background and we have the nerve to say they have an achievement gap. You’re damn right they have an achievement gap, but the gap is our fault because we haven’t taken their cultural background into consideration and learned how to address their needs…how to bring their needs into focus given their background, language needs, etc. We mess them all up into one big pot and say you all have an achievement gap.

Another participant spoke to the role of principals in being of service to the community, as well as the students:

Families are not an extension of the school. The school is an extension of the community. And if the community is asking for support, the school should engage to help the adults as well as the children. Principals should be aware of what’s going on in the community around them and it shouldn’t just be about the children.

In envisioning how the program could be positioned from a social justice lens, a third participant noted:

What I’d like it to be is a program that challenges the way things are done in schools and in society so that there would not be a need for a MSIC Program, because the causes of
the inequalities that exist in schools would no longer be there. The MSIC Program should exist to put itself out of business. That’s the difference between charity and social justice. Charities exist forever and people make money off of them. If social justice was the fundamental center of MSIC, then all of the systemic things that reinforce the achievement and opportunity gaps, (like the inequalities between schools), would be fundamental to the program. It would be teachers working with young people to understand the world in which they live that connect to the kids’ experiences and help them see that this isn’t their fault, but it’s the way the world is…and there are ways to challenge it from when they are in Kindergarten to when they are in high school.

Conceptions of Success

Charitable and social justice discourses to recognition influence how success is defined in the program and understandings of whether and how MSIC schools should be similar to or different from non-MSIC schools. In participant interviews, program success was defined in varied ways, including: the number of people and organizations wanting to partner with Model Schools; the fact that it is institutionalized in the Board and has moved from project to program status; an increase in parent voice and engagement in schools; curriculum and MSIC units that are requested by non-MSIC schools, other boards, and the Ontario Ministry of Education; and increased community partnerships.

The more formal assessments used and relied upon for demonstrating the value of the program are another example of standardization, sameness, and a focus on the individual, instead of on broader, systemic factors. Standards-based assessments such as the Canadian Achievement Test (national), the EQAO test (provincial), the Developmental Reading Assessment, and the Comprehension Attitude Strategies Interests (CASI) assessment, draw on very narrow notions of literacy and numeracy that support a neoliberal approach to education and reduce education to discrete and instrumental skills required to compete globally and contribute to the economy.

Furthermore, the Early Development Instrument and Resiliency Tests perpetuate liberal preoccupations with the individual and notions of success/failure that draw on ideas of
meritocracy. The idea of assessing readiness and filling gaps based on a pre-defined set of standards that must apply to all students to best prepare them for the workforce, and then working to get all students to the same standard as an act of justice, without recognizing students’ strengths not identified in these tests, and assuming that all students and their families have the same goals and destination, is highly troubling.

Nine of 15 participants noted that an additional difficulty with using standardized tests scores as a sole measure of achievement is that for a variety of reasons (e.g., being new to the country, being an English Language Learner, having different or limited educational experiences abroad, etc.), students start at different ‘levels’ or ‘baselines’ and move at different speeds. While this notion of starting at different baselines is still rooted in charitable discourses, four of the nine participants mentioned above struggled with seeing success beyond a neoliberal framework, but began to problematize the overemphasis placed on standardized test scores. For example, one participant noted, “We have to consider where the kids have come from to where they are now. People don’t see all of the students that move from a Level 0 to a Level 1 or 2. They only see the number of students that are not at Levels 3 and 4. They forget all these little increments of success. What are we doing to support all our students?”

Another participant noted a danger in using standardized test scores as the sole measure of achievement and opportunity gaps:

When you look at Lawrence Park, everyone wants to go there because it’s an affluent area, so it’s full. Lawrence Heights (MSIC school), nobody wants to go there and it’s empty. At Lawrence Heights, you have to fill it up somehow, so you fill it up with Special Education programs and then those students can’t write the test or are writing the test with difficulty, but the test is still the test for everybody.

Some of the descriptions about students’ academic achievement and school readiness were described in terms of what the students lacked, their gaps, and what their families and communities failed to provide them. School readiness is also described in deficit terms as
evident in the following quote by an interview participant about the Early Development Instrument (EDI) used to assess Junior and Senior Kindergarten students:

…if you track those early development indicators through, you’ll find that kids that will have challenges are at our neighbourhoods which don’t provide the kinds of support at an earlier age; they tend not do well on their EQAO test; in other words school weren’t making an incredible difference, as they go through. The Inner City Model Schools Initiative was an attempt to mitigate those areas.

Another participant remarked:

I think it's a hard thing because everybody keeps measuring us according to the EQAO [provincial standardized test]. On the EQAO, we've made some gains but we’re not 100%. You think after five to seven years, every school should be at appropriate standards and they're not which goes to show how far back we were in every school.

The Inner City Advisory Committee (ICAC), which came out of the Inner City Task Force, attempted to acknowledge the negative effects of standardized tests on marginalized students, as evident in the quote below from a participant interview:

…[The ICAC discussed] how standardized testing was thwarting growth and understanding what success looks like. Not just in our inner city children, but in students right across the system, but it really was very self-limiting. In fact it was a tool, it was part of a tool kit, but it absolutely should not be the only thing.

However, nothing came of their attempts.

In addition to standardized tests, the MSIC Program gathers data on student resiliency. Notions of individual resilience can place the onus on the child and the family to overcome the effects of socio-political, economic, and historic inequities. Agocs (2004) reminded us that the difference between outcomes discourses and rights-based discourses, is that the former leads to remedies on the individual level, while the latter leads to systemic changes at the collective level. The particular assessment for resilience used in the MSIC Program is framed from strength-based perspectives and the questions, to some degree, assess: identity affirmation, feelings of belongingness in school, perceived notions of ability, student perceptions about whether their voices matter and are affirmed, and long-term engagement that assesses whether
students feel that education will serve them in their future. This challenges traditional notions of individual resilience, but it is unclear how this information is used at the school or program level to address systemic barriers or draw on the strengths of students, families, and communities.

Furthermore, the resiliency surveys fall short of addressing equity in a deep sense according to one participant:

...there are the resilience surveys with the children and the surveys with the parents, but that still doesn’t really measure equity. It measures certain things. It measures their perception on how people treat them based on their culture, based on their language, based on their skin color, but I don’t think it really measures everything that equity is intended [to include]...It measures the impact of model schools. It doesn’t measure equity.

This participant also commented on the limits to the language used in the questions being asked on these surveys, noting language like “mother’s occupation” and “father’s occupation” that failed to include other caregivers.

There were very few examples of social justice discourses used in understanding the success of the program. There is currently no measure to assess whether mindsets about students, families, and communities are changing, and whether their strengths, contributions, and capacities are being acknowledged, celebrated, and valued in the education system. There is also no measure to assess whether the program is addressing systemic inequities within and outside of the Board. One interview participant suggested that new criteria need to be generated to measure program reforms for equity. Six of 15 participants also suggested that measurement tools need to be created to analyze systemic inequities, such as the overrepresentation of MSIC students in certain Special Education classes (e.g., Behaviour, Learning Disability classes, etc.) and the overrepresentation of MSIC students being suspended as compared to non-MSIC students. This is not being measured or addressed currently by the program. Race is also a key indicator of who is in certain Special Education classes and who is being suspended, and the
program is not addressing this either. Three of 15 participants noted that the program should measure its success based on its ability to challenge and change inequitable structures.

Eight of 15 interview participants suggested that we reconsider what we measure to gauge academic success. One suggestion was that measuring graduation rates instead of standardized test scores (or at least in addition to standardized test scores), demonstrates a greater element of choice for students to determine their own futures. The greatest concern raised is that there is no measure of whether the gap is closing between students living in and out of poverty. As one participant noted:

…it [the census data] changed in terms of everybody graduating more people and finishing high school than before, but the gap is still as big as it was to begin with. It's just that everybody is doing a little better. As long as that gap remains, I would say that we have a long way to go.

Relational data needs to be collected that speaks to whether the achievement gap is closing between students in and outside of MSIC schools. There is however, general agreement that MSIC is focused on more than simply academic success. According to one participant, the program, (while positioned as a saviour), intentionally measures students’ opportunities to learn:

You know if you just had an educational system, looking at educational outcomes, you avoid that whole conversation of how does a hungry child learn? How does a sick child or a child who can’t see, how do they learn or who can’t hear? What if they have an undiagnosed? ... And then you can start putting all those pieces together. If the family happens to be refugees from a particular country, those children have missed all kinds of basics, including immunizations, including check-ups. We are that place where parents trust and feel safe and where we can offer at least basic medical support, on those grounds and potentially ... you know it’s a win-win argument, potentially save long term devastating issues and support that child to be an all-round successful learner.

It is also true that while achievement gaps are measured in narrowly defined terms, they are one indicator of success and do provide some level of internal accountably. In focusing on how the program is closing the opportunity gap, but not focusing on whether the achievement and graduation gaps are actually closing, some level of onus is removed from the program and the Board to identify and close gaps that would increase opportunities to learn and by default,
increase students’ success, opportunities, and choices in life. As such, in terms of academic success and opportunities to learn, the MSIC Program is positioned as a charitable saviour, that without, the students, families, and communities would be doomed.

Another participant suggested that in addition to achievement, the program should make better use of measures of student engagement, such as “whether students feel as though they are valued in school and reflected in the teachings, and whether they are genuinely invested in their education because we have levelled the playing field without marginalizing or excluding certain students.” Another participant noted that social connections and relationships, as well as learning skills, are important aspects of child development that are not measured and incorporated into teaching and learning practices. A third participant suggested that success should also be measured by the sense of pride students feel in their school and the degree to which the schools are community schools. Yet another participant noted that the TDSB Mission Statement stated, “We want our students to achieve high levels of success and to become productive member of a democratic society”, and remarked:

Now we never have meaningful conversations about that and we should if we say that is our mission. What is a productive member of a democratic society? What is a model of that? Is it only high incomes? Or is it people who demonstrate the capacity for compassion, kindness, service to others, and leadership abilities? Those are important conversations to have to get people to define what they mean by success.

Given differing opinions on how program success is measured, one participant noted the dangers of not having a clear definition of success for the program and what that might constitute:

As a program we need to say what is success to us. We need to define success as a group because we haven't. Our success is that we get the money next year, that's all it is… How are we measuring success and what are we looking at? You have to go back to those kids and find out how they are doing things differently. How many of our parents are now employed? How many of our parents feel like they’ve been successful because of the help we’ve given them? Do we ever look at that? I just think that you cannot look at test scores alone… If you looked at those children and where those children are today, it would be interesting to ask them, "Did it make a difference that you went to a Model
School? Do you feel any more ready in high school? Did you feel like you were a step above those other kids because you had these great opportunities given to you?

A common understanding of what constitutes successful students in MSIC schools, as well as what constitutes a successful MSIC Program is very much needed for a number of reasons and should involve a wide variety of stakeholders, especially students and families most marginalized by the system. First, it would force all stakeholders to challenge their notions of equity and excellence and the relationship between these two constructs. Second, it would encourage all stakeholders to continuously think about how the system is serving some students and not others, and collectively generate solutions to addressing this gap. Third, it would also encourage the pursuit of a common vision and common goals that multiple stakeholders own and feel a sense of responsibility to uphold. Fourth, as an ongoing conversation, this process would allow the program to continually engage in assessment for learning about how to innovate for equity, ensuring that the ‘end goal’ is continuously questioned and challenged. Finally, new assessments could be created to demonstrate a much wider notion and understanding of success and growth that values difference and recognizes the contributions, assets, and capabilities of all students.

Furthermore, from a social justice discourse, students and families that have been marginalized and racialized by the education and other systems would be partners in assessing their own success and growth, and determining how success and growth would be measured. Pedagogies of care, recognition, and freedom are required for transformative change and an ‘equity within equity’ approach. In contrast, pedagogies of fixing, gap closing, and sameness are required to increase student outcomes, success, and choices (an ‘equality within equity’ approach), but do not change the fundamental structure that causes inequities and oppression in the first place.
Similarities and Differences Between MSIC and Non-MSIC Schools

In addition to different notions of program success, a range of charitable and social justice discourses to recognition are evident in how participants described the similarities and differences between MSIC and non-MSIC schools, and subsequently the differences between MSIC/non-MSIC students and families. A crude distinction is made here between MSIC and non-MSIC schools for the purpose of clarity, while recognizing that pockets of ‘poverty’ exist in non-MSIC schools and relative power and privilege in MSIC schools.

Seven of 15 participants suggested that MSIC schools should be the same as non-MSIC schools, and the reasons provided demonstrated aspects of both charitable and social justice discourses to recognition. Those that ascribed to notions of sameness and a set standard suggested that students in MSIC schools should have the same experiences as students in non-MSIC schools. Furthermore, when asked what an ideal Model School should look like, one participant said, “You don’t know that you’re in a poverty area.” Others who ascribed to social justice discourses suggested that the premise and foundations of MSIC should be the foundations of all schools, because families and communities are valued members of the educational community and there should be a focus of social justice in the curriculum and schooling practices.

Fourteen of 15 participants noted differences between MSIC and non-MSIC schools. Five of those participants noted MSIC schools are better than non-MSIC schools because MSIC schools have better approaches to teaching and learning and the sense of community is much stronger. The other nine suggested that the major differences would be in the cultural and racial diversity of the student body (and greater diversity in social class).

Participants that stated MSIC schools should be different from non-MSIC schools ascribed to social justice discourses. Seven of 15 participants spoke to the need for MSIC
schools to visibly demonstrate that they are a response to larger socio-political inequities, with resources such as kitchens and paediatric clinics and programs such as Parenting and Family Literacy Centres. One participant noted:

It is not only fair to expect the best teaching practices in MSIC schools, it’s critical. The students in our MSIC schools are vulnerable in a way. Although they have strengths and resilience, poverty alone makes them vulnerable in ways that students in other schools aren’t. I used to say that for many of our students, a good education is a life and death proposition—a good education will give students what they need to get them to where they want to go…we need our best and brightest teaching the most vulnerable kids. They need to be innovative, dynamic and responsive to kids in front of them—both teachers and leaders.

Another participant noted that MSIC schools would be places where “kids and parents and communities don’t have to leave who they are to come into the building.”

Interestingly, one participant commented that what is largely missing from this conversation is that there is no system approach to creating programs and curriculum that address unquestioned privilege for non-MSIC schools, as well as no acknowledgment of the negative consequences of unquestioned privilege (e.g., “limited worldviews and perspectives, lower levels of resilience, over-programming,” etc.). This participant suggested that perhaps measures should be created to identify these areas of ‘need’ and put initiatives in place to close these ‘gaps’ if the Board is truly committed to equity.

The ideological constructions of students, families, and communities, as well the MSIC Program itself, has a huge impact on the direction of the program and must be considered in intentional and transformative ways.

Representation

Representation with regards to opportunity gaps refers to ensuring that all people and all stakeholders have a real voice in decision-making processes and outcomes. Differences in charitable and social justice discourses involve the degree to which multiple stakeholders can influence decision-making and change structures and practices in the Board. Furthermore, there
is a conscious and consistent effort to include the voices that are most marginalized in and by the system.

**Charitable Discourses to Representation**

In charitable discourses to representation, some effort is made to address inequalities of voice in decision-making, as long as it does not upset power structures in the program or Board. The process of choosing the original three model schools and the MSIC Parent Academies are examples of this. The process for choosing the original three model schools required school ‘teams’ (parents, staff, administrators, and community partners) to create and submit proposals. In the invitational letter to school and community members, the Inner City Advisory Council (ICAC) stated, “One of the critical components of a model school is the involvement of parents and other community members. In fact, the ICAC hopes that the model schools will be an inspiring focus for the whole school community, beginning with the proposal to become a model school.” The teams assembled to visit schools that submitted proposals consisted of university staff, community partners, principals, senior administrative board staff, and trustees. Furthermore, the school communities were given opportunities to share their vision of the program, comment on their areas of strength and needs, and think about their readiness to embrace the program, without a pre-defined ‘standard of excellence’ that they had to meet to be chosen. There is very clearly an element of voice that exists for multiple stakeholders in the process for choosing schools, however their voice is one that celebrates their school community, but does not change the structure of the Board.

The MSIC Parent Academy is an example of this. The MSIC Parent Academy resource guide demonstrates a commitment to the third essential component of MSIC, *School as Heart of the Community*, in which “parents are welcomed and respected as partners in education” (p. 4). Parent Academies bring together parents and caregivers from cluster schools to share best
practices, decide collectively what they want to learn about, and to some degree, share feedback with the MSIC Program and the Board. Parent Academies are ‘by parents, for parents’ and the three main goals of the academies (i.e., supporting children’s learning and development, becoming familiar with and learning to navigate the education system, and workforce development) “cover the main areas of interest which MSIC parents themselves highlighted at a 2009 Model Schools Parent Conference, as well as successful practices from other areas” (TDSB, N.D., p. 4). The purpose of MSIC staff (i.e., community support workers, lead teachers, and cluster administrators) is to provide support to parents, caregivers, and families in determining their own areas of interest and learning, and remove as many barriers as possible to engagement (i.e., all events and workshops/meetings are free, with child minding, dinner, and transportation provided for free).

However, what is missing from this document is the opportunity for parents and caregivers to: collectively learn about and share concerns regarding the treatment and experiences of their children in the education system, as well as barriers to opportunities and access; effectively resolve concerns and complaints with their schools and the Board; ask questions of the program and Board and receive a complete response; hold the Board accountable to promises made; discuss how to address large-scale system failures such as streaming, sorting, and achievement/opportunity gaps; and, advocate for their rights and the rights of their children. This is most evident in the ‘safe’ topics that are listed as examples under Goal #2, which is becoming familiar with and learning to navigate the education system. This represents a depoliticized notion of parent engagement that works well when it does not fundamentally challenge the structure of the program or the Board.

Five of 15 participants commented on the depoliticized notion of parent engagement that has come to inform the MSIC Program. One participant noted that at the start of the program, community support workers helped parents and caregivers to understand and advocate for their
rights and navigate the system. Now, the community support workers are trained in such a way that they will not put the Board at risk as described by one participant: “Community support workers need to teach parents how to advocate and not simply provide them with workshops.”

Another participant discussed challenges with Special Education, which explains the difference between charitable and social justice discourses to representation:

Special Education in general is a huge centre of inequality and many people in Model Schools think that Special Education is the only answer…and that it the job of MSIC Program is to convince the parent that this is the best place for their kid as opposed to helping parents understand that these are big questions that we need to understand. And the Community Support Workers in the current program, they are not there to help parents challenge the system. They are there to help parents understand the system…understanding the Special Education process, understanding how to pick a high school…but it doesn’t help parents question what is happening to their own kids in schools and classrooms and in the movement through the system.

Six of 15 participants commented on the danger of approaching representation from a charitable discourse. One participant noted that there is a danger to having deficit mindsets about parents and assuming that parents have nothing to offer the school system or other parents. In reflecting on ‘Parent Training Weeks,’ this participant said:

Charity is what is getting all the applause right now. We say to parents, listen we can give you these training weeks and you’re going to get all of these skills to put on a resume and we are going to help you with the employability process. In the beginning we would provide the workshops for free, along with transportation, food, child minding, etc. because we thought we were removing the barriers. But what’s happened is that there is sense of entitlement that we have created. They complain when there are only sandwiches for lunch…but you’re getting all of this training for free. We’re creating a monster. We pity them. And maybe they do need support with some pieces, but they can also give back. They can attend the workshops one day and then help make lunch for others another day. We can’t assume that our families can’t help and have no skills.

**Social Justice Discourses to Representation**

Social justice discourses to representation are evident when structures or initiatives have the potential to change power structures in the program or in the Board. Examples of voice in decision-making that had the potential to change system structures and foci were evident in the
MSIC Task Force Report (2005). The Task Force Report required schools to engage in multiple assessments and evaluation strategies that would be shared regularly with staff, families, and communities for regular feedback and planning (p. 6). This notion of the school board being responsible to the community it serves is rooted in critical pedagogies. Five of 15 interview participants demonstrated social justice discourses to closing representation opportunity gaps. One participant noted that:

The Board may have some idea about how to close opportunity gaps, but the voices of the people who themselves have been marginalized need to be at the table to identify what they believe they need that would make a difference in terms of righting past wrongs.

There is also clear consideration that schools alone cannot eradicate the effects of poverty (TDSB, 2005, p. 5), and that the Inner City Advisory Committee (comprised of parents, trustees, community partners, university representatives, MSIC staff, and TDSB senior administrative board staff) should regularly oversee the working of the program and form strategic partnerships with other government ministries and community agencies to address broader structures affecting poverty such as housing, transportation, health, etc. (p. 6). This approach to reform places the focus on the system, instead of on individuals, as having responsibility to act to remove barriers and protect the rights of those who have been and continue to be marginalized. In the ICAC Backgrounder, available on the TDSB Website, it states the current mandate, as determined at the June 2007 meeting:

The ICAC undertakes to advocate for the needs of all inner city students and level the playing field so that successful inner city students grow up with choices. Through its advisory role to the TDSB, the ICAC has had an impact on many issues affecting students living in Toronto’s inner city communities. ICAC activities include: deputations and motions to the Board regarding issues like the community use of schools, budgetary issues, the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), food security issues, and TTC equity for older students, as well as the participation in Cluster Parent Academy Committee Meetings, and advocacy for inner city issues at all levels of government. Recently, the ICAC has encouraged increased participation in the committee by Model School parent representatives, to further ensure that the focus remains on the right issues, at the right time. (TDSB, 2014d, p. 1)
Words and phrases like ‘advocacy,’ ‘deputations and motions to the Board,’ ‘all levels of government,’ ‘encouraged increased participation,’ and ‘right issues, right time’ indicate the ability and legacy of this committee to challenge and change program and Board structures and policies. One participant added:

The solution is people participating in a process of real conversation about what the needs are, what the issues are and what they can bring to the table…the recognition that all partners have something to contribute and that we identify what is the best way for them to make the contributions that they can make. Because once you develop a process, the solutions themselves will emerge out of that.

It is important to note that from 2014 (when this study ended) to December 2015, several initiatives in both the MSIC Program and the TDSB at large have demonstrated a commitment to social justice discourses in closing representation opportunity gaps. For example, the MSIC Program and the ICAC have developed a community investment strategy, involving 150 community partners and parents, with the following goals: to initiate and change policies and practices to support open schools; to increase access to the use of school space by the community; and to remove historic barriers for marginalized groups in the MSIC Program and engage efforts to decriminalize racialized youth in the education system. The ICAC is also spearheading a motion to the Board to report on how much money the Board receives from the Ontario Ministry of Education through the Learning Opportunities Grant and its allocation in the TDSB. The TDSB has seen a rise of advocacy groups (e.g., the Portuguese Task Force and the Somali Task Force) as well as staff-led initiatives focused on Aboriginal and black student achievement that challenge the Board to provide better treatment, resources, access, and opportunities for racialized and marginalized students. Many of the parents in the TDSB advocacy groups were parents of students in MSIC schools who became increasingly involved in program and Board initiatives over time.
It is also important to note that outside of student voice in the context of curriculum, no participants mentioned increased student voice in MSIC in ways that would impact program goals, structures, and processes. In this study, I explored whether decisions to approach representation from charitable or social justice discourses was deliberate and intentional, or not.

**Re-Education**

This section explores charitable and social justice discourses to teaching and learning, or re-education, and in particular, will explore these discourses in the context of the focus on teaching and learning in MSIC, the MSIC Units, and opportunities for professional learning. Charitable discourses to teaching and learning centre on liberal notions of individualism, sameness, and meritocracy and neoliberal notions of ‘excellence.’ In this view, the purpose of teaching and learning is to ‘get everyone to the same point,’ as one participant noted. This ‘point’ is assessed using standardized test scores that many argue have a narrowly focused view of education and are the specific skills, dispositions, and attitudes needed to create workers for 21st-century jobs. Notions of difference are safe, and focus on inclusion and versions of multiculturalism that do not acknowledge or explore the role of power and privilege in creating and maintaining systems of oppression.

This discourse sees change in education happening as a result of internal characteristics, where individual success is accredited to hard work and perseverance. Therefore, individual students who are successful are constructed as ‘resilient and hardworking,’ individual teachers and principals who are successful in ‘closing the gap’ are revered and looked to for answers on how their mindsets and skills can be transferred and applied to all teachers and leaders. This meritocratic view of success and failure does not account for systemic imbalances in power and privilege that work at the collective level to maintain inequities on the basis of social identities. It also absolves the system of making deep, systemic changes that are at the root of the
inequities in the first place. While there was little mention of how unsuccessful students are constructed in the program, a focus on the individual can lend itself to notions of deficit thinking (Alonso et al., 2009; Apple, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Several participants focused on the failure of individual teachers and leaders to ‘make change happen’ or ‘close gaps’ in their schools. Blackmore (2002) argued that a focus on formal positions of leadership (e.g., principals) makes personal and individual, wider social and moral issues while ignoring “the wider terrain upon which we collectively walk, a fast moving terrain reconfigured constantly by changing forms of political and educational governance, shifting social relations of gender, race, culture, and class” (pp. 201-202).

With this focus on individualism, sameness, and meritocracy, a rhetoric of ‘excellence’ pervades teaching and learning. Students achieve ‘excellence’ if they meet pre-defined standards associated with neoliberal aims and educators achieve ‘excellence’ if they can get students to meet those standards. Achieving ‘excellence’ in this way, or ‘success’ as it is sometimes referred to in the data, leads to equity because it changes the perception of what students in inner cities are capable of, because they are ‘achieving.’

A social justice discourse on teaching and learning, or Re-education, focuses on notions of difference in collective identities and the root causes of inequities in ideologies, relationships, and systems that are common to critical pedagogies in education. The purpose of teaching and learning from social justice discourses is described here in a quote below from the Task Force Report (TDSB, 2005):

Successful inner city school students critically question the world around them and are active participants in a democratic society. Successful inner city school students see and understand the views of others and leave school with the skills and confidence that position them to compete equally in the broader world. (p. 5)

This discourse sees change in education as occurring from changes to environmental conditions of schooling and larger society, which increase opportunities to learn. As such, there
is a focus on how ideologies about particular groups of people influence policies, practices, and ways of knowing/being that maintain and reproduce social inequities.

Participant responses that demonstrated a social justice discourse on re-education suggested that focusing on equity, identities, power and privilege, and social justice should form the basis of teaching and learning. In this paradigm, students’ identities are positively affirmed so that they feel a sense of belonging and validation for who they are, and they are guided towards social action that addresses deeper, systemic inequities. As a result, engagement, learning, and well-being increase, and as a side effect, scores on standardized tests will likely increase (although that is not the primary goal). A social justice discourse continuously seeks out and critiques the system’s response to, and role in, creating and maintaining inequitable schooling outcomes. These include differences in access, opportunity, and treatment of students.

**Changing Discourses in Re-Education**

The changes to discourses in re-education were heavily influenced by the time-series analysis. As such, instead of separating charitable and social justice discourses as has been the case in the previous discussions, both discourses and their influences on one another, are examined here over time.

In the initiation of the program, a social justice discourse on re-education was evident. The Model Schools Task Force Report (TDSB, 2005) envisioned high-quality, high-level instruction based on a strength-based approach to students’ capabilities as identified here: “All children come to school with the capacity and desire to learn and that it is the task of the educational community to build on the unique strength of each child” (p. 2). In addition to a strengths-based approach, the MSIC Task Force Report also addressed the need for a response to historic inequities in education. Education researcher Jim Cummins is quoted in the MSIC Task Force Report as saying, “in suburban schools, students traditionally engage in
collaborative inquiry and knowledge generation, whereas students in inner-city schools are taught basic literacy through the transmission of skills and information” (p. 4). With the exception of the Canadian Achievement Test (a standardized test focusing on basic skills in reading, writing, and math), several MSIC documents, the MSIC Units, and the MSIC internal website demonstrated a commitment to high quality curriculum and professional development aimed at teaching and learning for knowledge generation, critical thinking, inquiry, and problem-solving.

There has been extensive teacher development for both the centrally assigned teaching and learning coaches and teachers in MSIC schools on literacy, numeracy, assessment, and to some degree, culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The MSIC interdisciplinary units support a focus on: higher-order thinking in literacy and numeracy; STEM-centric education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math); inquiry projects; training early years teachers on increasing precision in reading and writing; demonstrating high expectations for schools, teachers, and students; training on the use of iPads and other forms of technology; and, opportunities to engage in critical and creative thinking.

Pedagogies in the MSIC Program promote high quality teaching and learning (instead of the acquisition of basic skills), and many participants noted that the quality of teaching and learning was better in MSIC than non-MSIC schools. However, a charitable discourse on re-education was evident in the limited infusion of issues of equity and social justice into teaching and learning at large, especially in the later years of the program. The main framework for understanding issues of equity and social justice in MSIC is ‘Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy’ (CRRP), which is a combination of ‘Culturally Relevant Teaching’ (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and ‘Culturally Responsive Pedagogy’ (Gay, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In the context of teaching and learning, culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billing, 1995) has three main components: academic success, cultural competence, and critical
consciousness. According to Solomon and Sekayi (2007), “The achievement gap between urban, inner-city learners, between the rich and those living in poverty, between Whites and people of colour, will not close if reform initiatives do not include context-specific and culturally relevant pedagogy (p. 10).

There were different opinions on the degree to which this pedagogy has been infused in the teaching and learning initiatives in MSIC schools. One participant noted, “We say we are using the lens of CRRP, but that means so many different things to so many people.” When the documents were scanned for equity and social justice, there were limited associations between understandings of teaching and learning and culturally relevant teaching. There were limited opportunities for students to explore critical issues from multiple perspectives locally and globally (with a greater focus on global inequities), to engage deeply with different knowledges and constructions of social identities, and a politicized notion of education in which students learn to read/write the word and world (Freire, 1987). Two participants remarked that there was a deeper exploration of social justice efforts in education earlier on in the program when curriculum was directly connected to the students, families, and communities of that school, prior to efforts at standardizing social justice curriculum across all schools in the program.

The most notable example of differences in opinion on the infusion of culturally relevant teaching was the MSIC Units and the subsequent STEM Tasks (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). The MSIC Units were described as tools that empower students to be agents of change. Nine of 15 participants described the MSIC Units as excellent tools to support educators in improving their teaching and learning practice with regards to current best practices in literacy and numeracy. There are some stories of educators who have used these units and dramatically improved their classroom instruction, and subsequently, the achievement of their students (as measured by standardized test scores). The MSIC units also provided a
template for teachers to create their own units that are more responsive to the students in their classes, however three participants noted that very few teachers have actually done this.

Four of 15 participants had different perspectives. In reviewing the MSIC units and STEM Tasks, the notion of empowerment that was presented promoted acts of benevolence and limited notions of civic engagement; they required students to be agents of change without an adequate deconstruction of larger socio-political, economic and historic forces, and systemic structures that lead to inequities in the first place. There was very little mention of race and anti-racism; class and anti-classism; gender and anti-sexism; sexual identities; sex; gender identities and anti-heterosexism; ability and anti-ableism, etc. The units and tasks fell short in their ability to ensure that students, families, and communities were positively reflected and affirmed, a necessary requirement of teaching and learning as indicated in the quote below from the Task Force Report:

Achieving fairness and equity are predicated on ensuring the lives and experiences of our students and their families are reflected and affirmed in the school curriculum and that relevant issues from various social justice perspectives are embedded in ongoing academic programs. (TDSB, 2005, p. 3)

One participant’s comment added to the idea of positively reflecting and affirming students’ lives in the curriculum:

As a student, regardless of the high quality curriculum you provide, if my daily experience reinforces the fact that I, based on my culture, race, sexual orientation, am less valued than others, then I’m not going to be an effective learner no matter how many resources you provide me. I have to see the school as a place where my sense of self-esteem, my sense of who I am culturally, racially and so on is positively reflected in the environment in the school and in what and how you teach.

