Navigating Equity Through Governance: 
A Case Study of Micropolitical Equity Work Among School Board Trustees

by

Kelly Elizabeth Kawabe

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Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education 
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education 
University of Toronto

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This study explores how trustees utilize their positions to create equitable conditions within a school district. Using a critical conceptual framework informed by policy analysis, I draw conclusions regarding the relationship between trustees’ understanding of equity and how they use power and influence at micro, meso and macro levels to affect policy. First, interviews were conducted with five retired trustees within a school district and with follow-up interviews with personnel identified by the trustees as knowing their work. Second, an analysis of policy statements and school board minutes was undertaken to examine the extent to which trustees’ understanding of equity influenced school board direction and impacted equity outcomes. Third, after all the data were collected, themes were identified for analysis and coding. The resulting thesis examines the way school district leadership functions in regards to equity. Findings indicate that with the reduction of positional power within their role, trustees are utilizing personal influence in order to affect change. This study examines the impact of this power shift in relation to the following areas: trustee and equitable hiring practices; the role of trustees in policy development; and the ability of trustees to act as a representative for their constituents in
a racially and culturally diverse school board. As a result of this shift to using influence rather than the authority of their position, equitable outcomes were related to individual trustee longevity in the role, their personal preconceptions and the amount of cultural diversity within the board of trustees. This study also identifies ways in which those who seek organizational change encounter resistance.
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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The recent coverage of York District School Board trustees in the Canadian media in the Greater Toronto Area has brought to the fore the need to re-examine the trustee’s role in the education system (Javed, 2016). Prior to this, the Toronto District School Board was under scrutiny when trustees were perceived to be overstepping their roles. The government referred to a “culture of fear” and dysfunction throughout the school board and called for a rollback of trustee powers (Wilson, 2015, p. 2). Trustees were charged with being meddling, terrorizing “overlords,” and ruling their wards like “fiefdoms” (Wilson, 2015, p. 14) Opponents, on the other hand, said that the report reduced the “ability of trustees to be champions for their communities,” arguing, “Every education system which shuts out grassroots input ends up failing significant sections of the population in cities as diverse as [Toronto]” (Rushowy, 2016). Yet Myer Siemiatycki, a political science professor, argued, “You can’t find a more powerless, marginalized group of elected officials in the country than school trustees” (Rushowy, 2016). Which depiction of the power of the trustee is more accurate? With the reduction of formal legislative authority over the past thirty years, it is difficult to believe that trustees rule with an iron fist, but is the alternative to this statement correct? Are they maligned and powerless? How do trustees move their agendas forward?

Competing pressures in the political arena of today’s school districts challenge trustees’ ability to affect organizational change: pressures such as regional historical context, standardized student testing and curriculum, centralization, and school district amalgamation. Provincial government directives have reduced the authority of trustees in
relation to operations, curriculum and finance. This study focuses on how trustees perceive their ability to influence change when navigating the political systems within their school districts. It is situated within the context of Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Policy, PPM 119, and will examine the micropolitical actions of school board trustees as they pertain to this equity initiative.

With the introduction of PPM 119, Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools (2009), creating a more equitable education system has become a major focus in several Ontario school districts. In particular, districts with diverse student populations have made equity a key part of their strategic plan. As both elected democratic representatives and policy actors, trustees must understand how to work within local contexts to implement these directives. Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012) state, "Policy documents, including PPM No. 119 (2009) are often produced to be intentionally vague. Their interpretation rests ultimately in the hands of local authorities" (p. 8). They write, a "considerable and observable gap exists, between the goals of policy and the realities of practice in many Ontario schools" (p. 3). School boards are left to interpret and implement policy within the context of existing, evolving board policies and practices.

When implementing equity policy in particular, the politics among members of the board of trustees have the potential to substantially impact decisions and outcomes. Equity is a value-laden term and is defined in reference to our beliefs and moral understandings. In regards to equity, Ribbens (1999) wrote, "our reluctance to speak of morality and our suspicion, nurtured by our best minds, that we cannot prove our moral principles has amputated our public discourse at the knees" (p. xiv). Even if policy
makers come to an agreement regarding moral imperative, interpretations may differ because the groups "do not share the same framework and therefore proceed from different premises" (Zine, 2001, p. 248). Equity policy is value-imbued and thus subject to disagreements over definition and difficult to implement.

This study focuses on the power of micropolitical interactions: how power is perceived, and how it can be used to navigate through the political environment to either achieve or to act as a barrier against equitable outcomes for students, staff and other community members. The study will look at the larger issue of the conflicting mandates for equity and excellence in the context of PPM 119.

**Personal Connection**

In September 2009, the Ontario Public School Board Association (OPSBA) entered into an agreement with the Ontario Ministry of Education to develop a training program to address the needs of trustees to fulfill their duties and obligations. In the spring of 2012, I worked as a member of a research team to evaluate the effectiveness of the trustee training modules. Of particular note to me was that there was no module for trustees on equity training. Although PPM 119 mandates equity and inclusion policy development in Ontario school districts, the topic of equity has not been addressed in terms of trustee capacity building. I found this gap in current trustee training significant.

That evaluation led to my current focus. Through conversations, I became interested in how trustees use their position to negotiate change. In researching for writing my thesis proposal, I was surprised by the limited amount of Canadian research
on school district governance, especially on how trustees navigate the tension between the demands for standardization and excellence and the calls for equity and inclusion:

How board-superintendent teams understand and carry out their roles can make the difference between dysfunctional leadership teams incapable of leading change and highly effective leadership teams that build district wide capacity to ensure every student succeeds. (Duke, 2010, p. 63)

This study considers the intersections between social diversity, system leadership and organizational change to explore how individual trustees work with other school board members to create, implement and support visions of equity and inclusion.

**Research Questions**

As school district leaders, trustees are in the position to act as agents of change and/or as resistors to change. Situated within trustees’ understandings of equity legislation and through the conceptual lens of micropolitical interactions, this study explores the following research question:

*How do trustees who identify as equity-minded promote equity within their school districts?*

Sub-questions for this study include:

1. *How do trustees understand equity in education?*

2. *How do trustees perceive their role in regards to creating a more equitable education system?*

3. *What resistance, challenges and barriers do trustees face in advancing equity agendas and how do they overcome them?*
Study Significance

Charles Pascal characterized a “crisis in government” in the Toronto District School Board based on a lack of understanding of the direction that the board of trustees can provide. He stated, “The last few years have seen cliques of TDSB trustees fighting each other for power without apparent consideration of the purpose of that power” (Pascal, 2014). This, coupled with the more recent accusations of racism in the York District School Board, indicate that there is a need to examine how trustees act within their positions. Studying the ability of trustees to make changes can inform current governance practices regarding equity issues, and contribute to the growing body of knowledge on effective and changing governance practices in response to the current pressures on school systems.

This study centers on how trustees are able to influence policy through their use of micropolitical skills. In spite of the recent reduction of their authority with regard to curriculum and finance, trustees remain influential with regard to policy approval, school board direction and equitable outcomes. There have been several studies done at the school level as to the role of micropolitical interactions in relationship to creating a more equitable environment (Hoyle, 1989; Willower, 1991, Blase, 1991) However, none to date have explored this concept at the school board level. This study’s contribution identifies the change to the functionality of the role of trustee and in the deconstruction of the elements involved in influence. As equity is value-laden and often ethnocentric, the role of influence becomes significant as factors such as personal values impact direction and outcome. The study builds on the initial conceptual framework identified by Webb
(2008) by deepening the understanding of the specific aspects of influence and how it functions within the school board environment.

This study is organized as follows. Chapter Two is the literature review which examines research on the changes to the role of trustee over the past thirty years and the changes to equity legislation within the same time period. This chapter concludes with an overview of the discourses regarding equity in education. Chapter Three outlines the micropolitical conceptual lens to allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between the trustee and school board policy outcomes. Chapter Four contains the methodology, the process involved in connecting and analyzing the data. Chapter Five, the findings section, is divided into cases which have been taken from within the same school district. Chapter Six, the discussion chapter, is divided into three subsections which address the three research questions: how trustees define equity, how they navigate their political climate, and what resistance challenges and barriers they encountered. This chapter concludes by examining how this school board has attempted to address the barriers to equity. Chapter Seven concludes the study by summarizing the findings regarding how trustees understand equity and navigate their political climate to move agendas forward. It examines the concept of power and how resistance is identified and addressed. Finally, recommendations are made for trustees, system leaders, school districts and for further studies.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In an educational system with increasing centralization of authority and decreasing local power, trustees use micropolitical influence to navigate complex political and social interactions to affect change. In relation to PPM 119, The Equity and Inclusive Policy (2009), this study examines the extent to which trustees are able to promote an equity agenda through the creation and implementation of local policy initiatives within unique political environments. The literature review is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the impact of changes to Ontario’s education system over the past thirty years to the role of school board trustees, and the reduction in their power due to the centralization of curriculum, changes to school board configuration and changes to the provincial educational funding model. The trustees’ role in regards to creating an equitable school system is then linked through recent human rights cases against school districts.

The second part of the literature review outlines the parallel development of equity policy through the examination of PPM 119 and by exploring other considerations in regards to creating more equitable educational outcomes. This review of literature includes the following topics: racism, inclusion and exclusion, white privilege and systemic racism. Incorporating these topics was necessary for two reasons. Firstly, it establishes a foundation for understanding of why research in equity and education is important. Secondly it creates a basis for understanding the issues that trustees face when making decisions within a school district. The section concludes with a discussion of the
major discourses surrounding equity policies in the schools and the use of broad-based
equity policies within the Ontario school system. This lays the foundation for discussion
of equity regarding the trustee role in hiring practices within the school system.

**Literature Overview**

**The Role of Trustee**

Traditionally, the role of the trustee within school districts has been to act as a
voice for constituents; trustee powers have included setting the curriculum, hiring, and
setting tax rates to support system needs. Over the past thirty years, however, Ontario’s
education system has undergone sweeping changes as a result of initiatives designed to
centralize power, as the ideology of accountability and global competitiveness has been
adopted. Centralization of curriculum, policy development, school board configuration
and funding can be traced through legislation, and has resulted in a redefinition of the
role of trustee. Although one function of the trustees’ role is to allow for local
representation, the administrative aspects of the role have largely been removed. In
addition to this, the areas that trustees represent have become larger, making it more
difficult for trustees to be representative of all of their constituents due to the differing
needs within each of these larger regions. In addition to this, the creation of School
Councils has created a mechanism for parent voice that has empowered parents with
respect to site-based decision making. All of these changes have caused a shift in the
traditional function of the trustee; these changes can be traced through examining how
the curriculum has been centralized, the altering of school board configuration as well as
the changes that have been made in terms of how funds are allocated for education in Ontario.

**Centralization of Curriculum**

A call for changes to Ontario’s curriculum was indicated as early as 1987, with the Radwanski report, written to address the problem of the high school drop-out rate. This report argued that future policy direction should include de-streaming (not channelling students into university, applied or vocational programming in high school), reducing high school to a four-year program, and introducing fully funded early childhood education. PPM 115, introduced in June 1992 (revoked, Aug. 2004), furthered Radwanski’s recommendations, outlining several changes to the education system, and in particular the creation of a Common Curriculum (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2014, p. 8). Centralizing the curriculum at the provincial level removed power from board-level governance structure with regards to having power over what was being taught in schools.

The report “For the Love of Learning”, released in January, 1995 (RCOL, 2004), was a further move towards increased centralization of curriculum and was strongly tied to the logic of increasing Ontario’s global competitiveness through strong central standards and monitoring of local school boards. This document made recommendations for a number of policy changes (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2014, p. 11): establishing student trustees, school codes of conduct, school based budgets, a cap on trustee honoraria to $20,000, school councils and a call for accountability of the school boards. This report also recommended a limit of 10% of revenues to be raised from residential
property taxes (RCOL, 1995). A wide range of governance issues were introduced, including “the roles of trustees and administrators, trustee remuneration, the number of trustees, the relationships between school boards and schools, and the number of school boards” (Salter, 2012, p. 9). Sixteen of the 167 recommendations of the RCOL related to the “organization of power and decision-making in education” (Salter, 2012, p. 9). Although the term “shared” was used, in actuality this document paved the way for many later initiatives that removed much of the power from the local school boards to the province, and called for centralization to create a more accountable system.

The accountability mandate was also central to Bill 30: an Act to Establish the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in 1996. Standardized testing began in 1997 across the province. Part of the mandate of EQAO was “to develop accountability mechanisms to require schools and districts to submit school improvement plans that reflect results on provincial testing measures, stakeholder surveys, and locally-generated data on school performance and needs” (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2014, p. 16). This serves as evidence of the government’s desire to have more centralized control of academic outcomes throughout the province. The impact of this Bill has been far-reaching both at school and system levels. Coupled with reports of the Fraser Institute, which ranked EQAO results by school, the school system has become more influenced by competitive markets and government intervention. The accountability agenda has “severely limited local discretion in policy making and has pushed the central governing function of local school boards toward overseeing ever-growing local bureaucracies and monitoring compliance” (Danzberger, 1994, p. 371). Greater centralization, standardization of curriculum, results-based education, and increased accountability for
student performance through standardized testing have promoted the agenda of accountability while simultaneously limiting participatory democracy of the system (Lessard & Brassard, 2009; Salter, 2012).

**Changes to School District Configuration**

In January 1997, Bill 104: the Fewer School Boards Act was implemented, with the intent of reducing numbers of local administrative staff, amalgamating office facilities and enhancing collaboration between school boards through restructuring. This reduced the number of districts in Ontario from 129 to 72 and the number of trustees from 1900 to 700 (Salter, 2012, pp. 11-12). The consolidation of school boards was highly contested as eroding the power of local communities to participate in the governance of schools (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2014, p. 18). Amalgamation created a drastic reduction in the number of units of local educational governance and has been one of the most dramatic of all changes in Canada’s pattern of government (Fleming, 1997, p. 2). Amalgamation has created “super boards” where, because of the large geographical areas, local needs have been diluted in an attempt at fiscal “responsibility”. Although the rationale given for the amalgamation process was to reduce bureaucracy, the subtext of this restructuring was a loss in political clout for local school districts and, in particular, trustees. Reducing the number of trustees limited their ability to represent constituents and simultaneously strengthened the power of the province. As a result, fewer boards had larger budgets with less representations. Although on the surface this would seem to increase trustee power, the provincial government at the time also made changes to funding to further restrict the ability of trustees by pocketing the money or allocating it to specific areas.
Funding

The Progressive Conservative provincial government of Mike Harris (1995-2003) had an aggressive agenda for centralization, with the underlying expectation that the function of school boards was to be “dutiful implementers of central mandates” (Salter, 2012, p. 7). This centralization of services increased financial and accountability control but shifted the local trustee away from serving as a means for participatory democracy and local involvement to one of accountability. Critics argued “unwieldy bureaucracies and limited opportunity for trustee contact, characteristic of large, diverse, school districts, hampers the ability of a trustee to retain connection to community values and local needs” (Galway, Sheppard and Wiens, 2013, p. 6). The combined effect of the Harris years included the amalgamation of school districts across the province, the establishment of the current four school board systems, removal of the traditional power of school boards to levy taxes, and the introduction of a new funding model (Watson, 2003, p. 3). The Progressive Conservative reforms embraced “regulation, hierarchy, monopoly and uniformity in the design of public policy” (Bedard, 2000, p. 241).

Although previous governments had worked to increase the central control over educational funding, the Harris government’s “Common Sense Revolution” aggressively pursued this mandate as a means to “reduce government bureaucracy and spending, cut taxes, eliminate the deficit, and rationalize government services” (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2014, p. 14). In December, 1997, the provincial government passed Bill 160: the Education Quality Improvement Act which “centralized financial control at the provincial level by removing education funding from the residential property tax base and
eliminating school boards’ local taxing power” (Salter, 2012, p. 12). The new funding formula, based on a per-pupil ratio, was introduced and cuts were made through “reductions in non-classroom personnel and administrative costs, and through measures to reduce duplication of services across school boards” (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2014, p. 14), with the goal of cutting approximately 400 million dollars by the end of 1996. Boards were no longer able to run deficit budgets and those that did not comply were subject to temporary takeovers by independent auditors. This removed the power of the school boards to “manipulate the education portion of local property taxes to offset or supplement provincial grants” (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2014, p. 19), limiting the boards’ power to negotiate during collective bargaining. “The more control exerted by the provincial or state government over funding, the less scope local school boards have for making decisions” (Watson, 2003, p. 5). This action inhibited local governance structures allowing them less flexibility to meet local needs.

**Impact on the Role of Trustee**

The trend toward centralization resulted in substantial changes to school district governance. As each of the governments of the day assumed greater control, there was a corresponding decrease in the trustee’s decision-making authority, resulting in the role of the trustee being altered to take on a dual functionality. Although the trustee’s authority decreased, the role evolved from being solely a representative for the community to including acting as “a mechanism to improve school performance and foster market competition” (Salter, 2012, p. 4). Competing pressures on the education system, the call for accountability, and the movement towards a model that is based directly and deeply
on student achievement, placed an unprecedented pressure for trustee awareness and understanding of larger educational issues and a better understanding of which factors directly impact student outcomes. The role of trustees moved away from ensuring participatory democracy towards a means of promoting national and international competitiveness and economic competitiveness (Sattler, 2012).

In 2009, Bill 177: the Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act was introduced in an attempt to clarify the responsibilities of school boards, directors and individual trustees. This bill further reduced the political authority of trustees by identifying their authority as relating to governance as opposed to any operational concerns.

Table 1.0  Summary of Changes to the Role of Trustee 1990 – 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to 1990</th>
<th>1995 - 2000</th>
<th>2017 (as outlined by the Ontario Public School Board Association)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Local tax-levying authority</td>
<td>● Removal of tax-levying authority</td>
<td>● maintain a focus on student achievement and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Input into curriculum content</td>
<td>● Centralized curriculum (no input)</td>
<td>● participate in decision making that benefits the school board while representing their constituents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● More ability to represent constituents due to trustee/constituent ratio</td>
<td>● Amalgamation of 129 school boards to 72</td>
<td>● communicate decisions back to their constituents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Larger school board grants: greater authority over funding allocation</td>
<td>● 1900 trustees reduced to 700 causing a reduction in the ability to represent a larger constituency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.0 indicates a shift in the role and responsibilities of trustees over a forty year period, moving trustees away from operational concerns and towards governance. In reality, this division has been much less clear. What may present initially as a governance concern often has an impact at the operational level. It is difficult and artificial to separate the two. This is compounded by trustees that have served for multiple terms. For example, the tenure of trustees in this study span this timeframe, making it difficult to adopt changes in the role as the role was redefined.

**Recent History**

Recent history suggests that there is a need to examine trustees’ roles more closely with regard to equity practices. In the past ten years, there have been several cases where the actions of trustees have been scrutinized. The Falconer Report, written in 2007 as a response to the shooting of a student in a Toronto high school, identified a need to clarify and respect the boundaries of the role of trustee in order to maintain healthy school environments. As a response to this critical incident, the report identified a need for trustees to receive a minimal degree of mandatory training, a clear job description as well as a code of conduct. This code of conduct would prohibit trustees from embarrassing or intimidating other trustees or acting in a way that undermined the school board. It also recommended full time remuneration for the board Chair, given the amount of fiscal responsibility of the position. The Falconer Report recommendations highlighted the removal of trustees from internal school discipline and operational concerns.
The Wilson Report, released in January 2015, also called into question trustees’ ability to separate operational concerns from governance. In it, Wilson criticized trustees for “meddling and exerting undue influence on staff, repeated concerns about a ‘culture of fear’ identified in previous reports” (Rushowy, 2016). This report made thirteen recommendations, many of which pertained to the board of trustees, in order to improve the Toronto School District. These recommendations included reforming its promotion procedures and policies, limiting trustee participation in the audit committee, providing a three year plan for responsible stewardship and assigning a committee of advisors to make recommendations on governance and electoral representation (Wilson, 2015). This report was the culmination of an investigation into accusations that school board trustees were not acting in accordance with their assigned duties, causing “acute levels of distress” (Rushowy, 2016) for school board administrative staff.

**Trustees and Equity Issues**

The Wilson Report is not the only circumstance where trustee actions have been examined. In 2012, a precedent-setting case was filed with the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal against the Peel District School Board where a Indo-Canadian vice principal contended that visible minorities were vastly under-represented among Peel teachers and administrators (Grewal, 2012). It was alleged that direct and systemic discrimination prevented the vice principal from being promoted. Although the case settled out of court, minority groups appeared less well represented in upper management positions. The school district did not collect racial data at this time; however, the Toronto Star reported
that in 2008, only two percent of this schools’ principals in the board were South Asian, although South Asian students made up thirty percent of the population (Grewal, 2011). This was the eighth settlement against the school board by students and staff over the previous decade. The application to the tribunal called for the school board to collect statistics based on race, develop equity policies, review hiring, promotion and retention processes, mandatory training of senior staff and that visible minorities be better reflected within senior administration. As trustees are responsible for governance, the task of ensuring that these objectives are completed falls to them.

More recently, the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board was under scrutiny because a student applied to be excused from religious courses and liturgies. She was told that she would also be excluded from non-academic activities and assemblies, including the “mental-health awareness assembly, the graduation-preparation assembly and an honour-roll breakfast” (Alphonso, 2016) as the school considered these to be faith-based events. The complaint alleged that there was a “continuous pattern of discrimination and reprisal in connection with her request for an exemption” (Alphonso, 2016). The student’s lawyer contended that students who “try to exercise their legal right to an exemption suffer intimidation and harassment by school officials” (Alphonso, 2016).

The York Region District School Board has recently had two human rights cases filed against it. The first case was filed by the Vaughan African Canadian Association and the National Council of Canadian Muslims on behalf of a number of families, due to allegations of Islamophobia and systemic racism by school board employees. This was based on how the school board handled its investigation regarding Face book posts that
were made by an elementary principal that were offensive to Muslims (McGillivray, 2016). In response, the coordinating superintendent for equity and community services in the school board wrote a strongly worded letter accusing the board of cancelling equity initiatives and “failing to properly address Face book posts by a school principal that he labelled blatantly Islamophobic” (McGillivray, 2016). In this letter, the Superintendent claimed that he had nothing to do with handling the file for this case. Ultimately, the provincial Education Minister, Mitzie Hunter, intervened, requesting information about the issues and the board’s plan for moving ahead to address the concerns. The latest allegation in the York Region District School Board was specifically targeted against a trustee. In this case, a group of people alleged that they heard the trustee utter a racial slur following a board meeting (Javed, 2016). This case continues and has escalated, with protesters calling for the resignation of both the trustee and the Director of Education.

As leaders in their school districts, trustees are charged with working together to focus on student achievement and well-being. These recent cases point to larger systemic issues throughout the Ontario school system that go beyond the challenge that trustees have of balancing their responsibilities to their local community and the board as a whole. Clearly, more work needs to be done within school district board members, around the area of equity and cultural awareness.

A need exists to examine if and how trustees are able to continue to use their positions to positively affect change at a local level within the current definition of their role. Obtaining better insight into trustee’s understandings of equity and the challenges that they must overcome will lead to a more equitable education system. The reduction of power for this group has created a new dynamic through which trustees operate. The
result has been a movement away from “power over” towards a model of “power with” (Blase and Blase, 1997, p. 139). With the removal of positional authority, trustees must use political and social interaction to move their agendas forward. As such, their understanding of concepts such as equity are important, because their interpretation will impact the focus of their influence and, as a result, policy outcomes. The following section examines the concept of equity in education and better defines the distinction between authority and influence. It also identifies the strategies that may be used to influence others, and how micropolitical awareness can shape action. This understanding will be integral to the conceptual framework for this study.

**EQUITY IN EDUCATION**

**Introduction**

This section examines the concept of equity as it pertains to the education system as seen through a transformational theoretical framework. It is divided into three subsections. The first section defines equity through this critical lens and contextualizes why it is important to examine it within the current school system. The second section outlines various aspects of the equity issues, such as inclusion, social power and privilege, the prevailing neoliberal ideals and their impact on equitable education and systemic disadvantaging of marginalized groups. The third section addresses the different prevalent discourses with regard to equity in education and the use of broad-based equity policies.
Defining Equity

The current focus on equity in the Ontario education system has its ideological roots in the policy and practice of multicultural education. Broadly, in the 1960s and 1970s, multicultural educational policy focused on bringing awareness to cultural identity and sharing about different cultures. (Joshee and Johnson, 2005, p. 63). Over the past thirty years in particular, the notion of multiculturalism evolved, shifting away from merely acknowledging different cultures to a system-wide approach to identifying and removing discriminatory practices and systemic barriers for all marginalized groups. In the 1980s, there was a movement towards a more explicit focus on anti-racism as opposed to cultural awareness. (Carrington and Bonnett, 1997, p. 415). In Ontario, this movement came to the forefront with the 1987 report by the Provincial Advisory Committee on Race Relations entitled “The Development of a Policy on Race and Ethnocultural Equity” (Carrington and Bonnett, 1997, p. 415). This report drew attention to the limits of multicultural education and has further led to the development and implementation of anti-racist and employment equity policies in all school boards. With the introduction of PPM. 119 (2009), the focus has moved from antiracism to inclusion.

Equality of access is not the same as equity. The one-size-fits-all discourse associated with standardized testing is at odds with the goals of a more equitable and inclusive school system. Access alone “does not mean that students who occupy the margins of society will mysteriously find their culture, race, and ethnicity reflected in the center of their school experience” (Larkin and Staton, 2001, p. 365). Connell states that “justice cannot be achieved by distributing the same amount of a standard good to children of all social classes” (Connell, 1993, p. 19). The goal of creating equity in the
education system is to allow all students to see themselves in the curriculum and participate equally so that their needs are met. Educational leaders must examine the current education system to identify and create solutions for inequities so that all students may achieve to their fullest (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. 3). Over the past thirty years, in particular, there has been a focus on re-examining the central concepts of the education system in order to meet the needs of students and families (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. 3). The goal of equity in education is to overcome barriers to educational success for all, with a focus in particular on traditionally marginalized students.

**PPM 119**

PPM 119, The Equity and Inclusion Policy (2009), identifies “a considerable and observable gap (that) exists between the goals of policy and the realities of practice in many Ontario schools” (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012, p. 2). This policy outlines a vision for the Ontario education system in which:

- All students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected;
- Every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009)

As a framework for Ontario school districts, this document identifies the need to address barriers that exist for marginalized groups of individuals and allow all students to be successful. In working towards a more inclusive education system, biases and power dynamics that limit students’ ability to achieve must be identified, addressed and eliminated in order to achieve equity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6).
In order to understand PPM 119 through a transformative theoretical framework, equity is viewed within a social and historical context and with conscious recognition of how power impacts equitable outcomes for students. Researchers and policy actors from this perspective argue that “Education is a human right that should be guaranteed to all” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 75). This perspective points to “the failure of dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs” (Mertens, 2010, p. 21). At the center of this view is the ability to create meaning making as defined through cultural lenses and to address the power issues involved in determining what constitute legitimate knowledge (Mertens, 2010, p. 32). As such, what is taken as real needs to be critically examined by understanding the role of existing societal structures. Educational leaders need to understand how these institutional structures perpetuate oppression and need to address these barriers to success through policy action. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I define equity as meaning that all individuals are able to achieve to their maximum potential. Equity is achieved by understanding, identifying and eliminating barriers and must be viewed within social and historical context of the school district and reflected in successful outcomes.