In speaking specifically about the ways in which teaching and learning invalidate Aboriginal students and render them invisible, this participant also stated, “But if we continue by omission to fail to present Aboriginal students in the positive manner in which they are, as equal human beings, we are failing in our responsibility.”
What was evident in the MSIC Units and STEM Tasks was a focus on ‘Character Development’ and safer notions of ‘making change’ that do not require significant changes to the status quo, nor a deeper reflection of how we are contributing to the status quo. The approach to social justice here is more in line with Joshee’s notion of social cohesion (2008), than robust notions of CRRP. The social cohesion discourse suggests that shifts in economic and social policy towards neo-liberalism have led to increased social and political constraints (Joshee, 2008). Jenson (1998) stated that social cohesion is a “corrective measure aimed at increasing social solidarity and restoring faith in institutions of government “(p. 39). However, this view of social cohesion does not question the underlying structures of neo-liberalism that cause social tensions in the first place (Joshee, 2008). Furthermore, it constructs diversity and actively engaging politicized difference as challenges to social cohesion (Joshee, 2008).

Another participant described the MSIC Units being an end in themselves, as opposed to an opportunity for teacher learning:

The units miss the whole point—the idea of the unit. People don’t use the units to practice what they should be doing in their classrooms (like taking a course), as opposed to “Here is the unit. Take it and do it.” The kind of teaching needed in MSIC is not by unit. It’s so dependent on who you are a teaching, what you would do, what the issue is, and how you would make connections between the issues and the students’ lives. So a unit would be something you could work on simply to practice your teaching. But these units are seen as something that you give people and they’re teaching social justice.

A potential explanation for a depoliticized approach to curriculum was explained by Ghosh and Abdi (2004):

The most common argument used against diversity in education, presents excellence in opposition to equality, although several comprehensive studies provide empirical evidence of a positive correlation between diversity and excellence (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Unfortunately, policy-makers have created a false dichotomy between quality and equity, and have often aimed at achieving one at the expense of the other. (p. 47)

Ghosh and Abdi (2004) noted that if quality and excellence signify a comparison using norm- or criterion-referenced assessments (based on the cultures, values and norms of the
dominant group, and universally applied despite the diversity of students), then equity and excellence are at odds. However, “if quality and excellence are viewed as self-actualization and self-improvement, then equity and quality converge into equality” (p. 50). Six of 15 participants struggled with making sense of the equity and excellence conversation throughout their interviews. As one participant noted:

Maybe we focused a lot on academic success and how that leads to equitable outcomes and maybe not enough on the other pieces [of CRRP]. I grapple with that personally. Sometimes, the equity conversation treats equity as an end in itself as opposed to using it towards achievement. There is an actionable piece missing. I don’t know that starting at excellence and moving towards equity is necessarily wrong…there is a danger when we think about equity in education, because we are looking at education through just one approach.

Teaching and learning in the MSIC Program needs to further recognize and value other worldviews, other bodies of knowledge, and other life experiences as valid and worthy of study (especially those of our students, their families, and their communities). However, reconstructing notions of curriculum and knowledge cannot and will not occur without significant transformations in the professional learning opportunities afforded to MSIC staff, administrators, and teachers. There was little evidence in the Cluster meeting agendas of a specific focus on engaging with difference, understanding and working through personal biases, and thinking deeply about how students, families, and communities are constructed, individually and as a collective. Most regretful was the lack of opportunity in professional learning opportunities for educators to engage in praxis—critical self-reflection and action in service of justice and freedom of oppression.

One notable form of professional learning that incorporated a social justice discourse was “Community and Faith Walks.” In explaining their importance, Ghuman (2009), stated, “Schools must see well beyond their walls to better understand the complexities of their
communities and the diverse teaching practices needed to educate our children.” (p. 15). He also said:

Co-ordinating a Faith Walk for staff from the various schools to visit the different places of worship and learn about the cultural and religious beliefs and values of their students was an important step in broadening what the teachers understood as ‘professional learning.’ In addition to the latest literacy and numeracy initiatives from the ministry or our school Board, professional learning must also encompass truly knowing our students so that we can actually teach them literacy and numeracy effectively. (p. 15)

In speaking to the role of this type of professional learning on student learning and success, Ghuman (2009) also expressed:

Not only is ‘School as the heart of the community’ an integral aspect of the Model School vision, it is also a strategy to shift the way some educators understand teaching and learning. We know that many curricular initiatives have come and gone with little or no impact on the achievement of students in marginalized communities. Student, community, and school failure is not accepted in middle-class communities, and we should not accept such failures in the Jane and Finch community or anywhere else. Instead, we must continue to explore and incorporate new ways of teaching that remove the systemic barriers that exist for our students. (p. 16)

Community and faith walks have occurred in many schools, and in some clusters of schools more than others. It is not however, a mandated form of professional learning as is the case for opportunities to improve teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy.

With regards to professional learning for MSIC staff, six of 15 participants noted that opportunities with a focus on equity were far more frequent early on in the program and have drastically decreased over time. One participant noted that through activities like the Privilege Walk (an interactive activity where a series of statements are called out and participants are asked to move forward or backward to demonstrate relative privilege), “that’s where different social identities, different privileges and disadvantages that people have, that’s where that conversation comes in. I’m not sure if there is a deeper conversation. Maybe that’s one of the possibilities.” Another participant noted, “If MSIC staff are uncomfortable leading activities like the Privilege Walk on their own, clearly more work needs to be done”.

Analyzing discourses on re-Education over time demonstrated that there were more social justice discourses early on in the program that became progressively more charitable over time. Perhaps what accounts for this shift is that the program and the Board had to align and work within, a larger, neoliberal framework in the highly centralized provincial education system. Theoharis (2007) noted that social justice leaders working in neoliberal spaces—which resist practices and policies that they believe, and are not in the interest of all students—experience a personal and professional toll. This may cause some educators to struggle with their resistance and fall in line with the status quo for self-preservation. Furthermore, education leaders may not have the repertoire of actions and skills needed to enact and endure resistance (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006). However, this shift may also have been an intentional political strategy to ensure the existence or maintenance of the program. The unanswered question is whether there are any benefits to students, families, teachers, and schools in the MSIC Program of a one-size-fits-all model, at certain times or under certain conditions. This question was explored throughout the study.

**Additional Pedagogical Approaches to Social Justice**

There are different approaches to curriculum, teaching, and learning that would better prepare students to engage critically with the world around them and take their rightful place as full and equal members of society. Critical democratic education is required in which democratic practices are built into the school structure and promote critical democracy as a way of life (Glass, 2007). Glass (2007) described democratic education and its connection to democratic citizenship in the following way:

This kind of citizenship that should be the aim of a democratic education requires a different kind of somebody to be formed through the process of schooling, a somebody-in-particular who understands that identity formation in schools occurs within politically charged historical, social and cultural horizons. This somebody-in-particular sees behind the common sense dominant norms and standards of the day and achieves a grasp of the inalienable power each person has to shape those ideological conflicts. Democratic
education enables students to develop the capacities needed to challenge the limits of the current situation and transform the world toward a vision of a more just democratic community. Democratic citizenship entails creative effort to build a new reality through that collaborative struggle. Neither democracy nor citizenship can be bestowed or achieved by proclamation; both necessitate enduring commitments to a way of life that instantiates principles of fairness and participation so that each and every person is a valued member of the community. A democratic education worthy of the name refuses to make a nobody of anybody. (p. 84)

One example of such an approach is Dei’s (2010a) ‘Critical Integrative Approach,’ which sees schooling and knowledge production as related to power, culture, and identity and recognizes the system’s role in producing and reproducing inequalities. In this approach, the curriculum is designed to challenge the status quo and support students in constructing and reconstructing more positive identities by learning about how the historical processes of marginalization, oppression, and exploitation can link to their own identities. Therefore, the curriculum content and purpose need to be reconstructed in the MSIC Program in order to honour the lives of our students, see their strengths, and use their lived experiences as the basis for curriculum.

Another example of curriculum rooted in emancipatory pedagogies is what Portelli and Vibert (2002) referred to as the ‘Curriculum of Life,’ which views curriculum as a dynamic relationship among teachers, students, knowledge, and contexts. It takes into account issues of power, difference, and marginality within all educational projects. “Substantive and possibly controversial issues in the students' personal, social and political lives” form the basis of this curriculum, which assumes genuine respect for students’ minds, experiences, and voices, without romanticizing their experiences or falling into the liberal myth of neutrality (Portelli & Vibert, 2002, p. 39).

Perspectives on District Reforms for Equity

Eight of 15 participants noted that equity means “more for some, for a better outcome for all.” They noted that this belief is hard to challenge, because many people believe “more for
"some means less for me." In accounting for the opinions of participants and ideas presented in the MSIC documents, a collective definition of district reform is presented below:

- Acknowledging historical and current socio-political and economic inequities
- Providing a disproportionate level of support based on a disproportionate level of need for certain groups
- Engaging multiple stakeholders in collectively acknowledging and identifying inequities, learning, relearning and unlearning, and generating solutions with those for whom the reforms are intended to impact (marginalized and racialized populations)
- Collectively taking responsibility to address inequities (with a focus on the system as primarily responsible) and measuring the impacts of supports/pedagogies/policies
- Ongoing process (as opposed to final product) that creates the conditions for praxis (ongoing reflection and action) among multiple and varying stakeholders

**Perspectives on the MSIC Program as a District Reform for Equity**

Depending on the placement on a spectrum of discourses (charitable to social justice), interview participants had different responses to this question. When asked whether MSIC is a district reform for equity, there was an interesting and noteworthy trend that emerged in the participant interviews. Within the Board, those who are farthest away from the on-the-ground, day-to-day workings of the program (i.e., trustees and senior administrative board staff) tended to see the program more favourably as a reform for equity, by equating equity with large-scale redistribution and system recognition of inequities. For example, one participant commented on how the day-to-day implementation of the MSIC Program is what makes it a district reform for equity:

> I mean I think it’s a shining example [of district reform for equity], I think it’s been extremely successful, I think it’s been a very interesting and very living laboratory. I mean I think one of the things that’s most admirable about it is, how much they have made efforts to actually gather evidence, look at whether things are working, try new things if things aren’t working and continuously adjust accordingly and I think that’s an excellent example ... dare I say model for how that kind of thing should be done.

In contrast, those who were closest to the program (MSIC staff and principals) tended to explore the complexities in this question and look for evidence in support of this answer, as well
as evidence for areas of growth. For example, one participant suggested that there is a knowledge-to-application process required for real change and that different people are at different levels of applying their knowledge of equity. Another participant commented that a district reform for equity has to account for all stakeholders:

I think they [district reforms] are also aimed at educating those who have traditionally held power in the system, because you can't just aim it at one group without educating the other as well, and so I think it needs to be an approach that really looks to impact a whole number of stakeholders within a system.

In this quote, the participant was referring to schools and staff that are not directly related to the MSIC Program, and have little understanding of the need for such a program in the Board. Another participant noted that the program has become less of a reform for equity as it has expanded and become more standardized over time, because it has lost its political nature and the ability to respond to the needs of the community.

The community partners (being outside of the program in advocacy roles) had different opinions on this point. One partner shared that the program is failing as a reform for equity and stated that the intention of the program does not match the reality of the program. One community partner noted that the funds are dispersed so widely that it becomes meaningless and suggested that the MSIC Program cannot be a district reform for equity if the Learning Opportunity Grant from the Ministry of Education is not being used to support this, and similar programs. Furthermore, a focus on learning English language skills and a focus on inequities in Special Education is lacking in the Program. Another participant raised concern that the MSIC Program is one of the only district reforms being highlighted in the TDSB, which takes the pressure off of the system to continue reforming for equity in other ways.

**Conclusion**

Thirteen of 15 participants identified closing opportunity gaps as the foundation of the MSIC Program. Two main discourses (charitable and social justice) informed a spectrum of thinking, evident in both participant interviews and the program documents, to closing opportunity gaps. Charitable and social justice discourses were used to explore the four dimensions of inequality: redistribution, recognition, representation, and re-education. While both charitable and social justice discourses were evident throughout the analysis of the MSIC
documents and interviews—in complex and often contradictory ways—there was more evidence of social justice discourses in the earlier phase of the program and of charitable discourses in later years. However, there is growing evidence of opportunities for closing representation opportunity gaps from social justice discourses with an increase in community committees and initiative in the program, as well as parent advocacy groups in the Board.

While charitable discourses can be used to close some opportunity gaps (redistribution and some elements of re-Education and representation), social justice discourses must be used to close all four types of opportunity gaps. In fact, a focus on closing recognition opportunity gaps from social justice discourses is necessary in providing the ideological basis for closing redistribution, representation, and re-education opportunity gaps aligned with social justice discourses. Furthermore, without a strong focus on recognition and representation that challenge both ideological discourses and political structures, reforms remain largely charitable in their discourse on closing opportunity gaps. However, it remains unclear whether there are benefits to operating from a charitable discourse on closing opportunity gaps at certain times, under certain conditions, and with certain groups (e.g., building momentum, gaining support, etc.). This question will be explored in the following chapter.

It is important to note that many participants had contradictory responses throughout the course of the interviews, and several noted that this was a difficult interview because of the dissonance that emerged from their responses. There was also greater likelihood in the later phase of the program to describe practices and initiatives as promoting social justice discourses, when they were actually promoting charitable discourses to closing opportunity gaps. When envisioning the future of the program, participant responses demonstrated both charitable and social justice discourses on closing opportunity gaps. This speaks to the need to engage in dialogue about these and other topics in relation to equity and social justice to ensure that the
ideologies that provide the greatest opportunities for transformation and celebration of students, families, and educators, are the ones that are being promoted and continuously refined.
CHAPTER 6

RESULTS: POLITICAL INFLUENCES, NAVIGATION & MEDIATION

The changes have to do with not how we change students but how we change ourselves as a school, as an institution, what you do differently as a culture that you can demonstrate that works, what a positive school environment looks like in an inner city school where all students feel fully engaged, inspired to learn, enthusiastic about learning and who could express the very best behaviours as they go about the business of engagement in school. (Interview Participant)

Politics and politicking have largely influenced the MSIC Program at every stage of its development. Politics in this context is referred to in a broad sense: the power of people, ideas, events, policies, and organizations that make and influence decisions and practices. Differences in access and opportunity to influence decisions are considered, along with a consideration of the contextual factors that influence decision-making and power. The main research question of this study asks how the MSIC Program implements equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student achievement and experiences for traditionally marginalized communities.

This chapter draws on findings from 30 participant interviews and examines three of the five sub-questions related to how the MSIC Program initiates, measures, and sustains equitable practices and pedagogy. Using the conceptual framework, ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer et al., 2008), this chapter examines the influence of politics on all four elements of the conceptual framework beginning with the initiation phase of the program (pre-conception to year 3-4). This will be followed by an examination of the influence of politics on all four elements of the conceptual framework in the sustaining phase of the program (year 3-4 to– present, which is a six to seven year period). This demarcation of time indicates the point at which there was a significant growth in the number of schools in the program. The purpose of this section is not to provide a ‘how-to’ manual to navigate politics related to district reform for equity. Rather, complexities in political strategies and factors involved in reforming for equity, over time, are explored.
Initiating Equitable Practices and Pedagogy in the MSIC Program

The initiation of the MSIC Program was analyzed using, but not limited to, the four major components of Rorrer et al.’s (2008) conceptual framework ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ which includes: providing instructional leadership; reorienting the organization; establishing policy coherence; and, maintaining an equity focus. There will be a specific focus on the influence of politics for each of these components. Table 3 summarizes the findings of this conceptual argument as it applies to the initial phase of the MSIC Program. A more substantial description follows.

Table 3

Overview of the Political Influences in Initiating Equitable Practices and Pedagogies in the MSIC Program

| Political Influences in Initiating Equitable Practices and Pedagogy in the MSIC Program |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| **1. Providing Instructional Leadership**  | **2. Reorienting the Organization**                              |
| Generating Will                            | Refining and Aligning Organizational Structures                 |
| Building Capacity                          | Changing District Culture                                      |
| Focus on creating the conditions to learn  | • Variable coupling of centralization and decentralization with a greater focus on decentralized efforts and initiatives |
| Decentralized model with multiple stakeholders influencing decisions | • Awareness building of the opportunity and achievement gaps, poverty and equity |
|                                           | • Building allies at every level of the organization            |
|                                           | • High expectations and anticipating next steps                 |
| **3. Establishing Policy Coherence**       | **4. Maintaining an Equity Focus**                              |
| Mediating Federal, State and Local Policy  | Owning Past Inequity (including highlighting inequities in system and culture) |
| Aligning Resources                         | • The creation and existence of the MSIC Program, intended as a district reform for equity |
|                                           | Foregrounding Equity (including increasing availability and transparency of data) |
|                                           | • Navigating between charitable and social justice discourses to equity reform |
|                                           | • The use of data as a political tool                           |

Note: Based on the Conceptual Argument ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008)
1. Providing Instructional Leadership

In the conceptual framework, providing instructional leadership is dependent on generating will and building capacity. However, prior to exploring these two elements, it is useful to understand the historical context of MSIC and the influence of politics.

Historical Context of MSIC

Chapter 4 outlined the history of the Toronto Board of Education from the late 1960s to post-amalgamation of the former Toronto Boards of Education into the TDSB. One participant commented on the lack of equity initiatives in the board post-amalgamation, and stated that with the incoming Liberal government, there was some room and hope for change. A drought in equity initiatives at this point in the Board’s history created a need and provided an opening for an initiative like the MSIC Program. This program “would develop a process through which funding that comes from the Ministry could be channelled directly into the schools that were identified as being high on the Learning Opportunities Index.” The initial idea and impetus for this program started with one key trustee. Ten of 12 participants who were involved at the start of the program described this individual as passionate, well connected, and deeply committed to the program and the cause. One participant noted that it is of significance that this trustee came from the former Toronto Board of Education, in which the Inner City Project Schools existed and which, notably, was the blueprint of the MSIC Program. Another participant described this trustee as a champion of the program who subversively tried to revive the Inner City Project Schools initiative. This trustee enlisted the support of a coordinator (parent and outsider of the Board) and according to one participant, “it was a completely successful, symbiotic relationship that just worked.” The pair had complementary skills, as one was in a position of power and the other had excellent organizational skills and executed plans. Soon, the pair was joined by a principal of one of the inner-city schools, as well as the former Coordinator for the Inner City
Project Schools in the Toronto Board of Education. Together this group of four became the coordinators of the Inner City Task Force and was considered to be ‘politically savvy.’

These four coordinators sifted through archives of the old Inner City Project Schools initiative. They recruited people whose names kept appearing in the documents to be part of the Inner City Task Force. These stakeholders included trustees, parents, senior administrative board staff, principals, university professors, and community partners from every sector, who all advocated strongly for the program and for equity. As one participant described:

The thing that was different was it went way outside the perimeter…because everyone agreed that it had to be outside the purview of this Board, from people who got equity, people who had a stake in equity, in inner city communities and who would therefore help to drive this forward, which is exactly how it turned out.

This was a political, well-connected and multi-sectorial group, which later morphed into the Inner City Advisory Committee (ICAC). In fact, seven of 12 participants involved at the start of the program mentioned that the Inner City Task Force needed to be politically savvy in order to navigate the system and its competing demands.

The Inner City Task Force decided that the key requirement for becoming a Model School is that schools had to demonstrate an unquestionable desire to be chosen as one of the initial three schools, a solid commitment to sticking with the program, and a readiness to embrace the changes. One participant remarked:

There were many schools that talked about it and said no, we just don’t even want to do this. The first thing is that you have to have a cohesive staff. You have to have a whole bunch of people who really wanted to get together and wanted this to happen.

However, the Task Force also tried to ensure other prerequisites for success of the program, which were not approved by trustees and senior administrative board staff. As one participant stated:

We were hoping that the principals of those schools would be chosen [newly appointed]. We were hoping that teachers would be re-interviewed because they’d want to be there with no repercussion [no threat to job security] if they didn’t. There were a lot of things
that we were sort of thinking that had to exist for this to be successful that were never passed.

The content for the Task Force report relied heavily on the structure of the former Inner City Project Schools initiative in the Toronto Board of Education, and also included examples from other schools, research on urban schooling, and the experiences of members of the Task Force.

Despite efforts at reaching consensus and common visions, internal struggles continued to exist within the Task Force between what one participant described as the ‘realists’ who thought the million dollars to be allocated to each of three schools chosen as Model Schools was too much money to request, and the ‘idealists’ who had an ‘equity dream’ that included additional staff and resources needed to fully support students living in poverty.

**Generating Will**

‘Generating Will’ can be described as “the attitudes, motivations, and beliefs that underlie an implementer’s response to a policy’s goals or strategies” (McLaughlin, 1987) or as a “commitment to a decision” (Firestone, 1989). When it comes to generating will, the initiation of the MSIC Program actually deviated from the research findings of ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer et al., 2008) in two significant ways. First, it was political—not instructional—will that needed generating, in order to create the conditions required for student success (instead of direct reforms to teaching and learning). Second, this was not a mandated reform that needed to be implemented; instead, it was a reform that some participants referred to as grassroots, which wanted to establish itself firmly and securely in the Board. There was recognition that inequities in access and opportunity resulted in inequitable schooling outcomes, and that unless those inequities are addressed, teaching and learning are compromised.
Both the content and process of creating the Inner City Task Force Report and overcoming the above mentioned ideological differences were instrumental in generating will among members of the Task Force. The committee met almost weekly for several months to refine the Task Force, which in itself was a huge learning experience. There were key readings and questions that guided weekly work group discussions and large-group sharing. This led to the co-creation of a common, yet broad vision for MSIC, as described by one participant:

The real key though, was having a bigger vision from all those disparate groups. We had a common vision, even though we came from outside the Board. Having been done from within the Board entirely, we would have ended up with a Board vision, which might have gone a different way.

Eight of 12 participants who were involved at the start of the program spoke to the sense of collective mission that existed early on because everyone understood why the program was important and was willing to invest the time and energy in seeing it come to fruition. As one participant described:

It was that sense of collective commitment that really drives change, which was the overall sense that I gained from all of the players involved in this. It was almost like a movement within a movement within the system... that sense of wanting to see change happen and a belief in the Program that they were involved in, a belief that it in fact was important for the communities and the schools and that it will produce results.

Another component of generating will was the actual process for choosing the first three Model Schools. Eight of 12 of the participants who were involved at the start of the program indicated that the process for choosing schools was “the clincher” in generating will and momentum amongst the Model Schools. One participant remarked:

I think over and over again I heard that that process was the clincher, that that is where you got buy in, that is where you provided hope, that’s where innovation kicked in, that’s the first time the Board had given something away to a community, had said this is yours, this is your school, make of it what you will. It was very, very exciting.
However, seven of 12 participants noted that not enough was done to sustain this initial will of schools and communities working together because of other priorities and foci. As one participant described:

We lost the community after the [school selection] process. We brought them in for the discussion, they were engaged, they were exciting and that’s where it should have continued. Some of the really great principals and the staff that had come together to do the application found a new spark of excitement and a new bond with families and the community. But we were so busy trying to fight for this program that the parents’ voices got lost. And they either fell by the waste side or they became disheartened.

The perception of being a school in MSIC, both within and outside of the Program, also had a large influence on generating will to focus attention on the conditions required for teaching and learning. Six of 12 participants noted that instead of being seen as needy schools that required help, Model Schools were seen as lighthouse schools that all schools (in and out priority neighbourhoods) should strive to learn from. From the perspective of a participant who was part of one of the initial Model Schools, “We were winners, although they said it wasn't a win, but we thought it was.” Another participant noted, “It was an honour to be part of the program, and the title was taken seriously.” As a result, schools wanted to be in the program and it was seen as a sign of status to some degree. Schools understood that it was going to require a serious commitment and a shift in perspectives on the students, families, and communities. One participant remarked:

It was about buy-in. It was about setting high expectations. It was about changing teacher pedagogy. It was about changing expectations. It was about respecting community, respecting parents. It was about respecting children. It was about really understanding what our role is as educators and what role we played in the community, and how we were visitors of that school, that we did not own that community or that school, and that we had to really respect who owned that school and who got access to that school.

Perception was also important in that the leaders of the program and the Task Force were committed to defending the program and its reputation at all costs. Navigating these different perceptions was key to the success of the program.
Building Capacity

‘Building Capacity’ is also a key element of providing instructional leadership.

According to Rorrer et al. (2008), building capacity is described as follows:

From research on districts to date, then, we can conclude that district instructional leadership builds capacity by coordinating and aligning work of others through communication, planning, and collaboration; monitoring goals, instruction, and efforts to improve instruction, including increasing data accessibility, availability, and transparency and accountability; and acquiring and targeting support for instruction, including securing human and fiscal resources. (p. 318).

Once again, building capacity in the initial stages of the program involved creating the conditions to learn, which focused on building political and instructional will prior to focusing on teaching and learning directly. Building allies was a key element to building capacity. The Task Force coordinators strategically built allies at all levels in order to build traction for the program, including senior administrative board staff who were connected and committed to the program, principals of inner city schools who were vocal about the needs of their schools and communities (as well as their own needs), parents, trustees, community activists who were not necessarily parents of children in those communities, and active university professors committed to education for all. Six of 12 participants involved at the start of the program noted that it was especially important to build allies with the trustees and senior administrative board staff of the Board, and this partnership was instrumental in changing the status from the Model Schools for Inner Cities Project to the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program. Once the concept of Model Schools was initiated, community agencies flocked to the Board and to the schools to provide support and build partnerships. Having allies at every level ensured a pressure and support model, in which pressure could be placed on any stakeholder group that was folding to competing pressures, and support from other stakeholder groups as one group was making gains in initiating and/or sustaining the program. This provided a type of internal accountability, or
responsibility, to one another and the program at large. Furthermore, building allies allowed for common goal setting, collaboration, and a greater alignment of resources.

As well, the expectations for the schools and staff in the program were very high from the onset. One participant noted: “If you do not set a benchmark that is very, very high, not unachievable, but very, very high, then you will never get people to rise to it. If we lower it even a little bit, people will slack off. It’s just easier.” Furthermore, there was constant anticipation of how the program needed to grow next, and a continual laying of the groundwork at each step of the way. This involved a number of initiatives such as planting ideas, generating support, and developing new strategies, all of which strengthened its capacity as a new initiative.

It is important to note that generating will and building capacity at the initial phases were focused on setting up the *conditions* to enhance teaching and learning in MSIC schools and not teaching and learning directly, as well as the political (versus instructional) will for this initiative. This required political strategies such as creating processes for co-learning, creating a perception of being in the MSIC Program, creating processes for increased stakeholder engagement, and building allies to influence decisions at all levels.

2. Reorienting the Organization

This second component of the conceptual framework ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer et al., 2008) has two main sections: ‘Refining and Aligning Organizational Structures’ and ‘Changing District Culture.’ Of noteworthy significance here is that Rorrer et al. (2008) placed much more emphasis on the role of the district leader in ‘Reorienting the Organization.’ However, in this phase of the program, the Inner City Task Force (comprised of multiple stakeholders) heavily influenced how and when reorientation occurred, particularly the interplay between the decentralization and centralization of initiatives and mandates that Rorrer et al. (2008) referred to as variable-coupling.
Refining and Aligning Organizational Structures

According to Rorrer et al. (2008), ‘Refining and Aligning Organizational Structures’ involves elements such as decentralization/centralization, scaling up initiatives, the power of co-learning, and the use of incentive structures. At this stage in the program, centralization and decentralization was most salient in refining and aligning organizational structures.

Nine of 12 participants involved at the start of the program noted that the original schools were afforded a great deal of flexibility and freedom when addressing their unique strengths and needs as a school community. For example, according to all of the principals, the flexibility in the initial approach was a welcome component. One principal said: “I think it had benefits for sure…I think it gave us freedom to try a whole variety of things within the five Essential Components before deciding what the most effective ways of proceeding were…like what was worth spending money on.” The entire school community (parents, the teachers and the staff) would examine the needs and collectively come up with an action plan to allocate the funding accordingly. According to one participant, the initiative would have failed if the original schools were told that they had to be in Model Schools. One participant noted that central to the MSIC Task Force Report was an inherent trust in schools and a freedom afforded to educators to innovate with an understanding that mistakes would occur in the learning process. That vision changed over time.

In addition, one participant commented that if this program were more centralized, its success would be highly dependent on the person leading the program (i.e., their intentions behind decisions, knowledge of equity, ability to influence others, etc.), and it could have looked very different. A decentralized approach, on the other hand, allowed more room for discussion, dialogue, and creative conflict and thereby increased the likelihood that it would be successful. Another participant said:
It was very grassroots and very open to whatever was going on in your community. Communities were so very different, so you have your three different schools at completely different ends of the world, with completely different parents. They were on a different place of the continuum as far as advocating for their children.

In contrast, another participant noted that MSIC was not actually a grassroots initiative in the first place, because community members, trustees and educators started the program, and not parents. This is different from the Trefann Court Mothers who presented the Board with a report in the late 1960s called “Our Kids Aren’t Dumb” and which this participant highlighted as a truly grassroots initiative. Given the size of the new TDSB and the economic and political situation, “it had to be transplanted” into the system. However, two of three principals spoke to the need for increased centralization and standardization in the initial phase of the program. One principal remarked:

To have some expectations, common expectations or deliverables across the program is important, but at the same time having that flexibility within each of the schools to do certain things. We need to be better at showing what we do [in each school], so that other schools can see what others are doing.

Two other participants noted that one of the biggest challenges and disappointments was that the program had not been more centralized and lacked a sense of ownership from senior administrative board staff:

It [the MSIC Program] was forced on Senior Staff. It's not like people said, ‘What a wonderful thing this is happening.’ It was forced onto them and then superintendents were given responsibility for it [instructed to support the program]. So these superintendents who were assigned responsibility for Model Schools were assigned responsibility for something that the system still had not embraced. They were put in a very awkward position I'm sure, within the structures of the system. It also put them in a very awkward position in relation to all the people that sat around the Inner City Task Force table, because they were more or less seen as the enemy and treated badly.

In fact, the program had to be subversively pushed through the Board, which meant involving the media, because there was no onus on equity of inner city education. This participant noted:

It didn’t have to start from bottom-up. It should have been how TDSB does business. If TDSB were truly devoted, their whole way of doing things would look different. This was a grassroots group of people who got together and said this is absurd. The funding
and grants are not going where they are intended. It was unacceptable. However, once it was established it had to stay. The Board couldn’t say we don’t support it because it would go against their [equity] policy.”

There are opportunities and limitations to an initiative like this being initiated by both the larger community and the Board. One participant noted that an ideal scenario would involve centralization to the extent that the senior leadership of the Board would support the program, but not act as the sole decision-makers or mandate initiatives. However, other participants noted that despite ideological preferences, changes in centralization and decentralization, in reality, were largely influenced by politics.

**Changing District Culture**

‘Changing District Culture’ is the second element of reorienting the organization. According to Rorrer et al. (2008), this involves professionalism and professional dialogue as well as the role of district leaders in setting the tone for reform. Once again, in the case of the MSIC Program, there were a variety of stakeholders responsible for setting the tone for reform, not district leaders alone. It required multiple stakeholders to change and influence the opinions of many other stakeholders. In this phase of the Program, the awareness building that occurred within and outside of the Program was key to setting the tone for reform. 10 of 12 participants involved at the start of the program noted that building awareness of opportunity gaps was important to convince senior administrative board staff and trustees of the need for such a program. According to one participant:

The importance of reform movements, although they’re not called reform movements, is that they create a greater consciousness about the particular life circumstances of our communities so that in fact we can make changes in how we program and support schools in order to promote equity of outcomes for students. As a reform, Model Schools began to acknowledge the fact that students in circumstances where poverty, lack of nutrition, sole-support families, low-income families existed, these were important features of how students were able to learn effectively. That rose to the level of the Board, [and resulted in] Board discussion and Board acknowledgement that poverty was an issue.
This further became a systemic issue with an acknowledgment that poverty was not contained in a select few ‘inner-city’ schools, but that it existed throughout the city, even in ‘affluent’ schools. Changing the culture among trustees (who had to vote on the initiation of the Program and its subsequent funding each year) was extremely important to the success of the Program as outlined by several participants.

This awareness-building process was enabled by research, which was used as a tool to convince multiple stakeholders of the need for an intervention. In particular, the Every Student Survey (a TDSB-wide survey) provided the Board with demographic information on students and families. One participant notes:

all of which demonstrated that research data was important in getting a more accurate picture of the circumstances of the families in the school board that needed to be looked at and considered in order to provide effective instruction, effective service to students.

However, building awareness was no easy task. As one interview participant noted:

First, internal and external stakeholders needed to be convinced that there were concrete, tangible areas in this city where there is deep, grinding inequality in terms of access to all kinds of things…housing, food, jobs, etc. Then there was the battle of the LOI (Learning Opportunities Index) and getting people to understand that we had a tool to measure external challenge and what constituted external challenge. Then, there was getting people to understand equity and providing more for those that start with less…and then it got messy.

A complex relationship developed between the use of research data, funding for the program and building awareness. According to one participant, the research data drove both the funding for MSIC and an awareness of the need for MSIC. As the funding started to go to some inner-city schools and not others (three schools in the first year and an additional four schools in the second year of the program), the conversation became one of “why them and not us?” This led to a positive feedback loop and changes in decision-making because the earlier research had contributed to an increased awareness and consciousness about issues of poverty, and the realization that many schools had similar needs and would benefit from additional funds. As
such, the LOI was used as a more objective measure of schools requiring additional funding and support. One participant noted the salience of conversations about socio-economic status in the Board and the absence of others: “…that data clearly demonstrated the relationship between educational outcomes and socio-economic circumstances. In fact, that became the dominant acknowledgment in the system for many years over and above other inequities like race and gender.”

As awareness started to build, six of 12 participants involved at the start of the program stated that ‘marketing strategies’ were important in continuing to change district culture. For example, one participant remarked that the development of the five essential components and the name of the program became part of the branding for the program. According to another participant, “…the program used media in a pretty sophisticated way to put pressure on the Board to continually fund it.” Both branding and media were strategies used to continue generating will for participating and engaging in the program.

Another component of changing district culture was the professional learning that occurred amongst principals at monthly cluster meetings. Cluster meetings included principals, the superintendent of the area and other MSIC staff. Schools would report on progress, program updates would be provided and information shared, issues would be identified, and principals would engage in learning together. These meetings were organic in nature based on the needs of the schools at the time, and built on the collective experiences of the MSIC staff and principals. This was accomplished by harnessing the power of co-learning and valuing the voice and experience of each person. One participant shared the following about the process of generating will in one of the seven clusters of schools:

So we all had the same initiatives in all of our schools. I think that was unique probably to our cluster. I don’t know if any of the other clusters did that. That was very powerful also in terms of us moving forward and having professional dialogue because we all were on the same page and we had all agreed upon it. Everything had to be through
consensus. They had a voice, a very, very big one and everybody has to have a voice, right?

In all clusters, attendance at cluster meetings was highly encouraged and in some ways, the money was used as leverage over the principals. More support was required for collective problem solving regarding issues and concerns that schools were facing, which would have led to a greater understanding of equity and poverty.

In addition to learning, stakeholders at various levels influenced the program by sharing cluster-specific ideas with the entire program. For example, one participant noted:

One of the clusters decided to do hearing and vision testing on everybody in the cluster, and that brought to people’s attention issues around kids not having access to those kinds of assessments as well as glasses and hearing aids. Once we realized that was the need, that got spread among the seven clusters instead of this in the one cluster so we all learn from each other.

This increased a sense of ownership among stakeholders in the program and a responsibility to one another to support all students. This is a key element in changing district culture.

While professional learning differed among the original Model Schools, understanding and infusing equity pedagogy into practice was common among all schools. This was partly supported by equity training provided to MSIC staff that influenced all schools. This training resulted in translating documents, multilingual welcome signs, walking the school with parents and assessing whether it was a welcoming and equitable place, developing partnerships with local community agencies, etc. Equity training was also made available to the schools directly. One participant stated:

So for instance the explicit professional development around equity was there from the very beginning. I remember just because I was in a Family of Schools that had a lot of Model Schools, we all went to hear Glenn Singleton talk about *Courageous Conversations* and we had a big day where the entire Family of Schools was together getting equity training, and so that was … on the one hand it was a powerful statement because it was saying that equity is critical to everything that we’re doing and it’s important that every single person be involved in that.
Reorienting the organization in the early stages of the program involved a balance of centralized and decentralized initiatives (that provided support but did mandate decisions), as well as building awareness of larger systemic inequities and a focus on equity in professional development initiatives. However, unlike Rorrer et al.’s (2008) ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ framework, this involved multiple stakeholders and not simply district leaders.

3. Establishing Policy Coherence

Establishing policy coherence is the third component of the conceptual framework and involves ‘Mediating Federal, State, and Local Policy’ and ‘Aligning Resources.’ Decentralized structures and multiple stakeholder voices influenced both policy mediation and resource alignment.

Mediating Federal, State, and Local Policy

According to Rorrer et al. (2008), mediating federal, state, and local policy involves the role of the district leader taking either a passive or active role in initiating, responding to and navigating different policies. Once again, this role was not left to the district leader, and was instead shared among multiple stakeholders in the Inner City Task Force and within the program. In the initial stages of the program, minimal work was needed to align federal, state and local policy. However, work was done to develop partnerships at all levels and across multiple sectors. At the time Model Schools was initiated, the City of Toronto was developing priority neighbourhoods that would receive additional funding, support, and attention. Many participants noted the importance of aligning MSIC with larger systemic structures and initiatives both within and outside of education, to increase the program’s leverage and access to resources. Connecting to as many initiatives, organizations and Ministries/governmental organizations as possible also reduced the likelihood of the program being cut, given its broad reach and influence. Additionally, mediation was required at the internal Board level, and
involved playing politics to convince and influence internal stakeholders of the need for the program.

Playing politics internally was a key element to keeping the program alive. The Inner City Task Force was keenly aware at all times of who could block the program, what impacted those people’s decisions, and how to pre-empt any concerns and worries that might stop the program from moving forward. Nine of 12 participants involved at the start of the program stated that generating trustee support was key to this aim and required tremendous tenacity. According to one participant, “the politics were gut wrenching and they could be exhausting. We learned to be nimble and responsive and proactive and we were fiercely passionate about this.” One strategy was to have trustees—key decision-makers—on the Inner City Task Force to influence decisions and share updates that would quell the concerns of their colleagues. Another strategy was to pitch MSIC as a ‘pilot’ program with the idea that if it was a successful pilot, then it would spread gradually to more and more schools. This appealed to trustees who were concerned about the impact of the money. According to one participant:

I think a concern was that, often times when you have programs for inner city schools, the funding is allocated to do X and then you distribute it. But in the past, there had not been much effort to see whether the receivers of the funds had the capacity to use the funds…that is to say that the receivers of the funds were set up in a way that they’d actually be able to institute whatever program or a curriculum or whatever change it was that the funds were supposed to make happen.

Another participant noted the importance of demonstrating to the trustees the extent to which this initiative had been researched. Large blue binders were created consisting of all of the readings and research that informed the initiative. In speaking about the main trustee behind the Program, one participant noted:

….she absolutely insisted that every one of the trustees have one of those [blue binders] dropped off on their desk, prior to the Task Force being debated. It was very much about…she called it pounding. She knew they’d never read it, so that was to prove to them that we were indeed very serious and we had done our work.
However, as one participant noted, trustees would have better supported the MSIC initiative if there had been a thorough cost analysis attached to the report, because many trustees lacked clarity with regards to what exactly the money was supporting. Regular reports to senior administrative board staff were also readily available and provided to ensure their support of the program and to ensure that they had the language and knowledge to defend the Program to trustees.

Anticipating the potential lifespan of the program was also a significant factor in playing politics internally. Among the Task Force coordinators, there were discussions about the projected life of the Program. The main trustee behind the program was working under the assumption that all new initiatives die within seven years, and that four to five years into a program, people start asking if there is value for the money being spent. Reporting, influencing and sharing successes were framed under this assumption. Documentation and maintaining archives was also very important to this group given this timeline and the fact that if there were a change in government, there might be less enthusiasm for the program. One participant recalled advice given to the Task Force by senior administrative board staff:

You make sure you researched the hell out of this thing, because if you don’t, then another conservative government will come along. That’s what they did with the Project Schools. There was no real documentation and they just wiped it out.

Another participant noted the importance of the leader of the program:

I think whoever leads the model schools initiative has to have the support of Senior Staff and has to have the support of the trustees… because without having that support, it’s really hard to say, ‘this is what needs to be done’. At the beginning it has to be that someone is telling them what needs to be done.

Playing politics internally also involved considering the perceptions and reactions of local schools in similar conditions that did not get the funding. According to one participant:

Instead it kind of created this reputation that model schools had all this money and they had it so easy, of course they can do that because they have money, and it kind of became an excuse for other schools not to do important things that had been discovered
as critical. The principals of the schools I think quickly realized that there was so much resentment from neighbouring schools, about these schools getting so much money and their schools getting nothing. They realized that politically, it would make a lot of sense to share that money, and to try and include the neighbouring schools, which were facing the same challenges in the work that they were doing.

Despite these strategies, it was still a struggle to keep the program on the table. One participant noted:

We were constantly fighting to continue it, constantly fighting. It was almost like a survival piece in terms of … you sort of give in or you are done. It was a fight all the time, every year was a fight to continue it and there were these huge Board meetings, you didn’t really know what the outcome was going to be … I think there’s only a certain number of years that people can do that and I think the Board felt that.

During times when the program was being threatened, communities were rallied to pressure the Board and were “brought in by the busloads.” As one participant recalled:

We would give them the information and we would set up deputations. We would get the schools to bring the trustees in and say we want this; you better support it. It wasn’t machinations at the Board. It was really the community as much as they understood what was going on to who … it was a lot about the money because they got things that they couldn’t otherwise get.

Another participant recalled an actual scene in the Boardroom when a teacher brought his students there to participate in a rally:

You had people bending down and explaining democracy to these children. You had people telling the teacher to get those kids out of the center of the Boardroom floor. I mean this was real drama. He just flatly refused. He said no. I have total admiration for him. He said if you’re going to make a decision about their future and their education, then they deserve to be there and to hear it. It was stunning.

Three of 12 participants involved at the start of the program noted that this process was highly problematic. One participant noted, “I wasn't 100 percent comfortable with that because I feel like we were asking kids who were already marginalized to then stand up and beat on a drum and be more marginalized in public. But it seemed to have worked.”

As well, political differences led to some initial ideas of the Task Force being rejected. For one, personnel decisions such as choosing the principals of the Model Schools were not
accepted. Second, including racial inequities was an integral part of the initial conversations and one of the factors that the Task Force was most concerned about; however, that “fell off the table in the implementation stage” according to one participant, because the Board and the trustees were afraid to admit that there was a racial problem and the people leading the Board at the time “may not have had the knowledge to address the racial achievement gap.”

Given that the Ontario Ministry of Education did not mandate this initiative, the Board was not accountable to the Ministry. As such, accountability remained contained within the Board. Given the multiple stakeholders involved, accountability (or responsibility) was multidirectional. The Board was responsible to the Inner City Task Force (that later became the Inner City Advisory Committee) and the trustees. The Task Force was responsible to the Board. They all were responsible (in theory) to students, parents, and communities in the MSIC program. The purpose of the Inner City Advisory Committee (ICAC) is described in the following quote from the Task Force Report:

A well-resourced Inner City Advisory Committee should be established with the task of not only overseeing the successful implementation of the model schools and monitoring their progress to report to Board, but also to deal with all inner city issues in a comprehensive and pro-active manner. This might include regularly reviewing funding issues (LOG and the LOI) and working consistently with other levels of government to address social policy and funding issues in a much broader way. (TDSB, 2005, p. 6)

The role of democratic participation cannot be understated in the creation of this Program as evident in these words from one of the participants:

I think this is an example of a true collaborative venture, and it’s very messy because democracy is always very messy. It involves trustees. It involved community. It involved parents. It involved staff, universities. It was a very collaborative operation. It was a messy operation and time consuming from a staff perspective (because there were a lot of demands), which I think it a good thing because it was important. It’s a true example of democracy in action, in my opinion.
Aligning Resources

Aligning Resources is the second component of establishing policy coherence. According to Rorrer et al. (2008), this involves coherence in values and aligning both financial and human resources to support teaching and learning. At this stage of the program however, financial and human resources were redistributed within the Board to support creating the conditions for improved teaching and learning, as well as to create the overall structure of the program (rather than solely being aimed at improving teaching and learning).

Initially, each Model School received one million dollars to support the hiring of new staff, professional learning opportunities, classroom and school resources, etc. The first seven schools in the program were given one million dollars in their first year and then half this amount of money each of the subsequent years, as new schools were added into the program, until all schools in the cluster received equitable funding based on head count. With this money, additional staff positions were opened up in schools, such as community support workers, teaching and learning coaches, an Inner City lead teacher, a central coordinating principal (for all schools), child and youth workers, and school psychologists. Approximately half of the additional funds went towards paying additional staff. (See Appendix A for a breakdown of funding in the MSIC Program over the years.)

In addition to the redistribution of Board funds and staff requiring a tremendous amount of political manoeuvring, the use of MSIC funds and staff was also highly dependent on decision-makers in different contexts. Seven of 12 participants involved at the start of the program noted that the MSIC staff provided predictability and structure in an otherwise decentralized program. The structure of clusters also promoted a sense of inclusion and belonging in that you could share ideas, concerns and experiences with schools that had similar demographics. Having one main Model School poised as the leader in a cluster of schools was
also important in that the leadership came from within the cluster and further supported an environment of co-learning.

One participant remarked that there was so much money that some of the schools did not know what to do with it, and argued that a better process should have been provided for planning how the money would be spent:

How many of our schools have this amazing kitchen, nobody uses it. It's a community kitchen; it's not open to the community. But it's not open to the community because there's nowhere for them to eat when they're finished making food. It's in a hallway, like it makes no sense, but it costs thousands, hundreds of thousands of dollars for this community kitchen. It was like everybody just jumped on it and went crazy with it instead of taking a step back and saying okay. Okay, I'm going to give your school a million dollars next year, so now you need to plan this year. You already won it, you've already got it, you've already sent in your proposal, but now you need to actually plan it this year. Plan it with your community; plan it with your families. Plan it. Don't just fly off the handle… I feel like we bought a whole bunch of resources and nobody even knows where they are. We put a whole lot of money in staff and the staff was not being well used.

Other participants noted that in a highly decentralized model such as this, the commitment and foresight of the principal is key to the success of the program when there is so much choice and freedom.

Establishing policy coherence involved playing politics internally to influence other stakeholders within the TDSB, as well as the role of key influencers and decision-makers in aligning financial and human resources to support the reform.

4. Maintaining an Equity Focus

The fourth component of the conceptual framework involves ‘Owning Past Inequity’ (including highlighting inequities in the system and culture) and ‘Foregrounding Equity’ (including increasing availability and transparency of data). In addition to the two elements listed here, this component was evident in all three of the other components of the conceptual framework. Maintaining an equity focus was most evident in the political processes for change that were fairly democratic and included the voices of multiple stakeholders.
In providing instructional leadership, an equity focus was evident in the creation of the Inner City Task Force, in which a collective definition of equity and a collective notion of responses to socioeconomic inequities were established. The program was essentially founded on the idea of owning past (and current) inequities to access and opportunity that had resulted in inequitable schooling outcomes. To a large degree, the existence of the MSIC Program suggested that the Board was ready to own the inequities that existed both within (differences in opportunities and access) and outside of the Board (opportunity gaps and the effects of poverty).

In reorienting the organization, equity was evident in the level of decentralization and in the redistribution of financial and human resources to support the Program. Equity was also evident in the focus on professional development that supported the application of equity theories in practice. An example of this transfer from theory to practice in the early stages of the program was the approach to parent engagement. Parent and community engagement at the start of the program was very grassroots and really focused on understanding parents and the nature and nuances of the community, as well as supporting parents in advocating for their rights.

In establishing policy coherence, equity was evident in the methods used to influence various stakeholders of the need and relevance of this program, despite being heavily threatened to maintain its existence. Of greatest interest is that a charitable approach to equity reform was required in the early stages of the program in order to appease decision-makers who were more comfortable with a charity approach to equity reform than a transformative, social justice approach. As one participant explained: “The essence was there at the beginning, but I think it still was at a charity base. In those days I heard that you weren't even allowed to use the word social justice.” In order to navigate differences in political views, supporters of the program had to toe the line between their personal convictions and the political demands of the decision-makers. Luckily, the program was also structured in such a way to promote a broad-based
understanding of democratic participation, and this structure served to challenge limited notions of equity at various points in the program.

**Foregroun**

**d**

**Equity**

Foregrounding equity was evident in the level of research that existed highlighting the achievement gap *and* the level of data used and collected on students and families. The research collected was an important political tool in influencing decision-makers and to a lesser degree, changing the mindsets of educators towards students and families in ‘inner cities’.

Research methods were employed from the start of the program including student, staff, and parent perception surveys, tracking academic achievement, and other methods of gathering more qualitative data on the program. Staff, student, and parent surveys also provided a wealth of information about how these three groups felt about the MSIC Program and the school. As described in Chapter 5, the annual MSIC staff, student, and parent surveys provide opportunities for all three stakeholder groups to give their feedback on how well the school and the MSIC program are serving their needs and interests. Questions like, “How welcome do you feel in your school?” and statements such as “My contributions were valued by…” and “I was satisfied with the support given by…(various system stakeholders)” situate students, families and staff as having valid contributions and experiences, and locate the school and the MSIC Program as being in a position of service, rather than being positioned as a saviour.

This information is included in an Interim Report that is sent to schools annually. (See Appendix E for a description of the contents of the Interim Report.) For the most part, the MSIC staff and principals interviewed commented on the usefulness of having access to this level of data for school planning and program review. One participant further commented on the supports available to schools in unpacking the data in useful ways:

Then we’ve been given tools to analyze that data and support to use that data in our school improvement process with help from our Lead Teachers, for example. Certainly
we’ve been encouraged to share that data with stakeholders like staff, parents, community members even students…

However, how the data from these surveys was used, whether it was shared with multiple stakeholders and whether schools, clusters of schools and the Board responded to any of the concerns raised by parents, staff, and students, is unclear. Three of 15 participants noted that these surveys should provide structured mechanisms for having participants identify the benefits of the program, the challenges remaining, and areas not yet being addressed by MSIC. Eleven of 15 of the participants commented on the commitment of the Board’s research department to document and research students and initiatives in the program. One participant remarked that it was helpful that the research department collected anecdotal data as well, because the “quality of engagement may not always be able to be captured through data but through participants expressing how they feel about it”.

In addition to gathering information about students, families and communities, participants commented on information (formal and informal) gathered about the program, the schools in the program and the Board, in response to larger, socio-political and economic inequities. 13/15 noted formal structures that support them in assessing how well the program and the Board is serving schools, students, families and communities, such as the parent, staff, and student surveys. The Learning Opportunities Index was also noted as a useful tool that identifies schools requiring greater supports based on specific demographics in a timely and accurate manner, being that it is recalculated every couple of years to account for changes in student demographics and new research on external correlates of student achievement.

Eight of 15 participants suggested that using data to measure impact as a political tool was a central factor in the quality and quantity of data collected. Initially, judging the success of the program based on provincial standardized tests scores alone, painted the picture of a failing initiative. To keep the program alive, the definition of success had to broaden and change over
time to highlight the positive aspects of the program and increased student success. The EQAO provincial standardized test has often been the default for measuring the impact of the program. Recognizing that this was central to the mindsets of both the trustees and the Ontario Ministry of Education (and not a focus on increased equitable practices and pedagogy over time), there was a deliberate effort to demonstrate success in standardized tests scores for students in MSIC schools.

However, there was recognition that EQAO scores—which measure elementary students in grades 3 and 6 in math, reading and writing—would take some time improve. As such, the CAT4 test (another standardized test) was implemented early on in the program because in addition to being a normative test, it also measured the success of the student against her/himself over time. The likelihood of demonstrating success using this test was much higher, and in fact did prove to the trustees that the program was having an impact on student success. Six of 15 participants commented on their dislike of the CAT4 tests. One participant shared the following:

I found CAT4 to be kind of a strange assessment to use because it didn't really make sense in the context of anything that was being taught because it's a multiple choice Canadian standardized thing that didn't correlate all with report card marks or with EQAO scores. None of it seemed to be the same, but I guess they needed a standardized tool to use to be able to prove that there was ... because the people at the very top in the ministry were not ... that's what they care about is the number of students who are doing better academically.

In recognizing that other successes needed to be identified in order to convince the trustees of the benefits of the program, the parent, staff, and student surveys were created. One participant recalled this time:

There was some research data that started early on with the research department that began to identify areas where students' success indicators demonstrated some positive results from the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program, such as school attendance.
For eight of 15 participants, demonstrating successes outside of academic achievement was not necessarily a political move, but served to demonstrate a respect for the philosophy of the program. According to one participant:

Then from there the trustees always looked at what’s the impact of model schools. Often the impact was what’s the academic achievement of the students? There’s so much more that model schools has done other than pushing the academic achievement or looking just at the academic achievement.

One participant noted that the types of data collected and presented in MSIC actually served in some ways as educational training for the trustees. However, while trustees may have been solely focused on standardized test scores, frontline workers had different ideas of success, such as: changes in school climate/culture; changes in student attitudes about school; parents coming into schools where they previously did not come; and, reflecting the values and lives of the students in school.

In addition to the trustees, an equity focus was missing from the Board as a whole. In reflecting on the time of the Inner City Project Schools in the old TBE, one participant noted that equity was the mandate and how business was done. There was no question that the best principals and the most funding would go to schools with the greatest needs. MSIC served to reorient the Board towards this way of thinking again.

Reflections on the Political Influences of Initiating the MSIC Program

The four elements of the conceptual framework were evident in the initial phases of the program in varying degrees and with different emphases. Those who had power and access to influence both decisions and inaction influenced all four elements. Providing Instructional Leadership involved Generating Will and Building Capacity to create the conditions for teaching and learning and not focusing solely on teaching and learning directly at this point. Reorienting the Organization involved a balance between decentralized and centralized initiatives and building awareness and a focus on equity in professional development initiatives.
However, this was not led by district leaders, and instead involved multiple stakeholders influencing many other stakeholders. **Establishing Policy Coherence** involved aligning with external resources and playing politics internally, as well as aligning human and financial resources. This involved mediating politics *within* the Board, and aligning resources to set up the *conditions* for improved teaching and learning. **Maintaining an Equity Focus** was evident in all three of the other components, and had to take on more of a charitable approach to addressing inequities than a social justice approach in order to be accepted by key decision-makers (trustees). There was also a significant focus on the use of student data as a political tool to keep the program in existence and increase stakeholder engagement and learning.

**Sustaining Equitable Practices and Pedagogy in the MSIC Program**

While the ‘Initiating Equitable Practices and Pedagogy’ phase examined the program from pre-conception to the first three to four years, this section examines the role of politics in sustaining the Program through the lens of the conceptual framework, ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer et al., 2008), from approximately years four and five through to year 10. This section includes both a political analysis of current practices aimed at sustaining reforms, as well as participant suggestions for improving the MSIC Program. Some overlap exists in the findings shared in each of the four components. Table 4 summarizes the findings of this conceptual argument as it applies to the sustaining phase of the MSIC Program and is followed by a more substantial description.

**1. Providing Instructional Leadership**

This section will explore providing instructional leadership, which is dependent on ‘Generating Will’ (or rather, ‘Sustaining Will’) and ‘Building Capacity.’ In the initiating phase of the program, generating will and building capacity involved creating the conditions necessary for teaching and learning, in which a focus on teaching and learning was only *one of many* foci.
Table 4

Overview of the Political Influences in Sustaining Equitable Practices/Pedagogies in the MSIC Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Influences in Sustaining Equitable Practices and Pedagogy in the MSIC Program</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Increased focus on teaching and learning, with less focus on creating the conditions to learn</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Increase in centralization and standardization</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Greater alignment with Board and Ministry operations and foci</td>
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1. Providing Instructional Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generating Will</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on Sustaining Will</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Developing relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Individual commitments to equity and social justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Realistic but unwavering commitment to the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Increased resistance to sustaining will because of increased centralization and quantity of Program initiatives/demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Some principals and teachers feeling overwhelmed in MSIC schools; can lead to increased deficit thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Moving Forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Coordinated program vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Sharing successes</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Ensuring educators in MSIC schools want to be there</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Building Capacity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ MSIC structures and resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Culture of ongoing and professional learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Developing leaders and staff with an equity focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Moving Forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Sustained equity training for leaders, educators and MSIC staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Increased self-regulation and critical self and program assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Maintain high expectations for educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Increased sharing between schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Continue to build awareness within MSIC</td>
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2. Reorienting the Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refining and Aligning Organizational Structures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Navigating the political motivations and impacts of scaling up the initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Increased centralization, increased efficiency, increased predictability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Disadvantages of increased centralization: increased standardization and bureaucratization, decreased motivation and innovation, decreased opportunities for democratic participation and capacity-building among educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Moving Forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ A more balanced approach between centralization and decentralization</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Increased top-down and bottom-up accountability</td>
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<tr>
<th>Changing District Culture</th>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Alignment with, and support from the larger Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Consistency in program leaders, and some leaders being part of both the micro- and macrostructure of the program</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Careful positioning of the program within the Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Influences of Board on program and program on Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ MSIC pilots many new Board initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Moving Forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Deeper collaboration and stronger connections between MSIC and Board structures</td>
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</table>
### 3. Establishing Policy Coherence

| Mediating Federal, State and Local Policy | Navigating relationships with external stakeholders  
  Challenges:  
  • Limited opportunities for external stakeholders to hold the program and Board accountable  
  Suggestions for Moving Forward:  
  • Increased opportunities for external organization (i.e., ICAC) to mediate policies and advocate within and outside of the program/Board for students and families living in poverty  
  • Increased partnerships |
|---|---|
| Aligning Resources | Sustaining structures and culture despite changes in human and financial resources  
  • The changing role of financial resources from developing to sustaining structures  
  Challenges:  
  • Sustainable structures, mindsets and pedagogies beyond financial and human resources |

### 4. Maintaining an Equity Focus

| Owning Past Inequity (including highlighting inequities in system and culture) | Mentioned throughout the first three elements to some degree  
  Challenges:  
  • Lack of recognition of the intersection of other identities (race, gender identity) with socioeconomic status  
  Suggestions for Moving Forward:  
  • Collecting data on intersections of identities within MSIC to raise awareness |
|---|---|
| Foregrounding Equity (including increasing availability and transparency of data) | Use of some tools to support equity pedagogy  
  • Infused into professional learning and curriculum to some degree  
  Challenges:  
  • Low-level integration and different/competing understandings of equity  
  Suggestions for Moving Forward:  
  • Ideological dialogues about different notions of equity and their connections to practice  
  • Integration of equity into every decision  
  • Collecting data that highlights students strengths and assess program |

Note: Based on the conceptual argument ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorber, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008)

In the sustaining phase, there is a clear demarcation to a central focus on teaching and learning and less of a focus on creating the conditions to learn. Both sustaining will and building capacity required tremendous collaboration between various stakeholders within the program as well as politically and ethically motivated decisions that led to particular outcomes.

**Sustaining Will**

In this phase of the program, the focus was on sustaining will, rather than generating will. Developing relationships between and within stakeholder groups, as well as individual
commitments to equity, were key factors in sustaining will for teaching, learning and innovating. A key factor in sustaining will noted by participants was the relationships between MSIC workers (i.e., lead teachers, teaching and learning coaches, and community support workers) and members of a school community (i.e. principals, teachers, and parents). The relationships between principals and teacher representatives in cluster meetings were another example noted by participants of ongoing and shared learning. Finally, the relationships between various MSIC staff positions were also noted (e.g., community support workers, lead teachers and teaching learning coaches) as key to sustaining the program. These relationships served to challenge thinking about connections to community and curriculum in relation to equity and social justice. The importance of relationships cannot be understated and as one participant noted, trust and confidence go a long way in sustaining the will to take risks and engage in new initiatives. In addition to relationships, Eight of 15 participants commented on the importance of a personal commitment to equity and social justice as a key factor in sustaining will. One participant noted that many principals and teachers have sustained a commitment to the program out of a moral imperative to close opportunity and achievement gaps and address inequities in the system.

Several participants noted that sustaining will among principals and teachers has been difficult, as there is a significant degree of resistance to the initiatives and practices put forth by the program. One participant drew the connection between the degree of centralization and the degree of buy-in:

The problem is you lost that sense at the beginning of people electing to do this stuff as opposed to being told to do this stuff. As things become more centralized…whenever that happens I think, you risk people losing the personal commitment to the ideas and the passion.

Nine of 15 participants noted that there were too many initiatives in the program and we “start and stop a lot of initiatives and nothing is sustained.” One participant noted that some
schools do not want to be part of the program because “it is more of a hassle than it’s worth” given the number of initiatives and the intense workload. Another participant noted that the problem is in the delivery of programming and initiatives, stating that “a one-size-fits-all model does not always work” and that professional learning and program initiatives need to be differentiated based on school-specific needs. One participant noted:

Flexibility is needed within a structure of consistency. That consistency of organizational structure, of leadership, of goals, of all that, means that you can go deeper and deeper and get more and more competent at what you’re doing, rather than feel like you are always taking on something new.

Six of 15 participants noted that a culture of silence throughout the Board has prevented people from actively engaging and learning, and has led to a culture of compliance and “checking off items on a list.”