Ontario’s *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) outlines strategies to implement the commitments embedded in Ontario’s Human Rights Code (1962) to prohibit “discrimination in employment on the grounds of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status, record of offences, and disability” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 2). It supersedes all other legislation, including the Education Act and the Labour Relations
Act. The policy indicates that Ontario school districts need to work toward supporting the aims of equity and inclusion in terms of the curriculum, imposed systemic structures as well as in hiring practices. Inequity occurs when there is an unequal distribution of benefits and resources. To achieve equitable outcomes, school board leadership needs to give people “what they need in order to level the playing field” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 140). Equity outcomes differ between social classes, regions, ethnic groups (Connell, 1993, p. 12). There needs to be a conscious awareness of social positioning and consequences of perpetuating privileged versions of reality. Equity will be achieved when factors such as race, gender and cultural background no longer correlate to the rate of success among students (McCaskell, 2005, p. 140).

Why Educational Equity is Relevant

Since the 1980s, Ontario has seen dramatically increased immigration, more visible minorities and an increase in diverse school-age populations. The education system, founded on Euro-centric views, does not reflect the experiences of this population. Studies show that children from advantaged groups have increased acceptance rates into higher education (Connell, 1993, p. 13). Implementing PPM 119 requires school districts to examine their ethno-cultural and anti-racism policies and to make changes as directed by the Minister of Education (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012, p. 21). As knowledge is socially organized and constructed (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. 10), it is apparent that many students are not able to achieve their potential in spite of current interventions due to barriers to learning that are not currently being addressed (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. ix). Ryan (2012) adds that factors such as socio-economics,
race, gender and sexual orientation may all have an impact on student performance in
school. Marginalized students may feel disenfranchised by:

Biased and Eurocentric curriculum and standard achievement tests; the
disproportionate streaming of minority children in vocational schools; the
lack of effort to communicate the long-term significance of placement
decisions to immigrant and non-white parents; teachers’ failure to deal
with or report racial incidents and teachers’ participation in racist banter.
(McCaskell, 2005, p. 19)

Dufour, Dufour and Eaker (2004) point to our moral imperative to change practices and
systemic structures so that all students can benefit from the education system without
barriers that inhibit their development. “We should indeed promote high levels of
learning for every child entrusted to us, not because of legislation or fear of sanctions, but
because we have a moral and ethical imperative to do so” (p. 27). An education system
that privileges one student over another creates inequity through economic and social
advantage and disadvantage.

Considerations Towards Equitable Outcomes

Racism

Racism is defined as “the belief that characteristics and abilities can be attributed to
people simply on the basis of their race and that some racial groups are superior to
others…encouraging fear or hatred of others in times of conflict and war, and even
during economic downturns” (Shah, 2010). McCaskell (2005) identifies three categories
of racism: institutional/systemic, individual expressions, and common ideas. For the
purpose of this study, the concepts of exclusion/inclusion, personal values and biases,
social power and white privilege and systemic racism will be explored.
Exclusion and Inclusion

Exclusion is a bi-product of racism. In the case of schools, exclusion may occur when students believe that their worldviews and experiences are not represented within the curriculum or the school system. Students create meaning in their lives through their social interactions with others and their surroundings (Datnow and Park, 2009, p. 350). There is a growing body of research demonstrating that the education system can also be exclusionary because of hiring and promotion practices. As in the example of the Peel vice principal who believed she was denied promotion because of her ethnic background, visible minorities may feel that they received little support or mentoring. Educational leaders must ensure that all members of school communities are involved or represented in equitable ways. This can be done not only by making all students feel included in the existing environment; it may also be done by “making a new space, a better space for everyone” (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. ix).

Part of making our education system more equitable is to create opportunities for students to feel included in their learning experiences. Students who feel included by being welcomed, accepted and respected are “more likely to meet with academic success, to reach their highest potential, to improve their life chances, and to contribute to a more inclusive and democratic society” (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. ix). Ryan (2012) has done substantial work around the idea of inclusion and demonstrates how seeing “otherness” can lead to racism, and to the disengagement of students. Building an
inclusive school environment increases the likelihood of students becoming engaged in their learning experience.

Hiring is another area in which inclusivity is important. To this end, Ontario Regulation 274/12 was filed by the provincial government in September 2012 under the Education Act. The regulation establishes steps all publicly funded school districts are required to follow when hiring for long-term occasional (LTO) and new permanent teaching positions. The government has indicated that the purpose of Ontario Regulation 274/12 is “to promote a consistent, transparent and fair hiring process for long-term and permanent occasional teachers” (Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario (ETFO)). School district practices vary in regards to whether or not trustees are involved in the hiring process. This is a consideration for this study in school districts that do involve trustees in this process.

**Personal Values and Bias**

This study examines personal values and how they relate to individuals’ decision making. Personal values and bias are identified as a factor within this study as both of these terms are used in a variety of contexts and can be interpreted in many different ways. Personal values are embedded within our understanding of the world and therefore influence decision-making. Values are a major motivating force and are unique to an individual, based on their own background, experiences and understanding of the world. The goals we chose are outer expressions of our personal values. Gorton identify three ways in which values have an impact on decision-making:

Values serve as a perceptual screen for the decision-maker, affecting both his awareness of the problematic state of a system and his screening of
information relative to the problem. Second, values condition the screening of possible alternatives…Finally, values serve as the criteria against which higher order goals are assessed and projected…(Gorton, 1979, p. 57)

In these ways, values impact our perceptions, causing us to interpret situations through our own lenses of experience and causing us to discount other interpretations. Within the context of this study, values are a person’s significant principles and standards. Values form the basis of ideologies and are shaped by a number of sources such as family, peers, work, education, religion, culture or significant life events. Personal values are integral to identity and as such, are an important factor in regards to influencing decision making.

Bias, in its most basic definition, is a tendency or a preference and may be conscious or subconscious. Biases are linked to personal values in that the tendencies that each individual favours are grounded within their belief system. However, when preconceptions exist, there is a possibility that they may influence decision making unfairly, which may lead to discriminatory practices. Studies identify several types of biases that impact decision making. For example, confirmation bias is when we listen to information more that confirms our own preconceptions. Conservatism is when people favour prior evidence over new evidence. Status quo bias is the tendency to have a preference for things to be left in their current state (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988).

In his work “Identity, Belief, and Bias,” Geoffrey Cohen illustrates the prevalence of bias in decision making in regard to racial inequities. He states that “the tendency to evaluate new information through the prism of pre-existing beliefs, known as assimilation bias, is robust and pervasive” (Cohen, 2012, p. 385). Several studies indicate that people will persist in long-held beliefs even when new evidence invalidates those beliefs
(Kahan, 2010; Pronin, Gilovich & Ross, 2004; Tetlock, 2005). For example, studies indicate that when beliefs are tied to political identities, such as liberal or conservative, they are even more likely to resist altering perceptions (Cohen, 2012, p. 386).

Identifying psychological biases is a complex undertaking. An example of this can be seen in “hiring for fit.” Cohen argues that people want to be perceived as fair and objective and so if there is an unconscious prejudice against a group, members resolve the tension through a “constructed criteria of merit” (Cohen, 1988; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), that will justify the hiring of the favoured candidate. Another aspect of this tendency toward blaming the victim lies within the false assumption that has been identified that we all see the world in the same way (Ichheiser, 1970). Projecting our own values and biases on others can affect social policy and decisions. If an individual ascribes poverty to personal deficits, there is less of a likelihood of that person supporting social programs to address the issue. Bias implies judgement and the imposition of one’s beliefs on others. As such, biases are a reflection of personal values and ideologies.

**Social Power and White Privilege**

In order to effect change, people need power and influence. However, if there is an unequal distribution of power, some groups will have more opportunity to influence educational outcomes than others:

Differential access to decision-making positions, as well as resources, means that some social actors have more power to shape social reality. Studies of school and organizational change show those in power often have more opportunities and leverage to regulate behavior by shaping what is valued or discounted and what is privileged or suppressed…Differential access and use of power are affected by an actors’ position in the system” (Datnow and Park, 2009, p. 351).
The subordination of one group of people to another is deeply entrenched in the history of North American society. Examples are slavery, internment camps and residential schooling. Although in today’s society oppression is not as overt as in the past, it can still be seen through the acceptance of the dominant race as the societal norm and the consequent marginalization of other races. Also known as white privilege, this subtle form of oppression enables one group while disadvantaging or immobilizing another. In terms of the public education system, white privilege may be seen as a barrier to equity for all students. By examining how white privilege is intrinsically embedded in both curriculum and practices in our schools, administrators may better understand the impact of white privilege on students and reflect on how to address this to lay the groundwork for better student engagement.

The concept of white privilege contextualizes many of the inequities that exist in North American society. This theory portrays the hierarchical nature of society as giving unfair advantages and unearned assets to white people at the expense of people of colour, advantages that act “like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 125). Giroux contends, “Whiteness and white privilege have become institutionalized and identifies the systemic factors that underscore its continued dominance” (in Portelli, 2006). Whiteness in our society is often viewed as “invisible, colorless and as the inevitable norm” (Portelli, 2006).

Current practices in Ontario’s school system, which were originally built on these Eurocentric views, are exclusionary to people who are not from the dominant racial background. This approach within the curriculum inhibits student achievement, focusing
particularly on differences in ethnicity, gender, mother tongue, race and income. Dei speaks to the importance of family and school in the creation of each student’s personal and social identity. By negating culture through under- or non-representation in the curriculum, we are essentially denying students the ability to create a place for themselves within that curriculum, and as a result they become disengaged with both the educational process and society itself. In this way, the education system is grounded in a curriculum that reinforces societal biases and perpetuates the “unearned and unmeritocratic” (Portelli, Solomon and Daniel, 2005, p.) existence of white capital which ultimately leads to a lack of student engagement.

Teachers, largely from the white majority, reflect their own values through the curriculum, thereby reinforcing the status quo. As such, the questions that are posed both on standardized tests, as well as throughout daily classroom activities are not necessarily reflective of diverse racial backgrounds. The books that are still in use in our buildings are old and represent a narrow societal perspective, although there has been a push in the last twenty years for more inclusive texts and curricula. Even the way in which stages of language acquisitions are approached for students for whom English is not their first language, is reflective of the view that these students are at a deficit in the school system. In the context of this study, trustee awareness of the ideas of inclusion, exclusion, social power and white privilege improves their ability to create a more equitable educational environment.
**Systemic Racism**

Racism occurs not only at a personal level, but also at a system level. Racism:

was usually seen as a matter of people holding attitudes that led to discriminatory behaviour…these attitudes were the result of discriminatory structures and institutions. Doing something about racism is not only a matter of changing attitudes. It is also a matter of changing how our lives and institutions are organized.” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 59).

In this way, some members of society are consistently at a disadvantage compared to those of the dominant group. Systemic racism continues across generations and evidence can be seen through educational disadvantages and throughout society in general (Portelli, Shields and Vibert, 2007, p. 21).

Racism then can be defined as:

Any attitudes, actions or institutional structures, which subordinate a person or group because of their race or colour. It’s not only a matter of actions; institutional structures and attitudes can also be racist. For that reason, we considered not only situations of openly prejudiced personal actions but also those more subtle organizational programs and practices which provide encouragement and support for racism, albeit unwittingly” (from Draft Report of the Subcommittee on Race Relations, Toronto Board of Education, May, 1978, p. 8) (McCaskell, 2005, p. 21).

Systemic racism is deeply entrenched, perpetuating inequities and oppression by socially and economically disadvantaging one group over another. An example of this can be seen in the disproportionate number of placements and referrals of Black youth to special education programs.

White privilege and systemic racism are intricately linked and can be very subtle. Privilege and entitlement denies one societal group benefits while awarding them to another (Campbell Jones, Campbell Jones and Lindsey, 2010, p. 20). Patterns of advantage and disadvantage are not always visible and are intrinsically embedded in
institutional practices (Ryan and Rottman, 2007, p. 12). Systemic racism supports the perpetuation of negative attitudes and behaviours regarding visible minorities. Maintaining the status quo in the education system allows for these systemic inequities to persist. As such, racism becomes integral to the institutional practices and beliefs and becomes embedded in system structures. In this way, these embedded, exclusive system structures can undermine initiatives which attempt to make the system more inclusive. These structures persist in the attitudes, policies and practices within the organization itself (Ryan, 2012, p. 3).

**Discourses Regarding Equity**

Over the past fifty years, there have been major philosophical shifts in the way that multiculturalism has been perceived in Canada – moving from a stance of viewing diversity as an asset to be celebrated, toward a model of social cohesion in which diversity is a problem to be overcome. This has had an impact on how equity has been perceived at all levels of government. In her work on multiculturalism, Joshee (2009) uses the concept of policy webs to represent the interrelatedness of policy at different government levels, the policy texts and the open space in which individuals can interact to support, extend or undermine policy objectives, thereby influencing policy discourse. Through this conceptualization, Joshee discusses ten major discourses, which she groups into three subheadings that currently exist in the Canadian multicultural policy understanding. These are neoliberal, neoconservative and liberal/social justice discourses. These discourses coexist and evidence of each can be seen having an impact on educational decision making. An overview of these discourses will allow for a better
understanding of the history of the multicultural policy in Canada, and the impact of this evolving policy on both individual board members and in relation to board direction in implementing equity initiatives.

**Liberal/Social Justice Discourse**

The liberal social justice ideology predominantly guided multicultural policies in the 1980s. Liberal discourses focus on valuing diversity and maintaining and developing distinct cultural identities. The foundations of this ideology relate to social, cultural and economic equality and respect for all human dignity. The discourses involved in this world view acknowledge the unequal distribution of good and the inherit systemic inequities within the current education system and focus specifically on identity, recognition and rights. Joshee (2009) clarifies that identity and recognition refer to “respect for other identities and include members of diverse communities in public life that do not require them to dissociate from their cultural identity” (p. 102). Acknowledging rights means that this perspective “sees social, cultural and economic justice, rather than economic benefit as a rationale for supporting diversity” (p.182). This discourse can be traced through policy such as the Policy on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity (1993). This discourse incorporates into the concept of student success the ideas of “mental flexibility, problem solving, cultural stability and continuity, understanding cultural and family values, and awareness of cultural diversity and multiple perspectives” (p. 102).
Neoconservative Discourses

Like the neoliberal discourses, neoconservative ideologies also focus on tight control of spending, curriculum, and the current culture of accountability and high standards. These discourses contend that Canada is made up of two different groups: the tolerant Canadian, and those that do not live up to the standards that have been established. The consequences of both the neoliberal and neo conservative discourse are that diversity is perceived as a problem to be addressed in limited ways and focuses efforts to support diversity in terms of students who are having difficulty succeeding academically (Joshee, 2009, p. 102). In relation to this study, the multiple discourses surrounding multiculturalism and the historical context of the current equity legislation in Ontario provide a basic understanding of how trustees may personally perceive equity policies and the impact of the local historical context on this understanding.

Neoliberal Discourses

The Harris years were a major setback to policy development in terms of equity. Following the Tory election in 1995, equity policies and programs were dismantled. As a result, many of the equity initiatives that were previously recommended by the New Democratic Party government were not implemented after the change in government (Riviere, 2008, p. 83). Through Bill 104, school districts were amalgamated, drastically reducing the number of democratically elected trustees. At the same time, the introduction of standardized testing placed more emphasis on competitive individualism and conversely sidelined equity and diversity as relevant educational goals (Larkin and Staton, 2001, p. 363). Educational policy reform has been heavily influenced by market
methods, economic theories and the drive to improve efficiency, productivity and rankings (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. 3).

The neoliberal discourse which has become more prominent, particularly since the time of the Progressive Conservative victory in the 1995 election, carries with it a different understanding of equity and diversity. In this climate, cultural diversity is viewed as a resource and the function of the education system is to create a better worker. It is premised on the concepts that equality is sameness and that all society members strive to be like the dominant group. An example of this in legislation is the Safe Schools Act (2000) and the focus on character development in the schools. The Safe Schools Act is based on the premise that safety is necessary for academic success. This view of equity focuses on equality of outcomes, such that the government has a responsibility to intercede for and support disadvantaged students (Joshee, 2009, p. 101). In this way, the role of the government is to create social cohesion and does not challenge the inequities of inherent systemic structures. A neoliberal climate with an overemphasis on high-stakes tests and narrow curriculum has the effect of marginalizing students for whom the curriculum does not resonate, silencing social justice concerns and exacerbating inequalities (Larkin & Stanton, 2001; Marshall, 2004). Efforts to achieve more equitable outcomes are “continuously overshadowed by a telescopic focus on performance and effectiveness” (Rapp, 2002, p. 228). A false dichotomy is created where equity and excellence become competing values. In this way, more accountability, standardized curriculum and high-stakes standardized testing can be seen as being in opposition to the ideals of equity and diversity. Diversity “chafes against a system that is about ‘alignment’
with external goals that are standard and measurable and dealt with as a contract” (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012, p. 22).

A number of scholars have written about the effects of the dominance of a neoliberal ideology on creating a more equitable education system. Neoliberalism “has faith in the general fairness and justice of the markets with the underlying effect of limiting services and maintaining the status quo” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 392). Our current neoliberal climate with its emphasis on high-stakes tests and narrow curriculum has the effect of marginalizing students for whom the curriculum does not resonate. In this current atmosphere where accountability is at the forefront, social justice concerns become marginalized (Marshall, 2004, p. 7). Efforts to achieve more equitable outcomes are overshadowed by a focus on performance on standardized tests (Rapp, 2002, p. 228). Educational equity is “rarely linked to international pre-eminence, and educational excellence is seldom associated with fulfilling the promise of a democratic society” (Marshall, 2004, p. 8).

Larkin and Staton frame the current conceptualization of equity around the four components of access, inclusion, climate and empowerment. In reference to Ontario specifically, they state that this focus on market-driven education is creating barriers to social change which include the failure to consider diversity and power relations in educational practices and a co-opting of equity initiatives to serve market objectives (Larkin and Staton, 2001, p. 361). Larkin and Staton define access, inclusion, climate and empowerment as:

Access: Ensuring equal access to educational resources and opportunities. Encouraging students to consider non-traditional areas of study.
Inclusion: Looking at bias in teaching and learning materials in terms of inclusive language, content, and pedagogical practices.

Climate: Creating an educational atmosphere that is safe and supports equity. Dealing with harassment and violence.

Empowerment: Involving students in the process of social change. Taking a social action approach to education (p. 362)

These definitions call for a need to unfreeze the status quo and challenge the domination of groups through politics, culture and tradition (Riviere, 2008, p. 83).

Historically, equity of access has been the principle behind equal opportunity initiatives. It is apparent, however, that providing access does not equate to achieving equitable outcomes, nor does it allow for students to see themselves in and identify with the curriculum. The concept of equity of access itself has taken on a different meaning in this market-based climate. In fact, often the government or school boards cloak economic motivations in equality rhetoric. For example, one large Ontario school board has made it a priority to ensure that wifi access is available in all of its schools. The rationale for this has been promoted as creating equity of access for all students. However, as a result, the board has also moved to a “bring your own device” initiative, which removes responsibility from the school board to provide enough devices for an entire class.

Equity of access (providing access to the internet) has been used as a means for the school board to generate savings. As a result, many students are marginalized in their educational experience as they may not be financially able to afford a device of their own. Providing equity of access to the internet in effect creates potential for disadvantaging students of low socio-economic status and potentially creating a two-tiered education system. Addressing systemic inequities requires constant questioning of
taken for granted assumptions about the practices both at a school and systemic level and finding structural inequities that are inherent in the education system and society in general, that prevent equality of both opportunity and outcome (Riviere, 2008, p. 83).

All of these prominent discourses play a role in shaping trustee understanding regarding the purpose of education, as well as their views on how equity initiatives should be undertaken within the school system. Whether or not trustees are aware of the impact that these lenses have on their perceptions, the current focus on accountability, high stakes testing, and productivity does impact the decision making process in terms of which initiatives take precedence and are allocated resources.

**Broad-Based Equity Policies**

Over the past twenty years, there has been a shift in the discourse of anti-racism toward the paradigm of broad-based equity. Policy discourse explores how beliefs and values are shaped into policy by the various policy actors. This is done by examining “how these perspectives differ along key dimensions including beliefs about the direction of change, assumptions about the process of change, spheres of influence, role of context and values” (Datnow and Park, 2009, p. 348). Broad-based equity policies accommodate all forms of social difference into one policy, conceiving equity as something concrete, which can be identified, addressed, and eliminated through training people in knowledge, skills and behaviours. This approach is based on “fixed notions of ethnic and cultural differences, in the sense that such differences are easily ‘known’” (Riviere, 2008, p. 84). This approach denies pre-existing knowledge and complicity – even if unconscious – in
supporting unequal relations of power, both within the school and in larger society. It also assumes a linear process towards creating a more equitable education system.

The Toronto District School Board has been at the forefront of creating a broad-based equity policy. Through his work with the board, McCaskell supports this work towards broad-based equity policies. He views all forms of oppression as expressions of power which, although they may manifest differently, all have the same effect of marginalization. (McCaskell, 2005, p. 41). Arguments against the development of broad-based equity policies are twofold. The first points to incompatibility of often competing values within plural societies that exist under a liberal framework. The second deals with the issue of minority rights in relation to the dominant political framework in a liberal democratic society and in negotiating those rights when they compete with the rights and interest of other minority groups. Zine (2001) actively speaks against broad-based equity policies, arguing that the concept of equality cannot be translated into an undifferentiated measure of social need, particularly in the case of allocating resources. In this argument, marginality does not translate into a unity of oppressions.

In principle, the foundation of broad-based equity policies supports the resurgence of “sameness” (Corson, 2001, p. 67) to form the ethos of equity programs and policies. Putting into effect practices such as broad-based equity policies may appear to be non-discriminatory and meet the needs of a majority of students, however, systemic discrimination is being replaced by the more limited “one-size-fits-all” focus of equal opportunity (Larkin and Staton, 2001, p. 364). Marginalization manifests differently for different groups in society. The allocation of resources through the use of a broad base policy does not work, as some groups have different needs than others. (Zine, 2001, p.
For example, the needs of disabled students might be disproportionately higher than the needs of other groups. If the goal is to manage difference rather than truly servicing the needs of the community, then these types of policies are enough. However, if we truly want to create inclusive spaces, we need to rethink the use of broad based policies in the education system. (Zine, 2001, p. 259). Do broad-based equity policies create competition rather than solidarity between marginalized groups in society? Collapsing all forms of social difference under one policy does a disservice to all groups.

With the introduction of PPM 119, Ontario school boards are moving towards adopting broad-based equity policies, which does not necessarily create an inclusive environment for all groups. As in the example of sexual orientation, there is often disagreement with public policy and parental views. Parent and religious rights may clash as competing visions of equity and may come in conflict under the view of broad-based policy development. Groups of people that support equity on some grounds may interpret the policy differently or disagree over conflicting moral imperatives, or over values because the groups do not share the same framework and therefore proceed from different premises (Zine, 2001). Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012) agree with the stance that broad based equity policies do not create inclusivity, on the basis that it reinforces the concept of ‘otherness’ of marginalized groups. They state, “We have an obligation to eliminate broad-based and systemic biases, and to replace barriers with acceptance and inclusion for every individual” (p. 14). Whether or not policy leaders support the development of broad-based equity policies, the foundation for the development of a policy of equity and inclusion is built upon the idea of equity for all. Policy actors may, however, make a distinction as to the way that this should be actualized. Policy actors
such as trustees, are making choices regarding resource allocation based on these broad based policies. These policies impact how they understand the concept of equity and how their understandings impact their decision making process.

**Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate**

Recently, the Ontario provincial government released a three-year strategic plan to target systemic racism and government policies, decisions and programs to close the gaps between privileged and disadvantaged groups. The overview of this plan is organized to include:

- Disaggregated race data collection and a framework and guidelines for its use
- An anti-racism impact assessment framework
- Anti-racism legislation that would give the government the authority to mandate the use of race-related data
- A focus on education and awareness which would engage community organizations to create better understandings of race-related issues
- Creation of consultation groups and a conference to facilitate ongoing dialogue
- Population-specific strategies to focus on anti-Black and Indigenous-focused anti-racism

This multi-layered approach is an attempt to reduce the incidents of systemic racism both within the school system and throughout society in general. The Ontario Education Plan, released in 2017, specifically examines moving this vision forward in the education system. In regards to leadership and governance practices, this report calls for:

- enhanced accountability of school board leadership
- enhanced diversity in hiring practices for educators
• enhanced diversity in hiring and promotion practices of system leaders
• professional development focused on equity, inclusion and human rights
• the establishment of school board structures to promote and enforce human rights

(Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate, 2017)

Summary

Trustees can play a role in creating a more equitable education system by working toward opportunities for all students to succeed. Rooted in multicultural and anti-racist legislation, the call for equity has become stronger through PPM 119 and the corresponding actions of equity advocates and educational leadership. However, critics of current government practices oppose the view of equity being a standardized discourse and oppose such examples as when specialists are brought into the school district to teach “equity.” The approach to equity has moved away from a grassroots movement toward a “business-cized” equity model, in which there is an underlying incompatibility of competing values. This undifferentiated attempt to address social need emphasizes accountability through standardized testing and devalues a “liberal social justice” approach towards more equitable outcomes.

Researchers suggest many ways in which more grassroots outcomes can become reality. These include challenging the status quo, managing how resources are allocated with equity in mind, fostering a culture of inclusion and empowering marginalized groups (Ryan and Rottman, 2007, p. 20). Through policy development and creating awareness, these inclusive strategies support the organization to move towards more equitable conditions for all members of the school community including students, staff
and parents. Nurturing inclusive strategies and encouraging critical thinking around the concepts of equity is one way to alter the educational landscape towards more equitable practices. Others advocate for “disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Developing an understanding of the issues, building stronger community links, establishing a curriculum that reflects the experiences of all students and dealing with employment inequities are all tangible ways in which the system can become more equitable.

CHAPTER THREE
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The role of trustee requires that trustees act as advocates for their communities and maintain focus on student achievement and well-being. As such, trustees establish policy direction in order to meet the needs and priorities of their community and mediate conflicts and interests to meet these priorities. Many studies indicate that student success is linked to factors such as race, background, sexual orientation and socio-economic status and that currently, the school system is failing to help children overcome these roadblocks to academic success (Portelli, Shields and Vibert, 2007; Ryan, 2012; Stone, 1980; Stone, 2005). Although there has been little Canadian research in regards to how trustees navigate the oft times opposing agendas of equity and excellence, the analysis of educational reforms in America by such authors as Stone and Henig identify the complex political nature of creating lasting change. Stone argues that an interdisciplinary approach to reform is essential, allowing researchers a broader understanding from which to
research persistent problems relating to race and class (Stone, 1980, 978). Although research in the United States differs in terms of the financial mechanisms that have been established in Ontario (such as the removal of taxation abilities from individual school districts and the implementation of per-pupil funding for Ontario schools), two premises in this research are relevant. Firstly, attempting to address systemic inequities without addressing the embedded institutional inequities relating to race and class will ultimately be ineffective. Secondly, problems that exist within the school system are fundamentally political in nature. As such, using a micropolitical framework as a means to analyze the problems of addressing issues of inequitable outcomes for students in relationship to governance practices is appropriate and illuminates the inherent interrelationship between education, power and the political realm.

As a controlling group within the education system, trustees have both the positional authority and the ability to influence policy direction within the context of their political position. Politics and power can be used either positively or negatively to shape organizational direction by either affecting change to address these barriers or inhibiting change by maintaining the status quo.

A micropolitical perspective examines the nature of power relationships within the school system. Blasé identifies micropolitics as a fundamental dimension of school change and as such must be addressed when examining organizational restructuring or change initiatives (Blase, 2005). He states that power relationships within the school system are inherent to the system. If they are not identified and examined as a part of reform initiatives, then these reforms will ultimately be unsuccessful (Blase, 2005, p. 264). In the political environment of the trustee in particular, understanding the role of
micropolitical interaction is particularly relevant. Understanding the group dynamic, formal and informal decision making processes and the positional authority structure within the trustee group are inherent to understanding their role in the creation of policy directives.