There were still other explanations that accounted for the varying levels of optimism in bringing the program’s five essential components to life in a school. One participant suggested, “principals in MSIC schools feel overworked to the point of burnout” and “some people can persist through difficulty easier than others, and there are lots of difficulties that come up for principals in high needs communities.” Another principal noted it takes a high level of stamina and endurance and at times, it can be hard and it takes a toll on your personal life. Another participant spoke to the realities of teachers who are working hard in MSIC schools and the effects of educators feeling overwhelmed on students:

People feel that the obstacles are overwhelming and the realities of daily work are so great that it’s defeating. What supports are really available to help us with our work as opposed to the demands that are on us? I think most people feel that there are more demands than supports and people feel drained. And when people feel drained it leads more to deficit thinking. It feels insurmountable. When people feel supported – whether student, teacher, principal, SOE, then they’re going to feel better about their work, their possibilities and have much more of a growth mindset.

On the other hand, one participant spoke to the importance of unwavering dedication to the program, which cannot be understated for sustaining will:
As long as we have a poverty gap, MSIC will exist. I’d like to think we can succeed in closing opportunity and achievement gaps, but I’m not naïve enough to think that we’re going to beat the odds. I just want to think that we got to try. We just got to keep pushing and pushing and pushing and just be indefatigable. It isn’t good enough not to succeed.

However, a commitment to the program was accompanied by a sense of realism that recognizes it might not last forever. As such, a record of some sort is needed:

What we have to do is leave a clear footprint about how it can be done and what good it has done so that some bright spark 20 years from now will be able to look back and say god, that was really a great program. It’s always leaving enough information that they can take it to the next step.”

Eight of 15 participants also shared ideas on how to generate more will among administrators, teachers and staff in the program. One participant noted that there needs to be a coordinated, big-picture vision, instead of a smattering of initiatives. Another participant noted that MSIC staff needed to focus on a more sustainable way to build capacity, so that the school was not dependent on the program to sustain school-based reforms. The successes of the program (overall and on a school-by-school basis) need to be shared more readily because according to one participant, “Schools need to see that things are improving in their classrooms/schools.” Proven success is one the best strategies to maintain and sustain will.

According to one participant, this also depends on “how school leaders share the benefits of the program to motivate staff.” As well, continuing to create a consciousness about the growing poverty in Toronto and its effects on students is an important step to sustaining will to the larger socio-political issues, and not simply MSIC initiatives. As will be discussed later, sustaining will is difficult among people and schools that do not want to be part of the program. One participant noted, “You can’t give money to people who don’t want it,” and that as such, “only principals that want to be there and are committed to inner city schools should be there.”
Building District Capacity

Building capacity for instructional leadership has been a focus of the provincial government for some time. As such, the environment has been created (and some would argue that it has been mandated) for principals and district leaders to see their roles as instructional leaders largely influenced by neoliberal ideals. Within this environment, building capacity for teaching and learning continues to require intentional efforts, and even more so in MSIC schools, in which there is simultaneously a focus on creating the conditions to learn.

There have been many efforts to build capacity for improved teaching and learning, and MSIC structures and resources have supported this effort. The MSIC staff was identified by seven of 15 participants as being one of the greatest resources in the program. According to one participant, “The Coaches have been instrumental in improving school-based instructional leadership.” Several program structures that support schools and staff by promoting predictability, communication and learning were noted, such as: the internal website (SharePoint); cluster meetings; central MSIC staff; and, regular communication between the program and schools. Streamlining programs, processes and communication has been a very important strategy to increase efficiency in the program.

While the content in MSIC Units and professional learning in MSIC were discussed in Chapter 5, they are addressed here as well, specifically with respect to their abilities to build capacity. In speaking about the MSIC Units, one participant noted that there are a number of benefits to having a common exemplar of good teaching practice, such as: a common language is created among educators that leads to increased dialogue and sharing among educators; principals know what to look for and how to engage in accountable conversations with teachers; and, principals could discuss ideas for creating the conditions to support these best practices in
their schools. These structures and resources have also served to create a greater platform for educators to take risks and innovate with support.

In addition to the MSIC units, professional learning opportunities and foci allowed participants to observe and learn (in non-judgmental ways) about the application of theory to practice. One participant noted that ‘instructional and equity’ walkthroughs are examples of this type of learning. (It is interesting to note here that instructional and equity walkthroughs are seen as separate processes.) There has also been a shift from professional development (one-time event that is ‘instructor-directed’) to job-embedded professional learning (where support staff go into the classrooms and support teachers and schools in their own environments).

Further, the notion of learning extends to all stakeholders in MSIC. The program offered some professional learning opportunities for entire school communities (principals, teachers, parents, and community partners) on parent engagement, which many schools indicated was an area of need. In some schools, English as a Second Language classes, workshops and training, were held for parents during the school day.

Another example of a focus on learning was that monthly cluster meetings have been transformed from a focus on strictly business, to a focus on learning with a small component of business. In this model, principals and teachers come together and engage in learning, which according to one participant has had a huge impact on moving instructional leadership forward. MSIC is one of the very few programs in the TDSB to engage principals in professional learning and this changed the culture of learning and built capacity among MSIC principals as instructional leaders. Principals were supported in being able to walk through their schools and recognize best practices, engage in professional dialogue with teachers, and establish clear expectations. However, as one participant noted, this focus on professional learning has still resulted in “30% of the schools getting it, 30% on the continuum and 30% of the school falling behind” in terms of implementing best practices. Five of 15 participants noted that principals
want to engage in their own learning related to leading schools in inner cities, as that is a more pressing need than learning about best practices in teaching and learning.

Five of 15 participants noted that as the program started growing, it became evident quite quickly that inadequate leadership was the biggest challenge in moving the program forward, especially around equity-related practice and pedagogy. As one participant noted:

I think a Model School’s principal would have a depth and breadth of understanding of equity and a vision of what would make a difference in people’s lives – a real difference, not tokenism and work towards that vision. I believe that in my opinion every principal should be the keeper of the vision. If you don’t know where you’re going it very hard to get there.

Nine of 15 participants also commented on the leadership style that is required to sustain and improve reforms for equity. According to one participant, program leaders need to trust that other stakeholders will do a good job and trust others to take risks, as well as openly acknowledge when initiatives and practices are not working. Another participant stated, “The right people need to be in place, who are trusting, enthusiastic, passionate and have good social skills.” One participant noted that there is inadequate leadership in many MSIC schools because principals do not get to choose to be in these schools: “It takes too much work to shift thinking for people to get it” and this is one of the program’s greatest areas of need. According to one participant, “Principals need to be there who want to be there and who have a passion and willingness to work in MSIC schools,” and not simply placed there because there is an opening. Equity needs to be the number one priority for a MSIC principal.

Four of 15 participants also suggested that TDSB reconsider their hiring practices and requirements for principals to ensure that equity-pedagogy and equity-related practices have greater importance. Further, MSIC principals and vice-principals should have experience in MSIC schools and an understanding of poverty, marginalization, and racialization, and their effects on schooling. This would be an example of a systemic reform aimed at closing
opportunity and achievement gaps and increasing equity pedagogies and practices. This would guard against principals that just want the money that accompanies MSIC without a change in mindset and pedagogy.

As the program has grown significantly and quickly over the past five years, there is a gap in the beliefs and values of those teachers, leaders and schools who were part of the initial group, and those who joined the Program in later years. What is needed at this phase of the Program is a sustained focus on larger socio-political forces (such as poverty), equity mindsets and a genuine exploration of the strengths, contributions and capabilities of students, families and communities in the program. This tension will be discussed further in the section below ‘Maintaining an Equity Focus.’ One participant noted, “MSIC has to become a learning organization where people get equity and you don’t need to have that fight.” While there are no formal assessments to measure how school staff sees students and families, the program relies on more informal measures to assess changes in thinking:

Another measure is the questions and the reactions that we get from schools (in the Program). How do those schools see Model Schools? We collect that from surveys, but we also collect that through informal conversations with principals, with teachers, especially if we've been in the schools before. In those conversations, what are the questions that are being asked? What are the mindsets that come through in those conversations? Are they deficit mindsets? Or people actually moving to more asset-based perspectives about their school and the students that they serve? And how do they view Model Schools? Do they see us as just ‘give us the money’? Do they see us as the pain in the butt that comes around every year requesting documentation? Or do they actually see us authentically as a program that is there to better their school? (Interview Participant)

Nine of 15 participants provided suggestions about how to improve the culture of teaching and learning. Some participants noted that there are not enough opportunities to share ideas, concerns and needs, and that more hubs of learning are needed to promote sharing and prevent hoarding of information and ideas. Another participant noted that the expectations for teachers and principals need to be even higher, and that “if a child leaves grade 1 as is, not able
to read, the teacher has failed and needs support from the MSIC Coaches.” As well, two participants suggested teachers need to be better supported in improving educational experiences for English Language Learners and students with Special Education exceptionalities.

Building capacity also needs to happen among MSIC staff. This requires ongoing equity training for MSIC staff as well. Explicit equity training existed at the start of the program, with outside organizations such as the Centre for Urban Schooling at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto). However, over time, this has changed. Some participants explained this by saying that equity practices and pedagogy became infused in curriculum and program structures (e.g., professional learning and cluster meetings). Others argued that equitable practices and pedagogy have been replaced with a more narrow focus of improving literacy and numeracy as the program tried to align foci with the Board and ministry. Another participant commented on the shift away from equity and learning as the program grew and became more centralized:

There was a lot of that. There was a lot of reporting up. How many people have completed this task? How many people have completed that task? Just completed, not necessarily like how did the process really work? What was the result? Yes. Like "yes" isn't necessarily the only answer, like the only measure to decide whether it was good or not.

Seven of 15 participants noted that MSIC staff is not doing enough to engage in real issues of equity—the challenges, the intersections, and the opportunities for deep, transformational change. A comment was made about the need for greater connections between theory and practice in relation to professional learning requirements for community support workers: “There needs to be a common theoretical base and ideas/approaches toward parent and community engagement, supported by sharing effective practices of parent engagement.”
Staff training using the ‘Equity Continuum’ or ‘Equity: It’s in Our Hands’ (TDSB document) would be excellent resources for staff to engage in ‘self-regulation’ and critical self-assessment of practices, pedagogies and decisions, and determine next steps in learning. These assessments need to continuously occur to ensure that individual and collective mindsets are always transforming and becoming more equitable. One participant suggested slowing down and reducing the number of initiatives to ensure that there is time to build relationships, as “district reform is really people reform.” In this context of stronger relationships, courageous conversations can occur to move all stakeholders forward on the equity continuum.

Thirteen of 15 participants suggested that all stakeholders (especially trustees) should engage in equity training. For example, one participant said:

Staff and stakeholders need to understand equity and inner city experiences and understand the lived realities of kids. They need to understand the opportunity gaps and there is a lack of understanding of community.

One suggestion to sustain reforms was that various stakeholders in the program (MSIC staff, senior administrative board staff, parents, trustees, principals, teachers, etc.) engage in courageous conversations about what is/is not working at various levels and engage in a re-visioning process for the next phase of MSIC. One participant shares examples of these types of courageous conversations that are already happening in the Board:

…[we often ask] how much time are we spending on planning initiatives, and the administration of initiatives, and how much time are we spending on actually having conversations around equity? And prioritizing initiatives to determine is this really a charity piece or a social justice piece? How do we move it from one to the other? That conversation happens quite often about balancing, or just questioning how much time is being spent on this, and how much time is being spent on that. Those conversations whether they're being had amongst Community Support Workers, Lead Teachers or Teaching and Learning Coaches...I think the presence of those conversations, or the lack of those conversations tells us a lot about where we are as a program.
In addition to engaging in critical self-evaluation and equity training, several participants noted that the program needs to continuously be engaging in a process of self-evaluation, which was part of the initial intent of the program, but did not sustain over time.

Building capacity also requires that awareness-building still be a focus within the MSIC Program. As one participant noted, “Some staff in the schools do not even know that they are in a MSIC school!” One participant noted that even though making sure all stakeholders understand what MSIC stands for, “it’s getting to the classroom teacher, the principal and the superintendent and making them understand Model Schools. Anything other than this program just isn’t good enough.”

Sustaining will requires a focus on relationships and a personal commitment to equity and social justice. To further sustain will the program needs a more strongly coordinated vision, greater opportunities to share, and educators who want to be in MSIC schools. Building capacity for instructional leadership has a much more prominent role in the sustaining phase of the program. Building capacity has focused on program structures and resources, and the content and foci of professional learning, with a need for greater focus on both content and processes that promote a focus on equity. It is clear that the how, why and what of instructional leadership in the program was influenced by the political decisions of those with greater power.

2. Reorienting the Organization

This component of the conceptual framework includes ‘Refining and Aligning Structures’ and ‘Changing District Culture.’ At this stage of the program, there is a clear shift to more centralized reforms as the program grew to 150 schools, as well as a need to align with and position the program in certain ways within the Board.
Refining and Aligning Structures

This section describes the politics involved in scaling up the initiative and changes in the centralization/decentralization balance for reform.

Attempts to scale up the program were heavily influenced by political differences among trustees. In fact, there were times when program decisions were made to appease decision-makers and were not necessarily in the best interest of the program or MSIC students. Trustees voted each year on whether to put money toward the program. To secure trustee support, Model Schools had to be identified in the wards of all trustees who were opposing the Program, and that meant growing from three to 150 schools in six to seven years. Nine of 15 participants noted that the program grew too fast and did not allow for sustainability. One participant said:

Politically it was always difficult. It was an easy target. That $8 million was always kind of on a cutting block, and so in order to maintain a foothold the program kept expanding so they could show that they were making an impact on more schools. First it was 50 schools then it was 100 schools and then it was 125 schools and then it was 150 schools I’m hoping they stopped at 150. Because there hasn’t been much of an increase in the monies but we spread it out so that more people are benefitting.

In speaking about the shift in power from the MSIC Task Force and the district to the trustees, one participant noted:

I think the power shifted because of the cost of the program and people were very worried because the Board of course didn’t have enough money. It wasn’t the vision that was just keep randomly adding schools, but there was pressure, lots of pressure. I think the feeling was that if we didn’t, we were in jeopardy of being cut and so we kept adding schools. I don’t think that the powers that be wanted it to become more trustee-controlled, but that they felt that there was no choice basically.

This led to changes in the dynamics of how schools and principals interacted within the clusters, because relationships needed to be re-formed, and learning needed to be reconstructed. However, another participant provided a different perspective on why there was an increase in centralization:

… some people on the Board felt that they needed to own it more so that it could become more of a flagship of the Board, like it was the Board’s idea so that the Board took this
big equity initiative and ran with it as opposed to that it was ground up. Politically, it served the Board better the other way.

In addition to growing so quickly to appease trustees, the structure of growth did not necessarily meet the needs of poverty in the city, as one participant noted:

I think we would have done it differently (if we did not need trustee support) because we’ve never gotten to the pockets of poverty. School 151 (on the Learning Opportunities Index) is not better off than school 150, and there’s been that dividing line that we were forced into. If you look at the numbers, 59% (of students in the TDSB) are living in poverty. At 150, what portion of elementary schools is that? It isn’t 59%, not even close. It should be probably 250. We have to begin to take care of the pockets of poverty because that has come back to bite us a lot. You got wealthy students meeting students in real poverty, and they’re in the same school.

As a result of having to agree to this structure, there are children living in poverty in the system that are not receiving any support from the Board because their school is not designated as one of the 150 MSIC schools. According to one participant, the fact that the program is not tiered, (which would allow every school to receive differentiated support based on the number of students they had living in poverty), is confirmation that the trustees and senior administrative board staff do not understand the concept of equity.

One trustee noted that making decisions about equity-related programs is often difficult and contentious because there are so many inequities and not enough money or resources to support them all. Giving money to the MSIC initiative meant that another program or initiative would not get funded. Some participants felt that trustee training in equity needed to be mandated and may have alleviated some of these concerns, however efforts at trustee training failed because of low attendance and interest. As such, political strategizing was needed to convince trustees of the need for the program. Some participants noted that the program has listened too much to the political noise, rather than focus on what was best for students based on data and evidence-based research. Other participants noted that listening to the political noise was necessary to keep the program alive. The outcome, according to 12 of 15 participants, is
that for many schools and clusters in the program, growth at this rate did not allow for proper consolidation of learning and resulted in a dilution of the work.

Eleven of 15 participants noted that an increase in the size of the program was accompanied by an increase in the centralization and standardization of processes, initiatives and areas of foci. One participant remarked, “Somehow the Board gets to determine what you need because you are living in poverty and you are not scoring well on EQAO.” Participants noted both benefits and disadvantages to increased standardization. On the one hand, standardization maintains a base level of expectation for teachers, principals and schools in the MSIC Program. It is not an option to choose to care about creating equitable conditions for teaching and learning—it is expected of you. One participant pointed to the MSIC Deliverables as an example, which is a list of approximately 15 initiatives that schools are expected to engage in as part of the program. The deliverables provide a level of clarity and consistency about what it means to be a school in the MSIC Program, and they are determined based on data, evidence-informed practice (to some degree) and the experiences of schools and educators on the ground in MSIC schools. According to one participant, having a clear understanding is important “when funds are limited, because you want to appear as efficient and effective as possible or else you risk being cut as a program.”

On the other hand, participants noted that with increased centralization, you risk a lack of commitment and loss in innovative approaches to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. As well, schools do not need to engage in creative problem solving and ownership of the problems and solutions connected to larger inequities, because the program is directing their efforts. As such, schools are limited in their abilities to build capacity or sustain practices and pedagogies to close achievement and opportunity gaps, because as one participant put it, “schools are being spoon-fed by MSIC staff.” In this case, MSIC staff becomes a crutch. However, one participant explained that in order to be supported by the larger Board, “the
program could not go too far outside the box, or we would be perceived as trailblazers, and not in a positive way.”

Furthermore, one participant noted that increased bureaucracy has been accompanied by increased centralization, which has decreased the passion and commitment that many MSIC staff members have for their jobs. MSIC staff is expected to “roll out initiatives” instead of build relationships with parents and staff and encouraging change from the perspective of strong relationships. Another participant noted that one of the greatest strengths of this program was that it started off being political in nature, but that as staff, “It was harder to be political when the Board owned the program because you can’t fight against the people who employ you.” Finally, it was noted that changing mindsets and “reforms for equity” requires time and ongoing dialogue focused on meeting people where they are.

Eleven of 15 participants noted that a more balanced approach is required in which some things are mandated (i.e., equity training, access to health care, etc.) and many things are left to the school communities to decide upon based on evidence-informed practices and the inclusion of multiple stakeholder voices. One participant noted that internal program discussions occur regularly about the balance between centralized and decentralized approaches to program reform.

One participant noted that in its current state, MSIC is somewhat separate from the rest of the Board, so centralization actually happens within the program itself. For this participant, this raises questions about who supports this Program, who understands it, who owns it, and who is accountable for it. According to 13 of 15 participants, accountability measures need to be multi-directional within the program. One participant called for pressure points from both inside and outside of the system, which includes principals being accountable to senior administrative board staff, the community and parents, and the Board being accountable to both the program and the community.
Several ideas were put forth to sustain and increase top-down accountability. One participant noted that the money should be withheld from the schools initially until a commitment to the program is evident, because “principals are motivated by money.” Another participant identified that schools thrive off of constant feedback and that processes like school walkthroughs based on equity-related indicators are helpful in this process. A third participant noted that schools make changes when there is accountability from above, and supported regular checkpoints in the program, such as the annual review of the Canadian Achievement Test scores. All of these strategies place the onus on the school as the unit of change. This could be problematic if too much responsibility is placed on one person (the principal), which reduces opportunities for real democratic participation. Another participant suggested that teachers be assessed in terms of teaching ability, and recognized the challenges this would pose with the Teachers’ Union.

Bottom-up notions of accountability include a broader range of participants. One participant noted that, “parents and communities need a much stronger voice than they currently have.” Another participant suggested that greater opportunities are needed for parents and community partners to actively engage in problem-finding and solution-generating processes aimed at closing achievement and opportunity gaps. Some strategies used by the program and suggested to improve accountability included: increasing access points for parents to share concerns and ideas and impact decision-making in the school; strengthening relationships with parents and community partners to build trust; engaging in ongoing dialogue with parents about what constitutes student success and other educational topics; strengthening networks of parents with a focus on advocacy within a culture that is ready and willing to hear concerns; increasing community partnerships; and, increasing trustees’ connections to parents that have been marginalized by the system.
One participant noted, “Parents in MSIC don’t know they have the right to advocate for their children or how to advocate. Many parents don’t know they can ask for that. Some teachers don’t want to talk to parents because of language barriers, etc., so it’s easier to not have the conversation at all.” Another participant noted that we need to be creative about how to involve a broader range of parents who don’t participate in School Council activities “for one legitimate reason or other. These conversations need to be so ongoing, that they are seen as the culture of the school”. One participant commented on what happens when we do not truly listen to the people who we are intending to serve:

Quite often what happens is that we make all this stuff available thinking we know the answer and they (parents) come along and say, ‘that’s not the question I had in mind, so your answer isn’t the answer I need, so I’m going this way’. If we don’t encourage parents to be part of processes that affect them and their children, I don’t know how else we get to a human society.

Bottom-up forms of accountability also include gathering input and ideas from principals, teachers and MSIC staff about how to improve the program. There were mixed views on whether this happens in MSIC. Some participants noted that program leaders had many structures and avenues for gathering input, such as meetings of principal leaders in the program that acted as liaisons between the cluster and the program, the Cluster Parent Academy meetings consisting of parents from schools within each cluster, MSIC staff meetings that would elicit feedback from staff, etc. However, seven of 15 participants noted that increased engagement among staff, principals and teachers, required a deeper engagement of their voices, needs, concerns, and ideas. One participant noted that the greatest resistance came from those who felt that their voices are not heard. To increase opportunities for voice, stakeholders need to be a part of the co-creation process (e.g. developing understandings of equity, re-visioning the program vision, reviewing the program, etc.). Notably, three participants commented that the greatest resistance in the program comes from MSIC principals. Furthermore, frontline workers (MSIC
staff, teachers and principals) need to have a greater voice in decision-making as they are in touch with the daily realities of the program. This requires a flattening of leadership and a dispersion of power among various levels and stakeholders.

Sustaining reforms for equity has been a challenge for the MSIC Program. Increased centralization and standardization of the Program has resulted in high efficiency and output and in many ways has allowed the program to stay afloat. However, the centralization and standardization have also cost the program stakeholder engagement, responsibility and true opportunities to engage in transformative equity work. Given the political and ideological differences among the various stakeholders involved, different approaches were required at different times, and for different purposes. While at one point, increased centralization and efficiency may have insured the existence of the program, MSIC is now poised to make more transformative, more democratic, and more sustainable change in closing achievement and opportunity gaps to improve the schooling experience of students most marginalized by and in the system, identify inequities and address them directly.

**Changing District Culture**

‘Changing District Culture’ involves strengthening the relationship between the Program and the Board, including positioning and perception of the program within the Board. This section will also explore the relationship between the MSIC Program and the larger Board. Eight of 15 of the participants noted that a key element to changing district culture is alignment with, and support from, the larger Board. The support of senior administrative board staff in improving the instructional leadership of MSIC principals was noted on several occasions as a necessary component of building capacity. It was also important that superintendents understood and ensured that MSIC initiatives were being carried out in MSIC schools within their purview, with an understanding of *why* the initiatives were important. Nine of 15 participants discussed
the importance of integrating the program more deeply into the system. For example, the principal leaders in each cluster (Central Administrators Responsible for Steering) are now aligned with Board structures for dividing schools (known as Families of Schools) and can represent the program among other MSIC schools as well as non-MSIC schools within their Family of Schools. As well, Superintendents of Education have been given responsibility for each of the clusters, and as such have been required to learn about the philosophy and initiatives in the program.

Changing district culture to sustain equitable practices and pedagogies in the MSIC Program involves positioning the program within the larger Board. Twelve of 15 participants noted that MSIC is positioned as a high functioning and high output program. Three of 15 participants noted that MSIC schools are seen as trailblazers in the larger Board, and that there is a tremendous amount of commitment and passion from those leading the program. The program is also seen within the Board as having a strong commitment to a culture of professional learning in which there are high expectations for principals and teachers, accompanied by support and co-learning. One participant noted, “MSIC changed the culture of inner city classrooms from a dumping ground to a place where the best teachers go.” One participant noted:

I'm finding that more and more people want to be in a Model School...teachers and principals. They'll say on their application I want to be in a Model School, which I believe is quite a message. The feedback that I get from people is like, I want to be in the Model School because I get so much instructional leadership versus in a non-Model School.

Seven of 15 participants commented on the political utility of branding the MSIC Program. One participant noted the branding of MSIC as innovative is what has kept the program alive and at the forefront of recognition. The Board trusts that the program will deliver and that provides greater influence: “We can push boundaries now. People will (and we insist
that they do) make decisions based on the top 150 Learning Opportunities Index and that would have never happened 10 years ago.”

One participant explained that positioning the program as a vehicle for improved teaching and learning was not only an ethical decision, but also a political decision to demonstrate to senior administrative board staff and trustees that this program was committed to the core business of schooling—teaching and learning. Another example of political positioning was to create an image of MSIC as a flagship program that the Board could point to as an example of how it was attempting to close opportunity and achievement gaps. One participant noted the program had to be positioned as separate from the larger Board in order to be profiled as a flagship program. Four of 15 participants also noted that the self-interest of leaders have influenced the outcomes and directions of the program. One participant noted that a challenge with being positioned as a flagship program is that MSIC is at the whim of senior administrative board staff who re-package it according to the latest Board direction.

Four of 15 participants noted that a key strategy for changing district culture is to maintain consistency among the leaders of the program, so that relationships can be fostered and trust nurtured. Another participant noted that it is important to have certain people in both the micro- and macrostructure of the program, which one participant referred to as ‘matrix management.’ The microstructure refers to the internal workings of the program and the macrostructure refers to developing and maintaining relationships with the Board, community partners, and the larger public. A final strategy is that the program actively works at developing strong relationships between the key decision makers, the elected trustees and the senior administrative board staff at the Board to ensure that lines of communication are open and clear.

Another participant suggested deeper collaboration is needed between MSIC and the other departments in the TDSB, especially the Equitable and Inclusive Schools Team. One participant noted, “We have lots of core sets of people who are working hard to close gaps, but
in isolation, in silos, etc. How do we make it more than just a small group of people working as part of a larger TDSB system?” Furthermore, “What is learned in MSIC re: Inner city education should influence the entire system. Successful practices should be shared system-wide and this is not done enough.” One participant shared that MSIC staff members are “sitting at every table” in the Board and advocating for the consideration of students and families living in poverty.

Another participant noted sharing and collaboration should occur between teachers, leaders and parents in MSIC and non-MSIC schools to build capacity beyond the program.

One participant noted that the program has changed from being positioned “on the side” at its inception, to being “in the middle”:

The motivation behind both positions was not good. When it was on the side, not good because it was clearly not something that the Board was taking on as a priority for itself. It was something that this small group of people were making happen even though the Board didn’t want it. And then when it’s in the middle of the structure, it loses its autonomy completely and it’s completely dependent on the system.

Instead, the participant commented on how the program should be positioned:

It makes it hard for it to play the role that it should play. A Program like that with 150 schools should be challenging how the Board works all the time and in all ways, in terms of equity issues, in terms of LOI and how it’s used…and it hasn’t done that.

There are many perspectives on the influence of the TDBS on the MSIC Program and vice versa. All participants agreed that TDSB provided the funding for MSIC to continue year after year. Eight of 15 say that this demonstrated the Board’s support of the program. Seven of 15 say that funding came with a cost and that “being part of a bureaucracy has had a huge influence on how we value success, what programs we bring in, what we do, what we value.”

Another participant suggested that the program took what was great in the TDSB, mobilized it, and then created new and innovative things that became institutionalized. Some argued that the TDSB has placed MSIC on an international stage, whereas others argued that the TDSB slowed the progress of the program because so many people didn’t understand it.
Participants had many more examples of ways in which the MSIC Program influenced the TDSB. One participant noted that it has allowed for a broader definition of education than just achievement, in that “you can’t have achievement without well-being and can’t ignore one without looking at the other.” Another participant noted that MSIC is a model for how education is approached in the TDSB, with regards to infusing culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy into teaching and learning, community partnerships, innovative practices for parent engagement, and the raised expectations for superintendents, principals and teachers. However, another participant stated that it had not influenced the rest of the Board in the ways that it could have. In comparing MSIC to the former Inner City Project Schools, this participant noted: “Project schools were central to all schools in that they partnered with other schools. This was not just a financial partnership, it also involved teachers learning together and collaborating.” Finally, one participant noted that it would be beneficial if there were a way that TDSB could apply a tiered approach to every department, taking the LOI and other factors into account.

Five of 15 participants noted that while it is important for the program and the Board to maintain a dynamic relationship in which they are both learning from the other, it is also important to maintain a level of separation between the program and the Board. One participant suggested that it is important to always be intentional about understanding that students in some schools have greater challenges than students in other schools. This also increases the likelihood that the differentiated funding model stays in tact. Finally, it is important to be separate to a degree to evaluate success, make changes and derive lessons that can be applied to the whole Board.

In the recent past, there have been conversations about the program becoming an official Department in the TDSB. Integrating the program more deeply into Board structures was easier given the size of the program (150 out of almost 600 elementary school). Seven of 15 participants were excited because this change would demonstrate a degree of permanence and
institutionalization for the program that had not existed previously. As well, the program could re-establish some of the initial aims that were lost over the years. This would allow for deeper and more structural changes, and consistency and coherence in practice (i.e. “You could walk into any classroom in a MSIC school and see high expectations and a focus on equity”). Six of 15 participants (some of whom were also excited by the potential change) were concerned that becoming a Department would dilute the core of the program and would reduce the voices and impact of the multiple stakeholders connected and committed to the program. This concern was largely based on the belief that equity mindsets and the MSIC philosophy would be lost within the bureaucracy of a Board that is still learning about these issues. Another participant warned that MSIC couldn’t be seen as separate from equity, as equity is the basis of the program:

Ideally, MSIC would become part of a larger Equity Department and would be seen as a Program that challenged the way things are done in all diff ways. The Program needs to be more connected to equity at all times, and could benefit from the knowledge and perspective of people in the current Equity Department and the Aboriginal Centre, as their knowledge of equity is often deeper than those in MSIC. If we really believe that MSIC is an equity Program, it needs to be part of that umbrella. If we see it as simply a charitable thing for poor kids, then it could be a separate department. And we’re already doing that already.

Finally, three of 15 participants noted that a significant amount of work is required by the system to teach parents and caregivers in both MSIC and non-MSIC schools about the inequities that exist in our system and the challenges that some communities face. One participant noted that “parents with greater social capital know how to navigate the system and get what they want” and this needs to be acknowledged and addressed by the system. This requires actively teaching parents, especially those who have been most marginalized within and outside of the education system, “how to navigate the system in terms of policies and practices to support their children.”

Reorienting the organization needs to account for the political motivations of scaling up initiatives and a continued balance of centralized and decentralized approaches to reform. This
balance influences stakeholder engagement, increased voice in decision-making, and the
decisions themselves, which have been heavily influenced by the political interests and beliefs
of key decision-makers. It also requires deeper integration and careful positioning of the
program within the larger Board.