Using a micropolitical conceptual framework as a lens to analyze the data for this study allows for a deeper understanding of how trustees promote equity within the school district through examining how they interact with others in terms of their power relationships. The literature overview outlines the decreasing positional authority of the role of trustee in regards to curriculum, finance and a movement away from their traditional roles due to an increase in the size of the areas that they are representing. Within the same historical timeframe, the understanding of equity within the school system has evolved. The use of a micropolitical conceptual framework creates an opportunity to explore the relationship between authority and influence and how both are utilized within the trustee group. By exploring this relationship between authority and influence, themes emerge from the data to allow for a better understanding of the relationship between the micro interactions of school board trustees and the meso interactions which embed their understandings in policy.

Iannaccone, who coined the phrase “micropolitics in education” in 1952, later expanded his definition. Micropolitics:

is concerned with the interaction and political ideologies of social systems of teachers, administrators and pupils within school buildings. These may be labelled as internal organizational subsystems. It is also concerned with the issues of the interaction between professional and lay subsystems. They may be called the external systems” (Iannaccone, 1991, p. 466).
According to Hoyle (1982), micropolitics “embraces those strategies by which individuals and groups in organizational contexts seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests” (in West, 1999, p. 189). These definitions speak to power and influence, two of the oft cited components of micropolitical interactions. However, much of what has been studied to date with regards to micropolitics in education has been focused on dynamics at the school level (Ball, 1987; Blase and Anderson, 1995; Greenfield, 1991; Hargreaves, 1990). Such studies are valuable in that they look at dynamics between different power bases (between principal/teacher, teacher/student etc.). However, an underexplored area of educational micropolitical interactions is the dynamic that takes place between political players at the school board level of education. An examination of this arena of political interaction not only yields a different perspective on the influence of personal interactions on educational outcomes, it also allows for comparative analysis between the district level environment and micro-interactions.

For this reason, when examining how micropolitics functions between trustees, the following broader definition from Blase’s 1991 work is more applicable:

Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations. In large part, political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with the motivation to use power to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any action, conscious or unconsciously motivated, may have political “significance” in a given situation. Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are of the realm of micropolitics. Moreover, macro- and micropolitical factors frequently interact. (p. 138)

This definition serves best for this study because it speaks to both the cooperative and conflictive elements of moving an agenda forward. Typically, micropolitical studies
emphasize conflict and problems. The ability to negotiate, compromise, and accommodate others, as opposed to focusing only on the negative aspects of manipulation, dissension and domination allows for a broader interpretation. This definition also makes a distinction between “power over” and “power with.” This concept is more compatible with the current role of the trustee. As trustees have lost formal control over curriculum and finance, other means must be found in order to effect change. Rather than focusing on the “arenas of struggle,” it de-emphasizes the conflict, making room for consensus.

The conceptual framework for this study focuses on the major concepts of micropolitics in education as they relate to the role of trustee. In this context, included in this discussion are the topics of how trustees perceive the concept of equity; the perception of their function in the role of trustee; how trustees navigate the micropolitical interactions within their role; and how trustees encounter and deal with resistance. To understand these elements, the conceptual framework for this study expresses the relationship between positional power and influence and explores how micropolitical awareness affects trustee decision making within the education system.

**Power and Influence**

Power is a difficult concept to define but is crucial to using a micropolitical lens for this study. Most definitions of power focus on an individual’s ability to influence others (Parson & Henderson, 1965). However in defining power within the context of the trustee group, power needs to defined based within the understanding of an individual trustee’s ability to move forward an agenda through social interactions and therefore
needs to be viewed as relational. These relationships that trustees must work within include the relationship between legitimate power (authority) and influence; individual power versus the group dynamic within the trustee group; and the power relationship at an individual level versus how power is expressed at the school board level through policy outcomes. Therefore in this study, power is viewed within the social context of the school board and incorporates all aspects of power that trustees encounter both with individuals and within the historical context of their environment and any resistance that they might encounter when moving forward their agendas. Therefore, power is defined as the probability that one trustee within their social context has the “capacity to affect outcomes and goals or, equivalently as the control over valued resources” (Weber, 1965).

The literature review for this study identifies the removal of responsibilities from the trustee group which in effect lessens their positional or legitimate power. In support of this stance, Ontario Public School Board Association outlines that the power of the trustee is as a group; trustees have no individual authority and are only one vote within the system. However, this does not take into account the influence that an individual trustee might have to sway a vote or change the views of others in order to move their own agenda forward. If this is the case and trustees are still able to move forward an agenda of equity within the school board, examining other forms of social power that might be employed by the group is also essential to this study. As such, understanding the power dynamic at work within the trustee group becomes complex as each trustee must navigate and utilize power simultaneously at several different levels simultaneously: the individual level, the group level and the school board level. To encapsulate the complexity of all of these factors, several elements were incorporated to create the
conceptual framework for this study: the identification of elements of social power, as well as the power within the historical context and structures of the school board itself.

The conceptual framework for this study begins with examining the difference between power and influence. Also outlined in this section is a third category of power: stealth power. This is important to the study because the power structures that are engrained in the organizational practices of the school board may act as barriers to moving agendas forward. This is followed by a brief section outlining why an awareness of how to manipulating the micropolitical environment may be beneficial in the role of trustee. The work of French and Raven has been used as a basis to organize how individuals trustees use social capital to move forward their agendas. This often cited reference outlines the basis of both personal power (expert and referent) and organizational power (legitimate, reward, coercive).

Webb’s model of power is also used as the basis for the creation of the conceptual framework for this study as a way to tie in the organizational level of power that play a role in the interactions and power relationships between individual trustees and within the trustee group. This model expresses the concepts of authority and influence as a binary to the micro and macro interactions of the school board.

As an attempt to elaborate on this, the conceptual framework overlays the idea of micro/meso/macro levels as a way to tie in the organizational aspects of power that play a role in the power dynamic between individual trustees and with trustees as a group. Micropolitics is about how individuals use power to control outcomes; in regards to trustees, how that power is defined. In this study, power was initially examined at the individual and school district level. In the case of school board level politics, the micro
level is defined as the interactions occurring between individuals, whereas meso is the level at which power functions within the school district. For example, micro level interactions would be discussions that trustees might have in order to persuade other individuals to vote with them on a resolution. The meso interaction would be the policy that is developed as a result of this interaction.

Further data analysis within the study created the need to identify a third layer of interaction: the meso layer of interaction. This identifies the influence of local historical context on trustee decision making. As a result of this, the original conceptual framework for this study was altered to illustrate the addition of this third level. By using a micropolitical conceptual framework, the relationship between the micro, meso and macro level of interaction is examined. Trustees’ interactions at the micro or interpersonal level impact school board direction at the meso level. This all takes place within the context of the provincial initiatives at the macro level. Trustees are influenced by the historical context of the school board itself. Interactions at all three levels have the potential to create mechanisms for change for the whole school board, for example through policy development or system plans. The study of these power interactions at the micro, meso and macro levels is the basis for the conceptual framework for this study.

Power can be both individual and shared. It is embedded within the organizational culture and can be mirrored in systemic biases. Power can be achieved in many ways, either overtly, through institutionally sanctioned authority, or covertly through the ability to influence others or other stealth forms of persuasive. Power can also be viewed as an individual or a collective phenomenon. Overt power is the power of authority – power given through position or as a result of institutional placement. Authority is “the legally
supported form of power which involves the right to make decisions and is supported by a set of sanctions which is ultimately coercive” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 90). Overt power can be interpreted negatively, by examining power relationships that hinge upon manipulation and conflict. Conflict occurs when people with competing priorities – or values – want their views to prevail. Conflict can also bring about system change as it allows for the existing power relationships to be challenged. Therefore, collaboration and cohesiveness are not necessarily signs of a well-functioning organization (Marshall and Scribner, 1991, p. 349). Although power may be used both formally and informally through both authority and influence to manage real or potential conflict, it can also be used to enforce dominant views and maintain the status quo. (Marshall and Scribner, 1991, p. 349). This is interesting specifically when examining how equity policy can be implemented because to achieve a more equitable environment, the status quo must be shifted.

Influence, on the other hand, is “the capacity to affect the actions of others without legal sanctions” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 90). Influence is not fixed and does not operate through manipulation or bargaining but rather it has a more positive connotation, as it is embedded in the actual relationships within the group. Influence can be achieved through personal persuasion, expertise or resources. Micropolitical skills can be used to advance an agenda (who chooses which agenda is promoted and why). Blase and Blase refer to the use of influence to achieve an agenda as “power through” (Bliss, Fahrenheit and Steffy, 1996) and “power-with” (Kreisberg, 1992; see also Blase and Blase, 1997, pp. 139-140). This approach to leadership emphasizes the empowerment of others, rather than controlling them, and uses reciprocity, co-agency, negotiation and mutuality to
achieve goals. The use of influence implies expanding power as opposed to restricting actions.

Webb identifies a third category of power: stealth power. Stealth forms of power are pervasive both the decision-making process and the culture of the institution. This view sees power as an inherent property of the organization as opposed to a resource of that organization (Webb, 2008, p. 135). Stealth power is insipid and pervasive, throughout the organization. Foucault states, “power must be analyzed as something which circulates” (in Webb, 2008, p. 132). This points to the interrelationship between the micro- and macro- environments and how power flows throughout these environments simultaneously, rather than just within territorialized jurisdictions, influencing or shaping beliefs. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of organizations and the invisible and institutional power that is both historic and normative and embedded in policy. Stealth power can be tied to the advantage and disadvantage in school communities. In this way, power becomes very difficult to observe because it shapes interests and influences decision making without conscious awareness (Webb, 2008, p. 133). Power shapes people’s ideas, understandings and preferences so as to become deeply embedded and accepted in societal views (Webb, 2008, p. 133). This type of power is so fixed within the organization that it is elusive to distinguish. Although this study focuses on social power structures, acknowledgement must be given to the environment in which these social interactions are occurring. By including the concept of stealth power, this study acknowledges the complexity of the power dynamics within an organization. Power is not only utilized openly by trustees to influence, it also alters their perceptions as ingrained understandings through both the institution and
society in general. When speaking in regards to equity, these stealth forms of power must be explored as these understandings are the foundation of the decision making process and are thus reflected in policy. The inherent understandings of both the individual and within the system affect the possibility of equitable outcomes occurring.

**Micropolitical Awareness and Action**

Manipulating the micropolitical environment requires an understanding of how an organization works, and the role that power plays within the organization. Ryan refers to this awareness as political acumen. Political acumen is a conscious understanding of the politics that are occurring within the organization. This approach generates “knowledge about how people in organizations understand how power works…how it articulates with wider patterns of privilege of race, class, gender, etc., and how this organizational power can be turned to resist or disrupt these patterns of privilege” (Ryan and Higginbottom, 2014, p. 33). The policy process is about the allocation of values. Although awareness of the political environment is important, moving this to action is key to actualizing an agenda for change. Political acumen is awareness and this knowledge could just as easily be used to resist efforts to attain equity as it could to move this agenda forward or to forward no agenda at all.

Ryan and Higginbottom (2014) makes this transition towards action more understandable through the analogy of the term micropolitical literacy. This term implies an understanding of the micropolitical environments and compares the acquisition of these skills to developing the skills to become literate. Micropolitical literacy is “the capacity to understand, navigate and influence the complex landscape of roles, power,
interests, and norms within an organization” (p. 36). Gee (1996) states that the “meaning of a text is always dependent on the social context in which it occurs” (in Ryan and Higginbottom, 2014, p. 37). Awareness and acknowledgement of the political dynamic, the political influences on decision-making and the possible barriers to these goals, requires the ability to both understand and be able to articulate the values that drive decision-making. Developing micropolitical fluency allows political actors to read situations and manipulate their environments to achieve their desired end goals. Taking this analogy further, applying a critical literacy lens would extend the navigation of the political environment to using this knowledge and understanding to the ends of achieving a more equitable environment for all.

The work of Ryan and Higginbottom focuses on using micropolitics for social justice ends. Although referring to micropolitics at the school level, they speak to exclusionary policies and changing the organization from within. Their work focuses not just on policy outcomes, but on the use of this knowledge to move others towards actions that will achieve their goals. Coburn states, “All voices are not equal in the social negotiation of meaning. Rather, the way in which individuals jointly construct their understanding of policy is shaped by and in turn shapes authority relations” (in Flessa, 2009, p. 341). Within the context of this study, exploring the impact of unequal voices within the policy actors of the school board, allows for a better understanding of how policy is created, shaped and the influences that occur as a result of the complexity of these interactions. This study extends this work, by examining the trustee awareness of their political environment, their ability to influence the decision making process, as well as whose interests are being served. It also examines how, if a trustee perceives
themselves as equity-minded, they potentially use their power and influence to and disrupt organizational controlling practices to promote equity.

**Bases of Social Power**

Social power is the way in which individuals use social capital to exert influence on others. J. R. French and B. H. Raven identify six bases of social power: reward, coercion, expertise, reference, legitimacy, and informational. There have been a number of criticisms regarding the use of this model of identifying social power structures. First, it has been criticized for being arbitrary and under researched. Over the years, the number of categories has been modified from between five to eleven different types of power. It also does not acknowledge the taken-for-granted nature of power, such as the complicit practices and assumptions within the organization. Finally, it may place limits on the conceptualization of power within the organization. However, for the purposes of this study, this research is not being used to identify causality between leadership style and effectiveness. When analyzing individual trustee action, it is a useful tool towards understanding whether or not trustees are attempting to employ limited types of social power or are utilizing multiple power types. As such, it has been used as a starting point for categorizing power for the trustee group within the context of this study. In relation to the conceptual framework of this study, power within the board is complex and exists at the micro, meso and macro level. Individual social power is at play within the larger school board context. Thus, for the purpose of this study, it is necessary to examine elements of individual social power as laid out within French and Raven’s categories,
within the context of the powers that exist within the school board itself. In the realm of school board micropolitical interactions, it is necessary to be aware of not only the social power that is at work, but also the power structures within the school board itself.

Therefore, it is equally significant to identify elements of social power in addition to the stealth power that is embedded within the organization itself.

In regards to board politics and historical context, French and Raven’s categories of social power are useful to identify the various forms of individual power that are at play within the trustee group:

- **Legitimate** – This is also referred to as authoritative or positional. It refers to the power that is afforded a person due to their title or role.

- **Reward** - This is the ability to compensate another. These rewards can be impersonal, such as raises or promotions, or personal in nature.

- **Coercion** – A simple example of this would be punishment for non-compliance or when any type of force is used to exert power. In an impersonal example, it could be a letter of reprimand put in an employees’ file for not following the rule. A personal example of this might be when someone exerts power over another in a punitive way.

- **Expert** - Expert power refers to the skill and knowledge that one person might hold. It represents a personal source of power and in terms of trustees, might relate to job related expertise that they bring through other work that they do.

- **Referent** – Referent power is another personal power source, which relates to attributes that the political players may have, such as attractiveness, worthiness or the right to other’s respect. These can be both negative or positive depending on the situation.

- **Information** – This refers to the ability to control the information others rely on. Controlling information is a way of shaping the views of others. (Raven, 1992, p. )

Whether or not these sources of social power are used to make changes or to maintain the status quo may be affected by the motivation of the person of influence, effectiveness of
available power structures, group values and normative beliefs as well as historical context. Power and persuasion work hand in hand and micropolitical strategies support the ability to navigate these power sources. Individual sources of power may be used in conjunction with group power in order to move agendas forward or halt progress. The existing power dynamic between trustees and historical context impacts both how equity is perceived and how it is enacted.

Strategies

Interests are the “content of micropolitics” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 89). They can be personal, professional or political in nature, although it is often difficult to distinguish the nature of these interests unambiguously. Personal and professional interests can overlap and personal interest can be stated as professional in order to garner support. Interests more easily culminate in favorable outcomes if they are pursued in collaboration with others. These collaborations are central to the concept of micropolitics and can take many forms based on the longevity and strength of these alliances. Interest sets are less formal associations where individuals create alliances infrequently over a common interest (Hoyle, 1982, p. 89). A more permanent collaboration would be considered an interest group. This implies a group of actors who are aligned due to a common interest or shared desired outcome. Policy-making is about the allocation of values. Whether a group works collaboratively or as an interest group would depend on how strongly these values are shared between individuals and how much resistance is being met with in order to achieve these goals. Working as groups as opposed to working as individuals, allows for shared or mutual interests to move forward through the power of the group.
Micropolitical conflicts shift over time, however, working together, either on short or long-term goals allows political actors to manipulate their political environment more effectively.

Although interest-based coalitions are a powerful means of moving agendas forward, the study of individual skills used to gain support is also valuable. Bargaining is a strategy that individuals can employ to move forward agendas. Crozier (1964) advocates that examining individual social interactions and bargaining relationships allows for a better understanding of organizational processes (in Hoyle, 1982, p. 95). One approach to this bargaining relationship is exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). Exchange theory explores the explicit and implicit bargaining relationships within a group. This theory acknowledges the relationship of power within these relationships and how these exchanges are negotiated to achieve mutual interests. (Hoyle, 1982, p. 94). Moving an agenda forward, hinges on an awareness of the political environment and involves a personal skill set that will allow an individual to influencing others and protecting self interests. As such, an examination of the micropolitical interactions of board trustees focuses on the characteristics of individual board members, the strategies they employ within an alliance, or a combination of both.

**Conceptualizing the Power Dynamic**

Politics, power, conflict and interests: all are integral to the micropolitical lens. Power, whether overt or covert or institutionally embedded, is how individuals promote their own interests and use the resources available to them to achieve an end goal. Influence can be exercised by getting others to do what you want them to do, or by
shaping or changing their actual desires. In the school board setting, micropolitics are a means to an end that “embraces those strategies by which individuals and groups in organizational contexts seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests” (West, 1999, p. 189).

This study explores the micropolitics that trustees use to promote an agenda of equity within their school district. It examines how trustees function beyond the board room and beyond policy development to move agendas forward through their interpersonal relationships. The interactions within the trustee group are reflected through the practices, protocols and policies within the school board setting. As such, the conceptual framework for this study focuses on an understanding of micropolitical interactions as they relate to influence. Webb (2008) identifies that the understanding of how micropolitics work within an organization may be the key to understanding why educational reforms over the last 100 years have been unsuccessful in terms of altering embedded structures (p. 138). He identifies the most common model of power, in terms of examining micropolitical interactions, as a double binary relationship between authority and influence, and the micro- and macro- environment:
In this representation, power is depicted as being relational and manifests throughout the organization. Webb presents the concept of power as operating covertly and panoptically within the organization, expressing the concept of power in regards to the binary of authority and influence. Thus Binary 1 and Binary 2 are not only related, they produce one another. In short, “everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics” (Webb, 2008, p. 130). From this perspective, research which examines micropolitical power needs to consider the relational aspect of how organizational structures are reproduced. Webb indicates that researchers need to identify units-of-analysis that not only describe the power phenomenon but explain how organizational interests are fabricated.

In relationship to this study, the relationship between authority and influence within the trustee role is examined to identify whether trustees utilize one more than the other due to the impact of the reduction of their administrative duties in their role. Power consists of a number of force relationships. Positional authority and influence interact throughout the organizational decision making process. Utilizing the axioms regarding
the interrelationship between authority and influence and how they influence at both the personal and school district levels, allows for a deeper analysis of how power operates within the board. When using qualitative methodology such as interviews, it is difficult to capture the complexity of the various types of power that operate overtly, covertly and insidiously throughout the school district. Micropolitical influence can only be understood in relation to positional authority; policy can only be understood in relation to the inter-relational influence of those in the position to shape these views. Utilizing Webb’s conceptualization of the interrelatedness and pervasiveness of power as frame allows for the examination of the relational aspect of trustee interactions which takes into consideration the complexity of the interactions involved.

Webb’s study analyzes these relationships within a school setting. This study examines this relationship at the school district level. Specifically, this entails the examination of how both authority (positional power) and influence (the ability to move agendas forward) are used by trustees to create an impact on both policy making and personal belief systems. As a school district level study, this contributes to the body of knowledge and understanding as to how the relationship between the person and the district levels of interaction impact policy and direction. Situated within the changes in equity legislation over the past thirty years, it acts as a forensic case study regarding how power operates within historical context to create meaning making. The conceptual framework for this study builds on Webb’s notion of power relationships. As trustees have lost authority through the reduction of their ability to influence finance and curriculum, they have had to rely on their influence to affect change within the board.
This influence takes the form of micropolitical interactions with other board members in order to move forward their agenda.

This study expands on Webb’s framework by delving more deeply into understanding how influence works within the micropolitical environment through examining the complex relationship between individual trustees within their political context. The original diagram identifies the axiom that authority and influence work simultaneously and that there is a correlation between the two. As members of the board of directors, trustees have authority through position and several sources indicated that in particular, the chair still maintains a great deal of positional authority. However, as indicated in the literature review for this study, the positional power or authority of the trustee has been eroded over the past thirty years. As a result, influence is being exerted regularly by the trustee group in order to achieve their objectives. Whether examining local concerns, such as making exceptions in busing policies for students in the rural north of the district, or using influence to impact hiring and placement of board leadership, trustees use of influence far exceeds their reliance on positional power. Whether or not these lead to more or less equitable outcomes through policy responses depends on the intent and awareness of the trustee, in so much as the outcome is within the trustee’s control or ability to change. The research data indicate three levels impact trustee interactions: personal values and beliefs, the historical context of the school board and the dominant ideologies that are present impact the micro level of interaction.
As a result, the conceptual framework used for this study is as indicated:

**Figure 2 – Conceptual Framework**

Influence

- Micro Level
  - (Response Implication of Personal Values Lens)

- Meso Level
  - (Response Implications of Local Historical Context Lens)

- Authority

- Policy response

Macro Level

- (Response Implication of Dominant Ideologies Lens)

This framework illustrates the aforementioned relationship between power and authority and the reliance on personal influence over positional authority. The binary has been revised to express the inverse relationship that has occurred as trustees more often use influence over authority. This also alters the relationship between the macro and the
micro. Because the micropolitical relationships have become the main source of moving agendas forward within the board, the micro level also moves to the top of the diagram. The original binary relationship becomes illustrated as a triangle, illustrating two changes: firstly, the diagram illustrates the change in the power relationship between the macro and micro levels, demonstrating that within the trustee group, the use of personal relationships at the micro level has become more utilized. Although there is still a binary relationship between the two, the micro level of interaction has become the dominant form of interaction, altering policy and board direction at the macro level. Secondly, a meso level has been added to illustrated the impact of local historical context on trustee decision making. Adding this layer identifies how the history of the school board may potentially influence and adds to the complexity of decision making within the trustee role.

The addition of the central triangle in the revised conceptual framework is indicative of the how values, contexts and ideologies impact trustee actions. The circle is representative of the amount that each of these elements are being utilized by each board member. The closer the lines are to the outside of the circle, the more that aspect is influencing decision making. Although the triangle of influence in the above diagram represents that each of these elements are equally influential, this aspect of the framework would vary, based on the trustee involved. As indicated in the discussion section, each of the trustees had a unique interrelationship between their reliance on personal values, historical board context and ideological views. It was noted that equitable outcomes were not more or less prevalent regardless of which was favoured by each trustee.
Using a micropolitical framework to analyze the data for this study creates a way to examine the complexity of the trustee’s role in creating a more equitable school system. It allows for the examination of the data for this study on multiple levels:

1. It examines the micro layer of interaction which allows for the examination of how interactions at a personal level impact decision making. It also allows for insight into trustee perceptions of their own role and how they perceive equity in education.

2. It examines the meso layer of interaction which illustrates how trustees interact within the local historical context of their school board which may act as a contributing factor to the resistance that some trustees may face.

3. It examines the macro level of interaction which demonstrates the influence of provincial directives on local policy outcomes.

This (revised) conceptual framework captures the relationship between these elements in order to come to a better understanding of the complex micropolitical interactions that shape decision making. It allows for a way to illustrate the three main focuses for this study: how trustees perceive equity within the school system and what they see as their role in making the system more equitable; how they navigate the micropolitics of their position; and how they deal with resistance when it arises.
CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

This study explores the relationship between the micro and meso levels of interactions within a district school board within the context of the macro level. It specifically examines the micro/meso levels of interactions: the actions between trustees and other individuals at the micro level and the school board level actions at the meso level. The macro level is included because the policy direction at a provincial level impacts the policy development at the school district level. As school board trustees indicate in the study, they rely more on influence than authority to move forward their agendas. As such, exploring how they use this influence within the micro/meso relationship in particular, becomes key. Using the conceptual lens of micropolitics allows for themes of personal values, historical context and ideologies to be pulled from the data. This section identifies the research methodology that was used in order to analyze the data and interpret these themes.

Research Design

This is a qualitative case study of five retired trustees from within one large Ontario school district. Primary data were collected through interviews of these five retired trustees who had all been elected officials during a portion of the time period between 1985 – 2015. Some trustees were elected for only one term, while others served multiple terms. After the initial interviews, each retired trustee was asked to recommended an additional five sources who would be familiar with their work. From these five recommendations, three were selected as secondary interviews.
These secondary interviews were made up of representatives from the following groups: current trustees, current senior administrators, and current and retired principals. Interview groupings were composed of one retired trustee and three corroborating sources. The unit of analysis was the micropolitical actions between the retired trustee and other school board officials. The five cases were arranged as follows:

**Table 2.0 Overview of Cases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Retired Trustee</th>
<th>Other Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case One</td>
<td>Retired trustee (trustee for 30 years)</td>
<td>Three current superintendents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Two</td>
<td>Retired trustee (trustee for 17 years)</td>
<td>No additional data sources were given for this case and it stands as an outlier to the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Three</td>
<td>Retired trustee (trustee for 13 years)</td>
<td>Two retired principals, one current trustee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Four</td>
<td>Retired trustee (trustee for 3 years)</td>
<td>Current superintendent, current Board Chair and current principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Five</td>
<td>Retired trustee (trustee for 3 years)</td>
<td>Current principal, retired principal, current Director of the Board</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Selection of Participants**

Participants were chosen from one large, ethnically diverse school board with a historical background in policy development for equity and inclusion. A limit of this study is the small sample size. However, the purpose of the study is not to generalize, but rather to seek an intensive and in-depth understanding of the practices of one large district. The small sample size is due to the size of the pool of possible trustees eligible to participate in the study. Most large Ontario school districts have less than a dozen trustees. Due to the longstanding nature of many of the trustees, this sample was
representative of the trustee population over the past thirty years. Interviewing five trustees is a small enough sample to ensure anonymity of the board, but large enough to assure that most important perceptions will be voiced. The sampling would have been modified if the upper bound of the sample size was being approached without evidence of convergent themes. This allowed for an in-depth comparison of the perspective of board members with varying degrees of experience within the board and participation in a number of board initiatives.

The five retired trustees had varied experience levels, terms in office, and a variety of backgrounds both within and outside of the board. The trustees represented a range of attitudes and commitment levels towards their role as trustee. Interviews were open-ended and focused on the trustees’ understanding of both the changes in their roles as well as the changes in equity legislation that took place within the school district over their time with the board. Interviewing a number of trustees added depth and insight into understanding individual and group initiatives towards implementing the school board’s equity and inclusive strategy. In selecting from this sample, the researcher compared and contrasted strategies and political awareness levels of various board members based on their own understanding of equity. The sample allowed for multiple viewpoints of the same initiatives, based within the similar historic reference of diversity and equity-based policies within the board. Individual trustees were solicited through a snowball approach based on suggestions given in previous interviews.
**Interview Procedure**

Interviews with each of the participants were individual, semi-structured and face-to-face. The advantage of face-to-face interviews was that the researcher was able to use non-verbal cues in order to direct the questions and probe more deeply. It also allowed the researcher to build rapport in order to improve the comfort level of the participants. Participants were provided with the interview protocol a minimum of five days prior to the interview in order to allow them time to reflect on the questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. This transcription was shared with the participant in order to confirm accuracy.

The interviews for this study ranged from forty-five minutes to ninety minutes in length and concentrated on identifying specific examples of how the trustee elicited support. Participants were asked to frame their responses around their specific experiences to better understand their perceptions. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect on how they would change their experience for future initiatives. Although one-time interviews and small sample sizes have limitations in terms of generalizability, they do provide opportunities to explore emotions, topics and themes in some depth.

Although interviews were semi-structured, probing questions were elicited based on the following scripted questions:

**Research Question:** *How do trustees who self-identify as equity-minded promote equity within their school board?*

**Interview Questions:**

1. *How do trustees understand equity in education?*
a) Can you tell me a bit about your time with the school board? How long were you a trustee and within what time period?

b) How do you define equity? Do you feel that achieving equity is part of the role of trustee?

2. What do they perceive as their role in implementing a more equitable education system?

a) Tell me about your work in the school board as it pertains to equity.

b) Were there specific programs or initiatives that you championed? Length of time involved and expected outcomes. Did the initiative require a financial commitment? Did you need a majority vote? Was there a subcommittee?

c) How did your work aim to improve equity? How did you engage other trustees, superintendents or constituents in this work?

3. What resistance, challenges and barriers do trustees face in advancing an equity agenda and how do they overcome these challenges?

a) Describe any challenges that you may have faced? What strategies, process and/or techniques did you use to overcome these?

b) Did you experience any resistance or barriers? How did you overcome these barriers? What tactics if any, did you use and why? Did you rely on past relationships?

c) How did you measure the success of your initiative?

d) How does the role of trustee differ from others in creating a more equitable education system?
The questions were asked about specific initiatives because they focused the discussions. They also allowed for a framework from which further discussion regarding strategies that were being used while still being open enough as to not lead the participants to unsubstantiated conclusions regarding their work.

**Data Analysis**

Data from each of these cases were compared within each case and then across all cases into the larger unit of the school board. The benefit of this approach is that the five cases allow for a more comprehensive analysis at both the micro and the meso levels of influences that shape policy-making in the education system. It allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between global trends and policy development.

Coding was completed following each interview. Themes were identified based on the original trustee interviews and correlated with their recommended sources. The first interview set, therefore, acted as the baseline for the next series of interviews. This heuristic framework for micro-analysis lead to the identification of major themes and reassessment and reframing as the interviews progressed. The study used the constant comparative method to code the data into common themes based on trustee perceptions, looking for patterns.

The use of qualitative research methodology was selected in order to explore the relationships and interactions that occur between the trustees and other board members and board leadership to acquire political support. The research was not intended to test a predetermined hypothesis. Using a qualitative case study approach allowed this researcher to probe more deeply into the experiences of the research participants in order
to better understand their beliefs, ideas and political acuity and how trustees “interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). In addition to this, analysis of texts, reports, policies and board meeting minutes was done in order to gain depth and broaden and complement the understandings gained through the interviews. This approach allowed for a triangulation of evidence in order to better understand the role of the trustee and their methods for moving forward agendas.

**Emergence of Themes**

Throughout this study, themes emerged which helped to deepen the understanding of the challenges and barriers that trustees face when implementing or navigating equity through the government structures that are currently in place. The five retired trustee interviews represented board practices through a period of 30 years. The subsequent interviews with other personnel within the school board and within the community, allowed for testing these themes and either calling them into question or reinforcing them. Potential themes were identified throughout all of the interviews; however, each of the trustee’s cases are illustrated in such a way as to demonstrate particular themes which came out as pertinent within their particular circumstances. The data were examined both on the initial interview with the retired trustee and their three recommended sources, as well as being triangulated more broadly through cross-examination of both the retired trustees’ interviews and the other school board personnel by employment category. These overarching themes are discussed in depth in subsequent chapters. An analysis was also done on documentation and policy development within the school district. This was
utilized to document the school board’s evolving understanding of equitable education. For example, hiring practices, the diminishing official powers of the trustee, and the subsequent rise in the use of influence to achieve outcomes, personal bias, and personal attributes and biases, are themes that occur throughout multiple interviews. As such, these topics were analyzed across all groups.

The initial conceptual framework for this study focused on the micropolitical interactions of trustees. Although the research did not start from a defined point, the data were interpreted through this conceptual lens, examining the relationship between authority and influence within the trustee’s role. Using this framework as a starting point guided the direction of the data analysis. Through a series of open questions and concrete probes, data were collected and analyzed to determine which categories, themes and potential theories emerged through the constant comparative method. Constant comparative method as identified by Merriam (Merriam, 2009, pp. 175-176), is the method of identifying segments that are significant and comparing and codifying the data. The use of constant comparative method to identify common themes was selected for this study because questions were reassessed and reframed based on previous responses in order to elicit a better understanding of the phenomenon. This was an appropriate method to discover common themes and understand how trustees navigate their political environment to advance the equity agenda. By using this lens, three robust themes emerged. Specifically, these themes were the impact of personal values, historical context and prevailing ideologies on decision making. This added complexity and redefined the conceptual framework, allowing for a deeper understanding of how decisions were reached at the board level.
This process began with the data, which in this case were the transcriptions of interviews from both the trustees and the participants’ recommended referrals. The interviews themselves were open ended, focused and exploratory in nature. Pseudonyms were used for both the participants and the districts involved in order to protect anonymity. I transcribed each interview and coded, from the perspective of the conceptual lens.

I initially started by interviewing a retired trustee. This interview was transcribed and colour coded. Data from the first interview were used as a reference or baseline as the researcher moved on to the next interview. No significance or importance was assigned to the data until later in the analysis. Following that, I interviewed three of the five recommended secondary interviews, transcribing and coding each one and comparing it to the initial interview. Analyzing each interview to the initial trustee interview was done prior to proceeding to the next one. The researcher carefully examined the new data set after each interview was transcribed, coding the data into the categories that were developed based on the first data set as well as any new categories that emerged. Coding was based initially on the broad themes of the role of the trustee, and views on equity. From that, sub themes started to emerge. For example, within the heading of equity, the sub categories emerged regarding equity and hiring and equity in relation to student needs. These were then coded and subdivided even further into more specific categories. As an example, equity and hiring was further subdivided into hiring practices, hiring for “fit” and cultural representation or disconnect between the trustee and their ward. Each of these sub categories were colour coded in order to identify the themes consistently throughout all of the interviews. The researcher continued this
process for each data set, comparing them to the original and any subsequent data sets. This process of examining the data sets, developing categories and assigning pieces of data to categories is known as Open Coding (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). As the researcher analysed the data, a hypothesis formed. As a consequence of earlier interviews, the structure was in some cases altered for future interviews in order to accommodate richer findings.

When all four interviews from each data set were complete (the trustee and the three referrals by the trustee), data from all sources were compared to add depth and breadth to the analysis. This was done through colour coding the collected information. Once this set of interviews was complete, I moved on to the next set of four interviews and the process was repeated. The only exception to this methodology was with one retired trustee who chose not to give other sources for further interview. As a result, corroboration for analysis was achieved by examining the secondary data from other interviews that worked within the school district during the same time frame. When all data were collected, the data was triangulated and cross-referenced between interview sets, between all five retired trustees, as well as between like groupings of secondary interviews. This triangulated data were compared to the conceptual framework and the framework was revised to fit the data. This allowed for the development of the overarching and subthemes identified through the study.

Themes were often slow to emerge. During the data collection and theme identification, I continued to read and contemplate and research salient points that were identified. It became apparent as the themes emerged that the study was exploring the evolving relationship between the use of authority and influence within the role of the
trustee. The timeframe when trustees were in power also shaped the data. As a result, I compared the participant’s responses to the legislation that was in place at the time in order to come to a better understanding of how this factored in to the responses.

Layered on top of this was the concept of the trustees’ function in creating a more equitable education system. Although all trustees in this study identified themselves as equity minded, their own personal understandings shaped their particular responses. As themes emerged from the data, it became necessary to reflect on how these perceptions manifested in district outcomes. At this point, the school board documentation was examined to identify the relationship between the interviewees perceptions and the outcomes. This was done through the examination of policy and board minutes. The examination of policy was crucial to the conclusions of the study as it more fully identified the relationship between the meso and the micro elements at play in district decision making.

All interactions are social interactions, situated within historical context and related to the underlying power structures of the organization. For this study, data needed to be analyzed to identify whether the interactions at a micro-level, specifically the language use and communications at a social level, had an impact at the meso-level, which relates to the concepts of power, inequality and dominance. For example, was prejudice expressed by an individual expressed at the meso level through policy development or established organizational practices? Examination of the written word as well as the interactions between individuals allowed for a greater understanding these complex relationships. Van Dijk identifies several ways to categorize this analysis in order to examine whether there is a bridge between different levels of power:
1  Members–groups: Language users engage in discourse as members of (several) social groups, organizations, or institutions; and conversely, groups thus may act "by" their members.

2  Actions–process: Social acts of individual actors are thus constituent parts of group actions and social processes, such as legislation, news making, or the reproduction of racism.

3  Context–social structure: Situations of discursive interaction are similarly part or constitutive of social structure; for example, a press conference may be a typical practice of organizations and media institutions. That is, "local" and more "global" contexts are closely related, and both exercise constraints on discourse.

4  Personal and social cognition: Language users as social actors have both personal and social cognition: personal memories, knowledge and opinions, as well as those shared with members of the group or culture as a whole. Both types of cognition influence interaction and discourse of individual members, whereas shared "social representations" govern the collective actions of a group. (van Dijk, 2008, p. 354)

This study focuses on how personal and social understandings of individual group members play out within the current and historical social structures of the board.

This understanding is linked to both their personal understandings of equity, the historical context of the school district and how trustees fit within the various co-existing discourses that are prevalent in Ontario. Specifically, this study explores the power dynamics within the trustee group, how they control public discourse and subsequently control the actions of less powerful groups. Lastly, the study examines the social consequences of this control in terms of inequality for students, staff and the community.

In examining interactions in this study, power is a central notion. Individual, institutional and social power all interplay within the context of the organization and shape the direction of decision making. People with positional power, such as the trustees in the educational setting, have the ability to condone, legitimize or resist change depending on their own position within the group and their own personal values, understandings and ideologies. Conversely, the power of the individual may dominate
decision making of the group, depending on their own power and influence. As such, power may be coercive or persuasive and may act to circumnavigate other interests, creating a culture of dominance. The controlling group has the most influence over discourse. This study examines the inter-relatedness between the dialogue within the trustee group and the decision making process of the organization itself.

Utilizing Van Dijk’s categorizations allows researchers a vehicle through which dialogue can be examined. When using lens of social power interactions of the conceptual framework, the dialogue relates to the micropolitical interactions of trustees with other policy actors. Van Dijk states, “Action is controlled by our minds. So, if we are able to influence people's minds, e.g. their knowledge or opinions, we indirectly may control (some of) their actions, as we know from persuasion and manipulation” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 356). It stands to reason that groups who influence discussions the most also contribute to changing the thoughts and actions of others. Influence, therefore, shapes direction. In the case of trustees, influence shapes public discourse and district direction. Those who have more control over this dialogue through their influence have more power to shape local policy and either move towards a more equitable education system or use their power to maintain the status quo.

Analyzing trustee interactions is a complex undertaking as the context and the structures that are in place within the school board and within each individual trustee’s interactions that frame discussions. The context relates to the situations that are involved at any particular time, the participants involved and the roles that they have, the history of the board itself as well as the knowledge, attitudes and ideologies of all political players. In regards to the structures involved, it is not just the verbal and written communication
that identify the overall power relationship of the group. Context also interacts with these dynamics to impact outcome.

Van Dijk also outlines several ways in which power dynamic shapes peoples’ thoughts and beliefs to “reproduce dominance and hegemony” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 357). He refers to this as “mind control” and identifies several ways in which power and dominance can contribute to this. Pertaining to trustees, people tend to accept beliefs, knowledge and opinions if they come from an authoritative or reliable source. Being on the board of trustees lends authority through positional power. Secondly, if discourse is embedded in policy, participants such as board employees are obliged to be recipients of this discourse. Finally, in many situations, alternative beliefs or information that would lead to the development of such beliefs are not vocalized.

Trustees are involved with the political discourse of the school district through policy, and through the legitimization or challenge of power and dominance that may exist historically within the board. Examining how their personal values and beliefs interact within the historical context of their political environment allows a better understanding of how discourse is shaped, enacted, reproduced and legitimized in order to better understand their role in creating a more equitable education system.
CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

The five cases outlined in this chapter illustrate how background experience, length of tenure, training, and personal attributes all contribute to the understanding of trustees’ evolving roles, their understanding of equity in education, and their ability to move forward the agenda of equity within the school district. The findings section of this study identifies and illustrates the themes that emerged from the study’s data in relationship to the conceptual framework. The findings identify that personal history, historical context and prevalent ideologies all impact how trustees understand equity, and use this understanding to create policy and address equity issues. Each trustee case begins by identifying background information for each trustee, their views on the trustee’s role and their understanding of equity. The remaining subsections of each case have a particular focus on the understandings gained from each interview set. Each case contributes to a more in-depth analysis of how trustees use their micropolitical interactions within their role to move forward equity from their perspective. As the themes emerged from the data, it became apparent that other interviews had some significant data that could add clarification to the examples of the other case. As many of the trustees served on the same board of trustees at the same time, the inclusion of data from the other cases in an explanatory capacity was relevant and added to the depth of the study. In these circumstances, the supporting data were included as a supplement to the other cases. By using the micropolitical lens, this study identifies how both formal and informal power dynamics shapes outcomes within the setting of the school district.
Case One explores the concepts of power that exist within the context of the trustee’s role. Over the past thirty years, the power dynamic for school board officials has changed due to the historical context and legislative changes which alter both the function and the perceptions of the trustees in this study. The case built from Trustee One’s interview explores the concepts of group versus individual power, and the power of position versus the use of influence. Case Two addresses the trustee’s role in relation to the understanding of equity. A specific example is explored regarding the role of the trustee within the hiring process for school board leadership. Case Three examines the impact of local historical context on the role of the trustee, specifically, the understanding of how longevity in the role is both positive and negative. Serving multiple terms provides continuity of understanding, but also leads to more local advocacy as opposed to regional advocacy. A trustee with a long history with the school district is less likely to make changes that alter the status quo. Case Four examines how personal history and ingrained biases impact both the understanding of equity and the decision-making process. Case Five explores how prevailing ideologies also play a role in shaping school district direction through the board members.

**Timeline of Legislation and Trustee Appointments**

It is important to have an understanding of the relationship between the school district trustee appointments and the pertinent legislation that has been implemented throughout the past thirty years. Table 3.0 identifies the timeline of when these trustees were in office. Table 3.1 illustrates the timeline of legislation that reduced the power of trustees. Table 3.2 illustrates the relationship between when the trustees for this study were in office to legislation regarding both the role of trustee and equity.
Table 3.0 School District Trustee Appointments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Trustee Appointment</th>
<th>Years in Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985 – 2015</td>
<td>Trustee Sutton</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 – 2007</td>
<td>Trustee Smith</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997 – 2010</td>
<td>Trustee Wheeler</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 – 2006</td>
<td>Trustee MacDonald</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 – 2013</td>
<td>Trustee Singh</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Legislation Reducing the Responsibilities of Trustees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Legislation or Trustee Appointment</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Radwanski report</td>
<td>De-streaming, reducing high school to four years and introducing ECE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>PPM 115 (revoked)</td>
<td>De-streaming secondary schools, promoting integration of spec ad students, required senior and junior kindergarten programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>For the Love of Learning</td>
<td>Centralization of instruction and delivery, global competitiveness, policy changes, student trustees, school codes of conduct, school-based budgets, Trustee Honorarium, call for accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 – 2003</td>
<td>Harris government</td>
<td>Commonsense Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Bill 30</td>
<td>Recommended the establishment of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Bill 160 – The Education Quality and Improvement Act</td>
<td>New funding formula based on per-pupil ratio, boards not able to run on deficit, limiting boards’ power to negotiate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Bill 104 – The Fewer School Boards Act</td>
<td>Amalgamated smaller school boards into larger entities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Falconer Report</td>
<td>Mandatory training of trustees, clear job descriptions, code of conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Bill 177 – The Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act</td>
<td>Further reduced political authority of trustees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Wilson Report</td>
<td>Separations of operations and governance, reform of promotion policies and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Legislation or Trustee Appointment</td>
<td>Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Equity understanding</td>
<td>Equity as multiculturalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 – 2015</td>
<td>Trustee Sutton</td>
<td>Hiring practices, trustees loss of power and gain in influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980’s</td>
<td>Equity understanding</td>
<td>Equity as antiracism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Equity Stance</td>
<td>The development of a policy on race and cultural equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Radwanski report</td>
<td>Destreaming, reducing high school to four years and introducing ECE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 - 2007</td>
<td>Trustee Smith</td>
<td>Hiring practices, defining the role of the trustee, policy changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>PPM 115 (revoked)</td>
<td>Destreaming secondary schools, promoting integration of spec ed students, required senior and junior kindergarten programs</td>
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<td>Centralization of instruction and delivery, global competitiveness, policy changes, student trustees, school codes of conduct, school-based budgets, Trustee Honorarium, accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997 – 2010</td>
<td>Trustee Wheeler</td>
<td>District vs. local regional concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Bill 30</td>
<td>Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 – 2006</td>
<td>Trustee MacDonald</td>
<td>Cultural or personal blind spots and biases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Falconer Report</td>
<td>Trustee training, code of conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>PPM 119 – The Equity and Inclusion Policy</td>
<td>Reframed equity in terms of inclusion and outlined the role of the school boards in this initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Bill 177 – The Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act</td>
<td>Further reduced political authority of trustees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 - 2013</td>
<td>Trustee Singh</td>
<td>Cultural disconnects or connects, trustees as a steppingstone to other political aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Wilson Report</td>
<td>Separation of operations and governance, reform of promotion policies and procedures</td>
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Case One

The first case explores the power dynamics within the trustee group. As the first trustee was with the school board for over forty years, this case identifies the changes to the power that occurred throughout this timeframe. The concepts of the power of the chair, group versus individual power and the power of alliance are outlined.

Background

Trustee Sutton worked with the school board for a total of forty-five years. Prior to starting in the role of trustee in 1985, she had worked for fifteen years, first as a library technician in high schools, and later as an office manager. While a member of the secretarial union, she was actively involved in the executive and acted as one of their contract negotiators. As an employee involved with negotiations of staff, she felt that the group that she represented was not being treated fairly in that they were laid off at the end of each school year. As a result, she became interested in board politics and decided to run as a trustee. She gave up a job which made $16,000 a year to become a trustee. At the time, the role of trustee made approximately $7000 per year. She saw it as a service to her community. Her career as a trustee lasted thirty years, and she spent a brief time as district school board Chair.

The secondary interviews that Trustee Sutton recommended are with three current Superintendents. Superintendent A has worked in various capacities with the school board for over thirty-five years. She compares Trustee Sutton’s impact to that of B. F. Hutton. She:
Had a huge influence and there was no stronger advocate for her schools. And sometimes she used that power wisely and sometimes she used it for her own gain. But I would say that she was very measured because she had a long history with the board...She knew the genesis of a lot of things that had gone before and things that were coming out now. (T-1, SA-2)

This Superintendent views Sutton as someone who never shied away from tackling difficult issues, but also saw her as a consummate politician, very measured as to the way that she goes about things.

Superintendent B, who had been with the school board for 28 years, echoes the view of Trustee Sutton power:

Sutton was incredibly influential, and she would be influential in a way that was probably more than what she should have been. She was so influential that she got used to having her own way and knowing that she could call the shots. (T-1 SA-3)

Superintendent B describes Sutton’s strengths, noting her ability to have a very regional view of issues due to the length of time she was a trustee, her time as board Chair, and her participation on numerous board-wide subcommittees. Trustee Sutton herself acknowledges her strengths as the ability to wear many hats and to treat other staff as partners. She feels very strongly that building relationships is the key to being a successful trustee and cites the old adage, “You get more flies with honey than you do with vinegar” as her modus operandi. Due to the longevity of Trustee Sutton’s tenure, analyzing her career provides understanding of the changes that have taken place, both with the role of the trustees and in equity legislation throughout this time.

**Perceptions of the Role of Trustee**

Sutton describes herself as a huge advocate and sounding board for her community, stating that trustees “bring integrity and the local perspective” to the school board, “keep
the administration in-line” and ensure credibility with the public. She talks about the
difficulty that trustees had in the 1990’s, describing the Harris years as full of “conflict,
confrontation, and very challenging times” (T-1). Although trustees felt that Bill 160 was
an attempt to remove power from their position, Superintendent A states that this
legislation made great strides towards “levelling the playing field” for all students,
righting funding imbalances throughout the province.

Redefining the parameters of the trustee’s role has been a focus of legislation
throughout the last three decades. Sutton states:

We know our role. You know, we are not operations. And that's one of the
things that trustees really have to be made clear to them…There's
governance, and there's operations. We hire the director to run the show.
Our job is to ensure that he is running the show fairly equitably and with
integrity and we are accountable to the public. (T-1)

Although the idea of having a clear distinction between operations and governance is also
stated by the three Superintendents as well, defining the difference between these two
realms is challenging. Superintendent A expresses that the senior administration work to
“help (trustees) understand their sandbox and what isn’t their sandbox…because trustees
sometimes wanted to stray into other operational issues and we had to make sure that they
stay in the political realm” (T-1 SA-2). Superintendent A cites the recent reports from the
Toronto District School Board, where the “water got really muddy and it had a real
detrimental effect on the board and the effectiveness of the of the trustees” (T-1 SA-2).

In her opinion, having respect for one another and working as a team with administrators
goes hand in hand with understanding their jurisdictions.

Superintendent C believes that over the past thirty years, the trustees’ role has been
redefined to become more based on the community as opposed to being policy making
and budget alone. She gives the example of there being much more of a relationship between municipal and board politics. She also feels that trustees now become more involved in community action groups, allowing them to be greater advocates for their communities. (T-1 SA-3) Superintendent B also acknowledges the idea of operations not being a part of the trustee’s role. However, he does not feel that this is realistic in terms of practical application:

You know we talk a lot about the role of trustees as being in the realm of governance and the role of senior staff as being in the realm of operations. And never the two shall meet. Which is absolutely a false notion. And so the ministry can talk to us all they want about trustees having governance power and us having operational jurisdiction, but at the end of the day … if they as the board of trustees direct us to do X, we have to do it…like it or not. (T-1 SA-2)

Although Bill 177 (2009) attempts to clarify the differences between governance and operations, the practical applications of this legislation continue to appear to be difficult to implement.

Views on Equity

Trustee Sutton believes that creating a more equitable education system has been a focus of her work within the school district. Sutton defines equity as “treating all people equally and with fairness” regardless of background, race or religion. Her personal views have an impact on how she perceives equity as a trustee:

I think if you're treated equitably you were given the opportunity. The outcome, you are responsible for. You are responsible for your own destiny…but by being given the opportunity, I was on the same playing field as long as I've been given the tools to develop myself. We have two people side-by-side. As long as this one is not getting all the professional development and I'm getting none or this one's getting all the mentoring and I'm getting none, that's not equitable. (T-1)
This view reflects the neoconservative discourses that construct success and failure on the basis of resilience and meritocracy. It locates the source of failure on the individual and does not take into consideration the impact of culture, political and historical context.

During the early 1990’s, there was little racial diversity throughout the school district in terms of both teachers and senior administration. The board of trustees was entirely Caucasian, and yet both Trustee Sutton and the superintendents recall this as being a key time in moving the equity agenda forward in the school board. Superintendent A points to the hiring of two individuals who represented marginalized groups to senior administrative positions as key to this movement, indicating that this was a courageous decision which allowed the board to move forward towards “embracing all the different parts of the community” (T-1 SA-2). These individuals started the conversations and raised consciousness that moved trustees and other senior administrators to “look at diversity and listen to the voices of the community – not just the old voices, the voices of the majority, but listening to start to make decisions and policies that reflect the interests of the entire community” (T-1 SA-2).

Trustee Sutton sees these hiring decisions as key as well:

That's how changes come about. It's more of an acceptance. It's the society we live in now. People are more accepting. I don't see it happening everywhere. Like we're fortunate here. We had a board that supported the policy changes. (T-1)

The hiring of senior administrators that reflect the diverse population allows for conversations to happen which challenges the status quo and creates opportunities for change to occur.
Significance of Case One: Power and Influence

Micropolitics

Through the lens of the conceptual framework, Trustee Sutton demonstrates a high level of micropolitical awareness. At the beginning of her career, the board of trustees had been highly politicized with twenty-three trustees. Superintendent A calls it “the cheapest entertainment in town” (T-1 SA-1), noting that in the past there were factions of different trustees. She recalls at board meetings that she would “see trustees get up and go over and have a little sidebar conversation with other trustees and they would plan how they were going to vote on different things” (T-1 SA-1).

Trustee Sutton also speaks about the negative political climate at the time when she started with the school board, which stemmed particularly from the longstanding board Chair:

She used to terrorize people…Oh she was awful…she knew her job. And I learned to really respect her… She was smart, and she was in that job to make sure that those kids got the best education that they could. She was a great trustee. But she told me when I started “I don’t like you and I never will so sit back, keep your mouth shut”…and so I did, for probably a year. I was afraid to speak because she would look at me with this look on her face and I would think oh my God. But if someone voted against her, she’d tell you do you know how stupid you are? If you did your homework, you wouldn't vote like that. (T-1)

This quote demonstrates two points. Firstly, Sutton perceived misuses of power earlier in the board’s history. It also speaks to the need to “work as a team player, supporting motions of other trustees, bargaining to achieve support for her own initiatives” (T-1). Sutton indicates that at the time there wasn’t a sense of teamwork like there is currently in the board, but she understands the need for building relationships. This meant learning to support others and bargain for support for the issues that she was passionate about, and
on occasion “lobbying (her) head off” (T-1) in order to gain that support. Superintendent C indicates other strategies that Sutton used to garner votes:

Lots of emails and phone calls, behind-the-scenes. And lots of conversations with the superintendents with the trustees if in fact you're in a position where you want to make a policy change. As a trustee, you spend a lot of time having one-on-one conversation. It's just like anything else. You need to win people over. (T-1 SA-3)

This demonstrates micropolitical awareness as Trustee Sutton balances individual power and “knowing that (she is) only one vote around the table” (T-1). As trustees lost their authority through legislation, they relied more heavily on their personal persuasion to move agendas forward. The use of personal persuasion to move forward an agenda is a common theme throughout all of the interviews for this study.

The Changing Power of the Trustee

Perhaps the most significant finding from examining Trustee Sutton’s interview is the ability to trace the change in the power dynamic for trustees throughout her thirty years in the role. Sutton speaks in detail to the changes that occurred to the role of trustee in the mid- 90’s:

Prior to the Harris years the board could set the mill rates…The administration would bring forward their recommendations at a board meeting in those days…say, to add five social workers to the budget…So we're now up over our recommendation. We would say okay. We are prepared to stick with it. We'll raise the mill rate you know the property taxes. It may mean $10 per year for you as a homeowner. What does it mean to the school board? It means we got five extra social workers. (T-1)

Trustees view the inability to change the mill rate as a reduction of power. That, combined with the reduction of their salaries to five thousand dollars per year at the time,
gave them the sense that the government was attempting to get rid of the trustee position altogether.