3. Establishing Policy Coherence

This component of the conceptual framework includes ‘, ‘Mediating Provincial, Federal
and Board Policies,’ as well as ‘Aligning Resources.’ As the program became more centralized,
it became harder to maintain structures for the democratic participation of multiple stakeholders.

**Mediating Provincial, Federal, and Board Policies**

Ten of 15 participants noted that politics were difficult to navigate, as there were so
many differences in opinion. The trustees required that “every inch be justified” and this put
tremendous pressure on MSIC and senior administrative board staff. The other provincial
Ministries were not aligned with the Ontario Ministry of Education; so educating the ‘whole’
child became an act of mediating between and connecting the different Ministries at times. The
program was in conversation with the Teachers’ Union and at times, initiatives were blocked.
One participant noted that the intentional focus on teaching and learning stemmed from a belief
that “MSIC schools need the best teachers and the best teaching” and noted that this is often
hard to navigate in a highly unionized environment. Larger systemic issues have also had
impacts on muting the idealistic vision of MSIC, such as cuts to Special Education, larger class
sizes in Kindergarten, staff that are not interested in serving those communities, etc. Internally,
there were both needs and opportunities to connect with, convince and dialogue with other
departments in the TDSB to both ensure the very existence of the program, and ensure its
growth. One participant noted that it is important to have an internal role in the program with the
purview of advocating, connecting, and engaging in political discussions.
However, since the MSIC was aligned with Board and Ministry goals, little mediation was required there. The Board did want more money from the Ontario Ministry of Education in the Learning Opportunities Grant, but there were no instances requiring significant mediation here. The program was in line with the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and with the Ministry’s focus on raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. One participant noted that the program was served well to stay clear of the Ministry, as they would simply want to “pick our brains and take all the credit.” However, another participant noted, “It’s critical that the province recognizes the value of this program to provide sustained funding that will help us think longer term and really give initiatives a try.”

Nine of 15 participant responses clearly indicated that instead of simply mediating policy and politics, stakeholder voices needed to be increased and heard rather than decreased and silenced, for the program to be sustained and improved. Externally, a degree of mediation and advocacy is required to keep the program relevant and the Inner City Advisory Committee and some members of senior administrative board staff took a lead role in that. One participant noted that the ICAC “holds the Board accountable, lobbies different government bodies, and acts as a watchdog between the Board and the Ministry.” The ICAC had the potential to advocate for system change through lobbying and other efforts, and continued to support and create advocates for children living in marginalized communities. As one participant noted:

The very existence of ICAC mediates (policy and politics)...because they know when something’s cut and why it’s cut, and they look to the Board, and ask ‘Why did you cut it? Oh, well you have the money. You got it in a grant. How come you don’t have it for Special Ed? Why? You didn’t cut it for yourself right but you cut it for kids living in poverty. How come?’

For example, the ICAC pressured the Board to explain why there were more MSIC students in certain Special Education classes and why more MSIC students were getting suspended
compared to non-MSIC students. Another participant remarked that the role of ICAC goes well beyond mediating and advocating for change:

…but not only do you have to mediate, you have to look outside the box. You have to continually be thinking okay, here’s that itty bity classroom and it’s got … you know, you have the experts in the classroom, you have those teachers. What do the teachers need? What is driving them, what are the expectations, what are the outcomes they’re looking for and what are the resources we’re giving them to meet those kids’ needs? Then you look at the kids, then you look at the parents, then you look at the communities and you just keep building out and building out and building out. Constantly drawing in other infrastructure and other … so you’re breaking down silos and that is exhausting work all in itself, because you will always be met with oh we can’t do that. That is medical. Oh we can’t do that. Somebody else feeds them. Well no, actually because they’re in our schools, we will be feeding them and somebody else may pay for it and somebody else may provide the food, but we will be feeding these children, because we can’t guarantee that they’re going to have breakfast before they leave in the morning and yet we want to teach them. There are all kinds of possibilities, but you have to have somebody who can clearly lead this Program. I don’t care whether they’re inside, outside or in the middle, but somebody who is a leader, who constantly has their eye on outside the box.

It was suggested that the ICAC remain as a watchdog committee to hold the Board accountable and identify system inequities. Another suggestion was that research be used to compare MSIC and non-MSIC schools to ensure that the gaps are actually closing over time, and to address other inequities within and connected to socioeconomic inequities (e.g., race, gender identity, etc.). In order for members of the ICAC and MSIC staff to effectively meet the needs of the whole child, forming partnerships is a necessity. Since MSIC is considered a high profile program, partnerships with outside organizations were abundant and easy to form.

It was also suggested that the program play an advocacy role outside of the TDSB, encouraging different Ministries to step up to the plate and address inequitable housing, health care, food scarcity, mental health facilities, community resources, etc. The ICAC has played this role to some degree and so have the MSIC staff to a lesser degree. In addition to advocacy, the program can also strengthen partnerships with the City of Toronto to further support students and families. One participant noted:
We invited many key city stakeholders to a large gathering. We said to them, ‘the city
does not fund education but has a responsibility to education. How are we going to work
together? How are we going to affect integrated services? How are we going to affect
change at the funding level? What influences can we have?’ MSIC has become such an
incredible program that people are taking us seriously. The voices of these community
stakeholders are informing how we do business.

Aligning Resources

Eight of 15 commented on the numerous changes to human and financial resources in
the Board over the past several years, and that most often these decisions were determined by
political differences and financial needs in the Board. In the MSIC Program, staff have been
added and removed from current positions and actual positions have been added and removed
over the years. Despite these changes, the MSIC has continued to navigate politics to align
resources. Through all of the changes such as Board-wide cuts, it is clear that MSIC staff are
protected to some degree. According to one participant, this speaks to the reputation of MSIC
staff in building the capacity of schools to level the playing field. Another participant noted that
MSIC staff has become more integrated into TDSB structures, which makes them less likely to
be affected by Board cuts. Changes in MSIC staff have had serious impacts on sustaining
growth in the program. One participant noted that “just when you build a relationship (with a
MSIC staff member), the person is changed or the role no longer exists.” Nonetheless, the
general functioning of the program has been sustained despite these changes, which speaks to
the strength of the structures that can survive changes in human resources. The reshuffling and
changing of staff is common in neoliberal ideologies, as workers tend to be commodified and
valued for the discrete skill set provided. The importance of context, relationship and history
redirects the conversation from one of sustainability to one of transformation.

In the sustaining phase of the program, conversations around funding centered on
priorities, capacity building, and sustaining real change. Eight of 15 participants noted that as
the program became more standardized, so did the spending. According to one participant, more
initiatives requiring funding were determined centrally. Furthermore, as the program grew, less money was available to each school, as the total funding for the program remained the same. Many questions arose as to whether the resources provided were adequate for real, systemic change, or whether the money given to schools was tokenistic. Some participants marvelled at the program’s ability to account for every dollar, but questioned whether greater advocacy was needed to ensure more funding. One participant noted that while more money would benefit schools, schools should be given “slightly less money than needed, (because then) people work harder and feel like they have a mission. If there is too much money, you don’t have to work hard to use it effectively.”

Another participant noted that increased funding is beneficial to the extent that it changes the mindsets of staff about the capabilities of students and families in inner city communities, and to the extent that it improves teaching and learning. Another participant noted that money is also needed to continue to ensure that the conditions for learning are met, because poverty in the city is only getting worse “and kids need to eat every day.” There was no clear rationale provided by participants as to why the money was distributed to schools based on head count alone, and without consideration for a school’s placement on the Learning Opportunities Index (or other factors). One participant alluded to the fact that this funding formula was created as part of the pitch of the program being a pilot project initially, while another participant noted that the differences in external barriers to student success are minute between schools that are close together on the LOI.

Four of 15 participants also questioned what would be left of the program and MSIC schools should the funding end. One participant noted that we do not measure the sustainability of the program, in that we don’t think about what would be left of the program if the money and staffing were removed. Another participant noted that the program operates under the purview that the money could be cut at any point and aims to create structures and expectations that
would survive cuts to funding, such as forming meaningful partnerships. However, other participants were more sceptical about what the program would look like without funding and staff.

Establishing policy required navigating relationships and differences with external stakeholders, as well as sustaining program structures despite changes in human and financial resources. Participants suggested that to further enhance the program, structures to increase (rather than decrease) advocacy for students and families living in poverty are needed. As well, a re-visioning of the program would be helpful in examining what would be sustained in the program beyond human and financial resources.

4. Maintaining an Equity Focus

This component involves ‘Owning Past Inequity’ and ‘Foregrounding Equity.’ Increased centralization has impacted how equity is understood and enacted in the program. Participants provided suggestions on how to deepen the equity focus of the program.

Owning Past Inequity

In addition to continuing to make efforts towards closing the opportunity gaps, there is little evidence of the program owning past inequity. According to Rorrer et al. (2008), owning past inequity requires that district leaders do not disregard inequities, pretend they do not exist, or blame students and families. Instead, they need to recognize inequities and commit to change. Five of 15 participants commented on the program’s inability to address other systemic inequities related to poverty. One participant noted how the MSIC Program falls short due to the unwillingness and discomfort in addressing other inequities (based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.) that are interrelated to socioeconomic inequities. This participant asked, “If class is so intimately tied to race, why isn’t race being considered and addressed?” Another participant noted that this unwillingness is reflective of a larger system that is also unwilling to
address these inequities deeply. Creating awareness of these intersections would be well served if accompanied by research that highlights the need to focus on other inequities in connection to and in addition to poverty. Owning past inequities was also addressed in the three other components as inequities were addressed in program and Board structures and culture.

**Foregrounding Equity**

Participants struggled to provide examples about how equity is being foregrounded in the sustaining phase of the program. One example that four out of 15 participants pointed to was the use of tools like the ‘Equity Continuum’ as supports for foregrounding equity in the program. Several schools made use of this continuum when it was first introduced as a tool for classroom and school self-assessments and co-learning. Unfortunately, it was a one-time event for many schools and did not become a sustained practice of self-assessment and goal setting. As one participant put it, “Teachers, schools and the Program do not engage in self-assessment using the ‘Equity Continuum’ or the ‘Equity Foundation Statement’ in a consistent way, or at a Program-wide level” (e.g., equity walkthroughs).

Seven of 15 participants also noted that specific initiatives in certain schools focused on addressing larger socio-political issues such as creating all-gender washrooms in the school, supporting students in advocating for changes in local community development projects, or inviting parents and community members to share their expertise and contributions in the classroom. However, it was also noted that these initiatives were often led by principals who have an equity-minded focus and that without this focus, it was unlikely that equity initiatives would occur in a school.

It was also noted by five of 15 participants that a focus on equity and social justice is less explicit, but is embedded into curriculum, professional learning coordinated by MSIC, and for some, school-based staff meetings. However, six of 15 participants noted the opposite and stated
that a major challenge with the program is that equity is not deeply embedded in every decision and that the equity initiatives that are implemented are surface-level in nature. For example, one participant cited hanging up equity posters and making community boards as evidence of low-level equity initiatives. Another participant noted that buying multicultural books and using the MSIC Units are low-level equity initiatives that on their own, do not address larger socio-political and economic inequities in our society or promote democracy through education. One participant stated, “Level 2 expectations are evident in how we speak to kids and parents.” One participant remarked that increased standardization kills opportunities for real equity. Another participant noted that the number of program initiatives has diluted the core of the work, which involves closing achievement and opportunity gaps. This participant also commented on the “flavour of the month” mentality, while also recognizing that this mentality may have developed to prove the worth of the program to senior administrative board staff and trustees.

Fourteen of 15 participants noted that there is not a strong enough emphasis placed on equity in the program. Many participants noted that a major reason for the lack of equity initiatives in MSIC schools is that there is a system-wide lack of understanding of equity and issues related to poverty for all stakeholders. Another participant noted that there are different perceptions of what equity is in MSIC and in the TDSB at large. On one end of the spectrum, equity means charity (responding to the effect of the inequity) and on the other end of the spectrum, equity means social justice (responding to the complex root causes of the inequities). Furthermore, there are conflicting views on the differences and nuances between these two approaches. For example, some participants described equity as committing to the MSIC Deliverables (nutrition programs, hearing and vision programs, etc.), while others stated that this is just the beginning and does not address deeper notions of equity, such as changing mindsets, increased democratic participation among all stakeholders, and teaching and learning that encourages social action after an exploration of larger socio-political and economic inequities.
Eleven of 15 participants noted that deficit thinking is very present among teachers and principals, and that a real understanding of the contributions and assets of students, families and staff is not a common among educators in MSIC.

With regards to the types of data collected, it is important to note that there was very little mention of measuring the growth of the program over time, or collecting data on students to highlight their strengths, contributions and capabilities. One participant commented, “we analyze the student from every angle, but we don’t analyze the system from every angle.” These sources of data would shift attention and responsibility to the program and the Board and to help shift mindsets among educators and the public at large with regards to what ‘inner-city’ students are capable of. Research needs to answer the question, “is the program producing the desired results?” First, a clear understanding of the desired results needs to be decided upon collectively, articulated and shared, and used to guide Program goals and foci.

Reflections on the Political Influences of Sustaining the MSIC Program

The four elements of the conceptual framework differed in the sustaining phase of the program compared to the initiating phase. Sustaining the program saw an increase in centralized processes and standardization of program initiatives. Power, influence and voice impacted all four of these elements in different ways. Providing Instructional Leadership involved Sustaining Will and Building Capacity with a greater focus on teaching and learning itself, rather than a predominant focus on creating the conditions to learn. Several participants noted that the program would benefit from both structures and foci that promote deeper levels of equity and a re-visioning of the purpose and impact of the program. Reorienting the Organization demonstrated the political influences on scaling up the program, creating deeper alliances within the larger Board, as well as various couplings for decentralized and centralized initiatives. Participants noted that the program would benefit from decreasing centralized initiatives and increasing opportunities for decentralized initiatives that allow for greater choice
and voice in determining how best to serve students. **Establishing Policy Coherence** involved navigating external partnerships and sustaining program structures and pedagogies beyond human and financial resources. According to participants, the program would benefit from continued structures that ensure external accountability, increased partnerships and a focus on sustaining mindsets, policies and practices. **Maintaining an Equity Focus** was the component that required the most effort to sustain equitable reforms. Participants noted that intersections between poverty and other identities (race, gender identity, etc.) need to be explored, as well as intentional efforts to engage in ideological dialogue about differences in understandings of equity that influence decisions at every level. One of the participants quoted Paulo Freire in saying, “Faith in people is an apriority requirement for dialogue.” This participant further added, “until we are able as a system and society to value every person’s voice, we are going to have difficulty being truly equitable.’

**Concluding Remarks**

Initiating and sustaining the MSIC Program requires a complex and nuanced approach to understanding the influences of politics and ideology on district reform for equity. The purpose of this chapter is not to identify how, when, where, and why district reform for equity should occur. Instead, the purpose of this chapter is to illuminate how tensions in education and reform have been influenced by politics at various stages of the MSIC Program, against the backdrop of the conceptual framework ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer et al., 2008).

These nuances revealed several tensions that arose requiring discussion, dialogue and at times, compromise. These tensions included: Navigating politics and reforming based on data/evidence-informed practice; standardization and differentiation; democratic participation and central decision-making processes; integration in the larger Board and separation as a program; generating internal will and understanding/responding to resistance; a focus on equity and a focus on excellence (in teaching and learning); making drastic change and making gradual
change; short-term planning and long-term sustainability, charity and social justice; having a choice to be in the MSIC Program or being ‘strongly encouraged’ to participate; efficiency and complexity; depth and breadth; and, seeing the contributions/assets of students/families/communities and seeing the deficiencies/faults of students/families/communities. At different times and under different conditions, these tensions played out and impacted decision-making and action/inaction in the MSIC Program.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 1970, pp. 13-14)

In this study, I documented the experiences and learnings of an established urban district reform for equity in Canada’s largest, urban school district that is part of a highly centralized and largely neoliberal provincial, education system. The Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program serves over one quarter of the schools in the Toronto District School Board whose students face the greatest barriers to success. Using the ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ framework put forth by Rorrer et al. (2008), I explored how the MSIC Program implemented practices and pedagogies aimed at increasing student success, access and opportunities. I further considered how participants understood and measured this reform, and how the reform was initiated and sustained over time. Using grounded theory, data was triangulated from two sets of interviews with 15 participants (three from each of the following stakeholder groups: district leaders, MSIC Program staff, key principals, community partners and elected officials), and 12 key documents (program and policy documents, professional articles, and program data).

This chapter begins with a revised conceptual argument based on the findings from this study. Descriptions of the four key findings from this study are then provided, followed by overall recommendations aimed at urban district reform for equity based on those findings. Finally, stakeholder-specific recommendations are provided for: Academic Scholars, Ministry Personnel/Policy Makers, Elected Officials/School Boards, District Leaders, MSIC Program Staff, and Social Justice Advocates/Community Activists. This chapter ends with potential challenges to and opportunities for implementing the recommendations and concluding thoughts.
Revised Conceptual Framework

Strengths of the Conceptual Argument: Districts as Institutional Actors

The conceptual argument, ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer et al., 2008) provided an excellent framework for analyzing how the MSIC Program implements equitable practices and pedagogies, because it captured the complexities of the program and allowed for an analysis of overlapping ideas and influences that were connected in varied ways. It is also one of the only conceptual arguments/theories/frameworks for district reform that clearly indicates and makes space for conversations of historic and current inequities in schooling. Furthermore, the definition of equity that it provides encourages and makes space for critical theories of equity and education.

Limitations of the Conceptual Argument: Districts as Institutional Actors

As is common in a grounded study, the findings revised the argument. Several differences were noted between the original conceptual argument and participant responses in the case of the MSIC Program in the TDSB:

- The case of the MSIC Program required that the conditions for learning, as well as creating the conditions for pedagogy be in place prior to engaging in a direct focus on teaching and learning in ways that would improve life choices, experiences, opportunities, and access for marginalized students. This was not captured in the conceptual argument. Furthermore, the conceptual argument did not account for marked differences in initiating versus sustaining district reforms, such as the difference in generating political will versus sustaining instructional will.

- Maintaining an equity focus and the particular equity ideology employed at a given time, had a much larger influence on district reform than the other three elements of the conceptual framework. Equity in the conceptual argument underestimated the
importance of changing ideologies amongst *all stakeholders*—district leaders, principals, teachers, parents and families within and outside of the MSIC Program, elected Board officials, community partners, and students—as well as the need to address and change systemic inequities.

- The role of political influences, navigation and mediation had a tremendous effect on how all four elements were enacted or not. This goes beyond mediating policies and aligning resources as indicated in the element: ‘Establishing Policy Coherence.’ Political influences speak to who has influence (and who does not) on decision-making and under what contexts. The conceptual argument did not account for the level of internal politics that required navigation within the program and the Board in order to sustain MSIC.

- The conceptual argument inadequately recognized the importance of civic capacity and the important role of complex relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders, both inside and outside of the program and the Board. The conceptual argument did not account for the complex role that districts play in mediating internal and external relationships and interests and actively strengthening these ties to develop a stronger base for civic capacity.

- The conceptual framework did not adequately account for the role of leadership in mediating political and ideological influences, and in particular, the type of leadership required to foreground equity for the transformative changes needed to respond to individual and systemic injustices.

- Greater distinctions were needed between the sub-categories. For example, ‘Building Capacity,’ which is a part of **Providing Instructional Leadership**, included elements mentioned in ‘Aligning and Refining Structures’ and ‘Changing District Culture’ (e.g., professional learning).
As such, the following image captures the findings of this study. The particular points listed in each of the four components are a summary of the findings in Chapter 6.

Figure 2. Creating the Conditions for Pedagogy in the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program—an Urban District Reform for Equity in the Toronto District School Board

Findings 2, 3, and 4 are strongly influenced by Finding 1, and further problematize the current tensions in the literature on district reform for equity that were raised in Chapter 2. These tensions include: accountability and responsibility, centralization and decentralization/democracy and civic capacity, and scaling up equity initiatives.
Summary of Findings

#1: Creating the Conditions for Pedagogy

The greatest contribution of this study to the literature on urban district reform for equity is the importance of creating the conditions for pedagogy both prior to initiating reforms for equity, as well as its ongoing importance in sustaining reforms for equity. Study findings submit that conditions for pedagogy are intimately connected to particular ideologies, and mediated by politics and approaches to leadership. These two elements in turn influence pedagogy (relationships between educators, learners and the curriculum). In this context, the conditions for pedagogy set the stage for the conditions for learning, in a holistic sense (i.e., academic, social-emotional, physical, etc.).

The literature on urban district reform often speaks to the importance of improving teaching and learning as the instructional core and primary role of the district. Findings in this study suggest that real and transformative change in the schooling and life outcomes of students in urban settings must first attend to creating the necessary conditions for pedagogy, by addressing ideological differences in understandings of equity, generating and sustaining political will, and developing leadership for social justice. The literature on district reform is largely devoid of the role of ideological and political influences on key decision makers and subsequently how, when, why, and which reforms are taken up. This is especially problematic for urban districts, in which current and historical marginalization have, and continue to result in, racial, socioeconomic and other inequities in achievement; access and opportunities; experiences; well-being; and, treatment of students in schools.

Ideological Influences on Creating the Conditions for Pedagogy

Ideological influences speak specifically to the fourth element of the conceptual argument, ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer et al., 2008), i.e., ‘Maintaining an Equity
Focus.’ The MSIC Program is an equity-minded district reform aimed at closing opportunity gaps so as to lead to greater choice, success and life outcomes for marginalized and racialized students. However, participant responses and program documents revealed major ideological differences in approaches to closing the opportunity gap. While the intention of the program according to most participants was to increase equity and close opportunity gaps, differences in understandings of these concepts led to different foci, ideas and solutions. Discourses to closing opportunity gaps in this study can be understood as a spectrum of thought, with charitable discourses on the one side (rooted in liberal and neoliberal ideologies), and social justice discourses on the other side (rooted in critical pedagogies). Each of the perspectives can further explain the four elements of opportunity gaps as outlined in Table 2: redistribution, recognition, representation, and re-education. Ideologies related to equity heavily influenced decisions, policies, instructional approaches, parent engagement strategies, approaches to data, program funding, relationships with stakeholders within and outside of the program, and all other aspects of the reform.

A key finding was that dominant ideological perspectives held by key decision-makers at any given time (whose membership changed over the course of the program’s existence), strongly determined directions and actions/inactions in the program. Key decision-makers are defined here as those with the greatest influence to enact, change, subvert, or stall reforms and initiatives. Initially, key decision-makers at the program level included a combination of external community stakeholders and internal staff and elected officials. At the same time, key decision-makers at the school level included school principals and MSIC staff. As the program became more centralized over the years, much of the decision-making was the responsibility of district leaders and senior program staff, with school principals, community partners, and parents having less influence. While elected officials had and still have formal power over the program (i.e. to determine funding, to determine the existence or fate of the program, etc.), there
has been less need to exercise their power, as they have grown increasingly comfortable with, and proud of the MSIC Program.

In considering the Rorrer et al. (2008) conceptual framework ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ as depicted in Figure 1, ‘Maintaining an Equity Focus’ was, therefore, the most important of all four elements, as it captured the differences in ideological beliefs about equity itself. Ideological beliefs about equity in turn influenced the understanding and enactment of the other three elements in the conceptual argument.

**Political Influences on Creating the Conditions for Pedagogy**

While ideological perspectives are extremely important, the dominant equity ideology at a given time and in a given space was mediated by the relative power and influence of all key decision-makers, the available discourses, and stakeholders with influence over key decision-makers. Foregrounded in this study is the intersection between idealism and realism. Regardless of the ideological goals and visions of key decision-makers, relative power and politics influenced how decisions were made, who was making the decisions, who they were affecting, and how they were mediated. As Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedesclaieux (1999) claimed, “proposals for reform must be considered in the context of the political environment in which they will either wither or take root” (p. 274).

To initiate and sustain the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program, key decision-makers had to envision a reform rooted in critical pedagogies while working within a larger neoliberal system. As such, specific political techniques were required to change ideologies, which participants described as: accounting for the larger, political landscape at all times; anticipating the needs/fears/concerns/ questions of other key decision-makers or bodies of thought with different ideological underpinnings and pre-emptively responding to them; forming strategic alliances with stakeholders within and outside of the system who had the same vision for
education and could support the reform from their location; strategically using the media, data, research and parent mobilization strategies to influence decisions and generate political will; and, balancing the tension of subversive activity and political strategy to change the system from the outside, while working within the boundaries of a system in order to change it. Key decision-makers and influencers in this study paid attention to understanding the political and ideological motivations of those who would oppose the MSIC Program, and often used tools associated with neoliberal discourses on education (e.g., achievement and opportunity gap data using standardized test scores disaggregated by social demographics), to challenge and expose the limits of that system.

However, what this study makes clear is that a focus on navigating politics—without a clear understanding of the various equity ideologies at play and a strong commitment to ideologies that would result in the greatest forms of justice and learning for racialized and marginalized students—will result in systemic, individual and instructional decisions that are aligned with the dominant discourse on equity at that time. Many participants noted that the emphasis on the MSIC Program as a reform for equity has changed over the years. The program started out as a movement for institutional and social transformation, yet many participants felt that the conversations and initiatives have become “safer” over time. While stakeholders connected to the program often grappled with how it could sustain itself as a movement for institutional and social transformation, practices and foci became increasingly aligned with neoliberal discourses over the years. Maintaining a commitment to social justice (or critical) approaches to education is unlikely without a clear understanding of the differences in ideological discourses about equity and how to navigate these differences in efforts towards greater forms of equity. McCaskell (2005) echoed this finding in describing the fate of anti-racist education in the former Toronto Board of Education:
When issues of equity are on the margins of system change, an approach of conflict and pedagogy of liberation tend to dominate actions. When issues of equity are embraced by the system, there is a tendency for conversations to become ‘safer’ and actions take an inclusionary approach. (p. 284)

Findings from this study suggest that while ‘Maintaining an Equity Focus’ was the most important of the four elements in the conceptual argument ‘Districts as Institutional Actors’ (Rorrer, et al., 2008), and influenced the other three elements, political influences between and on key decision-makers had counter-mediating effects on all four elements. Therefore, political influences are the second driver of change in creating the conditions for pedagogy in the MSIC Program, which speaks to the power of people, ideas, events, policies, and organizations to influence key decision-makers. The political influences on decisions and practices in turn influence ideology, and the process continues iteratively.

**The Role of Leadership in Creating the Conditions for Pedagogy**

The specific ways in which ideologies and politics influenced the four elements of district reform and one another, were further impacted by approaches to leadership—an important theme that emerged in participant interviews. While district leadership in the literature is often equated with district leaders, this study highlighted the importance of broadening notions of leadership to include all stakeholders with decision-making power and stakeholders and discourses with influence over those key decision-makers. In this context, the ‘district’ is positioned as a set of relationships among key decision-makers and influencers, who change with time, space and content of the specific reform.

While leadership was conceived in multiple ways throughout the data, most evident in participant responses was the role of the school principal in enacting reforms. This study highlighted that differences in ideology about equity and leadership converge in problematic ways in the role of the principal. Participants subscribing to neoliberal discourses placed value
on the ‘individual’ as the unit of reform, whereas participants ascribing to critical discourses, placed the onus on the ‘system’ as the site for reform. Participants ascribing to critical theories often saw the principal as the person they had access to who represents the ‘system’, and participants ascribing to neoliberal ideologies often saw the principal as the most junior ‘individual’ in the system. This puts a tremendous amount of responsibility on school principals, both as the person to make real and transformative change in the school and school community, as well as the person to demonstrate high levels of accountability, efficiency and effectiveness.

This sentiment is echoed in other research. Flessa (2012) stated:

> Principals occupy a classic middle-management role. They sit atop a school hierarchy, yet they are responsible for implementing policy mandates received from above. They are expected to shape school culture in ways that take local experiences into account and at the same time to facilitate policies that they have not chosen. (p. 332)

This is especially true of principals in urban schools, whose responsibility is to serve families and students who have been inadequately served historically and currently, placing an inordinate and unfair responsibility on school principals to remedy larger social ills while disregarding the responsibility of larger structures within and outside of education from making change. In the case of the MSIC Program, senior MSIC staff are in a similar position to school principals, in that they are the most junior person to represent the ‘system’, and the most senior person with direct responsibility for the program. Nonetheless, the study findings clearly speak to the importance of quality leadership (at all levels) and its ability to mediate reforms and influence change through respect and relationship-building, fostering trust, and courageous acts.

The data from this study strongly suggests that a focus on the conditions of pedagogy is necessary to initiate and sustain urban district reforms for equity. These conditions include the ideological perspectives of key decision-makers at a given time, the political influences on those decision-makers, and their leadership styles and capabilities, which are foundational to the degree, quality and sustainability of large-scale educational change. Exploring ideology is
central to creating the conditions for pedagogy, while politics and leadership styles mediate and influence those changes. Ideology and politics, therefore, influence one another iteratively, the combination of which determines changes in education policy and practice at any given time.

This finding adds new dimensions of understanding to the three tensions initially introduced in Chapter 2, which are analyzed through the lens of Finding #1 and reintroduced here as Findings #2, #3 and #4.

#2: Accountability and Responsibility Tension

The tension between accountability and responsibility speaks to how student and program success is defined and the direction and purpose of accountability between stakeholders. The literature in this area suggests that district reforms for equity need to embrace a more critical notion of responsibility to multiple stakeholders, rather than a neoliberal notion of accountability based largely on standardized tests scores. More critical notions of accountability can be described as responsibility, in which schools and school officials are responsible to those whom they serve. Responsibility is based on a much wider notion of success and also includes student well-being, engagement, experiences, opportunities and access, and treatment in schools. However, in creating the conditions for pedagogy, neoliberal ideals such as accountability and efficiency were key in generating political and instructional will in the initial phase of a reform.

Accountability in neoliberal discourses is top-down and unidirectional. Given the larger, neoliberal environment in which the program was situated, participants noted that key decision-makers ensured accountability structures were designed from the start, to increase the likelihood of the program’s existence year after year. Specifically, these decision-makers knew that demonstrated increases in provincial standardized tests scores could support their claim that closing opportunity gaps closes achievement gaps. As provincial tests scores were slow to rise
in the first few years, an additional standardized test was introduced that measured a student’s
growth against her/himself and demonstrated the closing of gaps in basic skills over time. As
well, student, parent/caregiver and staff perception surveys were introduced to ideologically
broaden notions of ‘success’ in the program, and politically demonstrated program growth to
elected officials and other decision-makers.

In the initial phase of the program, several participants noted that achievement and
opportunity gap data, as well as data collected by the program also became ideological tools to
raise awareness about the differences in students’ lived experiences. The data served as a
learning tool for stakeholders within and outside of the district to learn about redistribution
opportunity gaps, and what was needed to close them. Therefore, efforts were made to meet the
conditions for ‘success’ from within the larger, neoliberal system to ensure the existence of the
program. However, efforts were also made to challenge and expose the limits of that system to
broaden notions of student and program success and demonstrate the need for differential
distribution of funds and staff. Proving that the program would effectively and efficiently use
funds to increase scores on standardized tests created the *conditions for pedagogy*, including
wide scale redistribution of funds and the creation of formal and informal staff positions in the
MSIC Program.