Along with the inability to raise tax rates, Trustee Sutton expresses other limitations that had been placed on the board of trustees. For example, currently, trustees are unable to influence the new health curriculum, even as a group. She feels that this is frustrating for trustees as many of their constituents have expressed displeasure with the new curriculum. She also speaks to the inflexibility of moving funding around as funds are now allocated into specific categories. Finally, she talks about the lack of power in terms of the bargaining process as most items are decided at the provincial level.

Although the province has removed responsibilities, Trustee Sutton alludes to other sources of power available to trustees:

The trustees have lost power provincially, but the trustees still have a lot of internal power…The director doesn't want to be called into the chair’s office…The administration understands that they answer to the board of trustees. And the trustees, they still have… they have pull- that’s the only way that I can explain it. The trustees have pull. (T-1)

Positional power is the authority given by virtue of being a trustee. Recent legislation makes a clear distinction between governance and operations, which reduces trustee power. However, Sutton still feels that trustees hold positional power, which she likens to that of a school principal:

We're the employers, so we're the bosses if you want to call it that. So it's like you having the power that you have with your staff. That’s the power of the position for the trustees. (T-1)

She speaks about trustees occasionally overstepping their positional power. For example, occasionally, a trustee attempts to tell the director that his decisions to close schools during bad weather is wrong. Although Sutton expresses an understanding that she needs
to “keep within the confines of her own sandbox” (T-1), she also realizes that the director will do everything that he could to “keep trustees happy” (T-1).

The Power of the Chair

All of the study’s participants express that in terms of positional power, the role of the chair continues to carry authority. Superintendents speak about the “sway” that both the chair and vice chair have within the board. Superintendent A attributes this to both “a great deal of respect for the position of chair and a great deal of respect for the (current) chair herself” (T-1 SA-1). Superintendent A also expresses a combination of personal attributes, experience and positional authority, which makes the chair highly regarded. Superintendent B indicates, “If you are in good with the chair, good things happen” (T-1 SA-1). The director also confirms that the chair is seen to have more influence than other trustees:

I think by virtue of the role, by virtue of the fact that they control meeting and control who talks and who doesn't, they absolutely have more opportunity to have influence on policy as it's being drafted and goes to board for approval, and also with other members of the board to support what they would like to have happened. (T-5 SA-5)

He also attributes the respect and power that the chair has to her longevity in the role, as well as her personal attributes. In defining what makes a good chair, he states:

First and foremost they’re a good listener and they give lots of time to the other trustees. They don't try to ramrod their personal views but rather they listen to you and they're very cautious about providing their own views…So a good chair has to be careful not to assume positional authority – positional influence…If she speaks eloquently and in articulate fashion with the core of what's best for kids, she will invariably listen to because she's the chair. (T-1)
This identifies the qualities of what makes a chair successful as well as the balance between the positional power and personal persuasion that is a part of the micropolitical awareness of being a trustee.

Sutton speaks about past Chairs who used the technique of “divide and conquer” (T-1). With a larger number of trustees to work with, often one side would “gang up on the other, to try to make changes in their own way” (T-1). This suggests the practice of voting blocks, which would be another way that trustees could use alliances to move agendas forward. Although the power of position is still acknowledged for the chair of the board, sources indicate that personal persuasion and group dynamics are much more important than in previous times.

**Group Power Versus Individual Power**

Superintendent A states, “All trustees have an equal voice…it’s just that some of those voices are louder than others” (T-1 SA-1). In examining group power versus individual power, both senior administrators and Trustee Sutton agree that powers vary based on the strengths of the individual trustee:

As a group they’re very powerful. Individual power of a trustee is… That's a jagged front. I think some trustees have more influence than others do. And that's partly whether or not they’re really good public speakers, whether or not they will put themselves out there. But as a group they're very powerful. Nothing can really move forward without the trustees. (T-1 SA-3)

Superintendent C points to both the individual strengths of some trustees and the power of utilizing alliances to move agendas forward. Sutton is viewed as a powerful individual, and acknowledges this herself. Although retired for a number of years, Sutton speaks of
her ongoing relationship with the current board Chair and other high level provincial politicians, whom she describes as personal friends.

**Personal Power**

There are many examples of Trustee Sutton’s individual power. She refers to principals who contact her to have renovations done on their buildings. Although this is clearly an operational matter, Sutton uses her position as a trustee to “go down, make (her) case, and ask for money to knock walls down and relocate the office” (T-1). Projects like this are not taken to the board table. She expresses that in order to achieve this type of goal, she has to depend on “rationale, information, and relationships” (T-1). If the planning department has difficulty getting permits for a building, she uses her relationships with the City Council and the Mayor to achieve her goals and asking for money from the capital budget to move the building project along.

Superintendent B speaks to the influence that Sutton exerts on fellow trustees prior to board meetings. Through backroom conversations and lobbying behind the scenes during social informal times, most decisions are made prior to the board meeting. He likens the board meetings to a “finely orchestrated ballet” (T-1 SA-2). Regarding the difference between influence and power, he states:

I think about power as being positional. As being sometimes gender-based. As being racially based…I see the trustees get involved in a lot of lobbying one another. You do this for me and I'll do this for you at a later date. I know that kind of stuff goes on with the trustees. They count votes before the vote is taken…the implication is if they don't have that capital does that mean that their agenda, which probably is every bit as valid as yours and mine, doesn't get the attention it deserves? (T-1 SA-2)
Being a member of a racial minority has become more a more significant factor as the board of trustees has increased in diversity, as trustees from a variety of backgrounds not only reflects the voice of the their cultural community more, but they are also able to reflect each trustee’s personal experiences as a minority representative in school board decision making. This is something that the board has had to learn to navigate:

People have their own narratives and sometimes they don't take the time to listen to other narratives. They really come from their frame and so one of the things that I think is a challenge for the director and a challenge for the Chair of the board, is working together with the board of trustees to listen to one another, to try and understand each other's narratives and also to understand the story of the board. (T-1 SA-2)

The superintendent explains “personal narratives can cause you to come to take it to the table with preconceived notions and sometimes you have to sit and listen and kind of dig underneath what you thought” (T-1 SA-2). The introduction of more a more diverse board of directors challenges and complicates the dynamic between members, but it also broadens and deepens the discussions around equity.

**The Power of Alliance**

The personal influence that Trustee Sutton and other trustees wielded contrasts with the power of alliance and the power of the group. Sutton herself attempts to make a distinction between the power of the collective and personal influence. She states that power is something that cannot be directed, whereas influence can be exerted over others. She illustrates the power of the group collective:

If we wanted to fire the director we have the power to do that with rationale. We have the power to close the school with the right rationale. So those are the powers that you have. But your powers are defined in the education act. Your power is to hire the director. That's your power. And
your power collectively is by board motion...Collectively you got power.
(T-1)

In its most positive form, alliances unite the school board. For example, when advocating for changes to funding with the Provincial government, the trustees worked together to create flyers, hold town hall meetings with their constituents, and lobby to Queen’s Park. Their strategies were effective as the funding formula has been changed through their collective efforts.

Superintendent A gives an example of when this collective power was used in a negative way regarding a forceful alliance that used to exist between four very influential trustees. She notes that these individuals were respectful of others’ points of view, but were the ones that people knew to contact to achieve their goals. The Superintendent also refers to previous times where there was an “old boys network” (T-1 SA-1) of trustees. This group had “well-established relationships, well-established power hierarchies” (T-1 SA-1) which would entrench the status quo.

Superintendent B also refers to the interplay of personal influence on the team dynamic. This is identified in many contexts: longstanding and new trustees; single trustee over a vast rural area, as opposed to a team of trustees representing an urban area; highly privileged areas as opposed to poverty-stricken areas. In particular, all of the Superintendents echo Sutton’s point that there is “power in longevity on the board” (T-1). That power is seated in affiliations with others and longstanding trustees use that power to sway more inexperienced trustees. Superintendent C states, “Experience is so important in terms of how much influence a trustee holds”. (T-1 SA-3)

Superintendent A summarizes Trustee Sutton’s impact through her work to make the board more responsive to the needs of gay and lesbian students:
We had a rash of suicides of gay and lesbian students who were in high school...and all of their notes, they talked about how they felt ostracized they were bullied; they didn't feel valued or accepted. And so Trustee Sutton took this really bold step to start this Grade 9 conference every year to talk about gender equity and to talk about sexual identity...It showed (her) responsiveness - responsiveness to their kids. And the fact that they've got kids that are feeling so disconnected from the school that they feel that they have to take their own lives that trustees felt that they needed to do something about it. So I think that even though they don't set a tax rate, I think they do amazing work. And they're the voice of the community. There is no more responsive level of government than local government. (T-1 SA-2)

Examining power and influence are integral in the understanding how trustees are able to navigate their political climate in order to move forward an agenda of equity within the board. Trustee Sutton’s interview is significant in that her career spans over thirty years of board history and provides context to the changes to the role of trustee and their ability to use power and influence at different times through the context of their position at the time.

**Case Two**

This case further expands on the understanding of the role of the trustee and the restrictions in their authority and subsequent rise in the use of influence to move the equity agenda forward. A specific example of how this influence has been utilized to create a change in funding is explored, as well as possible barriers to equity that trustees need to overcome in order to create equitable outcomes. Finally, the role of trustees in regards to hiring and placement of school board leadership is examined. This leads to observations as to how bias may be perpetuated through the use of influence as well as hiring in regards to community representation.
Background

Trustee Smith served five terms with the school board over the past twenty years. He ran because his own children had spent three years in portable classrooms that were placed outside of the main school building and he felt that the board was not giving a rational explanation as to why they were not building more schools to accommodate the student population. He cites his interest in equity as stemming from his professional career as a registered nurse. Although he is Caucasian, he feels that being in a traditionally female profession led to his marginalization in many respects. Trustee Smith describes himself as a bull-headed individual. He expresses that it doesn’t bother him if people don’t like him because he is not looking for approval to validate his self-worth. He expresses that he enjoyed responding to people who got irritated with him “What do you expect for $5000 a year?” (T-2)

Perceptions of the Role of Trustee

While on the board, Smith was very active with the planning and building committee. He describes himself as a “nag” about getting rid of portables and putting up more schools. He is known for not discussing resolutions prior to board meetings, which is unusual as many trustees express the importance of persuading others to support their motions:

You knew if you were trying to do a Hail Mary resolution – and I'm the king of the Hail Mary's – I would drop a resolution. Three or four times a year, without prior discussion with anybody. I did it deliberately to start something and see if it could get traction…and I would be shocked, occasionally, when my rhetoric would win the day. (T-2)
From his perspective, voting blocks are quite fluid. By never trading votes and by throwing motions out without pre-discussion, he avoids the possibility that other trustees might establish a “coalition” against him. Although he did not trade votes, Smith notes that he did stage some votes with other trustees to make a point but making sure that the motion would not get through. He gives the example of when Ontario Public School Board Association kept raising the rates for membership:

So we put a motion on the floor that unless OPSBA agreed to charge what we wanted to pay we would withdraw from the organization and we sent it to them and we gave them a month’s notice. They came back to us and said well, we can't agree to it but why don't you just pay the bill as you did last year. But we can't put it on the books. (T-2)

Smith suggests that every trustee comes into the role with a different agenda and individual understandings of what the role should entail. He summarizes his own perspective of the job as ensuring that the programs for kids are in place and ensuring that the public is respected in terms of the bureaucracy of the school board. He likens the role of the trustee to a public watchdog, providing accountability and transparency to his constituents. Smith expresses the importance of trustees not getting caught up in the minutia of the processes of running the board. “I don’t feel that the trustee’s role is to be involved in the process. I think they should be serving as the public eyes.” (T-2)

He also feels that during his time with the school board, trustee power had become restricted. For example, board meetings ended a full two hours earlier than when he first started as a trustee. One of the responsibilities that was removed just prior to Smith’s time as a trustee was moving to a per-pupil-ratio instead of mill rates. Smith is critical of this move because he feels that it lessened accountability of the trustees to the local taxpayers and moves the money into the “innocuous provincial pot where the public has
Smith disagrees with the centralization of educational resources and training. One shift that he feels is particularly restrictive is when the Director became accountable to the ministry. He feels that this accountability shift is problematic. “Directors are now caught in that conundrum well, the board employs me but the ministry can fire me if they want… If they don't like me they can fire me as well” (T-2). The current Chair also speaks to the reduction of trustee’s power and resulting change to the focus of the role:

The rules have changed dramatically. As you would say in some ways negatively because of our inability to meet local needs with regard to levying taxes…But in other ways I think it has simplified to the point where I think it's more effective…I think it's become more of an advocacy role which is I think perfect role for public education and for trustees. The system is complicated and children are as complicated and complex. And so especially with our new growth and a immigrant population and new Canadians…I think that we provide equity to those parents who need someone to help shepherd them through very confusing system and so that in itself it's a worthwhile goal purpose for this role. (T-4)

Although Smith indicates that centralizing processes remove power from the trustee, he also sees benefit to it. For example, if something comes before the board that makes constituents uncomfortable, often it will pass because it is initiated by a provincial policy thrust or in some cases human rights legislation. He indicates:

Some folks would be uncomfortable with it and we would say, well you know what? If it's a policy from the ministry, it's a policy from the ministry. That's it. You know it's one of the few times I actually agreed with centrally defined policies. Because sometimes you have to break it before you can remake it. (T-2)

Although Smith is against removing institutional power from trustees, having the ability to point to a provincial mandate has a positive impact in terms of moving agenda items forward.
Views on Equity

Trustee Smith situates his understanding of equity within the context of fairness:

So equity is… I don't want to use the word fair because it's not about fairness. It's about… And it's not about opportunity. It's somewhere between opportunity and fairness. About every child who dreams of being an astronaut can aspire to that and the school board doesn't get in the way, in fact, clears the path so that that is possible. (T-2)

Like many other trustees, Smith focuses his definition of equity around the concept of providing opportunities for students through funding and programming, situating these opportunities around the value imbued concept of fairness. When questioned, he identifies that part of the trustee’s role is to address systemic inequities as well and gives the example of how standardized testing can disadvantage some children:

Well, even into the testing system. You can have assistance at the exam but only if you need this and this and this. So what about that one kid who need something a little different? …that's a systemic barrier. What about the kid who doesn't read well?...throw a test in front of him. He's not going to be able to do it. (T-2)

Addressing systemic barriers when trying to close the achievement gap is identified across many interviews as an important focus for the board. However, at this point, superintendents contend that data to assist with this is currently not available. “There has been no sort of empirical studies done. I think we have some hunches anecdotally but there’s been no statistical data gathered like that and there has been no data gathered racially for students” (T-1 SA-1).

Funding Fairness – Special Education Campaign

Smith believes that when the power to set mill rates was removed from trustees during the Harris years, equity funding came to the forefront. Equitable funding,
particularly in terms of special education, was a topic of concern in a number of interviews. Participants in this study spoke to the school board’s campaign to increase this funding.

The funding campaign was highly organized, utilizing a grassroots method of garnering support. The current Chair explains:

   We kept the message simple..(and)…presented to every MPP because there are representatives in cabinet, in parliament. We needed them to understand exactly what it meant to their constituents. And so we personalize it for that and we actually made appointments and went and presented it. Again it was a lot of relationship building, a lot of trust building, and it was personalized. (T-2)

The ultimate success of this lengthy campaign demonstrates many points. Firstly, it demonstrates the political acumen of the trustees. Framing the conversation in such a way that school council members throughout the board supported the initiative allowed the campaign to gain momentum. The Chair expresses this was initially difficult to do as “people’s eyes tended to glaze over when (she) talked about the 1.8 billion dollar budget”. (T-1 SA-3) The Chair kept the message simple, and utilized the media in a targeted way. “Media played a big part too… so that the public understood what we were trying to accomplish. So that the statistics we presented were so clear that people couldn't deny it” (T-1 SA-3).

   This example also demonstrates the different types of power at play within the trustee group. As a group, all trustees spoke to their constituents and to their MPP’s to “get the attention to the level that the government took a look at it” (T-1 SA-3). In addition to working as a group, trustees used their own personal connections and influence to successfully achieve funding equity:
The minister met with Trustee Sutton, (the Director) and myself…And (the education minister) said yes I can give you half an hour…because she's a personal friend of Trustee Sutton’s…And she actually said I agree with you. You're right. Help me solve the problem...And we did…I'm not saying it was the point that turns the time but it certainly helped for the ministry to understand our issues. (T-2)

This demonstrates the personal influence that trustees, such as Trustee Sutton have in terms of moving agendas forward. Because of her personal connection to the Minister, she was able to set up a meeting and ultimately change the way that all schools in the province are funded for Special Education students.

Other interviewees acknowledge Trustee Sutton’s individual power. As a long standing trustee, her impact on the board, and indeed on the education system for the entire province is evident:

I’ve seen her in action. And some of us who are new Superintendents are like yeah you know what? You do have power and at the end of the day we understand the difference between governance and operations…Yup she had a lot of power and that worried me. That actually bothered me. Because that's like, how did one trustee have that much power? (T-4 SA-4)

As much as this ability to influence decision has been used to improve funding in this circumstance, it is also to influence decision making outside of the realm of governance. The Superintendent indicates that this happens based on the power dynamic and historical context within the district.

**Barriers to Equity**

Smith identifies several barriers to trustees supporting a more equitable education system. He feels that unions act as an obstacle to specific teachers being creative in their classroom delivery. In his opinion, unions hold the teacher to mediocrity so that other teachers don’t look bad. Another barrier is the length of time that teachers have been in
the profession. He feels that until you were a fifth year teacher, you are viewed as a probate. That, on top of the five years that it often takes to achieve full time employment, act as a huge disincentive for highly talented teachers to remain in the profession. He considers this dynamic to be a “systemic barrier to continuity” (T-2), causing young teachers to leave out of frustration.

This idea of experienced versus newer individuals also came out as a potential barrier to improving equity within the trustee group. A common theme was that experienced trustees are able to influence decision making more than inexperienced trustees. One current trustee indicates:

I think that when you're sitting at the table for 25 years as a trustee, you have my regards. You have given a lot of your time and energy to public service. Having only done it for six years so, I think if someone's voice has more weight it would be because of the experience that they bring to the table. (T-3 T-1)

This dynamic in the board appears to be changing. During the most recent election, several new trustees have been elected that have strong points of view and who are “not falling in line” (T-1 SA-2) with what the experienced trustees would like. This is “creating some interesting tension because there are the same oldies and newbies. It’s the new trustees that are rattling the cage of the established a little bit” (T-1 SA-1). Other superintendents also are noticing the change in the dynamic:

I would say some of our longstanding trustees probably have more voice. I would also say trustees some of our new trustees who are just willing to voice it. They have voice. Which I think is good too. I think we haven't had that…I would say a little bit of cognitive dissonance is always good. I think we were too much the same for a long time...And I would say that that's starting to change now, right?...we do have some cognitive dissonance. I worried a few years ago when everybody just agreed. Because sometimes you don't move agendas forward like this Black focus group that we're having now. (T-4 SA-4)
The current board is made up of a more ethnically diverse group, which is causing questions to be raised regarding current practices. Even the use of the term “new” was challenged, as it implied less experience. One board member recalls this discussion and now refers to this group as the ‘recently elected’ trustees out of respect for their position.

The current Director also identifies the current challenges regarding unequal voice at the trustee table:

> We were starting to see some challenges in our new board because it was a large turnover. You know, if you have one or two new trustees they are shaped very quickly by the remainder but if the turnover is large, then the new trustee are also shaping the current trustees and that's positive and as it should be in a democratic society, but it can also cause tension. And it can cause lack of understanding and clarity around the role of governance. (T-5 SA-5)

Although this dissonance can result in the status quo being challenged, it can also act as a barrier to equity if voting and discussions become polarized. Often dissent would be voiced as “my community would not be in support of this” (T-2). Another Superintendent B also noted this tendency to stalemate the votes as something that is currently happening within the board:

> I would say that voting is definitely polarized right now in the board of trustees. That's a problem…We have always had a much more cohesive group of trustees than other boards around us…there are some that need to be reined in and some that need to be given license to be more opinionated. (T-1 SA-2)

As demonstrated here, the longstanding nature of the trustees in this board can be seen as a strength in terms of continuity, but also potentially a detriment because of the influence that experienced trustees have on newer trustees.

Lastly, Trustee Smith identifies low socio economic status and deficit thinking as a barrier to achieving a more equitable environment within the school district. He speaks
about one area of the district where many of the students were minorities and from a low socio economic background. Constituents in his area worried about the stereotype of a rising crime rate and guns that would be brought in due to this. Smith attended community events at the school and noted:

They planned on filling the cafeteria but instead the entire school was full of parents supporting their kids…Parents moved to Brampton for a reason. And it was to give their kids opportunity…And there are caring parents in both communities…You get somebody who's made up their mind years ago about race they're never gonna change it. But I think it was more issues with socioeconomic is the real barrier to kids learning. (T-2)

It is interesting to note that board members accept disadvantage based on socioeconomic status more easily and are less open to discussing disadvantage based on race. A current superintendent notes that some of this sense of holding on to the past can be attributed to the rapid diversification of the area, particularly between the years 2000 – 2005. She speaks about how during that time, many families left the area and moved to the northern part of the school district. She indicated that people of South Asian descent refer to this as the “White Flight” (T-4, SA-4). She also speaks about the discomfort that some trustees display with the way that she answered a question regarding equity in her own interview to become a Superintendent:

A question was asked to me by one of the trustees and it was around equity. And she didn't want to hear about race and she didn't want to hear about religion because I talked about that. She wanted to talk about class. She made it very clear in the way she asked the question…I made a conscious decision to answer…talking about class based on intersectionalities. (T-4 SA-4)

What the superintendent illustrates so clearly is that although trustees are willing to talk about equity in broad terms, some areas are more difficult for them to broach than others.
Generally, people find it easier to discuss class than to discuss systemic inequities. The superintendent speculates that this is possibly due White guilt:

And I think not getting caught up in guilt and I think sometimes that's what happens. And once we get caught up in guilt that's when we can make it about ourselves rather than the people that we're trying to help. And we see this often with first Nations Métis community, where we all feel a lot of guilt. And so when we get caught up in our guilt we can't support them. We try to be saviours. And that's not the point. It really is to be an ally. (T-4 SA-4)

Being unable to discuss openly possible prejudices, obstructs self-reflection and a deeper understandings of the underlying causes of systemic barriers. White guilt limits our understanding and our ability to build a more inclusive society. Acknowledging and understanding biases and stereotypes allows individuals to think in terms of being an ally and appreciating each other as opposed to rescuing others.

**Achieving Equity**

In looking at the trustee’s role in creating a more equitable environment for learning, Trustee Smith feels very strongly that there needs to be a focus on both structures and processes:

I did a lot of quality improvement and one of the things I learned very quickly is if all you do is focus on the outcome, everything is going to fall apart because you need structure, and you need process. And it's not structure plus process equals outcome. Its structure times process equals outcome. So if you have a very strong structure and you only have a process that the value of one, that's all you get...And so that's the way I see equity. One is you want equity of opportunity. So if you say we want everyone in this country to be able to speak English and French but you don't provide English and French... That is structure. So you can have the structure...but if you can't find staff that can actually instruct in French and work in French, that's the process so that structure is totally useless. You need both. (T-2)

From his stance, the function of trustees is to ensure that both structures and processes are
in place. A current senior administrator spoke to a similar model. Trustees can “move an agenda forward by making sure that equity is part of the strategic plan and that money is directed towards that” (T-1 SA-1). In this case, the strategic plan would be the structure and the direction of resources to support that plan would be the process necessary to achieve the board goals.

Significance of Case Two: Trustees and Hiring Practices

Trustee Influence on Hiring

Equity in hiring procedures is an area of concern for school boards. Within this topic, concerns are identified regarding opportunities for promotion, as well as the representation of marginalized groups as teachers. The use of influence either in hiring procedures or in the placement of administrator to particular schools, jeopardizes the equitable outcomes of this process. This section identifies ways in which trustees in this board influence the decision making regarding hiring, particularly for principals and superintendents. By making recommendations to hiring committees and influencing placement outcomes, trustees use their power to shape the staffing of district leadership. This creates opportunities for bias to occur, circumnavigating the processes that have been established to create more equitable hiring practices and often maintains the status quo in terms of diversity.

Although under the definition of governance, the ministry dictates that trustees should only be involved in hiring of the director and possibly the associate directors, historically in this school district, trustees have been a part of the hiring process for
principals, vice principals, superintendents and the director. One superintendent indicates that:

Trustees have a strong voice in hiring. They sit on the interview teams, which is kind of unique anymore and I would say the province doesn't love that happening. But our director is committed to having the trustees voice at the table…their point of view has an equal weight to everyone else at the table. (T-1 SA-3)

Trustees see themselves as working together and working within the system to be a part of the decision making process regarding all administrators. The current Director supports this involvement:

It allows you to shape trustees views and help them understand what it means to be a good principal or vice principal or superintendent. And if they are a part of the decision, they can't three months from then say what were they thinking? (T-5 SA-5)

Although most other school districts do not involve trustees in the hiring process because of historical context, trustees continue to be a part of this process in this school district. This is done in part to give trustees confidence in the board leadership. In terms of decision making as to whether a candidate is successful in this process, trustee’s voices are equal to all others at the table. Currently, the practice is to use a rating scale for each candidate based on evidence seen either through a package of information submitted by the candidate or through the interview process. Following the interview, the team talks together and “unless there is strong opposition, the group decides that the candidate will be placed on the list” (T-5 SA-5). In this way, everyone sees their role in supporting new leaders.

Trustee Smith was a part of this process a few years ago and he does not feel that trustees should be a part of the hiring committees, seeing it as a strictly administrative function. He recalls times when trustees raised objection and vetoed a candidate based on
prior knowledge. Smith believes that many trustees wanted to be on the interview team because it helps them to get to know new administrators better. His concern is trustees get preconceived notions about the principals in their areas. Principals who have been involved in this process also express that it is inappropriate for trustees to sit on administrative hiring teams “in the sense that they can represent their community, then maybe but so much of the principal role now is policies, procedures, and legalistic and so no. The trustees are not part of that world anymore” (T-5 P-4).

Trustees Making Recommendations

Another way that trustees have influence over the hiring process is through recommendations and unofficial meetings of candidates. One Superintendent used a trustee as a reference for her promotion:

I wouldn't have used a trustee as a reference but (the Director) suggested I do. I was a little uneasy about that because you choose your references carefully. And I knew that it should be a good reference but I didn't know that a trustee would carry that kind of weight. But what she did do for me because she was very connected to the rest of the trustees, is that she arranged a couple of lunches. Where she… and I and (another trustee) went out for lunch one day. (T-1 SA-3)

When questioned about this potentially giving her an unfair advantage, the Superintendent didn’t feel that it was inappropriate:

There was no inside secret thing going on. But at least the trustee knew my face… So over that lunch she asked what have you done? And I was able to sort of talk to her. So that was probably a nice level of influence because that was one more person that I actually had a personal connection with. Before I had an interview. Is that influence? Yes that is. But it wasn't at a level that I think was untoward or anything… She kind of talk to me about what it might look like because it is a bit intimidating. (T-1 SA-3)
Trustees and Placement

In regards to placement of principals and vice principals, there is a great deal of variance in how superintendents and trustees perceive their role in this process. Trustee Smith indicates that some trustees “lobby ferociously for principals” and in some cases reject a principal with less experience. Smith disagrees with this stance. If asked by the superintendent for his opinion regarding the movement of particular principal he deferred to their expertise:

I never objected to any placement. My questions were, well, where have they been principal before. This is their first assignment as principal. So I got a first principal following the first principal following a first principal. And if the superintendent was smart, they say so it works right? And I'd say, okay. (T-2)

Other superintendents give a different perspective. The first indicated:

No, they don't have a voice in that. They only have a voice in that if they had a real reason for it to be a problem in an ideal world. I mean I have to say there that in some cases, based on the trustee there are some that are more interested in who the vice principals and principals are in their area. And some who would just trust the Superintendent team to make the best decision. (T-1 SA-3)

This statement seems contradictory to previously expressed views, in that the superintendent does not believe that trustees have input into placement unless they have a problem. The second superintendent indicates that in her experience, trustees are called after the placement meetings have taken place and that it is more of a conversation about meeting the needs of the community as opposed to individual characteristics of the principal being placed. However, Trustee Sutton holds a different view as to the trustee’s role in this process:

I could veto a placement in one of the schools that I represented. If I knew that there was an individual that was a principal…that had all kinds of issues – couldn’t relate to the parents, staff issues…What do I first do if I
haven't already heard John's name? I'll call my trustee colleague on the board and say hey, you got John at one of your schools. What's the issue down there? Oh God. Don't touch them. (T-1)

This indicates different views between trustees and superintendents as to the function of trustees in this process as to being either consultative in nature or more of a conversation after the placement has occurred. When asked who would get the “undesirable” principal, Sutton responds, “A new trustee would get them. A new trustee… somebody naïve”. (T-1)

**The Evolution of the Promotion Process**

This school board has recently moved away from the practices of having principals recommend candidates to the promotion process. This practice was changed after a report done by an external agency recommended that this would improve fairness of hiring practices. The current Director indicates:

It was a matter of confidence and optics. The survey that we had done and the report that drove the action plan for our (equitable hiring program) really would've suggested that some members of our staff didn't feel that we had a fair, and open, and equitable hiring practice. And to some extent they were right and wrong. They were wrong if they thought, and some did, that we were hiring people and promoting people based on who knew who. But they were right in that there were vast discrepancies between practices…So we needed to ensure that staff not only saw that it was different but also believe that it was different. (T-5 SA-5)

In the past, the school district has relied on mentoring of principals to support new candidates looking for leadership opportunities. Trustee Smith feels that there is both a positive and a negative aspect to this type of approach in that “if you’re well mentored by your first principal, then it’s not difficult to get a recommendation from your second” (T-2). He feels that if you are unsuitable, you won’t get the recommendation. However, he
neglects to take into consideration the potential personal bias of the mentors, in that a
candidate may have personal differences with their principals, which may act as a barrier
to their advancement.

One principal echoes this sentiment:

Certainly the process back then was who you knew. If you had a principal
that really supported you chances you were gonna get through because
chances are he – and I use he on purpose – chances are he had buddies that
were superintendents or who would be on the selection committees. So
there was the belief back then, that it was who you knew. (T-5 P-4)

At the time that this principal went through the promotion process, he felt that there was a
push to promote more women. The year that he went through the process “the twenty-
one final vice principals came through and there was only one male on the list: the rest
were females” (T-5 P-4). Although he acknowledges the need for a correction in the
system, he feels that this was done with a “sledgehammer when a tack hammer would
do” (T-5 P-4). He expresses frustration with this:

If you're gonna make a big huge change…we used to put great faith in the
word all other things being equal. If all other things were great, then hire
one of those five identified groups. Hard for us people who were in the
trenches to believe that all other things were being equal when 19 or 20 of
the 21 being interviewed were women. (T-5 P-4)

One of the female superintendents speaks about being promoted under affirmative action.
As a part of this ministry initiative, she indicates several instances where male colleagues
made her uncomfortable about taking on a leadership role:

Affirmative action…caused a lot of difficulty for me…I had my principal
say to me aren't you supposed be walking three steps behind?... I was
sitting in P/VP a meeting with him and they were trying to get people to
run for executive and…he leaned over and said the next thing you know
they'll want blacks and women in there. I really didn't have a recourse at
that time. After I was promoted I would have colleagues who didn't get
through say maybe if I wear your skirt and shoes I would get promoted too. (T-1 SA-2)

At that time, Trustee Sutton chaired the board. She articulated that one of the goals was to “work towards representation in the teaching profession that reflected the kids sitting in the classrooms” (T-2). Although not confirmed by other sources, Sutton speaks about the selection process for candidates that occurred approximately twenty-five years ago. She spoke to the comment “all things being equal”:

How do we do that fairly? How do you have a hundred people apply for a job, ninety-four of them are white and six of them are minority? What is your chance of getting an interview? The philosophy is, you choose the best person for the job. But when I was Chair …we brought in a method…you have two hundred applications. They randomly picked. If there's only ten minorities it's like taking a raffle ticket…If you were black, if you were South Asian…qualifications wise, all things being equal, you would get extra rights. You wouldn't go in the barrel. You would go straight to the interview. We were accused of quotas…So now you're giving that person an edge because their competition is only fifteen people. Where as your competition is one hundred eighty-five people. (T-1)

Although this practice was put in place to rectify systemic barriers, there was opposition to it from several of the board members:

The government didn't give us any opposition but then there was a perception that if you were minority you got the edge. Like it would come to me, what are my chances of ever becoming a vice principal? I'm just a white male. But Joe Blow - his chances are better…he's black. At the time we had to explain…he's got a masters, you got a masters. He teaches history, you teach history. We have to give these people a little bit of an edge. Because there's five thousand of you in the barrel and there's only ten minority representatives. But then we got away from that. You know there was enough opposition…The board members felt that we were doing quotas and nobody likes the word quota. (T-1)

The implementation of this legislation caused hard feelings both within and outside of the established power group.
Bias

The promotion dinner or as Trustee Smith referred to it as the “may be promoted dinner” (T-2), was a time for candidates to attend a banquet with trustees and senior administrators prior to going through the promotion process. The purpose was to get to know the trustees, superintendents and other leadership candidates. One principal expresses that he feels the connections made there with other candidates were very valuable. However, he also sees that it “became a schmooze fest and it was seen as providing favouritism to certain people” (T-5 P-5). Trustee Smith also expresses that although he enjoyed the dinner, he “felt sorry for the people because it was difficult to have a genuine conversation at a dinner table when you’re trying to show all your best manners… highly scrutinized” (T-2). The promotion dinner has recently been discontinued for these reasons. However, it leads to the bigger question of how bias impacts hiring practices. One Superintendent articulates:

How did those biases play out when I'm actually interviewing people and hiring and do I look for people who are also like myself? I don't mean just by race….Do I want to hire people like me? … It’s beyond just the race and the class and the gender pieces, also personality. We do hire people like ourselves. (T-4 SA-4)

Hiring for fit is as a theme throughout several interviews. One principal expresses:

So if I was hiring somebody for my kindergarten team… I'm looking for somebody else to complement (what I already have). That's what I mean by fit. I also mean personality. If I know I got three people that are fairly mousey and quiet teachers, I don't want Attila the Hun. That may fit in a different team of really strong players, but they would pull over and overpower quieter teachers. (T-5 P-4)
A current trustee speaks to the concept of “fit” as well in terms of placing a new principal in the rural north of the school district as a way to maintain the status quo. He states that hiring for fit:

would mean can you just maintain status quo for two years? Can you not come in and change everything? Can those children who went skating today if they have always gone skating here and you came in and the first year and changed it to no skating but curling. I would hear about that. It's gonna be an issue. (T-3 T-1)

Hiring for fit does maintain the status quo. In order to move the equity agenda forward, biases must be challenges so as not to maintain the current order.

**Hiring to Reflect the Community**

Most recently, trustees and their constituents have advocated for diversity in community representation for school board leadership positions. The current Director expresses the danger in looking merely at the number of racialized leaders in the system:

In 1990 it would've been unreasonable to have expected that there wouldn’t have been many South Asian teachers…you can't simply judge by the number of people in a position because there may not of been the pool to draw from…think back to how long it takes to become a principal, … it would be rare to be a principal without 15 years of experience. And so in 2010, you must’ve been entering the teaching profession in 1995. Well the wave of South Asians… would have only just started in the early 1990s …it's too easy to just look at the numbers. Particularly when you're looking at employment you have to look a little deeper as to what were the patterns. (T-5 SA-5)

This statement is based on the assumption that there were not candidates in other school districts or partially through this process prior to the influx of different cultures in the early nineties. Although there are currently no statistics within the school district regarding ethnic diversity of the work force, anecdotally it has been reported that there has been a steady increase in the number of ethnic minorities represented in the
leadership of the school board. It is unclear whether this is a result of the board creating a racial mix through hiring practices, or if the pool of people from which to choose is becoming increasingly diverse. One Superintendent comments:

The board is always looking for excellent teachers and in my day excellent teachers came from largely a homogenous group of white people and as diverse people moved into the regional region and apply for jobs, the pool of people available to principals now is increasingly more diverse. (T-1 SA-2)

The Director is aware of the community desire for more principals that were representative, however, he argues “labelling does not qualify you for promotion because of your race. It doesn’t help the individual or the race” (T-5 SA-5).

Many interviewees comment on the tension between hiring for diversity and hiring the best person for the job. A superintendent states:

I had colleagues that sometimes would make those decisions to hire someone of a diverse background that wasn’t necessarily the best person for the job because they felt that diversity was important. (T-1 SA-4)

It is unclear whether the increase in diversified leadership throughout the school board is natural due to an increase in diversity of teachers or whether there has been a purposeful push towards diversification:

I think there was a conscious effort. I think people saw that there was the expectation. I think we have a lot more administrators in positions from the community. When I started, there were two of us South Asian administrators. (T-4 SA-4)

This trustee believes that there has been a conscious effort to increase diversity, while still taking into consideration the best person for the job:

What I struggle sometimes with as South Asian person, is…I know that there's been some hiring…where they hired because they're south Asian. I still think it has to be high-quality people…So when I was a superintendent…There was one principal who was racialized. When I left three years later, there was 15. There was a conscious effort to put people
through whom were racialized. (T-4 SA-4)

The combination of people being ready and being given the opportunities has increased diversity throughout the board. In addition to this, administrators who are making a conscious effort to seek out diversity also are moving this agenda forward. Some administrators indicate that they “did not see colour” (T-3 P-1) while interviewing, however, others make a “conscious effort to pick those people up as placements opened in their schools” (T-4 SA-4).

Trustee Smith acknowledges that in public sector, hiring should reflect the community. From a business model of education, if the workforce is not diversified, business suffers because the company is not in touch with their consumer’s needs. Representing the community and having strong role models for students are two reasons why the school district has focused on hiring people of diverse backgrounds.

In regards to hiring for diversity, people who represent marginalized groups but who are culturally assimilated are thought to have unique perspectives. One superintendent expresses the feeling of not belonging to either culture:

My South Asian community would say I'm not South Asian enough, right? Because you know I speak English without an accent, I was born here, I went to school here so I understand kind of the dynamics. And then you really aren't white either. (T-4 SA-4)

Superintendent D carries an awareness of this bridging of cultures at all times. In her position, she makes a conscious effort to keep this in mind when hiring and also when interacting with others. At one point, a colleague indicated to her:

You’re gonna be okay through your promotion processes…because you can talk “white”. And I was very insulted by that…not really even sure what that means. But I think what the person was trying to say in reflection now is probably because I understand the micropolitics – like political acumen there – you understand the structures. (T-4 SA-4)
This quote is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly diversity in hiring is a significant issue in creating a more equitable education system. Representation of marginalized groups in leadership roles allows students to have role models and see themselves reflected in their educational experience. The Superintendent refers to herself as being accused of “talking white”. This refers to her ability to assume characteristics of white people, such as speaking without an accent or fitting in with social expectations of white society. Although the person in this circumstance is implying that this is a positive attribute and will cause the Superintendent to be more successful in the promotion process, it is a highly pejorative term, implying a betrayal of culture. The concept of “talking white” relates significantly to the concepts of social power and privilege in that it implies a level of awareness of what is the accepted norm within the school district and the ability to adapt to that standard in order to be promoted. This concept will be analyzed further in the discussion section. In relation to the macro/meso/micro lenses, trustee awareness of the importance of diversification has an impact on the system as a whole. As they have historically always participated in the hiring process for this board, their understanding impacts hiring and ultimate may or may not lead to a more equitable education for all depending on their understanding of equity and their ability to influence change through this understanding.

Although Trustee Smith was in many ways an outlier to the study, his interview provides valuable insight into the trustees’ perceptions of barriers to equity as well as their ability to use influence to move forward agendas. This is most significantly demonstrated in the successful trustee campaign to have the special education funding formula changed. Finally their role in evolving hiring practices and hiring for diversity
were highlighted and discussed.

Case Three

This case explores how the localized understanding of equity in the school board impacts both trustees’ views and their decision making about it. Advocating for local community needs is sometimes at odds with the greater needs of the school district. As such, this case examines how trustees balance these when the agendas are opposing.

Background

Trustee Wheeler was elected to the board about twenty years ago and remained a trustee for thirteen years as the sole representative for a largely Caucasian community. She was a bookkeeper, and she believed that her financial background was an asset as a trustee. Initially, she ran because of her own grandchild’s difficulties in school:

He said…Nanna I can’t read. I said what do you mean? You’re in Grade 3. You should be able to read something by now…and then I thought I’m going to have a look at this school system…And there was no standardized curriculum back then…So I ran. I knew nothing about the education system. (T-3)

Wheeler did not win the first election, but was subsequently acclaimed in the next term. She recalled that her salary was five thousand dollars for the first nine years. During this time, she saw the introduction of the standardized curriculum, the change to provincially allocated funding based of the per-pupil ratio and substantially increased diversity
throughout the school district. She was the sole representative for the north end of the school district, which is mostly rural with large pockets of affluence.

Board members who worked with Wheeler refer to her as enthusiastic, dedicated, supportive and influential. One superintendent tells of Wheeler’s tough upbringing, how she raised her own children in poverty and how this influenced her views on equity within the school system. She “had a great interest in students who are struggling…Her thoughts were around equity and making sure that the kids who were struggling were getting what they needed”. (T-1 SA-3) Principals who worked with her describe her as a “dynamo”, “passionate and dedicated”. Wheeler’s tenacity is referred to in a number of interviews and is documented through the examples of busing and portables discussed in this chapter. Wheeler acknowledges her persistence when championing causes such as the drug awareness program in her ward. She identifies this advocacy and relationship building as her greatest strengths.

Views of Equity

Trustee Wheeler views equity as providing opportunity and access for all students:

For me, equity is about fairness… within the school system, and equity for teachers. That really bothered me that we were building state of the art buildings down (the south end of the board). And (the north end) had these pokey little schools… To me there is no equity there. (T-3)

Although the Social Risk Index is far lower in the school district’s north end and rural populations are declining, Trustee Wheeler feels that money should be put into new buildings for this area. Although the area was reputed to be affluent, Wheeler believes
that unreported poverty in the area of migrant farm workers creates a need for more equity work in the area:

There’s a lot of low income housing. You don’t see them because it’s a rural area. If you go on the lines, you’ll see these little trailers at the ends of farms. (T-3)

Wheeler indicates that even wealthy people in her area are “broke on a different level because they can’t pay their taxes because the bills are too huge” (T-3). This is one of the paradoxes in equity discussions with trustees. Their understanding of equity is shaped by their constituency and often leads to advocating for local as opposed to regional needs. A trustee living in an affluent neighbourhood may have difficulty understanding the needs and economic hardships in other areas.

Many examples are given of Trustee Wheeler bending policy to meet local needs. An example of such a situation can be seen in allowing parents to purchase portable classrooms to be positioned outside of one of the schools through fundraising initiatives. The $56,000 raised by parents allowed the students to remain there until Grade 8. In this particular circumstance, Trustee Wheeler supported the parents and the students remained at the school. She believes that the reason that the board gave in to this request was because it was highly publicized. The superintendent that has represented this area comments, “I don’t think we would offer that kind of influence to a parent group anymore. I think we make a decision in planning and they can delegate the board (approach the board to appeal a decision) if they want but it was a bit of a one-off” (T-1 SA-3).

The current trustee for this area was a part of the parent group that advocated for students to stay at the school. During the course of the interview, I asked if he himself
believes that this was an equitable decision given the influence that was exerted by parents through their social and economic capital. After some thought, he comments:

It is not equitable in that sense that someone in a socially deprived, economically deprived area doesn't get what people in other areas do and that's not fair. And I don't know how to address that…I don't know how to create a level playing field. (T-3 T-1)

He indicates that if he had been the trustee at that time, he would have relied on one-to-one conversations and used policy to anchor the discussion to dissuade parents from exerting this influence. This would have allowed him to navigate this political situation in order to achieve more equitable outcomes for students in the entire school district. This situation is a clear illustration of how a trustee can create inequitable conditions when advocating for local needs. Purchasing portable classrooms meets the needs of the local community but creates a two-tiered system for students in this area over an area where parents are economically disadvantaged.

**Significance of Case Three: Local Historical Context Influencing Decision Making**

**Power and Influence**

Trustee Wheeler’s time with the board spanned the introduction of a centralized curriculum, the creation of EQAO (standardized testing for Grade 3, 6 and 9 in Ontario) (1997); Bill 160 (1997), which introduced the new funding formula for school districts and disallowed deficit finances; affirmative action; amalgamation; PPM 119 The Equity and Inclusion policy (2009); and Bill 177 (2009), which further clarified the role of the trustee and reduced their political authority. At the beginning of this time, as one superintendent describes the influence of a small group of trustees. “They were a powerful force. Now that doesn't mean that they weren't respectful… but that they would
be they would be the ones to get to if you wanted whatever it was you were working on” (T-1 SA-1). Wheeler does not see this as a power clique, but as people who were good at networking:

Back in those days, (another trustee) and I were the only smokers…and I would go outside and smoke between meetings and stuff at conferences…I got to know Liz Sandals (a future MPP in Ontario) really well smoking…and the chair of the Toronto School Board and the mayor of Thunder Bay. The four of us would be out there puffing and networking. (T-3)

Trustee influence over financials was also more prevalent. With the new, pocketed money system, trustees considered themselves to be micromanaged. However, trustees did still have a great deal of positional power in terms of sitting on subcommittees. Because Trustee Wheeler was the only one representing her area, she was required to sit on every committee, which actually increased her positional power. An example of where her influence was increased was with her work on the Supervised Alternative Learning for Excused Pupils Committee (SALEP), where she directed finances for special education children. She also sat on the teacher’s grievance committee, which acted as “judges in terms of teacher grievances” (T-3).

School board employees are very aware of trustee power. One principal refers to a time when he upset Trustee Wheeler early on in his career:

I was a principal and we had outdoor classroom and we were getting some awards and things we decided we wanted to invite some dignitaries. I had been advised by my Superintendent that it was really important to involve trustees as much as possible… I invited the mayor and the trustee and then it became a scheduling conflict around the schedules of the two politicians. So I suggested that we conform to the schedule of the mayor…So (Trustee Wheeler) basically relayed the message down through my Superintendent “Didn't I understand who was the political representative of the school board that employed me? And didn't I understand that superintendents and directors reported to her and not to the mayor”. (T-3 P-1)
Through this political faux-pas, the principal realized the authority that trustees could exert. Trustee Wheeler also indicates that she was aware of both her positional authority as well as the influence she could utilize to move forward an agenda. She tells about how she used this authority while trying to collaborate with the area police detachment commander in order to get a drug awareness program implemented for the northern part of the school district. She upset the commander and he became quite aggressive with her:

He come across the desk at me. And his language was unbelievable. I guess he was getting some problems with his officers and he took it out on me. And he threatened me. He come across the desk…And so I went to the board and asked for a meeting with my board of trustees. We had a private meeting to tell them that I wanted to write a letter on my letterhead – trustee letterhead – a formal complaint to the commissioner. (T-3)

Although she was a trustee at the time, she was not acting in official capacity as trustee at that time as the drug awareness program was a project that she created outside of her school board responsibilities. However, she did not hesitate to use her positional power to defend a perceived injustice. She indicates that it wasn’t long after her letter of complaint that he was removed from the post.

Although examples of trustees using personal persuasion to move forward their agendas are still widespread throughout the board, now there is a strong attempt by administration to ground discussions in policy. Senior administrators report modeling this kind of problem solving and current trustees indicate this is how they look for solutions when working with parents:

What I would do is meet with people and show them the policy and say here is how I think you can best serve yourself. I tell them all the options: you can come to the board, you can delegate the board, you can create a petition, and I could present it to the board, you could write to the Minister of Education, you could write to the Premier and the answer will still be the same. (T-3 T-1)
Positional power still exists for trustees; however, it has been greatly diminished. As a result, trustees rely on personal relationships to move agendas forward. This can result in personal biases affecting outcomes. Policy can be used as a means to provide system cohesiveness and to move decision-making away from personal agendas. This is unsuccessful when trustees seek to make exceptions based on their own perspective of what is fair.

**Local Versus Regional Concerns**

Perhaps the most significant finding from the interviews with Trustee Wheeler relates to her responsibility as a local community advocate in relationship to the regional context of her work for the entire district. This is particularly acute in this school district because it spans a wide geographic region with varying needs:

I think a rural trustee…they have their thumb on the pulse of their community far greater than urban one would. There's no way trustees in the middle of (an urban community) that might have 150,000 people living in their ward would know. The trustees that were elected up here in the North, came from old farm families. You look back at the name and they will have lived here for five generations… So I think they felt much more of a personal tie. (T-5 P-4)

One current trustee frames this local versus district tension within the context of the differing transportation needs. “A rural area is mixed in with two large urban centers. The rural area doesn't have public transit and two other large urban areas both have their own public transit system” (T-3 T-1). He also speaks about the interpretation of culture as being different:

We talk about culture all the time as if it only exists south end of the board or culture in terms of religion, faith or skin color or language or food but there's culture in the north as well. It's a culture of agriculture. It's also of faith. It's also of the pace of life. So I just say when we are looking at
principal placement in the area…that they will really understand it has rural values and in many cases the families of the children who were in school went to that school as well. So change is not easy in a rural area. (T-3 T-1)

Being a local community advocate and wanting to promote an agenda of equity within the board may be at odds. Evidence from this study’s data indicates that the rural culture at the north end of the school district is slow to adapt to changes. It may be particularly problematic when longstanding community families who value rural traditions, resist when they feel that those traditions are in danger of being changed. An example of this is when the community raised funds to purchase portable classrooms instead of having their children go to a different school. If trustees are attempting to make the school system more equitable, they need to address the resistance of their constituents, not allow it to persist. Because trustees live within that culture, they may be unable to identify inherent biases or inequities within the region. In this particular school board, this is compounded by the fact that there is only one trustee for the large northern region. Because all regions must have representation on all subcommittees, the one representative from this area is involved in all decision making for the board and thus has a stronger ability to either create opportunities for change or prevent it from happening.

Wheeler’s longstanding history in the area, coupled with her longevity as a trustee, often contribute to her advocating for local needs as opposed to the needs of the whole school district. One superintendent describes Wheeler’s approach as more community-based:

I think that the longer they’re trustee, the more they advocate for their region; their own constituents. And that should almost be the other way around but the longer you’re trustee, the more you want to stay one…People get very attached to the work and their community…and partly in order to keep your community voting for you, you have to look to
support your constituents. (T-1 SA-3)

This tendency to passionately advocate for local community needs can cause trustees to lose sight of the bigger school board picture of providing equitable outcomes for all students. The relative wealth of the area compared to the economic needs in the south creates tensions and points of disconnect for the trustee when considering equity in making policy decisions.

**An Example of Trustee Influence and Local Advocacy**

An example in which Trustee Wheeler chose local over regional concerns is illustrated regarding to the busing needs in one of her schools. Safety was an issue at this school because students were being loaded on buses on a major highway. The solution to this problem was complex, requiring getting an appeasement for the neighbouring land, which was costly and working with multiple levels of government. Trustee Wheeler championed this cause and was persistent in bringing it forth with the board. She brought the planning department out to see the difficulties and convinced a number of other trustees to vote with her to make this a priority in the budget. The principal at the time notes, “She made everyone aware from the director to the superintendent in charge of everything and it was a huge financial commitment” (T-3 P-2). The former principal of the school states:

I could tell everybody until I'm blue in the face that we need to do something about the situation because it's not safe but if you can make a trustee understand then they are a very strong advocate…(Trustee Wheeler) brought the assistant associate director to the school, that’s when things started to change. It was much more powerful. Without her, that meeting never would have happened. (T-3 P-1)

Trustee Wheeler describes that at the time, she used her influence as a trustee to move
forward her agenda. She also believes that this was an equity issue, defining equity as fairness and having the same opportunities for all. She states, “All decisions are equity decisions” (T3). The benefit to having a longstanding trustee in this circumstance is that Wheeler was able to utilize her board knowledge of “every corner of the system” (T-3) to achieve her goal. Her longevity allowed her to be a better advocate for her constituents.

The principal of the school comments:

The principal and Superintendent changed fairly frequently. You could try and advocate for that issue but nothing would likely get done. And plans would be put on hold...It wasn't until the trustee started really advocating and she advocated...for nine or 10 years before anything happened...The biggest issue was trying to mobilize the political will to take that process on. So if it wasn't for the trustee that never would've happened. If it wasn't for somebody who had a longstanding understanding of the situation and desire to seek do something about it. The superintendent who wasn’t there for thirteen years wouldn't have had the political clout to make it happen. (T-3 P-1)

Longevity with the board allows the trustee to utilize personal relationships in order to influence outcome.

Busing in the north end of the school district has recently been in the forefront of conversations regarding equity as well. This area is so vast that students who want to attend the only French Immersion high school program are not able to due to a lack of adequate transportation. However, school board policy does not allow busing for regional programs. The current trustee in the north argues that it is an equity issue because students in the south end of the school district have access to city transportation, whereas there is no transit system in the north. When advocating for a local concern, the trustee needs to appeal to the larger trustee group. He does this by arguing that an equitable solution does not mean it has to be an equal solution. This trustee quotes a poster that really helped conceptualize the difference between equity and equality. “Equality is
making sure everyone has a pair shoes. Equity is making sure everyone has a pair of
shoes that fits” (T-3 T-1). The principal involved in this busing states, “His gift lies in
showing them that regionally it can be equal, just the factors aren’t there. So they need to
see why this is a challenge that needs support to be resolved” (T-3 P-2). He does this by
garnering support of other trustees. The Superintendent clarifies:

In that business of the most recent busing issues, it would be the new
trustees who were the supporters - the ones that have been elected just this
year. And I don't think that they are as close to their constituents as they're
going to end up being if they stay in the business…The actual trustees who
been around for a while were the ones that had a hard time saying (that one
area of the district) should have anything different than the rest of the
system. (T-1 SA-3)

The argument against giving one region different busing is based on the contention that
policies do not need to be consistent throughout the district. The trustee explains:

They won't do it because it's not fair in their mind for the whole board. So
they can logically argue that people who live in (the south) and their
school is a bus ride away as well. And maybe they’re a single mom, who's
got three kids who want to go to different schools and she has got to pay
that fare not only there but back. How is that equitable? So this is a really
challenging issue because I understand that as well…and yet we would
argue at least they have public transit. At least it's accessible. At least it's a
choice they can make. (T-3 T-1)

The policy implications of decisions such as these are difficult if trustees do not have a
firm grasp on what equity means within the board. Should one area have different
policies than another? The benefit would be that the school board would be better able to
meet the needs of all students. The danger is that personal predispositions or
longstanding historic elements may influence potential outcomes for exceptions to those
policies such as in the earlier example of the parents purchasing portables.
Case Four

Another theme that was identified through the interviews of this study was how, when using personal influence, personal preconceptions and blind spots may impact equitable outcomes for students. Although all of the trustees in this study self-identified as being equity minded, the case of Trustee MacDonald demonstrates that she has a lack of personal awareness as to how her beliefs shape understandings. As a result, her case actually demonstrates how trustee decision making may reinforce inequities and lead to the maintenance of the status quo. Blind spots and impartiality works at both the micro and meso level. Following the examination of Trustee MacDonald’s personal predispositions, this case examines the impact of these predispositions within the school district context. This section is followed by an examination of how the board has attempted to combat addresses inequities through broad-based equity policies is then discussed.