There were also pedagogical benefits to working within a neoliberal system in the initial
phase of the program. Given that the program had to demonstrate increases in standardized test
scores as a central measure of its effectiveness, and given that provincial standardized tests
scores focused on higher order thinking skills, the program actively sought professional learning
opportunities for MSIC staff, teachers, and principals to support higher standards of teaching
and learning. For many educators in this initial phase, increased student performance led to
different ways of thinking about the capabilities of ‘inner city’ students. Therefore, to some
degree, a neoliberal system focused on standardized test scores put pressure on the program,
teachers, and principals to perform, resulting in higher quality teaching and learning in the initial phase. However, there were limits to a neoliberal approach to urban district reforms.

As the program became more established over time, some participants noted that neoliberal ideologies continued to dominate decisions and action/inactions in the program because program success (formally and informally) continued to be defined by standardized tests scores. Some participants noted that broader notions of program success were not clearly defined; student, parent/caregiver and staff surveys were not being used throughout the program as tools to better serve students, families and communities, and there was no formal assessment of the program’s ability to close the other opportunity gaps (specifically recognition and representation). With an increased focus on accountability, some participants noted a decreased focus on equity as a moral and political imperative. In the initial phase of the program, owning past inequity was evident in the purpose and creation of the program itself. However, the program has not grown in its ability to own other past and current inequities that intersect with social class in complex ways, such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, and other social identities. At later stages of the program, many participants noted a huge gap in the program’s ability to change educator mindsets, or to address the systemic inequities in the program and the Board that continue to sustain all four types of opportunity gaps (as outlined in Table 2).

This is largely because efforts to close opportunity gaps have remained largely in the realm of redistribution and to some extent, re-education. Recognition and representation opportunity gaps have yet to be acknowledged and closed in meaningful ways in the MSIC Program, which influences understandings and responses to the re-education opportunity gap. Findings in this study demonstrate that key decision-makers who ascribe to neoliberal ideologies knowingly or unknowingly, and/or the influences on these decision-makers, largely influence this gap in the program’s ability to effect greater change. In this case, an examination of the impacts of ideological differences on district reforms can result in more critical notions of
responsibility, which include broadening definitions of student and program success, and increasing the complexity and multi-directionality of accountability measures.

Findings in this study clearly suggest that in a larger, neoliberal education system, key decision-makers need to work within the accountability framework to both initiate and sustain reforms for equity. External pressure for more critical approaches to education might be the impetus for change, however real and transformative change recognizes the larger, systemic equity ideologies at play, works from within that system to broaden/challenge notions of equity, and problematizes the limits of the neoliberalism discourse from within the (neoliberal) systems. Imposing change from within or outside of the system, without the learning and reflection necessary on the part of all stakeholders, simply reinforces past practices while assuming new terminology. This political strategy must be situated with a broader ideological framework that clearly distinguishes between charitable and social justice discourses to reforms, such as what constitutes opportunity gaps and why and how to close them. Without a broader ideological framework from which to navigate, policies and procedures continue to promote limited notions of achievement, equity and schooling associated with dominant, neoliberal perspectives.

#3: Centralization/Decentralization Tension

The centralization and decentralization tension speaks to the degree to which reforms are initiated, sustained, mediated, and controlled from the top down or bottom-up. Findings in this study suggest that when an urban district reform is initiated from within a district, and not imposed provincially or federally, the school is the site of change that distinguishes top-down (i.e. district leaders, elected officials and senior program staff) from bottom-up (students, parents and community partners, teachers and school principals). As Rorrer et al. (2008) stated, centralization and decentralization are variably coupled, with the balance between this tension changing with time and space. However, what is not clear from their conceptual argument is the
connection between the *purpose* behind increased centralization or decentralization and its influence on the actual balance. While some participants noted neoliberal purposes for increased centralization (e.g., increased individual accountability), others noted more critical purposes for increased centralization (e.g., large-scale equity training, mandating equity policies and practices, etc.). Ideology heavily influenced the balance between centralization and decentralization over the history of the program and how various stakeholders responded to changes given their perceptions of the *purpose* behind the change.

Therefore, if the core of educational systems were designed for equity from critical perspectives, then an entirely decentralized system would undermine efforts to sustain this focus, as equity is not an ideal that is upheld by all or understood in similar ways by all. In decentralized systems that allow for choice, those who do not ascribe to this theoretical perspective would likely replicate social inequities as “choice is always made from the available, and in the absence of social analysis and critique, the available amounts to the status quo” (Portelli et al., 2007, p. 11).

Findings in this study suggest that from critical perspectives, *both* centralization and decentralization are needed at different times, for different purposes, and in different contexts. Centralization is helpful to the extent that it supports the conditions for critical pedagogy (i.e., ideological shifts, political supports, leadership, and structures/resources), but that decentralized efforts regarding the content and details of specific initiatives at the school level, are what sustain political and instructional will and innovation among educators. As such, the locus of control for decision-makers needs to change depending on the degree to which the conditions for pedagogy have been established in a district and within a school. It follows that managing this tension requires a clear, ideological understanding of what should be centralized. However, political influences also impact this balance. Participants noted the following political influences that impacted the degree of centralization/decentralization: winning the support of elected...
officials; the individual interests of principals, district leaders and program staff; external pressure from the Inner City Advisory Committee or other groups; navigating provincial politics in a neoliberal system; and forming strategic partnerships within and outside of the Board. As policies and practices shift away from critical pedagogies, centralized efforts are needed to recreate or sustain the conditions for critical pedagogy.

Centralized and decentralized approaches are both needed to create the conditions for critical pedagogy. According to participants, increased centralization led to:

- The Board taking responsibility for, and owning current and past inequities, which some participant say was not the case at the beginning;
- An increased sense of identity and belonging;
- Strengthened formal and informal partnerships within and outside of the Board;
- Structures to promote processes such as networking and sharing best practices;
- A focus on equity and equity training for all stakeholders as it relates to decision-making, curriculum, and professional learning; and,
- Ensuring that schools follow suit with the initiatives laid out by the program.

Participants noted that increased decentralization led to:

- Increased critical democratic engagement of multiple stakeholders both within and outside of the system;
- The establishment of a multi-sectorial task force that later became the Inner City Advisory Committee and served as a political watchdog to the program and Board;
- Increased political will among multiple stakeholders for the need of the program as well as increased learning about issues of poverty, inequity and marginalization.
- Decreased standardization and bureaucratization, leading to increased motivation and innovation among teachers, program staff, and principals.
To add to this conversation, the literature suggests that urban districts also require decentralized structures to support increased civic capacity and engagement in education, which is “the extent to which various sectors of the community have developed formal and informal means to define common objectives and pursue common goals” (Henig et al. 1999, p. 14). However, Trujillo (2012a) warned that the degree to which democracy is enacted in urban settings is influenced by the dynamics of the high-stakes accountability movement, and that policies that grant greater freedoms in lieu of greater test scores, or hold all districts to the same standards, may exacerbate the very problem of inequitable outcomes that they are trying to address.

The influence of neoliberal discourses on civic engagement is most evident in the example of the Inner City Advisory Committee (ICAC), which is the political body of the MSIC Program that evolved out of the original Inner City Task Force, which was at the heart of this reform. Many participants sadly noted that the civic capacity developed through the ICAC has decreased over time, and that the committee’s role as an external watchdog has also decreased over time. As well, many participants noted that the approaches to greater centralization have resulted in decreased opportunities for parents and families to make meaningful contributions to decisions that impact the fate of students throughout the program (i.e., differences in access and experiences in Special Education and specialized programs, advocating for their children, etc.). They echoed calls for greater and more meaningful engagement of families and community partners to address larger, systemic injustices related to opportunity gaps of recognition and representation.

What was once an opportunity for many stakeholders to influence many decisions in the MSIC Program, is now a handful of stakeholders making the real decisions, with many other stakeholders sharing opinions and perspectives that have no real influence on the direction of the program. Some relationships between stakeholders have become strained as a result, while
others stakeholders have become compliant or quieted. Unfortunately, there were fewer examples of opportunities for dialogue and dissent about program philosophies and actions, which is exactly what was needed to increase political and instructional will and innovation.

Therefore, centralization is important to the degree that it supports the ideological shifts and practices required for transformative change (e.g., equity training, opportunities for networking and sharing best practices among and between stakeholder groups, supports for processes such as data disaggregation, etc.), political structures to support civic capacity (e.g., formal and informal partnerships within and outside of the Board, strategies and training for critical democratic engagement at the program and school levels, etc.), as well as equitable structures for resource allocation (e.g. funding, staff, school/classroom resources, etc.).

Decentralization is important to the degree that it sustains political and instructional will and innovation, promotes civic capacity, and supports site-based programming and decision-making.

#4: Scaling Up Equity Initiatives

The debate over scaling up equity initiatives is centered on how and when reforms should grow, and how to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach in the process. Findings from this study revealed that while micro- and macro-politics influence how and when reforms are scaled up, inattention to establishing the conditions for pedagogy with new stakeholders and schools during the scaling-up process, often produced negative effects on students, teachers and principals, thereby thwarting real, transformative change in the program. Among these negative effects is the fact that schools and principals were not able to integrate the new structures and processes deeply and educators were not able to integrate new processes for teaching and learning deeply.

The relationship between politics, ideology and leadership is important in considering when and how this reform was scaled up. Some participants noted that the rate at which the
MSIC Program was scaled up was a response to pressures from elected officials who wanted to know that schools in their jurisdictions were benefitting from the program too. Others noted that to sustain the program, greater alignment was required with larger Board initiatives and foci so that district leaders would take greater ownership and responsibility for the program. Still, other participants cautioned while the Program should be positioned in the larger Board in ways that deepen integration and support, efforts should be made not to lose the core essence (or ideology) of its mandate. Rincon-Gallardo & Elmore (2012) reminded us that successful and sustained educational reforms from the margins require a commitment to changing individual and collective motivations of teachers, and seeking out and taking advantage of mobilizing structures and political opportunities to initiate or further strengthen the reform.

In considering the conditions for pedagogy, a tension emerged in the data between some participants who called for greater funding and resources and other participants who suggested that while additional money was useful in closing the redistribution opportunity gap, it was changes in ideology, school processes and instructional practice connected to the recognition, representation and re-education opportunity gaps that had the greatest impact on reforms for equity. This tension speaks to the importance of different ideological views on equity and schooling, suggesting a greater need for dialogue within and across stakeholder groups. Furthermore, the redistribution opportunity gap juxtaposes a charitable discourse (i.e., a one-size-fits-all model of reform based on a discourse of sameness) with a social justice discourse (i.e., equitable allocation of resources within a reform for equity and greater differentiation of resources). As such, conditions for pedagogy need to be addressed differentially, considering differences in histories and context, with an understanding that closing all four opportunity gaps is foundational to creating and sustaining the conditions for pedagogy.

A distinction emerged in the findings between sustainable and transformative reforms for equity. Sustainable reforms for equity assume that structures and processes in the initial
design need to be maintained over time. For some, sustainability also referred to deeper ideological and pedagogical changes in addition to structural changes. Transformative reforms build on the notion of ideological, pedagogical and structural/systemic changes by engaging in the process of change. Transformative reforms sustain themselves over time because they are continuously being re-imagined in response to contextual changes (e.g., demographics, staff, policies, etc.). In this case, the final goal or end outcome is not fixed, and is mediated through a process of dialogue and learning.

Based on the four findings listed above, the following are suggested overall recommendations to create the conditions for pedagogy for urban district reforms for equity, and provide ideas on navigating ideological differences, political influences and the role of leadership. While the relationship between each of these factors influence one another, they will be described here separately for ease of understanding.

**Overall Recommendations for Urban District Reform for Equity**

As Henig et al. (1999) stated, long-lasting, structural changes are required for reform, and not single-sighted pedagogical or structural quick fixes. The following recommendations account for influences on the ideological, political and leadership aspects of district reform.

**Navigating Ideological, Political and Leadership Influences on District Reform**

**Ideological Influences**

Critical and transformative approaches to education provide the greatest opportunities for levelling the playing field and ensuring more equitable schooling outcomes for marginalized and racialized students (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007). In order to implement reforms for critical and transformative approaches in education, urban school districts need to establish certain structures and ways of knowing and being. First, absolute clarity is required regarding the type of education system that will best support the life
choices, opportunities and academic success for marginalized and racialized students. Second, a
clear understanding of how current neoliberal ideologies perpetuate the marginalization and
racialization of students is needed to generate will and support for transformative reforms, both
within and outside of education circles. In particular, naming ‘hidden’ inconsistencies in thought
and highlighting tensions in ideas and concepts, will change the collective consciousness both
within and outside of education circles and generate support for transformation. From this lens,
the education system is not seen as passively responding to, and being influenced by the larger
society. Here, education is seen as a social movement for equity, justice, and humanity that
fosters in students the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for critical citizenship.

An example of naming hidden inconsistencies is highlighting the limitations of the
notion of success asserted in neoliberal ideologies, and actively working to broaden notions of
success for students, districts and reforms. Similar suggestions are offered in the literature.
Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay & Parker (2010) suggested a broader notion of understanding
success:

There are multiple ways of defining success that extend beyond standardized indicators
to issues of school culture and climate (Firestone & Louis, 1999; Mintrop, 2008;
Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007) and to the nature of relationships and shared meanings and
practices (e.g., Fullan, 2007) within the school—between teachers, between staff and
students, between teachers and school leaders (e.g., Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, &
Wahlstrom, 2004)—and beyond the school into children’s families and communities
Difficulty arriving at a single definition of success reflects, in part, the diverse goals of
education itself (Cuban, 2000; Labaree, 1997). However, observing these areas can
provide better understanding of how schools attempt to define and meet goals that are
most important to them. (pp. 2-3)

Findings in this study suggest a broader notion of success must be accompanied by a
broader notion of equity and education, and therefore move towards notions of responsibility.
Conversations about equity need to move beyond opportunities and outcomes as measured by
standardized tests scores that first confuse equity with equality and then confuse charitable
notions of closing opportunity gaps with transformative ones. To support schooling processes and accountability systems that focus on the needs of the whole child in the context of socio-political and economic inequities at the individual and systemic levels, the following concepts need to be included in addition to conversations about achievement: Equitable opportunities and access; outcomes for student engagement, treatment in, and experience of schooling; student well-being; and parent/caregiver perceptions of and experiences in schools. Further, this data also needs to be disaggregated by various and intersecting social demographics, and re-assessed regularly, to ensure that efforts at closing these gaps are successful. These outcomes need to be discussed, understood, challenged, critiqued, and reframed by multiple stakeholders in the educational community. This is a description of responsibility in education, that moves beyond the narrowly-defined notions of accountability in a neoliberal system. Finally, success could also be measured by the ability of the district to challenge larger systemic inequities both within and outside of the education system.

The third ideological consideration for school districts is that those reforming for critical notions of equity must also navigate these inconsistencies, and not simply understand them. Reformers are more successful when they hold a dual consciousness. On the one hand, reformers are urged to ensure that reforms to the necessary degree adhere to values of effectiveness and efficiency and demonstrate neoliberal ideals of accountability (namely results on standardized test scores). Some reformers might argue that this approach goes against their core ethical and political values, however study findings demonstrate that for critical notions of equity reform to take root in a neoliberal system, and garner political and financial support to grow, reformers must prove the value of the reform from within the current system. At the same time, reformers are urged to simultaneously hold a more critical space that supports their abilities to disrupt, problematize, and challenge the limits to neoliberal discourses from within a neoliberal system.
Attempting to change the system from the outside alone is neither sustainable, nor transformative. Too often, education and social activists call for the complete dismantling and overhaul of the system, however Henig et. al (1999) remind us that efforts at district reform must incorporate the existing bureaucracy. Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) stated that while creating new systems is tempting, with time, those new structures take on the characteristics of bureaucracies themselves. Findings from this study demonstrate that while external influences may be the impetus for change, deep and sustained reform is best suited to occur from within the system, or district. To a degree, reformers need to play the game to change the game. Therefore, if the end goal is an education system that promotes critical citizenship through democratic education and critical pedagogies, then efforts towards this goal must account for and work within the context of a larger neoliberal system.

Fourth, conversations, professional learning, and visioning/re-visioning the reform, need to include multiple ideological frameworks, so that dialogue about opposing thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and values will lead to new meanings and new solutions. It is through dialogue that addresses ideological tensions that consciousness is changed in real and transformative ways. In this sometimes-chaotic structure, we can hold multiple truths, multiple experiences, multiple consciousnesses, and multiple solutions. Imposing policies and practices from critical discourses is a necessary first step, but will not lead to real and transformative change unless it becomes central to professional discourse and learning. Real and transformative learning requires a sustained commitment to engaging in difficult conversations, over and over again in a process of learning, relearning and unlearning and in a process of being, re-being and un-being. It will require a form of slow learning, which involves slowing down and focusing on process rather than product, as there is no final destination in critical notions of equity.

This type of ideological engagement requires a shift in how we relate to one another and ourselves. It requires that as a system, and as individuals within the system, we have a
willingness and courage to engage complexity, hold multiple and seemingly different truths simultaneously, experience emotional and cognitive dissonance that changes beliefs and orientations, embrace the unknown, and stand in the vulnerability (and strength) of not knowing, being wrong or asking for help.

This also requires a shift in how reforms are ideologically constructed. Urban district reforms would best serve families and communities if reforms themselves, and system staff—as brokers of social and cultural capital—were constructed as allies of students, families and communities that are marginalized and as structures that interrogate and interrupt systemic inequities both within and outside of the Board.

Finally, to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to scaling up reforms for equity, districts are best suited to draw on the work of Powell (2008) who advocates for an approach of targeted universalism described here:

This framework assumes that implicit biases and practices of inter-institutional arrangement continue to distribute inequitable outcomes along racial lines. Thus, Powell argues that of main concern is the imposition of seemingly neutral programs onto already inequitable institutional arrangements, which will likely leave arrangements unchanged or serve to intensify them. He argues for the development and implementation of reforms that promote targeted universalism. Rejecting universal strategies that do not acknowledge differences among racialized groups, he posits that a targeted universal strategy is one that attends to the needs of both dominant and marginal groups while paying particular attention to needs of marginalized racial groups. (Trujillo et al., 2014, p. 902)

While the targeted universalism approach can be used to address other inequities as well, it is important to draw attention to the need to address racial inequities, which are often missing from reform literature and from the findings in this study. Furthermore, it is important for districts to apply this approach within their reforms for equity, to ensure that a one-size-fits-all model is not being applied to address all members of a particular social demographic, thereby essentializing their identities, experiences and histories.
Political Influences

If education is a tool for critical citizenship that leads to a more just and humane world, navigating the political landscape can make this idealistic goal a far-fetched reality. Differences in political views and self-interested actions will always plague educational politics. Stone et al., 2001) consider education to be a “high reverberation” policy system, and describe it as “[the] frequent reshuffling of stakeholders, multiple and strong competing belief systems, interests from parents and educators, ambiguous boundaries, making the prospects for establishing a new equilibrium more problematic” (p. 50). They suggested that neither Superintendents of Education (Directors of Education in Canada) nor school boards can do this alone, and that sustainable change depends on factors in the larger political world. They also asserted that given the breadth of political forces at play, it is unclear how to initiate and/or sustain top-down or bottom-up reforms. However, several strategies for navigating the political context of education have been discerned from this study. Below are recommendations to establish and sustain successful urban district reforms for equity.

In a pluralistic and democratic society, you have individuals and groups with varying political views and ideologies. Efforts towards promoting a particular ideology without an awareness of the larger, political environment are often futile. Within a context of frequently changing stakeholders and ideologies both within and outside of education, districts need to position themselves flexibly to mediate large scale reforms; address concerns and requests from families and communities; and, support teachers, principals and central staff in making sense of competing discourse and demands. To this end, Trujillo (2012b) positioned districts as zones of mediation and asserted “the consistency between the norms and values implicit in policies or reforms and those held by community members determines their inclination to adopt or reject certain changes” (p. 535).
Findings in this study suggest that the adoption or rejection of large-scale district reforms requires genuine learning and understanding among all stakeholders, multiple forms and directions of communication, policies that are intended to be mediated and reformed by the very people they are intended to impact, and district leaders who are courageous and politically strategic in their ability to question, navigate and push back against imposed policies that do not serve the best interests of all students. The inclusion of different voices and opinions for the purpose of compliance to an equity policy or an act of tokenism will not produce transformative change. Key decision-makers and reformers for equity need to be continuously aware of who the other decision-makers are, their particular political leanings, their fears, their concerns, what and who influences their decisions, and what tactics will mediate those influences. This includes efforts to garner political will from educators within the district that are connected to the reform directly or indirectly.

However, there will inevitably be times when the political atmosphere or leadership at the district level does not allow for wide, sweeping reforms for equity. This study suggests that at these times, education and social activists, both within and outside of the educational system, become extremely important to initiating change. McCaskell (2005) arrived at similar conclusions in his historical account of the TDSB and former Toronto Board of Education, suggesting that most equity advances in the Toronto Board of Education occurred from external pressures (and some internal pressures), and equity allies inside the organization supported external pressures by creating opportunities for democratic participation. As such, the cooperation between external and internal equity allies is foundational to initiating equity reforms.

Findings in this study also suggest that data is an important political tool in generating the will among multiple stakeholders to effect change both within and outside of the district. This finding is echoed in the literature. Henig et al. (1999) suggested that data be used as a tool
for political mobilization rather than intervention, in which a wide variety of assessment measures be circulated to give community members and families a sense of the relative performance of the schools and opportunities to both identify challenges and be part of the solution. Gaskell and Levin (2012) also suggested that data can be used as a tool for professional dialogue, in addition to being a political tool to shift thinking. In addition to these suggestions, this study also suggests that districts should employ external means to share successes (i.e., the media) as well as internal means of sharing success among schools (i.e., newsletters, research reports, etc.).

Henig et al. (1999) reminded us that the literature on district reform has overstated the need to get reform on the public agenda, and inadequately addressed how to sustain these reforms. Findings from this study offer suggestions for sustaining the political will needed for equity reforms. First, sustaining political will requires ongoing awareness building as well as engagement in praxis—continuous reflection and action—among all stakeholders. District staff needs to engage in ongoing equity training and dialogue to explore and identify mindsets that are more or less supportive of transformative change. Furthermore, current and relevant data and research on poverty, how to acknowledge and close equity and opportunity gaps, district reform, curriculum, civic capacity building, school reform, etc., needs to be shared with all stakeholders regularly in an effort to sustain transformative change. Data and research should not be used as a tool to discover the next ‘silver bullet,’ but rather as a tool to promote ongoing dialogue and build trust and confidence amongst stakeholders that their efforts towards creating a more equitable schooling system are substantiated by a large body of research. Generating political will is especially important for families and members of the larger community whose privilege and power may not allow them to understand or care about the lived realities of those who are more marginalized in society and in schooling.
Findings from this study also suggest that in order to sustain reforms, key decision-makers need to build strategic partnerships within and outside of the Board. Within the Board, equity allies need to work together to both support one another and challenge individual and collective thinking, policies and practices. As well, reform or district staff need to build partnerships with other departments and sections of the Board to: build awareness of the need for the reform; generate political will to support the reform; and, strengthen pedagogical relationships that influence how equity, teaching and learning are understood both within the context of the reform, and more importantly, within the Board at large. For district reforms for equity to be effective, strategic partnerships outside of the Board are necessary to: develop a holistic and comprehensive plan of action that accounts for larger socio-political and economic forces; hold the district accountable to plans, practices and commitments to equity; join efforts to mobilize for large-scale political change within and outside of the district; and, to support in efforts to generate political will throughout the district for reforms for equity.

Furthermore, there is a need for leadership at multiple levels and board structures to adapt to the reform, which may require a combination of systemic changes (i.e., hiring practices) and ideological changes (i.e., changing mindsets and equity training, approaches to leadership and change, etc.). This study clearly suggests that a dual-approach to change is required. While short-term goals must remain focused on how to change, challenge, and influence the system from within, long-term aims of reforms for equity must act to change the existing structures that lead to inequitable opportunities, access, treatment, and outcomes in the first place. At times when leadership and the general atmosphere is in favour of equitable reforms, efforts need to be made to create structures that address these long-term aims. If education is a tool to promote and sustain critical citizenship, structures and channels need to be created for more democracy, more civic capacity, more political action, more dissent, more disagreement, and more engagement of all stakeholders, rather than efforts made to stifle, divert or silence dissent.
To sustain reforms aimed at increasing the educational outcomes, choices, experiences, and levels of engagement of traditionally marginalized students, they must involve the very people they aim to serve—the students, parents and communities that have been underserved by educational reform efforts to date. Every effort needs to be made to include the perspectives, voices, ideas, and decision-making power of the students and families that are most marginalized by the system. Responsibility to a shared vision will be heightened when multiple stakeholders are involved in the creation of reforms that affect them and in regular assessments of those reforms in which they can provide ongoing feedback to the system and each other through open, honest and transparent dialogue. Students, families, and communities that have traditionally been marginalized from the schooling processes must be part of the creation, implementation and assessment of reforms aimed at improving their life outcomes and experiences. This means that the system needs to acknowledge and own the problems of historical and current-day inequities in an environment free of blame and shame.

From a critical democratic perspective, difference and disagreements are not hidden or silenced; they are taken seriously and form the basis of dialogue and change. As such, involving multiple stakeholders with multiple perspectives in ongoing and uncomfortable dialogue is necessary to subvert inequitable educational outcomes and engage educational change as a form of critical democracy. Gaskell and Levin (2012) echoed this sentiment, in their reflections of the former Toronto Board of Education. They concluded that school boards should engage community and parent perspectives proactively instead of reactively; have systems in place for public engagement and political action (beyond school councils that tend to attract only certain parents); resist the urge to focus entirely on operations; actively engage parents and community partners from marginalized communities; and, engage citizens beyond the parent-base especially when the aim is to disrupt the status quo.
This study speaks to how establishing trust between the Board, schools and larger communities is essential to sustaining reforms for equity. This is even more important in urban areas where there are histories of racism and classism that have so deeply and negatively affected people’s lives and families. This finding confirms Henig et al.’s (1999) statement that, “In this context—where the prospects for long-term success are uncertain and the likelihood for immediate success negligible—the added doses of mistrust, suspicion, wariness, and volatility associated with racial politics can have substantial consequences” (p. 279). Valuing community knowledge as legitimate, as opposed to simply relying on advice from ‘educational experts’ is essential to not only building trust, but to generating solutions that work.

Henig et al. (1999) also argued “efforts at school reform should focus on building working relationships among a wide range of stakeholders inside and outside of government and inside and outside of the education community” (p. 281). Urban Theory Regime provides an excellent theoretical grounding for this type of engagement:

Urban regime theory reconceptualizes the role of the state in that it assumes that political mobilization is not solely the work of government officials and institutions (Stone, 2008). These theorists blur would-be distinctions between political, economic, non-profit, and social spheres, expanding the notion of politics and government to one of governance, whereby political mobilization includes a broader alliance of governmental and nongovernmental actors (Shipps, 2008; Stone, 2008). It shows how the constitution of a governing coalition required to successfully advance a reform agenda depends upon the goals of the reform itself. Over the years, researchers have considered the composition of these governing coalitions in the context of large-scale educational reform, as well as the challenges to maintaining progressive social-oriented regimes (Bulkley, 2007; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 2001; Mossberger, 2009; Orr, 1999; Shipps, 2003, 2012; Stone, 2008). This theory moves away from conceptualizing power in the Weberian sense as something that necessarily involves the imposition of one actor’s ideas and agenda onto others. Instead, it asserts the importance of “power to,” or that actors can work with others to enable stakeholders to act in a manner not otherwise available to them (Stone, 2006). Conceptualizing power in this way enables an analysis of informal and formal relationships that affect reform. It illuminates more and less visible aspects of governance. (Trujillo et al., 2014, p. 903)

Finally, study findings suggest that sustaining political will for equity reforms requires that the reform be in a continuous state of renewal, with multiple stakeholders assessing and re-visioning goals and directions. It is especially important for reformers and educators to be convinced that their efforts are resulting in educational/life choices and opportunities for students that would not have been possible otherwise, to sustain their political and instructional
will. While changes in a range of outcomes may be slow to occur given the larger systemic injustices, Henig et al. (1999) argued that interim objectives be set that can serve as benchmarks towards larger goals, and that change should be measured in decades and not years. They also suggested that for reforms to be successful districts should focus initially on winnable victories; form partnerships with people and organizations that already have the respect and loyalty of the community; and, avoid the constant threat of reform or funding cuts. These findings were echoed in this study.

The role of district leaders then, is to create the conditions (i.e., mindsets, networks, structures, policies and procedures, etc.) for a greater number of stakeholders to work collaboratively and collectively towards an equitable education system that requires the efforts, ideas and knowledge of all stakeholders to effect real and lasting change. Inattention to political influences on education results in short-term efforts that lack sustainability and lead to disillusionment. Further, political strategy and efforts without a clear ideological understanding of the direction required, promotes the view that education is politically neutral and will likely result in neoliberal and positivist claims for change.

**Leadership**

Transformative district reform for equity requires broad definitions of leadership, as evident in this study. Leadership needs to be acknowledged and fostered in students, community partners, parents, teachers, administrators, the board of trustees, senior administrative district staff, and program staff. Furthermore, the relationships within and between leaders in various stakeholder groups as well as the relationships between individuals and discourses need to be considered when examining who or what influences decision-making, and whether reforms are sustainable or transformative. Supports need to be provided to strengthen the relationships between program staff and school staff. Transformative reforms require that deep relationships
of trust and respect be developed over time and not be reduced to the simple provision of a service. As such, a greater focus on relationship building is required along with training in this area. This also means that changes to program staff be reduced at all costs.

Formal power and leadership is especially important when implementing equity-minded reforms in order to mediate the interests and concerns of students, parents and families who benefit from the status quo and for whom the traditional education systems work. Participants in this study called for program-level changes to address the gap in skill and knowledge required for MSIC principals, such as increased training on equity and inclusive engagement, as well as having higher expectations for principals and holding them accountable (from the top-down and bottom-up) to implementing changes. These changes should further be reflected in systemic hiring practices to ensure that this type of leadership is expected of all leaders rewarded through promotion processes. Highly committed, equity-minded leaders should be placed in urban schools first and foremost.

Participants also called for systemic changes such as allowing principals to opt-out of leading a Model School and strategically placing the best, equity-minded principals in Model Schools. To improve the quality of teaching and leading in the Program, participant responses clearly indicated that leaders, principals and teachers should have a choice of whether or not to be part of the reform. This means that teachers and principals of schools in the MSIC Program should have the option to change schools without penalty or reprimand, and that principals and teachers placed in these schools should specifically request to be there. This also means that schools in the MSIC Program need to be places where educators want to teach and lead, with the necessary supports and structure so that the moral imperative to address inequities can be sustained and supported with the proper infrastructure.

While participants suggested that improved leadership is fundamental to sustaining the MSIC Program, specific suggestions were not readily provided. However, recommendations for
leadership from critical perspectives are essential to recommendations in this study. As such, leadership for transformation and social justice in the literature will be explored here.

**Leadership for Transformation and Social Justice**

Working from a concept of leadership grounded in Freire’s critical democratic theory, Shields (2010) offers a view of transformative leadership for school and system leaders that begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices and addresses both individual and public good in response to and respectful of contextual differences (p. 1). Transformative leadership necessarily concerns itself with educational outcomes, but also with the larger social context within which it is embedded and offers to school leaders guiding principles and questions for creating more inclusive and socially just schools.