Background

Trustee MacDonald started in the board around the year 2000. She stayed for two three-year terms and then moved into municipal politics. She explains her rationale for becoming a trustee:

I have seven children, one of which needed extra help. So I dealt with the schools for years. I've been involved with school councils I've been involved with everything I can possibly be involved with in the school system…special education especially. So when my son wasn't getting support… I wasn't getting support from the trustee and I wasn't getting support from the school, I ran and was elected.
MacDonald describes herself as a strong communicator who values honesty and sincerity. She supports this statement by talking about the many different ways that she distributes information on a daily basis through email lists, Town Hall meetings and face-to-face individual meetings. She feels that communication is the key to being a good public official.

A principal who works closely with MacDonald confirms her strong communication and people skills as a trustee:

I think she was formidable. I think she had a vision. I really liked the way that she would have monthly meetings at the local coffee shop and people would come and talk to her. She was very open to her constituents. … She had a newsletter that she put out monthly. (T-4 P-3)

MacDonald also expresses her belief in the importance of knowing her community. As a politician, she does not feel that it is necessary to be the biggest voice in the room or to be constantly getting her name in the paper. She states, “It’s not always the squeaky wheel. They might get the headline, but I talk to staff. I get it done by treating the staff with respect” (T-4).

**Micropolitics**

Trustee MacDonald is very aware of micropolitics when moving agendas forward:

I lobby my counterparts… If I'm hell-bent on something that I do my homework, send it out to my counterparts, and ask for their support. If they have questions I answer them and then when it comes time to vote or discuss it at council then hopefully it's not up for debate. I've never in sixteen years had a delegation against something that I am putting forward or presenting to my community. I do all the work beforehand. (T-4)
Other strategies that she uses are lending support to other politicians on issues and manoeuvring and massaging the message. She speaks specifically about “framing” issues in order to garner support:

It's all in how you present something. You can give them the worst news in the world but if you present it like you're excited about it, and this is good. It's good for us, it's good for the community, you can sell anything to the community…and I've always had that reputation of honesty because it's easier for me to remember…Sometimes they don't like you for it. But they can't say that I lied to them. (T-4)

Trustee MacDonald demonstrates a strong awareness of the strategies that she uses to move agendas forward in the political arena. However, she also demonstrates a no-nonsense attitude if she feels that people are not respecting her positional authority:

People email me, and they scream and yell at me. I would phone them the next morning at 6:30 in the morning and I would say calmly I'm coming over. Put the coffee on. You woke me up they say. I say I don't care. You sent me a nasty email and I don't appreciate that. I'll be over. I know where you live. So put the coffee on because I'm on my way. And they're shocked when I come to their house…By the time we're done we're best friends. At least that's what I feel. At least they know that I'm not going to tolerate that kind of stuff. (T-4)

MacDonald continues to maintain political office at the municipal level. She credits her re-election over multiple terms to her ability to maintain priorities. If there is a conflict between an event in her ward and a committee meeting, she chooses the public event. She is very aware that this garners votes and if she attends an Education Week event or a Traffic Safety presentation, her constituents remember and appreciate her efforts.

**Views on Equity**

Although she currently chairs a committee for inclusion and diversity for her area, Trustee MacDonald’s understanding of equity is under-developed. She attempts to define
equity by what it is not, stating, “equity to one person is not equity to another. Equal is not equity” (T-4). MacDonald uses this definition to justify not accommodating other religions in regards to holding meetings:

So, when you're getting people from all over the globe, sitting in one room. For instance it's Ramadan in June. Well, the Muslims don't want to meet. They feel that I, and the rest of the community, should put everything on hold to allow them to have the Ramadan. I can't do that. Because do I do that for Christmas, do I do that for the Chinese New Year? Do I do that for Jewish holiday? Do I do that for Diwali? (T-4)

When it was suggested that we do take time to acknowledge Christmas, MacDonald responded “well yeah, but you know what I mean like it's still a Christian country. But you can't start bowing to all of their needs” (T-4). MacDonald contradicts her previous statement that “equal is not equity” (T-4) illustrating an ill-conceived perception of what equity is.

Other issues that have been challenging for this newly established committee have been flag raisings and proclamations:

Do we do it for the lesbian and gay community? You know on their day. So if we have a strict policy that says that we only do it for this certain situation, then all of those other people feel that they're not getting it. So it's equal. It's equitable. So that's how we're trying to perceive this committee as not playing favorites to certain groups. (T-4)

In an attempt to give voice to the various constituents on this committee, several non-voting stakeholders, such as the United Way, send representatives to give the perspective of their organizations to the inclusion and diversity committee. MacDonald finds this problematic:

We had 160 apply to be on this committee. A lot of them were self-serving. A lot of them unfortunately felt that this was a way to get on council - a way to get a job. And that's where we have to fine-tune this. I don't care where you're from or what your background is. If you're the best person for the job, you get the job. Or you get elected. (T-4)
MacDonald’s perceptions are clarified in this statement. She believes that hiring should be done based on two criteria – either by being the best person for the job or by being elected, however, she is unable to give clarity as to what that entails specifically to meet the needs of this committee. In this way, she articulates her belief that the agenda for excellence and equity cannot coexist. And yet MacDonald speaks about several projects that she has championed in order to accommodate other cultures. While she was a trustee, she worked with one principal to establish a prayer room in the school and currently she is working to put foot-washing stations in the new recreation center in her area. In both of these circumstances, she had to defend her decision to make these accommodations to her constituents. This indicates that although her idea of equity is limited, she does have a desire to accommodate and be inclusive of other cultures.

**Perceptions on the Role of Trustee**

MacDonald credits her political awareness to her years as a trustee. She believes that a large part of the role is to act as a community representative and a voice for the people of her wards. A principal that MacDonald worked with extensively spoke about her work with both the city and the school board to change a piece of land into a wetland. The principal believes that this truly demonstrates her ability to listen to her constituents and act to make their neighborhood more appealing. MacDonald gives one example of how she had supported her constituents in the role:

For instance, when they took away the prayer rooms a couple of years ago. Everybody was there to support keeping the prayer in. So as a trustee or as a counsellor…I would make sure that I'm representing my community, which wanted the prayer. So I vote to keep the prayer in… sometimes you manipulate the situation for the benefit of your own community. (T-4)
As a trustee, MacDonald learned to use her skills to actuate the desires of her constituents through community projects such as these.

Trustee MacDonald believes that many people coming into the role of trustee do not realize the magnitude of the responsibilities attached to the position. In addition to this, she believes that the role is restrictive in regards to funding and the ability to support the community. She indicates that she and others use the role as a stepping stone to hone skills before moving into the arena of municipal.

**Significance of Case Four: Personal Biases and Blind Spots**

**Personal Biases**

Personal bias must be considerations when examining how trustees are able to move forward the agenda of equity within the board. In spite of the micropolitical astuteness that public officials such as MacDonald demonstrate, trustees may not be aware of how their own personal history and upbringing impacts awareness and therefore, their decision-making processes. During the interview, several instances were illuminated as to how MacDonald’s own views of the world influence her perspective. The following sections discuss many of the observed perceptions that are ingrained in MacDonald’s views. Following this, the perspectives from the current board Chair and a current trustee are explored to highlight how the board is attempting to address this potential difficulty in regard to personal understandings influencing board outcomes.
Ageism

MacDonald demonstrates personal bias against retired teachers in referring to the utilization of retired teachers for supply work:

What I'm saying is bringing back staff members that have retired to not allow those people to get those jobs because there are older people taking them… Young fresh blood have new ideas and new objectives…They know what's going on. I still have a problem with my Face book and email. I just wasn't brought up in that era. Whereas my assistants there it is. They're in and out like this. (T-4)

Not only does Trustee MacDonald express the concern that older people are taking jobs from younger people, she implies that younger people deserve the job more because their ideas are better due to their age. She also makes the assumption that younger people are better with technology and thus are more valuable employees.

On Hiring

Trustee MacDonald also expresses the stance that cultural diversity should not be a consideration, arguing instead for best person for the job:

Just because they're black or Chinese doesn't always mean that the best person for the job. I can relate to any of those people. It's your people skills. So I don't have to say prayer on Friday to relate to the Muslim community. They're all parents. So they all have issues as parents. (T-4)

This view of hiring the “best candidate for the job” is one that has been commonly expressed by many interviewees, from the perspective of past and current trustees as well as other school board administrators. In spite of this, MacDonald feels that it is a good idea if someone in the office, whether it be the Principal, Vice Principal or Office Manager, is able to speak the language. She felt that this is important specifically when assisting female constituents:
A lot of these women don't speak, or they choose not to… I don't know. They don't speak English and that's where the communication part is difficult. But somebody in the house speaks English so like even if it's a child and the child can read it. (T-4)

In this way, MacDonald demonstrates her cultural insensitivity by seeing the value of having office staff reflect the school’s population entirely as a way to enhance communication. She also makes the assumption that every household has someone in it that can speak English – whether they want to admit it or not. Also, she makes the assertion that it is appropriate to utilize children to act as translators when trying to convey messages to the family.

**LGBTQ**

Trustee MacDonald has strong views regarding the accommodation of the LGTBQ community by having transgendered washrooms available. MacDonald states “we have family washrooms”, referring to the work she is doing in her community as a municipal counsellor. She expresses that the transgendered issue is “sexy” now because of Bruce Jenner’s coming out. MacDonald raises a point that people are currently struggling with this concept but given five years, it “might not be such a big thing.”

Currently, this board is working to acknowledge the LGBTQ community through providing a more inclusive environment for staff and students. The Chair recognizes a lack of awareness of this equity issue in the past:

I'll be honest, it really wasn't on my radar a number of years ago. It was becoming on the radar but now we're looking at transgendered in a very serious way of looking at inclusion. And we have a number of students and staff who just were never evident because they didn't feel comfortable enough to identify themselves. (T-4)
Transgendered rights have been brought to the forefront with the new Health and Physical Education curriculum. The message of the board has been clear: “We are not going to stand for anybody not treating (LGTBQ) like everybody else” (T-4 SA-4). Although this points to the position of striving for equality as opposed to equity, the superintendent is articulating the struggle that some trustees are having with acceptance of people who are different from themselves. She discusses the behind-the-scenes difficulty that some trustees are having with the director’s firm stance on this during his opening address, stating “Some of them struggled with why are we taking such a hard stance on this? …If you can't get it from the humane perspective, it's human rights. It's in the code” (T-4 SA-4). Although trustees in this school district resist concepts that may be foreign to their personal historical context, the trustees present a united front to the media. The Director’s office does work with trustees to provide training and build capacity regarding equity within the school system. This has been done through a series of discussions with trustees and superintendents who have an equity portfolio.

O Canada – And if you don’t like it…

Trustee MacDonald demonstrates through many of her stories a lack of appreciation for people in different circumstances than herself. Her solution often focuses on self-reliance, or conforming to the status quo. For example, parents who miss work because their children are sick should “just create a backup plan” (T-4), or “stay home and actually spend some time with (their) kids” (T-4). In other circumstances, MacDonald makes attempts to be sensitive to other cultures. As a municipal counsellor,
she is often responsible for community events. In these situations, she attempts to honour religious beliefs by providing accommodations for other cultures:

If they want Halal yup, but we're serving meat over here. I don't care if you want Halal. I'll order that... just like my Canada Day event, I've got the morning portion that that the Islamic sisters are doing. It's during Ramadan so I bought takeout containers and they can take all of the food home and eat it after prayer. And then that night is the end of Ramadan so I've allocated half an hour so that they can come and get the end of Ramadan prayer. Get them all the space they need and then the party starts. And if they don't like it, they can go home. (T-4)

This quote demonstrates that MacDonald is attempting to be sensitive to other cultures, not so much through understanding, but through the provision of parallel activities and foods to make all of her constituents happy. However, her intolerance for others is also demonstrated as she indicates that if they don’t like it, they can go home.

MacDonald relays another experience that took place just after 9/11, which also demonstrates her own personal lack of cultural awareness and inability to accommodate for others:

The principal called me... this parent isn't allowing her daughter to sing O Canada. And so, I went in and I said to the parent you're actually doing more harm than you're doing good. Right now we're trying to make peace with this situation...but taking your daughter out of class is worse than leaving them in there and telling them just not to sing ... everybody will know that she didn't sing O Canada. But if she's kept in the class and she just doesn't sing there's no attention paid to this. Well the parent protested - ...and I said well then maybe you should just take her to Islamic school. Well I can't afford that. I said well then you have a decision to make. Either conform, because three of those subjects are mandatory and that's our school system, which you knew when you registered. And if you don't like those, then you're gonna have to pay to have her in another type of school. (T-4)

Trustee MacDonald demonstrates cultural insensitivity in asking families to conform regarding singing O Canada and participating in subjects that are against their religious beliefs. Her “if you don’t like it, you can leave” attitude harkens back to an earlier time
when attempts to understand the beliefs of those outside of the norms of the status quo, were less prevalent. Many of the anecdotes she relays carry the same theme: when there was a call for prayer rooms in school, she recalls parents pushing back and asking her, “Why do they get this? Why do they have to take gym?” (T-4) Although in her current role, she demonstrates a willingness to accept people from other cultures, she seems unaware or unwilling to be accepting within herself. In these examples, it is okay for them to participate in their own beliefs as long as they don’t impact hers.

MacDonald does attempt to accommodate for the needs of other cultures in her current work as a city counsellor. For example, she discusses building a new community centre, which will include a foot washing station and a divider in the pool for men and women to have different sections, to accommodate her Muslim community. She feels that barriers to this work are protests from other cultural groups, as well as from other council members. Although she is attempting to appreciate the diversity of her community, if she gets push back from the community, her response is always that they don’t have to use the centre. This line in the sand approach demonstrates a lack of a willingness to explore personal biases and bring awareness to a deeper level. MacDonald identifies that understanding different perspectives and points of view is a strength of hers. However, when pressed on this point, her stance is to not acknowledge specific racial groups with their own event. “I don’t have a Hindi event. I don’t have a Muslim event, or a white event. If you want to come and enjoy the activities, you all come together” (T-4). This cultural blindness is inherently a view that is generated by the dominant culture. Although intended to be inclusive, it is actually a way of maintaining the status quo and addressing differences on a very surface level.
Awareness of Blind Spots and Biases

Biases are not only personal. They can also be ingrained within the board’s historical context. The current Chair speaks to the benefits of consistency within the board of trustees:

I think the consistency is good, although this year, half the board is newly appointed…but there's some comfort in consistency. And that includes senior administration as well. And so there's a culture and feel. And there's a culture that we're really proud of. (T-1 SA-3)

Although there is a “comfort in consistency” (T-4), there is also a tendency to avoid change and maintain the status quo. This can be particularly difficult in a region where there is a rapidly changing demographic.

Trustees are very aware of their political perception to the public, but the superintendent explains that behind closed doors, they verbalize their true feelings more openly:

It's one of those things where you know it's wrong but you can't articulate why it's wrong. Well trustees still – they just spew it out….And they wouldn't do it in a public session. They do it in committee, and you're kind of going am I really hearing this? And I remember when a couple of them raise their hands I just kind of cringed. It's hard as a person who is not of the dominant group and you hear that perspective, and you're just shaking your head and going really in 2016? (T-4 SA-4)

This statement is important for a number of reasons. First it illustrates the trustees’ political awareness to not articulate their questions in public session. This also indicates that they know these statements are not acceptable as they maintain the “politically correct” position when interacting with the public. Secondly, it demonstrates that the board is developing an atmosphere where it is acceptable to have conversations to challenge biases. Lastly, it acknowledges the importance of having people from other cultural groups and more developed understandings of equity in positions of authority to
articulate different stances and probe thinking.

**Addressing Bias**

Organizations such as the municipal government and the school board are beginning to put measures in place to address personal bias and systemic inequities. MacDonald speaks of her work with the Inclusion and Diversity committee. The board is also utilizing many strategies to challenge and increase understanding of equity. Superintendents talk about modeling how problem solving should be approached and how to ground decision-making in the Human Rights Code and board-developed policies.

An example of this can be seen recently, regarding holding a high school graduation in a place that, although it had no religious symbols, is used as a church. Some trustees and superintendents disagree with the board giving money to a religious establishment and challenge the practice. One Superintendent brought a greater sense of awareness to this issue by stating that if we use a church one year, the school board must be prepared to use a mosque for graduation in the following year. This made people uncomfortable:

> And some trustees to this day still struggle with her decision not to use the (church). And again, they're coming with a very their own very Christian perspective of what's right and wrong. The way I see it is that even if even one kid feels excluded, you can't do it there. And they said well nobody's come forward. But that doesn't mean that there's not somebody didn't attend because they were uncomfortable being there. (T-4 SA-4)

In order to address this discomfort, the Director held a number of focused conversations with senior administrators and had some “really solid conversations and very courageous conversations” (T-5 SA-5) about this decision. Following that, the Director met with trustees, informed them of the decision grounding it in terms of the human rights code. Although “there would have been trustees who were still not happy with the decision or
superintendent” (T-4 SA-4), ultimately, the board accepted the administrative direction.

The current Chair states that “it takes a long time to turn the elephant around.” (T-4 T-2) She indicates:

We've done a lot of work on inclusion within our schools and I think we've come a long way but we have a long way to go. I don't think you change that culture or people's perceptions quickly... every step, every progressive step that we make, clears the path for others. (T-4 T-2)

MacDonald echoes this sentiment, “I think the children are best teachers. The children have no problem. It's the adults. Kids have more friends from different parts of the world then they know their backgrounds.” (T-4)

A lack of awareness regarding personal bias is one of the greatest barriers to trustees realizing a more equitable education system. Being open to having courageous conversations, bringing new trustees into the board who challenge the status quo and represent different cultures, leads to positive influence within the system. A principal reflects, “We recognized that we are a changing society and I think we've recognized that we've got to bring in all the voices, all the ideas, we've got assistance or what's working, what's not working” (T-3 P-2). The Superintendent agrees that the board is moving in the right direction:

We don't want to become what some of those countries in Europe have become where you breed hatred because of your policies and approaches...we are at a very interesting point right now where we have large communities with various religions, races, cultures and genders. The last thing we want to do is anger people to the point that they're upset. (T-4 SA-4)

Equity policy development is currently handled in ways which lump all differences together into one group of “others”. Although this allows for consistency of language, it
also creates a sense that those who are a part of this group are outside of the norms of society.

**Case Five**

This case identifies a cultural disconnect that exists between the student population and board leadership and how trustees and administrators have attempted to rectify this over the past thirty years. This school district has experienced a tremendous influx of culturally diverse students in the last three decades. This case also explores the disconnect between constituents and their trustee representatives. Having a South Asian background, Trustee Singh represents the difficulties of identifying and then taking steps to close this gap.

**Background**

As a child, Trustee Singh settled in the region with her parents at a time when a large number of other immigrants were moving into the area. Being a young South Asian female, she describes herself as being a “very new dynamic” (T-5) to the board which did not have strong South Asian representation until very recently. Elected in 2010, she has been a part of the most recent equity initiatives within the school district. She began as trustee following the introduction of PPM 119, the Equity and Inclusion Policy (2009), and Bill 177, The Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act (2009). Trustee Singh decided to run because she “found there was a lot of missing information between the community and the board” (T-5). As she states, “Everyone comes to the board with their own agendas” (T-5). At the time, she hoped to interact with constituents
on a grassroots level. She describes her initial impetus for running for school board trustee:

There was some miscommunication, some misguidance. There wasn’t that connect there [between her constituents and the school board]…a lack of understanding on both parts. I was hoping that we could break down that barrier…and work with the community to engage them…and educate them about the system. (T-5)

Being a person of South Asian descent and in her mid-twenties, Trustee Singh brought a different perspective to the role. She views herself as not only representing her own constituents, but also as acting as a bridge to build relationships for the large South Asian population in the area. As a trustee, she completed most of her first term before moving on to pursue other political aspirations.

Trustee Singh believes that her strengths in making connections, building relationships and her political astuteness lead to her success as a trustee. She expresses that she made efforts to “pick her battles” (T-5) in order to maintain these relationships and identifies herself as an equity-minded individual. As a trustee, her goal was to “work at a steady pace throughout the term, to provide equitable, fair representation for (her) community” (T-5). In spite of her newness to the role, principals feel that at the time, she gained trust with her constituents by “supporting schools, supporting principals, supporting families and supporting kids” (T-5 P-5). One principal identifies a number of ways in which Trustee Singh supported his school: through her attendance at community events; through interactions with parents over specific issues, such as busing; and through local concerns such as working with parents to ensure student safety when the local creek flooded (T-5 P-4). Both principals interviewed identify this support as less hands on than it would have been with previous trustees. Trustee Singh is described by both as being
educated, articulate and having a positive energy. One describes her interactions with the school as “more on a public relations level” as opposed to interfering operationally. This is not to be interpreted as good or bad, rather as an observation that the perception of the role of trustee within the trustee group is changing to be less involved in the day-to-day operations of the individual schools.

The Director describes the strengths that are necessary for trustees to be successful as including relational skills, an ability to learning about a topic and political acumen:

Trustees are very good at reading the room. They are political by nature and anyone who becomes a trustee probably already was school council chair…So they’ve developed the skill of reading the room, listening carefully to who’s got the stronger voice, which way the wind is blowing based on the discussion. (T-5 SA-5)

Trustee Singh expresses a disconnect between her initial perceptions of her role and the actuality of doing the job specifically in regards to policy setting within the group dynamic.

The expectation was definitely different because there’s a lot of talk about [the trustee as] being somebody who sets policy for the board, sets direction…You do to some extent but it is not quite the same when you get there…Once you’re elected and once the group has made a decision, whether you voted for it or against it…you have to align yourself within that policy. You have to move forward and take ownership of it…it’s a democratic system where the majority rules. (T-5)

This quote identifies a number of key areas that will be explored in subsequent chapters regarding the democratic nature of the trustee representational system, the power dynamic within the trustee group and the importance of acting both with a regional perspective and in solidarity regarding policy setting.
Views on Equity

Trustee Singh articulates her views on equity in hiring and special education. Encompassed in that is her desire to see employment equity in age, gender, wage, race and creed. She indicates that it is the responsibility of the board of trustees to promote policy development that allows racialized people to advance as teachers and as senior administrative roles. She cautions that hiring practices should be viewed from both the lens of diversification, and hiring the most qualified person for the job:

You can’t just be hiring simply based on diversity. And I would be the first person to say something like that. Equity-based hiring needs to be done but it needs to be done first and foremost through qualification basis…I want the best for my kids it should be not just because of the color of their skin. (T-5)

She also notes that in addition to the need for high quality candidates is her desire to see employees that reflected the population. She notes that over her time as a trustee, there was tremendous growth in hiring to reflect the cultural makeup of the community, both at the classroom level and senior administration. During her term, the focus in terms of equity was in regards to diversity and inclusive hiring processes. Trustees were trained through seminars and workshops. However, Trustee Singh believes that this training was not very helpful as she felt that most of the information necessary was learned through daily interactions.

In regards to special education, Trustee Singh frames the conversation in terms of limits to funding, as well as the trustee’s role as negotiator when trying to support special needs students and families. She indicates that equitable special education funding means ensuring that everyone’s interests are met. However, she cautions that the board may not be able to meet the needs of all specialty advocacy groups. If a group comes forward
asking for funding that is not within the board budget, the school board cannot provide extra services before covering essential costs, indicating that you are not being able to “go on a vacation before you pay your mortgage” (T-5).

Trustee Singh gives many examples of how she helps families with special needs students in her community. In one example, she speaks of working with a special needs student, his parents and a transition team to prepare the student to transition to a new high school. As a part of this team, she went with them prior to the school year starting to give tours, walk the stairs to alleviate apprehension, and establish a buddy system. She believes that this example epitomizes an equitable education system – one that focuses on student success and “makes sure that every student has the opportunity that they need to be able to go to school” (T-5).

The discussions with Trustee Singh are most significant in two specific areas: her understanding of power and political acumen, and an example of the cultural disconnects that were prevalent within the board at the time. The following sections will examine these two discussion points.

Significance of Case Five: How Prevailing Ideologies and Cultural Disconnects Influence Decision Making

Power, Political Awareness and Political Aspirations

Trustee Singh demonstrates a very clear understanding of the change in the power dynamic at the school district level due to Bill 177. She explains, “You don’t hold any individual power in the world now as a trustee. In the past you may have held more personal power and personal ability to change things; now you act as a collective group” (T-5). Principals echo this understanding regarding the changing power dynamic. “It’s
almost now the trustee is just a disseminator of information. I mean they still take a lot of
the complaints…but the trustee doesn’t have the power that they once did” (T-5 P-4).
This points to the changing dynamic regarding the role of trustee. With the loss of
authoritative power, trustees indicate that other micropolitical strategies and persuasive
techniques are being used to gain support in the boardroom. Singh refers to her own
political awareness as the ability to strategize how she presents herself to the community.
She indicates that she sees “everything as political” (T-5), and as such has a conscious
understanding of how she is perceived. She states, “You can play the game as long as
you want…they’re not stupid to it anymore. Once you educate them on the process they
also become more aware and you can’t play political games” (T-5). As a new trustee,
however, it took her some time to realize that conversations prior to board meetings were

     When I first started I used to work full-time so I never made it out to the
     pre-board dinners. And one of my colleagues said that’s where it all gets
done. That’s where you should really be. That’s where all the gossip
happens. There were a lot of things discussed at pre-board dinners… You
learned so much more about what is going on at the dinner. (T-5)

This back room politicking is confirmed by other sources, who work closely with the
trustee group prior to board meetings:

     They're good at doing work behind the scenes. Before an item comes to the
board, they talk to each other and try to convince each other…By the time
the board convenes, they already have a sense that without any discussion
that there's probably five of us that are going to oppose it…So they do
even more legwork behind-the-scenes before comes to the board to see if
they can convince two other people. (T-5 SA-5)

Principals also have an awareness of the political aspect of the trustee role and the need to
gain allies at the board table. One participant refers to them as “political animals”, citing
this political acumen as a key element to their success. He describes Singh’s ability to
work the political arena with her colleagues in order to gain support for local community needs.