In her study of transformative leaders, Shields (2010) identified seven major elements of transformative leadership found in the literature: a combination of both critique and promise; attempts to effect both deep and equitable changes; deconstruction and reconstruction of the knowledge frameworks that generate inequity; acknowledgement of power and privilege; emphasis on both individual achievement and the public good; focus on liberation, democracy, equity, and justice; and, evidence of moral courage and activism (p. 562). Similarly, Theoharis (2007) described educational leaders who are grounded in social justice as follows:

...these principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions...central to their advocacy, leadership practice and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. (p. 223)

Working towards a framework of leadership for social justice is therefore a mindset that cultivates spaces for reflection and dialogue, asks questions that promote controversy as a necessary part of praxis, and supports the personal transformation that is absolutely essential to the principles of critical democracy where equity, inclusion, and diversity are valued among all
peoples. Trujillo’s (2012b) study on the politics of district instructional policy formation noted that equity-minded district leaders in contexts that support humanistic and equity-minded values, are more capable of mediating the current environment of accountability and facilitating “contextual conditions that favour more equitable, rigorous instructional policies” (p. 553).

Leadership for social justice is important in supporting and sustaining targeted programs aimed at reducing and eliminating inequities. However, leadership for social justice is also important in engaging students, families and members of the larger community who have more relative power and privilege in society and in schooling. District reforms for equity must be considered in the context of the entire district, and all school leaders (both those connected to the equity reform and others) must be trained and expected to recognize, call out and respond to privilege among teachers, leaders, families, and community members at large.

Another key element of the role of formal leadership is to foster leadership in all stakeholders and allow multiple leaders to influence decision-making in real and meaningful ways. In their study of principals in high-poverty schools, Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay and Parker (2010) noted:

In every school in our study, underlying schools’ success at making connections, stimulating inquiry-based learning, and resolving dilemmas of social and academic need, we saw the presence of strong leadership that extended beyond the principal. Our case study participants reported that strong leadership by teachers and administrators on issues of poverty was crucial to maintaining both momentum and optimism in school change work. Examples of leadership included convening conversations about poverty and schooling, emphasizing the connection between educators’ attitudes and educators’ school-based change efforts, and acknowledging both successes and challenges to school improvement work. (p. 29)

Notions of formal leadership cannot and should not exist outside of a broader definition of leadership required to create the conditions for critical democratic education. Moving towards a social justice leadership framework entails a different understanding of leadership, as described by Rottmann (2007), embodied not only in individuals in formal leadership positions,
but also through activist collectives and through the language of ideas and discourses which
effect change that maintains the status quo, follows global trends or works against structural
inequity. Rottmann stated:

Given the multiple, shifting definitions of leadership and the dominance of one unit of
analysis over others in much of the empirical research, it is necessary for me to clarify
that when I speak about leadership I am referring to a relational form of influence that
may exist at the individual, organizational, or discursive level. Most of the mainstream
research on educational leadership presents individuals as agents, and organizations and
ideas as more or less permeable structures that constrain or facilitate the actions of these
agents. However, it is possible for organizations and ideas to lead as all have the
potential to be influential. Ultimately, individuals, organizations, systems, and ideas
work together in complicated, interactive ways to influence one another. (pp. 53-54)

Each of these types of leadership (individuals, organizations and ideas) can contribute to
change in education by actively maintaining the status quo, following current trends, or resisting
educational inequity (Rottmann, 2007). This connection between the type of reform and the
approach to leadership, based on different theoretical frameworks, is especially useful to all
stakeholders participating in reforms for equity (or resisting educational inequity). Leadership,
both formally and informally, has a significant mediating effect on the political and ideological
influences on district reform for equity.

**Stakeholder-Specific Recommendations**

The previous section addressed overall recommendations for district reform for equity
based on the findings in this study. This section addresses stakeholder-specific
recommendations, as well as specific recommendations for the Model Schools for Inner Cities
Program. While the recommendations are fluid and may apply to more than one stakeholder
group, my intention here is to encourage reflection and action among all stakeholder groups in
efforts towards urban district reforms for equity that both recognize the constraints of reform,
and simultaneously urge us towards a more just, humane vision for education.
Recommendations for Academic Scholars

1) More research is required to address the gap in educational administration literature on the roles of districts in advancing reforms for equity as opposed to district reform for improved student achievement based on standardized test scores. Further, literature on urban district reform for equity would greatly benefit from additional case studies that examine reform from critical perspectives that question how, why, for whom and by whom, urban district reforms occur.

2) Notions and assessments of equity in the literature (beyond district reforms for equity), need to move beyond neoliberal notions of equitable student outcomes as measured by standardized tests, to include more critical notions of responsibility that also measure outcomes such as student experiences, engagement and well-being as well as system causes and responses to these inequitable outcomes (i.e. differences in opportunities to learn, access and treatment, school cultures, inequitable system policies and practices, etc.).

3) Scholars are urged to be cognizant of how their personal and theoretical leanings influence how and what is studied, as well as the limitations of their approach on marginalized and racialized students, families and communities. It is highly recommended that scholars endeavour to move beyond the rational, technical and positivist approaches to reform research (Trujillo, 2013), which disregards the very real and strong influences of politics (i.e., macro- and micro-politics), ideology (i.e., individual and collective ideologies) and broader definitions of leadership (i.e. that maintains or challenges the status quo and that exists in individuals, relationships, organizations and ideas). A greater focus on critical approaches in reform literature, and urban district reform in particular, is required in the conceptualizations, design, and analysis of research. This would be beneficial so that competing ideas, constructs and
approaches within critical discourses are identified, and the tendency to essentialize critical discourses (as a peripheral discourse) is minimized (Rorrer et al., 2008). For example, this study explored opportunity gaps in further detail, by identifying different MSIC discourses in understanding four inequities related to opportunity gaps: redistributive, recognition, representation, and re-education.

4) Much of the research on district reform is based on contexts in the United States, which are very different from Canadian contexts (i.e., degree of centralization/decentralization, federal education mandate vs. provincial mandate, differences in funding, etc.). More research on urban district reform from Canada and other education systems is necessary to create a more holistic understanding of contextual impacts on education systems.

5) More research is required on how districts sustain equitable reforms, as much of the research on district reform focuses on the need for, and strategies to generate, the political will to initiate reforms.

6) Broadening notions of districts to include relationships between key decision-makers and stakeholders, as opposed to district leaders alone, provides a more comprehensive understanding of how reforms are initiated, sustained, understood, mediated, and subverted.

7) Research on urban district reform would also benefit from perspectives of students and families for whom the reforms are intended to impact. This is a major limitation of this study. In failing to include these stakeholders, this study and the broader literature in this field overlooks the agency among students, families and communities. Evidence-informed education as research is constructed as the only discourse, rather than part of a larger discourse that includes the lived realities and beliefs of those most affected by the reforms, which might in fact contest and resist the ‘evidence.’ This is especially true for the most marginalized and most racialized students and families within the program.
Case studies that examine district reforms from the perspectives of students, families and community partners would greatly contribute to the literature on urban district reforms for equity.

8) Research on urban district reform would also benefit from perspectives of principals and teachers, as much of the research is restricted to the perspectives and experiences of district leaders or senior officials.

9) The literature base would benefit from analyses and examples of district reforms that enact a pedagogy for those with greater relative privilege, in order to create the conditions for greater equity throughout the system (i.e., white, middle/upper-class, able-bodied, Christian, heterosexual, males), and with a recognition that power and privilege are fluid, contextual, and relative concepts.

10) Research must include a greater focus on ideological and political influences on district reforms for equity (e.g., micro-politics, engaging in acts of resistance, tools, ideas and strategies for influencing ideological change, etc.)

**Recommendations for Ministry Officials and Policy-Makers**

The following recommendations are an effort to strengthen and make better-informed policies, thereby closing opportunity gaps for students in the existing structure:

1) Ensure wide-scale equity training for all Ministry officials and policy-makers. Ensure that equity-minded ministry officials and policy-makers are part of every section of the Ministry of Education, so that equity becomes deeply embedded in all processes, and is not simply seen as an add-on. These officials should also engage in knowledge mobilization to ensure that the latest research from critical perspectives or district reform or urban district reform is reflected in policies and practices in the Ministry.
2) Do away with a uniform approach to district reform, district funding and district policies. A one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work because of historical and current differences in the socio-political and economic environments. Additional funds, resources and supports are required for urban districts, in which there are greater inequities and greater challenges in engaging in critical democracy. As Trujillo (2012a) stated:

Accountability policies that are framed in terms of their potential to further democratic aims by granting greater liberty in exchange for results, and by holding all districts to the same high standards, risk exacerbating the same racial and socioeconomic segregation that they presumably exist to transform. Policy making that does not account for powerful contextual differences across more and less privileged districts leaves urban school boards disproportionately vulnerable to reduced democratic control and participation. (p. 354)

3) Regularly determine which initiative and programs are to be centralized and which initiatives and programs should be left to the discretion of districts, recognizing that districts are best situated to engage in district reforms for equity to meet their specific needs, and that provinces can support with ideological, political and infrastructure needs. Ensure that large-scale reforms imposed on Boards do not stifle growth and innovation and are informed by the district leaders themselves.

4) Engage in dialogue about the strengths and limitations of different theoretical frameworks on various aspects of district reform, such as: different understandings of equity; accountability (neoliberal ideologies) vs. responsibility (critical ideologies); centralization and decentralization; democracy and local governance; and teaching and learning.

5) Collect various forms of large-scale student data (engagement, well-being, achievement, etc.) and disaggregate it by various and intersecting social demographics to identify gaps in opportunity, experience, treatment, well-being, and achievement. This will support in
the identification of districts in greatest need of additional supports. Require each district to do the same.

6) Require districts to develop plans of action, in consultation with parents/caregivers, students and community partners (especially those most marginalized by the system), to identify disadvantage among student populations and intervene. Districts must also engage in regular, multi-stakeholder assessment practice to identify gains and determine next steps. Ministries must hold districts accountable to identifying disadvantage and intervening effectively, while providing opportunities for support and sharing of best practices.

7) Support districts with inventive plans to address inequities with additional funding and resources as sites of innovation, and create structures for districts to share best practices and results with other districts.

8) Support district leadership with training in: equity, critical democracy, and pedagogy for the privileged; strategies for generating political will for equitable reforms; and, social justice leadership. Specific training and support is required for district leaders to navigate top-down and bottom-up pressures. This may require additional staff in urban schools.

9) Engage in political efforts to change public opinion about the need for, and benefits of, an equitable approach to education at large, which will set the stage for districts to enact equitable reforms. Encourage partnerships with education lobbyists, media and organizations that can use stories, data and research to change opinions.

10) Embed strong accountability and transparency practices in all aspects of Ministry activities. Publicly share findings, areas of strength, and next steps and elicit public input in decision-making efforts.
11) Share accessible, brief, and easy-to-understand reports to school boards, districts, and educators that provide an overview of the literature, questions for consideration, ideas, strategies, and resources to support the change process (rather than provide silver-bullet solutions).

12) Increase the number of locally elected school board officials, their subsequent roles and responsibilities, compensation, and required training. Ministries should allow local school boards greater autonomy and at the same time increase opportunities to engage in educational dialogue and planning with Ministry officials, academic scholars and the greater public.

13) Strengthen the scope and role of advisory committees as vehicles to build civic capacity and critical democratic engagement. Ensure that policies and procedures are in place to engage as broad a committee as possible with regards to stakeholder identities, expertise, interests, and experiences connected to the committee.

**Recommendations for Elected School Board Officials**

1) Engage in ongoing equity training with a particular focus on how it pertains to student engagement, well-being, experience and achievement, and their roles in governance, advocacy, mediation, and fiscal accountability.

2) Participate actively on advisory committees and seek out committee members with a broad range of identities, perspectives, experiences, and expertise.

3) Trustee meetings should be sites of initiating and supporting ongoing civic engagement. As such, trustees should receive mandatory training in advocacy, negotiation, and mediations to navigate change efforts and encouraging dialogue.
4) Engage in deeper learning and stronger partnerships about educational reform by staying up-to-date with educational research on districts, reforms, and reforms for equity and by increasing working partnerships with district staff and academic scholars.

5) Increase awareness of the need for trustees and local governance through media and other sources.

**Recommendations for Urban District Leaders**

1) Identify, using various sources of city and school data (as well as schools that identify need), schools in the district requiring greater supports to address opportunity gaps in their schools.

2) Create and foster knowledge mobilization structures and networks to ensure that decisions and directions are being informed by and informing the literature on urban district reform (e.g., stronger partnerships with universities; networking opportunities to share, learn, and forge deeper connections between research, theory and practice; making knowledge mobilization a key component to the role central staff, etc.).

3) Generate political will for reforms by: widely sharing opportunity and achievement gap data to build awareness and clearly identify the problem; partnering with the media to share untold stories of disadvantage in the district; forming external partnerships with multiple stakeholders within and outside of the district who support the reform; and, clearly laying out a plan to address disadvantage and inequities.

4) The following recommendations relate to equity training across the district:
   
   a. Provide initial training on equity, inclusivity, anti-oppression, and critical democratic education for district leaders first.
   
   b. Training should then be provided to principals and teachers in schools with high concentrations of racialized and marginalized students.
c. Training should be extended to elected officials (if applicable), families and community partners connected to these schools.

d. Finally, training should be extended to principals and teachers in schools with larger proportions of higher income families, with a focus on pedagogy for the privileged.

e. Training for all stakeholder groups should have specific applications to the practical day-to-day work that informs their practice or work.

f. Equity training for district leaders, principals and teachers should be ongoing and carefully woven into every aspect of leading, teaching and learning. Ongoing courageous conversations must/can occur to move all stakeholders forward on the continuum of equity.

g. Create structures that provide support for district staff to actively engage in challenging systemic inequities at all levels —in classrooms, in schools, in the reform initiative, in the district, and in the community at large.

5) Carefully select the initiatives and practices to be centralized and those that should remain context-specific. Centralization and decentralization will vary over time.

Centralization is important to the extent that it supports the reform ideologically and politically, and should be balanced with efforts towards decentralization that promote a sense of ownership, innovation and learning.

6) Specific training and support is required for principals to navigate top-down and bottom-up pressures. This may require additional staff in urban schools.

7) Ensure that equitable approaches are taken within equitable reforms by using approaches such as targeted universalism, as described by Powell in Trujillo et al. (2014):

Thus, Powell argues that of main concern is the imposition of seemingly neutral programs onto already inequitable institutional arrangements, which will likely leave arrangements unchanged or serve to intensify them. He argues for the development and
implementation of reforms that promote targeted universalism. Rejecting universal strategies that do not acknowledge differences among racialized groups, he posits that a targeted universal strategy is one that attends to the needs of both dominant and marginal groups while paying particular attention to needs of marginalized racial groups (Powell, 2008)” (p. 902).

8) Increase opportunities for dialogue, dissent, learning, unlearning, and relearning within and between all stakeholder groups at the school and district levels. Opportunities for democratic participation need to be created as a way of doing business in education. Meaningful parent and community engagement, and the discord and creative chaos that may ensue, needs to be positioned as a sign of district, reform and school success. These conversations should honour the experiences and knowledge of parents/caregivers, students and community partners. At times, these conversations need to involve research and data on urban education, district reform, equity in education, closing opportunity gaps, etc. These conversations and understandings of research can guide vision, foci, next steps, and regular program assessment. A greater distribution of power and efforts to include key stakeholders regarding policy and legislation decision-making processes will result in a more critical democratic education system.

9) Increase opportunities for developing networks of support and sharing best practices that promote and support critical pedagogies, within and between schools, families, communities, and the relationships between all three. District leaders and school principals need to position themselves as allies that will challenge inequities, and as brokers of social and cultural capital, from a place of genuine respect for the strength, agency, and courage of those who are more oppressed in an inherently oppressive system like schooling.

10) Create a broad network of strategic partnerships both within and outside of the district to: garner political support, increase knowledge mobilization, increase the quality and
success of goals, and interventions by engaging multiple perspectives, and learn from and with one another. Actively maintain and grow these networks over time.

11) Measure reform success in 5-year blocks as opposed to yearly. A sustained and persistent commitment to deep change versus broad change is needed to address the root causes of inequity and change the possibilities, opportunities and choices for all students. Change happens over years and it cannot happen as a result of silver bullet initiatives in the areas of curriculum, parent and community engagement, and/or closing the opportunity gaps (Henig et. al, 1999). However, annual needs assessments should be conducted to determine the needs and challenges of teachers, students, and families. Accountability and transparency is required regarding finances, outcomes, existing gaps, needs and challenges still to be addressed, and level of progress.

12) As echoed by Gaskell and Levin, (2012), the conditions in urban schools need to support a high level of teaching and learning. This speaks to the physical environment, the quality of leadership, the quality of teaching, and professional opportunities for ongoing learning.

13) Districts need to make systemic arrangements to ensure that teachers and leaders in urban schools want to be there, and that they are strong leaders and teachers who are committed to giving their all. School principals and teachers should be able to opt out of urban schools without penalty, principals and teachers within urban schools should receive extra support and incentives to innovate, and districts should hire committed, equity-minded leaders, especially in urban schools. Urban schools should be positioned to attract and retain the best teachers (Gaskell & Levin, 2012).

14) Systems and structures need to be established that program staff and schools can rely on year after year to support the reform (funding, staffing, resources, etc.).
Recommendations for the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program (MSIC)

In addition to the recommendations for urban districts above, the following recommendations are specific to the MSIC Program going forward:

1) Increase efforts at decentralization of practices and initiatives at all levels including central and reform staff, school principals, and teachers. Centrally mandated initiatives should be limited to: training focused on equity and social justice practices and pedagogies; strengthening internal and external partnerships; and other process-oriented practices such as unpacking school data, critical democratic engagement that encourages the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes, sharing best practices among and between multiple stakeholder groups, and drawing on current best practices in urban education (whether at the district level, the school level or the classroom level). Program deliverables should be reconsidered in this light.

2) Ideological tensions need to be explored between and within stakeholder groups. Some of these tensions include:
   a. The purpose(s) of education and the distinction between education and schooling
   b. Charitable and Social Justice Discourses to education, closing opportunity gaps, curriculum, etc. (This belongs to a larger conversation about notions of equity being rooted in charity or social justice.)
   c. The nature of change: individual characteristics or environmental conditions
   d. Closing the gap versus increasing the mean level of achievement, well-being, opportunity, experience, etc.
   e. Individual and systemic inequities, with a focus on cognitive and representative injustices
f. How the following concepts are understood and constructed: difference, resistance, success/failure, equity and excellence, “good for some, better for all,” power, privilege, multiple and intersecting identities, etc.

3) Make issues of race and racial differences in achievement, experience, well-being, opportunity and treatment among students in the program central to discussions, directions and practices.

4) Reinstate the lead teacher position to reduce the burden on principals and teachers to implement initiatives. Maintain the roles of teaching and learning coach, but ensure that approaches to curriculum and pedagogy are aligned with critical pedagogies. Community support workers also require tremendous training before they can be held accountable for their work in supporting critical democratic engagement.

5) Professional learning for program staff, principals, and educators needs to be rooted in critical and transformative discourses. This expertise needs to be built within the staff (in conjunction with equity advocates within and outside of the district) and then continued as a practice in every aspect of leading, teaching and learning in the program. Changes to MSIC staff should be reduced at all costs to foster relationship building between the program staff and school staff.

6) Include parents in meaningful ways, such as: educating them about their role as parents in the education system and their rights and responsibilities; sharing results and data that highlight strengths and areas of need of the program and their schools; and, including them in decision-making and assessment processes at the program and school levels.

7) Increase top-down and bottom-up accountability at the school and program levels. Superintendents of education should play a greater role in overseeing the equity initiatives as they relate to the program. Funding should be withheld from the schools initially until a plan and commitment is developed in conjunction with the larger school
community. The MSIC Program should share data regarding program success and areas of growth and engage in a visioning/re-visioning process for the next phase of Model Schools. This process will take into account the learning over the last 10 years, current research and data, and the voices of multiple stakeholders (especially the people most affected by the reform).

8) Create an Equity Department that includes the MSIC Program, to ensure that equity and social justice considerations are embedded in all aspects of programming. Hire only highly qualified personnel who are well versed in issues of equity to oversee, restructure and maintain consistency for the entire program.

9) Create district-wide structures that support students living in poverty who do not attend a Model School. Schools should have the option to submit a detailed proposal for funding to address the needs of poverty in their school. This structure should be extended to include schools addressing issues of anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, etc.

10) Engage in a re-visioning of the program that considers areas of strength and next steps. This requires co-creating definitions of program and student success. Determine whether the program is in fact closing the opportunity gaps if that is its purpose. Create assessment tools that highlight student strengths in the program and create supports to build on these strengths. As well, collect data that explores intersections between class and race, and other social identities. This may include expanding the Program to close opportunity gaps from pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12, and the necessary infrastructure to support this.

11) Strengthen the role of the Inner City Advisory Committee (ICAC) as a watchdog that holds the program and Board accountable to continually serving students more equitably. The ICAC should actively engage macro-level politics at the city, provincial and federal
level to strengthen partnerships and advocate for changes to policies, funding structures, etc.

12) Continue to strengthen partnerships within and outside the Board. Internal partnerships will serve to strengthen co-learning and sharing of best practices.

13) Continue to build awareness of the purpose of the MSIC Program and political support within the larger Board, among schools, principals and families who are not served by the program. Train leaders and teachers in non-MSIC schools on issues of equity and social justice from the perspective of a pedagogy for the privileged.

14) Ensure formal and informal practices to ground decisions in the literature on urban district reform and urban schooling, to ensure a more intentional approach to reform and to consider ideas and theories presented in other contexts.

**Recommendations for Social Activists**

1) Develop a clear understanding of the education system’s role in maintaining and perpetuating individual and systemic inequities so that actions can educate others and intentionally interrupt such patterns. As Starratt (2014) put forward:

The former [social justice advocates] tend to see their work as primarily political, calling attention to the reality that education is not politically neutral, but rather that it tends to reflect and reproduce the political, cultural, and economic ideologies of the political, cultural, and financial elites of a society in the interests of maintaining their privileged status in society. Social justice advocates view the schools as legitimizing, through the school’s representation of how the world works in its curriculum and organizational procedures, the political, cultural, and financial status quo. Advocates for education as social justice see this arrangement of the schooling process as denying those communities of children and their parents their rights as citizens, guaranteed in most cases by law, to an equal opportunity to participate fully in the life of the community. (p. 75)

2) Become familiar with policies that influence education at the level of the school, the district, the province/state, etc. In addition to policies, become familiar with the processes for change at various levels. Ensure that this information is shared widely with
community partners, families and other interested stakeholders in pressing for change externally.

3) Continue to vigilantly navigate the political context for reform, and be conscious of whether the equity is operating in the cracks of the institution, as part of a movement for an institutional and social transformation, or whether it needs to accommodate itself to the existing institutional culture (McCaskell, 2005). With a recognition that change must happen from within the system, equity activists and allies need to position themselves to continuously push for deeper experiences of justice and support the system in becoming more equitable in the face of inevitable ‘safety’. Tools for mobilization include: data, research, media, sharing best practices, dialogue, sharing stories and experiences, etc.

4) Stay connected to other allies, both within and outside of the system. Greatest efforts at equity reform in a system that is not ready to reform occur through strong partnerships with internal and external stakeholders to the district. Develop as large a network as possible with allies from both within and outside of education.

5) Trustees need to represent the public demographic socio-economically, racially, linguistically, etc. Efforts should be made by social activists and public advocacy groups to actively seek out and support candidates (including younger candidates) to run for the Trustee position. Increased advocacy efforts (e.g., use of media, campaigns, etc.) should be developed to inform citizens of their rights and what they can ask/demand of their elected trustee.

Potential Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Recommendations

The above recommendations are intended to incite dialogue and inspire action, however anyone who endeavours to implement these recommendations will undoubtedly face challenges. First, is the self-imposed constraint of pragmatism that suggests this level of change is not
possible, whether due to lack of political will, resources, skills, knowledge and/or attitudes needed to create this type of education system. The MSIC Program is an excellent example of what can happen when the veil of pragmatism lifts for long enough to engage in possibility and idealism. Second, change is slow to occur and will require a tremendous level of individual and collective persistence and tenacity on the part of reformers. Third is the very real concern that initiating reforms for equity from critical perspectives will be thwarted in a larger, and often more powerful, neoliberal environment. Fourth is the fear that many district and reform leaders have regarding the loss of control and power that accompanies critical democratic engagement. Finally, district and reform leaders must contend with the often conflicting and contentious reactions to reforms for equity from students, families and members of the larger community who benefit from, and want to maintain, the status quo.

There are also many opportunities that present themselves if these, and similar recommendations for equitable reforms were implemented. First is the tremendous opportunity to change the schooling and life outcomes of students and families that have historically and currently experienced mistreatment, misrecognition/lack of recognition, misrepresentation/limited representation, and differences in access, opportunity and choice as a result of systemic factors within and outside of the education system that violate their political rights and personhoods. The culture of trust, respect and openness between school districts, schools, families, and communities is simply not possible in highly bureaucratic systems, pervaded by approaches of ‘power-over’ and a culture of fear. Second is the opportunity for urban schools to become part of a larger social and political movement that works to create a more just and sustainable world beyond their borders. Third is the opportunity for principals and teachers to be more engaged and experience greater personal and professional satisfaction in being part of such a movement. Finally, this approach will benefit us all based on the notion that what is needed for some is better for all, in the long-run, especially as we become increasingly interconnected
and interdependent. Therefore, while there are many challenges to implementing district reforms for equity, the opportunities far outweigh the costs.

Concluding Thoughts

The Model Schools for Inner Cities Program and the Toronto District School Board have the pleasure of working alongside and serving strong, courageous and agentic students and families. A school district that is committed to resisting educational inequity (Rottmann, 2007) actively identifies the systemic barriers that prevent all students from experiencing greater happiness, choice and success, and intentionally develops, implements and assesses pedagogies and practices that better serve marginalized and racialized students alongside, and in service to, those populations. This type of education system arises from a deep and enduring belief that education has the potential to form and transform our societies towards greater justice, humanity and social consciousness. The expectation of education systems must be broadened beyond the narrow, neoliberal aim of preparing students for 21st-century jobs. Education has to be seen and experienced as a means, process and movement for changing how we relate to each other, our environments and ourselves, by engaging in critical democracy as a process for un/re/learning and un/re/becoming.

School districts are perfectly poised to develop an education system that enacts critical democracy and citizenship not only in their pedagogical approaches, but also in their everyday operations and deliberate efforts to build civic capacity and authentic engagement among students, families, communities and community partners, educators, and elected officials. The challenges in urban settings, in which there are greater concentrations and degrees of historical and current systemic injustices, require greater efforts from school districts to support civic capacity. In these spaces, there is greater educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that needs to be repaid to students, families and communities who suffer from the cumulative effects of educational, socio-political and economic injustices. However, engaging in these efforts also
provides school districts tremendous opportunities for critical democratic participation and social change.

School districts, and urban school districts in particular, must guard against rational, instrumental notions of reform that negate the importance of ideological, political (macro and micro politics) and leadership influences on who makes decisions, how, for whom, and for what purpose. A greater focus on understanding these differences and their influences on education reform is necessary to create education systems that incite compassion, justice and hope for a better tomorrow. However, this must be matched with intentional efforts to engage transformative ideologies, practices rooted in critical democratic engagement, and leadership for transformation and social justice.

Reform for equity is possible and districts are best suited to increase the levels of achievement, well-being, experience, and engagement of all of students, with a committed focus to closing opportunity gaps in distribution, recognition, representation, and re-education. This study has explored the debates in reforms for equity and the role of districts in advancing those reforms from multiple, theoretical perspectives and concludes that the TDSB and other urban districts, must continually move towards critical discourses in implementing and sustaining reforms for equity (Dei, 2010a; Freire, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Portelli et al., 2007; Shahjahan, 2011; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007) and allowing for multiple approaches within these discourses. However, this study argues that while reforms for equity must look towards critical discourses, critiquing the impacts of a neoliberal system alone will not result in the breadth and depth of reform needed to make real and sustainable change. Educators committed to reforms for equity will need to play within the game to change the game—but be aware at all times of what the game is, how it needs to be changed and for what purpose, how and when to initiate and sustain change, and above all, have the conviction to steadfastly focus on the ultimate goals of the game.
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APPENDIX A
Model Schools for Inner Cities Program
Approximation of Budget Allocation and Spending

In the description below:

- Phase 1 MSIC schools refer to the original three MSIC schools added in year 1
- Phase 2 MSIC schools refer to the four additional MSIC schools added in year 2
- Each of the seven original MSIC schools formed the basis of the seven clusters of schools that currently exist in the program
- Secondary schools were added in year 5 and removed from the program in year 8
- Changes to central staff are also listed below

Year 1 (2006-2007)
- Program gets $3.5 M (three MSIC schools, 22 additional cluster schools. Total: 25 elementary schools. $0.5 M for central expenses.)

- Phase 1 MSIC schools each get $1M with the approximate breakdown in spending:
  - $500,000 goes to the original MSIC schools in that cluster
  - $100,000 is split among seven to eight other cluster schools in the surrounding area (i.e., approximately $13,000-$14,000 each)
  - $400,000 for extra staff and central initiatives

Year 2 (2007-2008):
- Program gets $8.5 M (seven MSIC schools, 43 additional cluster schools. Total: 50 elementary schools. $1.5 M for central expenses.)

- Phase 1 and 2 MSIC schools each get $1M with the approximate breakdown in spending:
  - $500,000 goes to the original MSIC school in that cluster.
  - $100,000 is split among six to seven other cluster schools in the surrounding area (i.e., approximately $13,000-$14,000 each)
  - $400,000 for extra staff and central initiatives

Year 3 (2008-2009):
- Program gets $9.78 M (seven MSIC schools, 68 additional cluster schools. Total: 75 elementary schools.)
- Additional program staff: community support workers, teaching and learning coaches, Inner City lead teachers, and program staff and administration.

- Phase 1 and 2 MSIC schools each get $1M with the approximate breakdown in spending:
  - $500,000 goes to the original MSIC school in that cluster.
  - $100,000 is split among nine to ten other cluster schools in the surrounding area (i.e., approximately $10,000-$11,000 each)
  - $400,000 for extra staff and central initiatives
Year 4 (2009-2010):

- Program gets $8.9 M (seven MSIC schools, 93 additional cluster schools. Total: 100 elementary schools.)

- Clusters from Phase 1 MSIC schools get $1M divided accordingly:
  - $500,000 cluster split fairly evenly between all 13-14 schools (based on head count)
  - $500,000 for central staff and central initiatives

- Phase 2 MSIC schools each get $1M with the approximate breakdown in spending:
  - $500,000 goes to the original MSIC school in that cluster.
  - $100,000 is split among 13-14 other cluster schools in the surrounding area (i.e., approximately $7,000-$8,000 each)
  - $400,000 for extra staff and central initiatives

Year 5 (2010-2011):

- Program gets $8.7 M (125 elementary schools, including seven original MSIC schools.)
- seven secondary schools added to the program

- Clusters get $1M divided accordingly:
  - $500,000 to the cluster schools split fairly evenly between all 17-18 schools (based on head count)
  - $500,000 for central staff and central initiatives

- Secondary schools get $10,000 each

Year 6 (2011-2012):

- Program gets $8.1 M (150 elementary schools in the MSIC Program, including seven original MSIC schools.)
- Seven secondary schools still in the program

- Clusters get $1M divided accordingly:
  - $500,000 to the cluster schools split fairly evenly between all 17-18 schools (based on head count)
  - $500,000 for central staff and central initiatives

- Secondary schools get $10,000 each

Year 7 (2012-2013):

- Program gets $8.8 M (150 elementary schools in the MSIC Program, including seven original MSIC schools.)
- seven secondary schools still in the program

- Clusters get $1M divided accordingly:
  - $500,000 to the cluster schools split fairly evenly between all 20-22 schools (based on head count)
  - $500,000 for central staff and central initiatives

- Secondary schools each get $10,000 each
**Year 8 (2013-2014):**
- Program gets $7.25 M (150 elementary schools in the MSIC Program, including seven original MSIC schools.)
- seven secondary schools still the program
- teaching and learning coaches were cut in this year

- Clusters get $1M divided accordingly:
  - $500,000 to the cluster schools split fairly evenly between all 20-22 schools - schools were categorized into small, medium, large to provide a base amount, followed by a top-up based on head count
  - $500,000 for central staff and central initiatives (less staff)
- Secondary schools each get $10,000 each

**Year 9 (2014-2015):**
- Program gets $7.5 M (150 elementary schools in the MSIC Program, including seven original MSIC schools.)
- seven secondary schools no longer part of the program
- teaching and learning coaches were reinstated and lead teachers were cut this year

- Clusters get $1M divided accordingly:
  - $500,000 to the cluster schools split fairly evenly between all 20-22 schools - schools were categorized into small, medium, large to provide a base amount, followed by a top-up based on head count
  - $500,000 for central staff and central initiatives (less staff)

**Year 10 (2015-2016):**
- Program gets $7.5 M (150 elementary schools in the MSIC Program, including seven original MSIC schools.)
- Lead teachers continue to be cut this year

- Clusters get $1M divided accordingly:
  - $500,000 to the cluster schools split fairly evenly between all 20-22 schools - schools were categorized into small, medium, large to provide a base amount, followed by a top-up based on head count
  - $500,000 for central staff and central initiatives (less staff)

**Funding Stream**
This money put towards the MSIC Program comes from the Learning Opportunities Grant given to school districts from the Ontario Ministry of Education to address differences in opportunities to learn.

**Partnerships and In-Kind Donations**
It is important to note that in addition to the money listed above, Program partnerships have also provided the funding for:
- iPads (20 per school)
- Free trips for every class in every school to attend the Ontario Science Centre
• Hearing and Vision clinics (including eye glasses and audiological supports), Paediatric Clinics, Nutrition Programs, Beyond 3:30 (after-school programming), and Telepsychiatry equipment.

• Publication of student book: *Gandhi’s Glasses* (collaboration between World Literacy Canada and 15 MSIC schools)

• Family Day at Ontario Place and Family Passports that provide reduced entrance to major attractions in the Greater Toronto Area.

This money is given to the MSIC Program, but is managed by the Toronto Foundation for Student Success, an arms-length registered charity of the TDSSB that operates independently.
Overview of Case Study Project

This study examines the role of school districts in promoting and sustaining equity-minded reforms, a largely under-theorized area in Educational Administration literature. Using Rorrer, Skrla and Scheurich’s (2008) conceptual argument ‘Districts as Institutional Actors in Reform,’ this study positions the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest, urban school district in Canada as the unit of study and explores the following research question: How does the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program in the Toronto District School Board implement equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at student success, access and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities? Using an embedded case study approach, this study examines both the TDSB as the larger unit and the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program as the sub-unit, which is a district-wide initiative aimed at improving educational achievement and experiences for students and families living in Toronto's inner cities. Two rounds of interviews with senior officials, Board members, key principals, MSIC staff and external partners along with document study using discourse analysis was used to examine how district-wide equity reforms are implemented.

Districts as Institutional Actors in Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity: A Theory of Systemic Reform

- Non-linear
- Complex
- Variable-coupling
- Examines the district as a unit “bound by a web of interrelated roles, responsibilities, and relationships” (Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008, p. 333).

This study will be rooted in grounded theory and participant responses and document study using discourse analysis may change the structure conceptual framework.
• Time: 1998 to Present. In 1998, 7 predecessor boards amalgamated to create the TDSB. Using this date to bound the larger unit of this case study allows for an analysis of the collective notions of reforms for equity that represent the needs of children in the entire City of Toronto
• Space: The physical boundaries of the Toronto District School Board post-amalgamation and the electronic boundaries of the TDSB public (external) and private (internal) websites
• Content of Analysis: Interviews and document study using discourse analysis (described in greater detail below)

The boundaries of the sub-unit (TDSB) include the following:

• Time: 2004 to Present. In 2005, the MSIC Task Force Report was drafted, which was approved by the Board of Trustees in the TDSB and was the foundation of the program. Beginning the analysis in 2004 allows for greater depth into the context required for this program to be initiated.
• Space: The boundaries of the Toronto District School Board post-amalgamation with a specific focus on the MSIC Central Office and the 150 schools in the program and the electronic boundaries of the TDSB public (external) and private (internal) websites.
• Content of Analysis: Two rounds of interviews and document study using discourse analysis (described in greater detail below)

Field Procedures

Access – There are three avenues to increase access to information

1. Approval from the TDSB External Ethics Review Committee will increase access to documents. The key informant will support with access to documents.
2. There will be a second tier of interviewees and documents to draw from if access to first choices is denied

Procedural Reminders

- For interviews: Bring consent forms, interview questions, the case study protocol, a tape recorder, extra batteries and a pen and paper to take notes.
- For document study using discourse analysis: Bring the case study protocol and a laptop/pen and paper to take notes.

Clear Schedule of Data Collection
This will be confirmed closer to the start of data collection.
Case Study Questions

Questions posed to me, the Investigator

1. Am I gathering sufficient evidence about district reforms for equity in the larger unit (TDSB)?

2. Am I gathering sufficient evidence about district reforms for equity in the sub-unit (MSIC Program)?

3. How does this interview or document connect to the research questions and sub-questions?

4. How does this interview or document confirm or refute the conceptual framework? How might this data modify or extend the “Districts as Institutional Actors” theory?

Questions of the Case

Research Question: How do urban school districts implement equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

Sub-questions:

a. How do urban school districts understand equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

b. How do urban school districts initiate equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

c. How do urban school districts measure equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

d. How do urban school districts sustain equitable practices and pedagogy aimed at improving student success, access and opportunities for traditionally underserved communities?

Questions of the Interviewees (First Set of Interviews)

1. What does it mean to promote district reforms for equity? Who are these reforms aimed to impact?

2. How does the TDSB initiate equitable practices and pedagogy? What factors, strategies and stakeholders are involved in this process?
3. How does the TDSB measure reforms for equity? What factors, strategies and stakeholders are involved in this process?

4. Is the MSIC Program an example of a district reform for equity? If so, how? If not, why not?

5. How does the MSIC Program promote instructional leadership? How is the instructional leadership similar to or different from that in the TDSB?

6. How does the MSIC Program create organizational structures, processes and culture to align with equity reforms? How is this similar to or different to the structures in the TDSB?

7. How does the MSIC Program mediate federal, provincial and Board policies? How is this similar to or different to mediating policies in the TDSB?

8. How does the MSIC Program maintain an equity focus? How is this similar to or different from how the TDSB maintains an equity focus?

9. How does the TDSB sustain equitable practices and pedagogy? What factors, strategies and stakeholders are involved in this process?

10. What barriers does the TDSB face in sustaining the equity-minded reforms?

11. What strategies are used to overcome those barriers?

12. What supports are required to sustain district reforms for equity such as the MSIC Program?

Table Shells

For interviews, consent forms, interview questions and the case study protocol will be available.

For document study using discourse analysis, the following table shell will be included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Researcher’s Reflections</th>
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<td>Date/Time:</td>
<td>Key Findings/Inferences – Factual observations noted</td>
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Potential Sources of Information

Interviews

Three of each of the following stakeholders will be interviewed: Senior staff in the TDSB, Trustees, key administrator, key partners and MSIC staff. Three of each of the above noted stakeholders will be included in the interview process in part to protect the identity of the participants. The 16 interview participants will be considered based on the following criteria: they have been actively connected to the program for a minimum of two years between the years 2004-2014; they represent one of the key stakeholder groups; and others would agree that their involvement in the program has had demonstrable impacts on its initiation, stability and/or progress. Participants will be chosen on the basis of maximum variation in experiences and perspectives to capture core experiences and central, shared dimensions of district reform for equity (Merriam, 2009, pp. 78-79). Participants will be requested to participate in two interviews. The first interview will use the interview questions listed above and the second interview will be based on themes that emerge out of the first set of interviews that require further probing.

Documents

Twelve documents will be chosen for analysis based on the following criteria: they support answering the research question and are linked to the literature review (Butin, 2010, p. 99); they are significant documents in the MSIC Program between 2004-2014 or in the TDSB that have impacted MSIC initiatives and directions; and a combination of documents that focus on the program philosophy, history and applications of this philosophy in day-to-day activities. A deliberate effort will be made to note changes in foundational documents over time. Potential documents include the TDSB Equity Foundation Statement, the MSIC Task Force document, the MSIC Backgrounder and pamphlet over the years, a description the Learning Opportunities Index (a measure of external barrier to student success used to rank schools in the TDSB and determine the schools who are part of the MSIC Program), the MSIC website, the internal website that houses documents and resources for MSIC staff, administrators, teachers, and senior staff, the TDSB Equity website and archival data that includes a summary of data collected in the MSIC Program about student achievement, well-being, engagement and school climate.

Guide for Case Study Report

The study will follow the traditional format for research and will include an introduction, a literature review, detailed methods, findings, analyses and conclusions/recommendations. In addition to the final thesis being stored in the library stacks at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, the information gained may also be used for multiple purposes:

a) If requested by senior staff in the TDSB, MSIC staff and/or the Advisory Committee to the MSIC Program, a presentation will be made based on the findings of the study

b) Findings may be compiled and submitted for publishing in an academic journal

c) Findings may be presented at educational research conferences
APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS #1

1) What does it mean to promote district reforms for equity? Who are these reforms aimed to impact?

2) How does the TDSB initiate equitable practices and pedagogy? What factors, strategies and stakeholders are involved in this process?

3) How does the TDSB measure reforms for equity? What factors, strategies and stakeholders are involved in this process?

4) Is the MSIC Program an example of a district reform for equity? If so, how? If not, why not?

5) How does the MSIC Program promote instructional leadership? How is the instructional leadership similar to or different from that in the TDSB?

6) How does the MSIC Program create structures, processes and culture to align with equity reforms? How is this similar to or different to the structures in the TDSB?

7) How does the MSIC Program mediate federal, provincial and Board policies? How is this similar to or different to mediating policies in the TDSB?

8) How does the MSIC Program maintain an equity focus? How is this similar to or different from how the TDSB maintains an equity focus?

9) How does the TDSB sustain equitable practices and pedagogy? What factors, strategies and stakeholders are involved in this process?

10) What barriers does the TDSB face in sustaining the equity-minded reforms?

11) What strategies are used to overcome those barriers?

12) What supports are required to sustain district reforms for equity such as the MSIC Program?
APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS #2

1) What is Equity?
   a. How do you understand this concept?

2) Achievement/Opportunity Gap
   a. Why does the achievement/opportunity gap exist?
   b. What is the solution? Who can solve it?
   c. Can we close it?

3) What is MSIC?
   a. What is the purpose of MSIC?
   b. What is a Model School?
   c. Why is MSIC important?
   d. Who does MSIC serve?
   e. Who is responsible for the success of the program?
   f. What are the Intentions of Programs vs. Realities of Program vs. Possibilities of Program?

4) MSIC In Relation to TDSB
   a. How can we tell the difference between a MSIC school and a Non-MSIC school?
      Should we be able to tell the difference?
      - Similarities
      - Differences
   b. How has MSIC influenced TDSB?
   c. How has TDSB influenced MSIC?
   d. Should MSIC be integrated into the larger board? If so, how?
APPENDIX E – SUMMARY OF DOCUMENTS USED IN DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

1) Model Schools for Inner Cities Task Force Report

The Model Schools for Inner Cities Task Force Report is the founding document created by a 31-person group of trustees, parents, school principals and superintendents, board senior administrative staff, community partners, TDSB staff, university professors, and representatives of other organizations connected to children and education, led by a group of four Task Force coordinators (a school trustee, a principal of a school in Toronto’s inner city, a past coordinator of the Inner City Department in the former Toronto Board of Education, and an assistant Task Force coordinator). The 27-page report was presented to the TDSB Program and School Services Committee in the Toronto District School Board in May 2005 following Board approval of the Task Force and its mandate in November 2004 and Task Force meetings that occurred from January to March 2005. The document outlines the entire plan and vision for the program and includes the following sub-headings: Introduction; The Issue; The Vision; Successful Inner City School Students—How Do We Get There?; Essential Components of Model Inner City Schools; Selection Process; Resources; Recommendations; Appendix A: Inner City Clusters and City of Toronto Neighbourhoods; Appendix B: Essential Components of Model Inner City Schools; Appendix C: Research and Review Components for Model Schools for Inner City; and Appendix D: Imagine… A Day in the Life of a Model Inner City School and its Students.

2) Model Schools for Inner Cities—Criteria for Choosing the Original Model Schools

This document has two parts. The first section is a memo written by the Inner City Advisory Committee to the Program School Committee in the TDSB. It includes the recommendation of schools chosen to be part of Phase 1 of the MSIC Program. The second section includes all of the supporting documentation for the entire proposal process including
letters to schools and communities, timelines, the proposal outline, site visit information (names, locations, etc.), and the criteria for assessing school visits. The proposal asks schools to list general information about the school community, their vision for a model school, the strengths and challenges of the school community, an assessment of the school’s readiness to embrace the project, and additional information. The information on the school visit checklist falls under the same categories as the purpose of the visits was to confirm/deny/add to the contents of the school proposal.

3) The TDSB’s Learning Opportunities Index—FAQ

The TDSB’s Learning Opportunities Index (LOI) is a ranking of elementary and secondary schools (separately) based on measures of external challenges affecting student success (based on different calculations for elementary and secondary schools). The school with the greatest level of external challenges is ranked number one and is described as highest on the index. Of the list of elementary school (Kindergarten through Grade 8), the highest 150 school on the Learning Opportunities Index are part of the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program. While students in all schools face some barriers to success, this is a measure of relative need at a specific point in time and compares schools on the exact same criteria. Some form of the LOI has existed in the TDSB and its legacy boards for approximately 30 years, however a change in calculation occurred in 2009 based on the advice of various stakeholders including representatives from the Inner City Advisory Committee, and this has remained the same calculation to date. The LOI is calculated approximately every two years to account for demographic changes and school boundary changes over time. This document consists of 12 questions and answers followed by a list of elementary schools ranked from 1 to 474 and then a list of secondary schools ranked from 1 to 110. It is important to note that differences between LOI rankings can be as little as 0.0001.

4) Model Schools for Inner Cities: 3-Year Highlights—Narrowing the Gap
This document, presented as a PowerPoint presentation in February 2010, was created by a TDSB researcher who has worked closely with MSIC to analyze the impacts of the program from multiple perspectives. At this point, the first seven MSIC schools had been in the program for three full years. This document begins with a focused case study on Nelson Mandela Park Public School, and then provides a shorter analysis of the other six schools along various indicators of success. The overall finding of the report is that while there were differences among schools, every school made gains academically (as determined by results on the standardized Canadian Achievement Test) and/or based on other outcome areas (e.g., ‘physical, social and emotional well-being, resiliency, school readiness, student, staff and parent engagement in school, and community involvement’). The report concludes with the following seven conditions to close the gap and to keep it from widening:

1. Solid support and resources to level the playing field (to fill the opportunity gaps)
2. Extra efforts (innovative and intensive interventions) to make up the initial achievement gaps
3. Relevant research and review information to help monitor progress, to inform programming and planning, and to adjust practices where necessary
4. Sufficient time for schools and students to demonstrate growth—the more challenging the school the longer the time is needed.
5. Sustained leadership, which is fair, open, collaborative, forward thinking, and visionary
6. Staff support and engagement
7. Continuous resources and efforts to cope with the changing

5) Article Featured in Voice Magazine: Leading and Learning With the Community By Harpreet Ghuman

In 2009, former lead teacher and now principal of one of the Model Schools for Inner Cities wrote an article about his experiences growing up in one of Toronto’s inner-suburbs and then as an educator in that community. He comments on the importance of having strong school-community partnerships and being a visible member of the community as an educator in that community. The article describes two forms of professional learning that Harpreet Ghuman organized for teachers in inner-cities/suburbs—community walks and faith walks—in which
teachers become aware of and form greater connections to elements of the community, faith institutions, students, and families from the areas in which they work as a form of culturally relevant teaching. The article was featured in a provincial magazine published by the Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario, titled Voice.

6) Model Schools for Inner Cities Structural Documents: Organizational Chart, Backgrounder, Roles and Responsibilities, and Deliverables

These documents outline structures and systems in place to support the 150 schools and over 50 TDSB staff people connected to this program from 2009 to 2014 (the earliest record available was 2009). The Organizational Chart outlines the structure of the organization and shows the relationships and relative ranks of the staff members who support the program. The Backgrounder is a brief two-page document that highlights the most salient aspects of the program and is shared with schools, visitors, and external stakeholders as part of an introductory package. The Roles and Responsibilities document outlines the specifics for each of the following nine roles in MSIC: Superintendent of education with the MSIC portfolio, superintendent of education (family of schools), central coordinating principal, family of schools MSIC lead administrators, program coordinator, central lead teacher, teaching and learning coach, community support workers, and learning classroom teachers. The Deliverables document outlines the programs and initiatives that schools are to engage in to be part of the MSIC Program, which are divided by the five essential components of MSIC. These documents were created by the steering committee for the MSIC Program (trustee most involved with the program, superintendent with the MSIC portfolio, central coordinating principal, and coordinator). All of these documents are made available on the internal SharePoint site that all TDSB employees have access to.

7) 2006 Article—Break the Mold: Lessons Learned from Inner City Schools featured in: the Ontario Principal’s Council Magazine By: Vicky Branco and Nancy Steinhauer
In 2010, an article published by superintendent of education Vicky Branco and principal Nancy Steinhauer was featured in the Ontario Principal Council’s magazine titled *The Register*. The article is really a qualitative ethnography that provides a description of key elements of the program and highlights seven lessons learned. It also provides a description of what is meant by inner city schools and the Models Schools for Inner Cities Program.

8) *Model Schools for Inner Cities—Program Presentation to Visitors and Year-at-a Glance Documents*

MSIC regularly hosts national and international visitors interested in learning about the program and visiting one of the schools in the program. PowerPoint presentations have been created over the years to document key elements of the program. The latest version begins with a history of the program that is situated within the larger TDSB framework, describes the context of poverty in Toronto, provides a description of the Learning Opportunities Index as a research method for ranking schools based on external challenges to success, and lists key initiatives and programs that fall under each of the five essential components of the program. The *Year-at-a-Glance documents* also highlight key programs, initiatives, and areas of focus (similar to the Program Presentations), however with a more in-depth explanation in writing. The 2013-14 and 2014-15 documents were analyzed.

9) *Presentation at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference in 2012 and 2013*

In both 2012 and 2013, a presentation titled “The Achievement Gap Cannot Be Closed Without First Reducing the Opportunity: A Case of the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program (2012 and 2013)” was presented at the annual American Educational Research Association Conference. The presentation was created and presented by a TDSB Researcher and the now superintendent of education with the MSIC portfolio (previously the central coordinating principal of MSIC). The reports include an eight-page written document as well as a 30-slide
PowerPoint Presentation. In addition to providing a context for the study and a description of key elements of the program, the report and PowerPoint presentation provide both formative and summative findings between 2006 and 2012/13 and the basis for a developing theory of change. There is also a connection to scholarly research in the written report that aims to situate the data within a larger body of literature.

10) The MSIC Parent Academy Resource Guide

This document is a report that outlines a structure for parent engagement that builds upon Essential Component #3—School as Heart of the Community. The Parent Academies—by parents, for parents—are intended to welcome and respect parents as partners in education with the following three goals in mind:

1. Supporting children’s learning and development
2. Becoming familiar with, and learning to navigate the education system
3. Workforce development

These goals cover main areas of interest which MSIC parents themselves highlighted at a 2009 Model Schools parent conference, as well as successful practices from other districts. The report was written by MSIC staff and rolled out to MSIC clusters in 2011. It includes structural information (e.g., roles and responsibilities, timelines, etc.), governance rules and regulations (e.g., voting processes, decision-making powers, budgeting, etc.), as well as general information (e.g., permits, child minding, resources, etc.).

11) MSIC Units

The MSIC Units are sample units intended to support educators in “planning interdisciplinary units that embed literacy and numeracy essential skills within current social justice inquiry topics. The planning framework can be adapted to the unique culture of all TDSB schools. The practices outlined in this guide can also be adapted to any unit/lesson/activity that a teacher wishes to incorporate within any subject area or discipline. They are meant to enhance, not stifle, teacher creativity by enriching the level of in-class discussion and instruction and by
actively engaging students in higher-level critical thought. The following areas of focus are addressed in each unit: enduring understandings, culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, assessment and evaluation, interdisciplinary approaches, differentiated instruction, inquiry-based learning, and professional learning. There are three sets of MSIC units in English at the elementary level, two units at the secondary level, and one set of French units that can support Core and Extended French programs. In addition, a lesson plan and a detailed unit plan are provided for teachers to create their own context- and classroom-specific units.

12) MSIC Interim Reports

The MSIC Interim Reports are provided to each school annually based predominantly on data collected about the school from the previous year and intended to support direction setting and decision-making for the current school-year. The following are the categories of data listed in the report: Student background information (gender breakdown, top five languages, students’ countries of origin); Kindergarten students’ readiness for school (results from administration of the Early Developmental Instrument for Junior and Senior Kindergarten students); student engagement (resiliency tests, lates, absences, suspensions); student achievement (results on Canadian Achievement Test—a standardized test focused on basic skills in mathematics, reading, and writing, as well as access to report card marks and EQAO provincial standardized tests scores); MSIC student surveys (overall experience and relationships in school, school safety, homework and home support, after-school activities, and internet use) or TDSB student census survey results; MSIC parent surveys (student demographic characteristics, parents’ perceptions of their child’s school experience, parents’ responses about their child’s health, student activities outside of school, and parent-school relationships) or TDSB parent census results; and, MSIC staff surveys (school climate and school rules, inclusive school experiences, student needs and student attitudes, and about staff themselves).
The TDSB Equity Foundation Statement and the TDSB Achievement Gap Task Force Report

The TDSB Equity Foundation Statement and Achievement Gap Task Force Report were not part of the 12 documents analysed. However, both documents have influenced my thinking about equity-focused interventions and programming in a school board. Practitioners and scholars often refer to the Equity Foundation Statement, in particular, as a document that is deeply committed to principles of equity and social justice. This document was created by the Toronto District School Board in 1999 (post-amalgamation) as a policy document intended to value the contributions of all members of the TDSB community (staff, students, families, and community groups), and increase equity of opportunity and access to achieve successful outcomes of those served by the school system. This is in recognition of the individual and systemic bias that exists on the basis of multiple and intersecting social identities, which do not reflect the abilities and contributions of individual students, staff members, families, and community partners. This policy impacted the following areas of the Board: relevant and responsive curriculum; students are provided with equitable opportunities and barriers to student success are identified and removed; hiring and promotion practices are fair and bias-free; the contributions of diverse parent and community groups are valued; all stakeholders are provided with effective procedures for resolving conflicts and complaints; financial and human resources are put towards supporting equity-related initiatives, training and partnerships; and, procedures are in place at all levels of the system for implementing, reviewing, and developing policies, programs, operations, and practices which promote equity in the system.

The 2005 TDSB Achievement Gap Task Force Report is a 21-page document that outlines: the context of the racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in the TDSB; the mandate of the Task Force; directions for consideration (i.e., The System Challenge, current student achievement initiatives, using student data, culturally responsive teaching, addressing
racism, student engagement, Schools of Opportunity, and Schools of Choice); key barriers to
student success; what other school boards have done; best practices in TDSB schools; and a
summary of recommendations.
PROTOCOL REFERENCE #29995

March 11, 2014

Dr. Joseph Flessa
OISEAT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION
OISEAT

Ms. Vidya Shah
OISEAT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION
OISEAT

Dear Dr. Flessa and Ms. Vidya Shah,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "District reform for equity: The case of the model schools for inner cities program in the Toronto District School Board"

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: March 11, 2014
Expiry Date: March 10, 2015
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager
APPENDIX G – QUESTIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS WHEN EXAMINING IDEOLOGICAL TENSIONS IN OPPORTUNITY GAP DISCOURSES

Critical Inquiries for Practitioners

The following critical inquiries are framed for both personal and collective reflection and action. Participants are encouraged to use the questions and the table below to engage in critical dialogue with multiple stakeholders, to critique and question the information presented, and to add explanations and examples that is district-specific.

1) What do I/we know about achievement gaps, opportunity gaps, and educational debt, and the relationships among them? What evidence exists to support these beliefs/assertions? What is my district’s/province’s/state’s understanding of achievement gaps, opportunity gaps, and educational debt, and the relationships among them? What is being done in these contexts to address educational, socio-political and historical injustices?

2) How well do I/we understand the ideological differences between charitable and social justice discourses to closing opportunity gaps? What has contributed to my/our level of understanding?

3) As a district, where do we fall on the spectrum in each of the four dimensions? Do other stakeholders agree with my assessment? Why or why not? What information can we glean from differences/similarities in assessment? How might this information inform our next steps?

4) What structural barriers exist in understanding and addressing these gaps (e.g., inadequate or lack of policies, theoretical frameworks in education, funding, resources, time, political will, data collection and analysis practices, hiring and promotion practices, district partnerships, socio-political economic contexts)?

5) What historical contexts contribute to these gaps? For whom have they benefitted and for whom have they disadvantaged? What current socio-political barriers contribute to these gaps? What supports and resources do we need to acknowledge and work through these barriers so that they not prevent or stall action?

6) What ideological resistance exists towards social justice discourses to closing opportunity gaps? For example:
   a. More for some is not better for all
   b. Challenges with identity politics
c. The nature of change: individual characteristics or environmental conditions

d. Closing the gap versus increasing the mean level of achievement, well-being, opportunity, experience, etc.,

e. How the following concepts are understood and constructed: difference, resistance, success/failure, equity and excellence, “good for some, better for all”, power, privilege, multiple and intersecting identities, etc.

f. What supports and resources do we need to acknowledge and work through these ideological differences so that they not prevent or stall action?

7) What emotional resistance exists towards social justice discourses to closing opportunity gaps (e.g., fear of loss of control, fear of failure, fear of the unknown, etc.)? What are we scared of? What supports and resources do we need to acknowledge and work through these fears so that they not prevent or stall action?

8) How have these gaps changed over the past five years? What strategies, skills and attitudes among district staff (district leaders, principals and teachers) have contributed to this (positively and negatively)? What other factors have led to change or impeded it?

9) Am I/we willing to ask myself the tough questions and acknowledge how my/our beliefs are limiting the life and schooling outcomes of the most marginalized and racialized students? Am I/we willing to experience the cognitive and emotional discomfort needed to unlearn patterns of oppressive practices?

10) What will our district look like if a social justice approach was enacted for all dimensions of closing opportunity gaps?
| Opportunity Gap Discourses in Districts (Adapted from Fraser’s (2005) Theory of Justice) |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| **Charitable Approach** | **Social Justice Approach** |
| • Liberal and neoliberal approaches to education | • Critical approaches to education |
| • Notions of: sameness (one-size-fits-all), individualism, meritocracy, neutrality, standardization, apolitical and ahistorical | • Notions of: difference, recognition, rights, collectivism, systemic barriers, context (socio-political, economic, historic) |
| • Notions of deficit thinking | • Notions of strength-based thinking |
| • Addresses the effects of poverty | • Addresses systemic and ideological root causes of marginalization and racialization |
| • Inclusion, multiculturalism | • Anti-racism, anti-classism, anti-sexism, anti-heterosexism, anti-ableism, etc. |

**Redistribution (Inequalities in the material conditions of children’s lives: economic dimension)**

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<td>• Discourse of sameness (equality) and individualism exists at the school and/or district level</td>
<td>• Discourse of difference (equity) is evident at a system level with regards to the redistribution of funds and staff required to establish the reform in response to larger societal inequities (poverty) and system inequities (achievement, opportunity gaps)</td>
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<td>• Levelling the playing field with regards to opportunity gaps outside of the school system (e.g., health care, nutrition, access to community resources, etc.)</td>
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<td>• Levelling the playing field with regards to the material conditions within the school system (e.g., access to field trips, technology in schools, etc.)</td>
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<td>• “Opportunities” are considered broadly and constructed beyond those common to white, middle-class students</td>
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**Recognition (Inequalities in the cultural belonging or equal social status: cultural dimension)**

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<td>• Inclusive notions of multiculturalism that do not threaten the status quo, surface-level recognition that does not require the critical engagement of competing values, and multiple and opposing truths</td>
<td>• Equitable notions of who and what is considered ‘different’ and why (accounting for the socio-historic context), examination of what constitutes the status quo and how policies, practices and ideologies deny, maintain, or resist the status quo</td>
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<td>• Deep and fundamental differences are acknowledged, valued, viewed as strengths and serve as catalysts to</td>
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- Students and families are positioned as being ‘in need’ and ex/implicity through a deficit lens, sense of pity, single story of poverty
- The reform is constructed as a tool for empowerment and as a saviour

change the fundamental structures of schooling practices
- Students and families are positioned as agentic, with capabilities, strengths and contributions.
- The reform is constructed as an ally in challenging injustice (individual and systemic)

### Representation  (Inequalities in voice in decisions that affect one’s well-being: political dimension)

- All students, parents/guardians, community members and staff count as equal members of the schooling community in theory

- Increased stakeholder voice in decision-making that does not have the ability to change Board/reform structures and foci

- All students, parents/guardians, community members and staff count as equal members of the schooling community in theory and in practice
- Interventions to increase political voice are created to address the needs of students, families and communities that are currently, and have historically been misrepresented.
- Stakeholder voice has the ability to change Board/reform structures/foci

### Re-education  (Inequalities related to schooling experiences, pedagogy and learning: educational dimension)

- Schooling leads to student success (as defined by standardized tests)

- Equity in education: sameness in outcomes, success, readiness to learn, potential, choices (as determined by school system)

- Excellence (as defined by standardized test scores) leads to equity

- Schooling prepares students to take their rightful place in a democratic society and leads to broader notion of student success (choice, opportunity, well-being)
- Equity in education:
  - Same rights, recognition, choices (determined in conjunction with students, families)
  - Differences in approaches, resources, opportunities
- Equity leads to excellence, but that is not the goal of education