Unlike in her current political role, there are no party politics as a trustee. Singh indicates that loose alliances were often made for specific issues. “You find people and there are never any formal alliances…So you have to find somebody who will support you who has common interests” (T-5). As a result, Singh identifies that she relied heavily on personal skills to win votes. Examples include finding people with similar interests or people who serve the same community dynamic in terms of socioeconomics. Another strategy that she used was to find people who had similar worldviews, values or morals. For Singh, using these political strategies had been a conscious decision. She identifies the need to “pick your battles” (T-5), indicating that although using relationships would win her many votes, this strategy would not win every vote. She indicates that she was always aware of which ones she wanted to win. If all else failed, or if the decision was administrative, she would go to the Director to present her case:

You find a way to be heard…I was more than twenty plus years younger than everybody there…and I came from a background where people saw me as a silver spoon child, but I just wondered if it was because I had the recognizable name, not because I had the ability or the background. They felt it was more that I came from a political background, a political family. But you’ve still got to knock on those doors because you’ve still got to build your credibility. (T-5)

Singh expresses that the need to build credibility stems not only from the difference in age between herself and other trustees, but also from being a new trustee. Many sources indicate a power imbalance between experienced trustees and those who were new to the role. As Trustee Sutton also indicates newly appointed trustees are expected to sit and listen. Both trustees indicate a need to build relationships in order to effectively
leverage social capital. Credibility built through longevity and people skills allows trustees to influence political outcomes. Senior administration within the board recognize the benefits of trustees being aware of micropolitical nuances:

I think it’s very complex role being a trustee, because they don’t have a lot of authority but they do have a lot of influence. I think for astute trustees who understand that, they are a lot less frustrated and more effective. (T-5 SA-5)

Singh’s understanding of the need to use her personal relationships and political awareness enables her to not only be successful as a school board trustee, but also to move forward politically. She sees being a trustee as a great stepping stone and a great way to gain experience and build “grassroots connections and relationships which make going forward a lot easier” (T-5). Principals and senior administrators also note the tendency for trustees to use the job to prepare for other political careers. The downside of this is the impact that it can have on their decision-making:

In some cases we're seeing more of trustees now using the role to leapfrog to sit as city councillor or to MPP or MP and there's nothing we can do about that as long as they're doing their job well as a trustee. However sometimes we see that when a trustee has that as a goal, they can make decisions based on whether that's going to affect their future election or not... The most effective trustees are ones that are not worried about whether they're elected but rather just do what they believe is the right thing and is reflective of our policy. (T-5 SA-5)

Trustee Singh validates this concern during her discussion:

At the end of the day as a trustee or as a politician, you need to remember that you’re there to benefit people. You can forget that today, but then four years down the road, it’s a thirty-day job interview.

Trustee Singh identifies her political awareness and her ability to identify and meet her constituents’ concerns as being instrumental in her success both as a trustee and a provincial politician.
Cultural Disconnect

Perhaps the most significant finding of this interview is that in spite of the district’s focus on moving forward Equitable and Inclusive Hiring Practices, Trustee Singh identifies a feeling of cultural disconnection for South Asians due to the changing demographic. A senior administrator indicates that in 1990 there were very few South Asian students. However, “by 1993, it was probably the largest group within my school” (T-5 SA-5). Within the span of three years, the demographic of the central region of the school district had changed significantly.

By approximately 2010, Trustee Singh was aware of an enormous disconnect between the population in the region and representation within the school district’s senior administration. She was the first South Asian trustee and yet over 70% of the population within the region reflected her cultural background. Communication and understanding the culture became key issues between the board and the South Asian community. One example that illustrates her point is the board’s inability to plan properly for new community development. New schools are built based on the same 1.2 students per household that the planning department uses in other areas that are largely populated by Caucasian people. She indicates that:

Sometimes we look at socio economic status in the neighborhood…you might have a 7000 square-foot home, which is worth two million, but we forget that it is not a single residence…There are multiple families living in those residences…often with illegal basement apartments. (T-5)

This illustrates a gap in understanding on the board’s part as to the differing needs of this particular community that housed multiple families in every home. Planning would not change the formula that they used to project the number of students that would be going
to each school. This resulted in a lot of unnecessary movement for students to rectify the situation of over-capacity schools. Trustee Singh indicates that at one point, one of her schools, built for 650 students, was housing 1450 students. This angered parents. As the trustee for the area, Trustee Singh felt the need to support the board’s position when speaking in public meeting. However, behind the scenes, she often was frustrated with the lack of understanding on the part of board members.

As a person of South Asian heritage, Trustee Singh expresses the importance of the community seeing themselves reflected on the board. Acting as a role model for this community is important for her as she believes that students should “see themselves in role models...in teaching staff and in senior administration to encourage them to see that they can be better personally” (T-5). Speaking several different languages also helps her constituents, as they are more comfortable approaching her with issues. Being the first South Asian trustee brings a cultural sensitivity to the school board that wasn’t present in previous years. Trustee Singh believes that her being a part of the board allowed for “a lot of outreach to happen” (T-5) and helped to move forward the equity agenda through her presence.

Principals who worked in Singh’s wards also identify the cultural differences in this area. One principal states that his perception of why she “was elected was because she was local, she was brown and as such she represented the brown community” (T-5 P-4). Another principal supports the need for cultural representation for both trustees and senior administrators:

You do need to have a voice of the community at the table...otherwise the bureaucracy can...get out of control. They are...the voice of the community to make sure what the board is providing the kids reflects what the community thinks it needs. (T-5 P-5)
As he himself is white, the principal believes that there is the possibility of a disconnect at his school because he is not “a part of the East Indian community. There was always respect, but (he) could see how it would have had more of an impact for there to be someone of East Indian descent as principal at the school” (T-5 P-5). Singh indicates that she brings a different perspective to her role. However, although she believes her role as a trustee was significant in building bridges, she doesn’t feel that she only advocated for the South Asian community. First and foremost, “I was Canadian born and raised. I’m a Canadian and I represent the interests of everybody regardless of their racial background” (T-5). This duality of status caused Singh to actively utilize her role to bridge the gaps in understanding that she believes existed between the school board and her constituents at the time.

An incident occurred where being a South Asian trustee in the school board was extremely beneficial. A large group of constituents lodged a complaint against the school board over a perceived instance of discrimination:

There was a huge delegation to the board…a security issue…and I was targeted…People were screaming from the bleachers “you should understand us”. They felt that I should understand, because I was South Asian, that this was discrimination…There was a four hundred person delegation and we had police and backup police…they were screaming at me directly above the delegation. And that was the opportunity for me to go out and stand by my board as a collective body. (T-5)

Singh saw this as an opportunity both to prove herself to other board members and to advance her political career. As an individual of South Asian heritage, the perception of both the parent group and other board members was that Trustee Singh could speak with understanding in regard to the perspective of this group. Whereas something such as a “petty boundary change was not the hill to die on” (T-5), this is where Singh chose to
make a stand. In this case, having a trustee that was of the same cultural background as her constituents allowed for a positive connection to be established. Partly because of this link, the situation was resolved positively. This example illustrates one instance of how having representatives that are reflective of their communities can have positive benefits within the school board. Cultural representation also allows for a deeper understanding of different cultural norms and allows for the school board to be more responsive to community needs.

This case is significant because as a representative of the board for six years, Trustee Singh moved the equity agenda forward through her representation of the South Asian community. Trustee Singh’s political astuteness was a tremendous strength which she utilized to bridge the gap between her cultural group and the school board. Her political acumen and aspirations towards provincial politics allowed her to successfully navigate the board system by building relationships with colleagues, administrators and parents within her community. In her own words:

It’s all about relationships. It’s who wants to sever those relationships and who wants to build them and who wants to maintain them. You can’t win everybody. And if your job is important to you, when you are in it for the right reasons, then that’s what you’re looking at. (T-5)

However, using the trustee role as a political stepping stone was a concern expressed by some interviewees because when trustees act in the interests of their own political advancement, their decision making may be focused on their own advancement as opposed to being aligned to school board goals.
Table 4.0 Summary Chart of Findings

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Trustee</th>
<th>Major Equity Debate</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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| Case One | Power and the Role of the Trustee | • Changes in power over the past 40 years (evidence of the removal of positional power from the role)  
• The increasing use of influence by trustees as their positional power has been decreased  
• Group versus individual power  
• Evidence is given regarding the power of the Board Chair, the power that can be obtained through alliances and the power of longevity over multiple terms |
| Case Two | Trustees and Hiring Equity | • Outlines the role of trustee in relationship to principal and superintendent hiring and placement  
• Identifies the rise in the use of influence as authority of the position has been restricted and how this has an impact on hiring practices  
• Examines trustee identified barriers to equity (unions, Bill 274 in relationship to hiring practices)  
• Identifies how a lack of diversity within the board of trustees can be problematic, but how a more diverse board creates dissonance |
| Case Three | Local Historical Context Versus Regional Concerns | • Contributes to the understanding of how longevity of board members over multiple terms can both positively and negatively impact equitable outcomes  
• How longevity leads to a continuity of understanding but also leads to local advocacy as opposed to regional decision making  
• How a long history with the board can lead trustees to be less likely to make changes which will alter the status quo |
| Case Four | Personal History and Ingrained Beliefs | • Identifies how personal preconceptions and blind spots regarding other cultures may impact equitable outcomes, particularly when trustees use personal influence to meet agendas  
• Lack of awareness of personal biases may be one of the greatest barriers to achieving a more equitable education system  
• How trustees may inadvertently reinforce inequities in order to maintain the status quo |
| Case Five | Cultural Disconnects | • Identifies that some trustees use this position as a stepping stone to other political offices  
• Examines the disconnect that exists in this school district between the cultural background of constituents and their trustee representatives  
• Contributes to the understanding of how having cultural representation of constituents can be beneficial by increasing communication, bridging gaps in cultural understanding and allowing all members of the community to see themselves |
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

This chapter considers the background of each of the five trustees, their perceptions on their role, their understanding of equity, other significant aspects of how trustees influence the understanding of equity and how they shape policy direction within this context. Case One explores the power dynamics in relationship to the role of trustee. Case 2 examines how trustees can influence the hiring and placement process of senior administrators and principals. Case 3 identifies the complications associated with local versus regional advocacy. Case 4 studies how blind spots impact perceptions and decision making. Finally, Case 5 explores a case of cultural disconnect and the use of the trustee role as a political stepping stone. From the cases, three categories emerge as having significant impact on trustee decision making: their personal values and beliefs, historical context and prevailing ideologies within the context of the school district.

The first part of this chapter utilizes these three categories (personal values, local historical context and prevailing ideologies) to answer the research sub questions: How do trustees understand equity in education and what do they perceive is their role in implementing a more equitable education system? Then the intersectionality of personal values, historical context and ideologies is examined through the micropolitical conceptual lens. Each case is analyzed to see which of these elements are relied on more heavily by each trustee and how this has had an impact on their understanding of equity. Part Two of the chapter examines how trustees promote equity within the school district,
specifically through utilizing the micropolitical awareness. Part Three answer the sub question: *What resistance, challenges and barriers do trustees face in advancing an equity agenda and how do they overcome these challenges?* Finally, policy responses are explored to identify whether trustees are able to address these barriers successfully through structures and processes that they establish. This is analyzed by examining how systemic pressures are addressed through policy response and identifying whether these responses lead to more equitable outcomes.

The conceptual framework for this study emphasizes the interrelationship between micro and meso levels of power within the school board within the macro environment of the province. A meso level of analysis involves an understanding of power, dominance and inequities between social groups. This study focuses specifically on the interrelationships of trustees within the school district as it pertains to this larger global concept. As such, this study exams board direction through policy discourse and provides evidence of past and present situations in relation to these power dynamics at the meso level. At a micro level, I examine the personal beliefs and relationships that trustees demonstrate through their relationships and interactions with others. When trustees use influence to move forward an agenda, personal power plays a significant role in shaping the direction of the organization. Systemic inequities reflect entrenched personal beliefs. This is also mirrored in the opposite way: the organizational culture impacts individual beliefs. These interrelationships create complex dynamics, which make up the “meso-level” of political power, where personal and organizational power meet and form a unified whole. In order to understand the role of the trustee and their impact at the
school district level the meso level, we must also examine the micro level of interactions and be aware of the provincial context in which these interactions occur:

**Figure 3 – Macro/Meso/Micro Interactions**

PART ONE: THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL VALUES, HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND IDEOLOGIES ON TRUSTEE PERCEPTIONS OF EQUITY
Personal Values and Beliefs

The overarching question in this study is “How do trustees who self-identify as equity-minded promote equity within their school district?” In order to address this question, the first sub question, “How do trustees understand equity in education?” was analyzed by examining the data.

This chapter first explores the micro level of analysis - the personal circumstances and subsequent personal values that have shaped beliefs about equity for the five trustees. Then the historical context of the board itself will be analyzed to understand what impact this has on trustees’ views. Thirdly, the prevailing discourses regarding policy development will be examined in relation to how they are expressed through local policy development. Lastly, this chapter will explore the second part of this question, “What do trustees perceive is their role in implementing a more equitable education system?”

Referring back to the literature, Gorton identifies three ways that values impact decision making:

1) Values serve as a perceptual screen affecting the awareness of the problem and the information surrounding the problem.

2) Values condition the screening of possible alternatives.

3) Values are used to compare and assess higher order goals. (Gorton, 1979, p. 57)

Trustees’ personal values are reflected in many ways. Personal values are part of the motivation for becoming a trustee and shape decision making. Personal values influence the interactions that trustees have with others and impact the focus for their decision making process. Examining why each individual made the decision to become a
trustee provides insight into their personal values, their equity views and their decision making process.

**Trustee One**

Trustee Sutton served the board for over three decades. Prior to becoming a trustee, she worked as a secretary in the school board and a librarian. She was also the union representative for office staff and teaching assistants. In each context, she chose opportunities within her role, that enabled her to express her idea of equity as fairness for all employee groups. For example, she worked towards establishing a Whistleblower policy and an audit committee for the school district, and sat on the harassment and discrimination committee. In all of these circumstances, her personal definition of equity as “treating all people fairly” was an underlying impetus to her decision making and advocacy for certain causes.

**Trustee Two**

Trustee Smith’s views are somewhat different. Being a white male, he is a part of the traditionally dominant power group. However, being a male nurse causes him to be more aware of others being marginalized. While he was a trustee, he readily identified and confronted issues of prejudice in his ward, such as when his constituents were concerned that a large number of black families from low socio-economic backgrounds were moving into the area. Smith acknowledges that he had an antagonistic approach. He refused to make “backroom deals” and would often throw motions out for discussions.
in meetings without pre-conversations. His aggressive and blunt tactics were effective in bringing to light the deficit mentality that existed about his constituents.

Smith is the only trustee to express his concept of equity in terms of outcomes. He synthesized his thoughts on his role in supporting equity down to the equation:

\[ \text{process} \times \text{structures} = \text{outcomes} \]

which he identified as being a business approach to governance. As a trustee, Smith feels that his role in creating a more equitable education system is to put into place processes and structures that will allow for more equitable outcomes. In contrast, other trustees identify that they were attempting to provide equity of opportunity.

**Trustee Three**

Sources speaking about Trustee Wheeler indicate that she came from an impoverished background. She lived in the small, rural community that she represented for over twenty-five years, and as such, had deep connections to the area and the people there. Many of the causes that she championed, such as getting a new busing infrastructure for one of her schools, focused on local community needs. She often chose to advocate for the underdog, as seen in her fundraising and her personal passion for the school program to educate students on the dangers of drugs. Other sources identify that because of her background, she saw her role as supporting struggling students, particularly those coming from poverty. She states adamantly that for her, this was an equity situation.

Both Sutton’s and Wheeler’s views align to charitable discourses, in which everyone needs the same opportunities to achieve. They define equity in terms of
fairness and providing the same opportunities so that every student has access to state of the art facilities and the best opportunities. The significance of this is that neither of these trustees demonstrate an understanding of the difference between equity and equality.

Without a consistent definition of equity within the trustee group, it is difficult to align school district policies with improved equity outcomes. Wheeler expresses her view of the trustee’s role as being “quasi-judicial” overseers of the education system. Inherent in these views is a focus on the individual’s ability to overcome barriers in order to be successful. Sutton describes this succinctly:

I think if you're treated equitably you were given the opportunity. The outcome, you are responsible for. You are responsible for your own destiny. If I'm given the opportunity to become a principal and I blow it as a vice principal, then the onus is on me. I've been given the opportunity and I just didn't cut it. But by being given the opportunity I was on the same playing field as long as I've been given the tools to develop myself. We have two people side-by-side. As long as this one is not getting all the professional development and I'm getting none or this one's getting all the mentoring and I'm getting none, that's not equitable. (T-1)

From this stance, the goal of education is to support student access and opportunity so that their education does not limit their life choices. However, this charitable stance does not examine the inherent inequities in the system itself or challenge existing power structures.

**Trustee Four**

Trustee MacDonald comes from a middle class background in which she represents the dominant societal group. She had seven children of her own, one with special needs. She felt at the time that her special needs child was not being serviced well in the school system and that the trustee in her area was unresponsive to her concerns; she cited this as
the reason for her becoming a trustee. She saw being an elected official as a way to advocate for parents who were having difficulties and to make the education system accountable to the needs of her constituents.

As a member of the dominant group in society, MacDonald has not explored deeply her personal understanding of equity. She indicates equity may be different for every person but does not provide a fulsome definition. Although she attempted to resolve situations equitably (such as putting prayer rooms into schools), her decision-making process reflect her viewpoints, which are based on the benefits of maintaining the status quo. In the case of O Canada, she recommends that the parents “fit in” rather than making a big deal about not wanting the child to be a part of this and suggests if they don’t agree, they should find a private alternative for schooling. She has not challenged the current education system as it is aligned with her own worldview. She struggles with non-dominant groups wanting their religious holidays observed and argues to maintain the status quo. She sees herself as an equity-minded trustee because she is willing to acknowledge in a superficial way that other cultures exist – offering Halal food as an alternative during celebrations. MacDonald is the epitome of the “tolerant Canadian” unless that “otherness” conflicts with her own understanding. In this way, cultural diversity is seen as an inconvenience or a difficulty to be overcome.

Trustee Five
Trustee Singh comes from a political family. Other family members are politicians and she expresses that there was every expectation on her to follow in their footsteps. She became a trustee in order to build grassroots connections and further her political career. For her, every decision is strategic. This has a direct impact on how she problem-solved in the role. Trustee Singh comes from a minority background. She was the sole representative from her ethnic background while on the board and believes that this had a significant impact on her actions. In many ways her motivation for running as a trustee was to break down the communication barriers for her ethnicity and to engage the community more in the education system. Although she is aware of the political element of her role and the impact of decisions that upset the community, she also saw that she was helping families and was motivated to support her constituents and make them more aware of how the education system worked. Singh believes that she brought to the role cultural sensitivity, a different perspective and outreach to a different segment of the population.

These perceptions shape her understanding of equity. When asked to define what equity was, she spoke about it in terms of employment equity and how it is important for the board to be aware of diversity in its hiring practices. Having a workforce that reflects the ethnic diversity of the community is a key component of having a more equitable education system. In terms of equity for students, she expresses this as being fair to all; not seeing one family’s needs as being more important than the next.
The Impact of Personal Values and Beliefs

The goal of the PPM. 119, the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Strategy is to create a vision for the education system in which all students, parents and community members feel welcome and respect and every student is supported to achieve to high expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Having a strong understanding of the concept of equity is necessary in order to achieve these goals. Through the analysis of the data for this study, it is apparent that trustees do not have a clear concept of what equity is. Although all retired trustees spoke about the concept of “fairness,” they had very different ideas as to what this meant. Some trustees regarded fairness as being equal to equality, whereas others identified fairness as giving students what they need to succeed. Fairness is often used in regard to judging a situation without the influence of one’s feelings or personal interests. Fairness is not treating people equally, but in accordance with a rule of standard. Fairness is viewed by society to be a universal value that is independent of personal perceptions. However, in regard to the trustee interviews, fairness is a value that is fluid, existing in the mind of the interpreter. What one trustee describes as fair may not be seen as fair by another trustee. For example, giving busing to students in the north end of the school district for French Immersion but not providing it for the rest of the school district was perceived as a fair decision by one interviewee but seen as disadvantaging students in the south by another. Each person’s interpretation of what is fair is situated within his or her own personal beliefs. In fact, the expectation of fairness is very much a middle class concept. People who have more may have a different interpretation of fairness because they hold all of the power, resources and opportunities. Fairness is different depending on the lens that it is viewed through. This data speaks to
Merten’s critique regarding equity (2010). Merten identifies that in order to achieve equity the dominant group must analyze their advantaged situation and understand the effect of this advantage. This can be done through defining cultural lenses and addressing power issues. As four of the five trustees interviewed are members of the dominant societal group, they create meaning through their own cultural lens, making them unable to critically examine their advantaged social situation and the impact that it has on their beliefs.

In fact, power and fairness are somewhat at odds in that those who exert power often do not want to relinquish control. Even those trustees who express the desire to make change to better education for marginalized students do so from a position of power. Historically, the board of trustees from this school district has been composed of Caucasians who stay in the role over a number of terms. The data from this study indicated that a number of members have advocated to maintain the status quo. Power as a means of making social action possible is still power, and maintaining this power can potentially have the effect of constraining social action. The inability of trustees to critically examine their own personal values and beliefs makes achieving equitable results more challenging.

The Impact of Personal Values and Beliefs: Levelling the Playing Field or Switching Sides

Another theme this study reveals is the concept of levelling the playing field. McCaskell speaks about this metaphor in regards to acknowledging institutional or systemic inequities within the education system and creating an awareness of privileged
versions of reality in order to create more equitable outcomes (2005). The metaphor comes from the idea that when playing on an unlevelled field, one side may have a distinct advantage. To compensate for unevenness, the field is levelled so each team has an equal opportunity of winning. This aligns with trustees’ expressed personal value of providing equity of opportunity for students.

However, to extend the analogy, another way that fairness is created in sports is to have the teams switch sides midway through the game. Switching sides is an attempt to compensate for external factors such as wind or glare from the sun which may provide an unfair advantage to one team. Although both levelling the playing field and switching sides are attempts to make the conditions of the game more fair, switching sides can be thought of as a mechanism that has been put in play to compensate for disadvantage by temporarily giving advantage to the other group. Levelling the playing field actually changes the underlying structure of the field in order to create conditions where one team will not have an unfair advantage. In regards to equity in education, an initiative that levels the playing field would be one that addresses the underlying causes of inequities while switching sides would temporarily give an advantage to the marginalized group. This distinction was most prominently noted in this study through discussions on hiring practices.

Policy actors in the board – both trustees and superintendents – often have misunderstandings about this term and talk about levelling the playing field, when they are actually advocating switching sides. For example, one interviewee described Affirmative Action as a way of levelling the playing field, but in actuality, this is a way of temporarily giving one group an advantage. The hiring practices discussed by Trustee
Sutton where, in the past, minority applicants were moved directly to the interview stage as opposed to going “into the hat” with the rest of the candidates, would also be considered switching sides. Quota hiring would be another demonstration of switching sides. The inequity has not actually been addressed, but the advantage has been given to another group in an effort to right the balance. When an extreme imbalance exists, such as in the early 1990’s, where minority groups were largely unrepresented in the teaching and administrative roles of the school district, there is a temptation to use means to switch sides to allow for advantage of the disadvantaged group. However, this does nothing to change the underlying conditions that may allow the inequities to perpetuate.

Policies are an attempt to regulate fairness. Trustees currently equate levelling the playing field to providing students with equity of opportunity. However by extending the metaphor and introducing the concept of switching sides, trustees may come to a better understanding of whether initiatives are addressing innate systemic inequities or merely providing a solution which rectifies an injustice by giving temporary advantage to one group over another. This additional reflection may allow for more informed decision making and have an impact on resource distribution and board direction.

**Historical Context and Power Dynamics**

The power dynamics of both individual trustees and the trustees as a group take place within the local historical context. The board in this case study is situated discursively within the social justice discourse of privilege. The school district is divided geographically into three distinct regions. The south has segments of a largely white and wealthy urban population and other more ethnically diverse and lower socio-economic
groups. The central region is much more mixed in terms of its ethnicity with much of it pre-planned, with housing of mixed socio-economic status within the same communities. This middle region was once more Caucasian as well; however, in the early 1990’s a large influx of different ethnic groups – largely South Asian - settled in the region. As a result, many of the families that had lived centrally moved farther into the northern, more rural area. This movement has been deemed “White Flight” by one of the interviewees in this study. The northern area, also known as “the rich man’s playground” has a largely wealthy population. Examples came up throughout the study of instances of when different rules were applied to this northern region. For example, the “K-8 in 98” campaign, where parents were allowed to fundraise over $60,000 for the purchase of portables for one of their schools. Due to the larger geographical area, the mix of rural and urban environments and the influx of different cultures and pockets of very wealthy areas, trustees struggle with their understanding of equitable solutions versus equal solutions to problems throughout the district. This is exacerbated as well by an unclear understand of the difference between the terms equity and equality.

Individual values shape perceptions and play a key role in analyzing motivation for future action. However, through the conceptual framework, we can see that it is the relationships between trustees and other policy actors which are being analyzed as these are where micropolitical action takes place. As such, the social power of groups or institutions is also a key concept. Central to the understanding of social power is the concept of control. Groups have more power if they are able to control situations and the actions of others. This understanding is built on the assumption of a power base (van Dijk, 2008, p. 354). Power bases may be inequitable to some groups. In the education
system, the power base can be inequitable based on privileged access to resources. Groups may also be at a disadvantage due to a lack of political acumen or knowledge of the school board culture. This relates to Datnow and Park’s (2009) research on social power and white privilege (2009). As a result of power being removed from the trustee group in the areas of curriculum, finance and through centralization and amalgamation of school districts, their ability to affect change has been limited. Therefore, what was observed in the trustee group was that they were relying on their influence as social actors to move agendas forward. It was noted in the findings that some social actors had more power to shape decision making, based on how they utilized their social power to influence others. This use of influence, coupled with an unclear understanding of the inherent disadvantages which exist for some groups of students, created opportunities for inequitable outcomes in spite of the trustees’ desire to improve equity within the school district.

The work of French and Raven’s (1992) identifies the six bases of social power. This study identified that trustees utilize the power structures of legitimacy, coercion, expert, referent and informational power to leverage change within the school district. The data indicate that these sources of power function within and as a result of the historical context of the school district and the province. They evolve and are utilized to different extents based on the extent to which influence is being used as opposed to authority.

**Historical Context and Power Dynamics: Legitimate Power**

The political power dynamic in this school district has changed over the past thirty
years, as it has across the province and society in general. Trustees who were board members in the mid 1990’s described the use of positional or legitimate power to control board direction. Trustees described an abuse of this legitimate power, indicating that there was a “reign of terror”\textsuperscript{(T-1 SA-2)}. At this time, block voting was common and longstanding trustees created a hegemony of power that was difficult to challenge. In several interviews, four specific trustees were noted to have been a “powerful force”\textsuperscript{(T-1 SA-2)} on the board. Interviewees referred to this board as the “old guard” (T-1). New trustees were expected to “sit and listen and keep their mouths shut” (T-1) and felt the need to be observers until they established credibility. Winning approval was seen as an “uphill battle” (T-1). Some indicated that it took them a year to become comfortable voicing their opinions, while for others, it took their whole first term in office.

Superintendents viewed trustees at that time as holding a tremendous amount of power as well. The role of the Chair carried even more power. The Chair thirty years ago was described as “awful”; she “used to terrorize people”\textsuperscript{(T-3)}. If someone voted against her, she would accost them and “tell them how stupid they were”\textsuperscript{(T-1)}. However, she also was given a tremendous amount of respect because of her position and her personal attributes.

This power dynamic within the board has changed somewhat as the “old guard” has resigned their positions and legislation has removed the operational aspect of running the board from the trustees. The power dynamic between superintendents and trustees has changed. For example, superintendents no longer ask trustees if they agree where principals will be placed, they “inform them.” However, trustees still hold positional power. One principal described a situation that took place recently regarding portable
buildings at his school. Although the principal had worked with the superintendent to devise a plan around the use of portables, because of the trustee’s input, the plan had to be changed.

Although the trustee positional power has declined, the Chair still carries considerable legitimate positional power. The current Director confirms this when he indicates the chair has a greater opportunity to have impact on policy, due to their position, and their ability to control who gets to speak. However, he also cautions that the Chair should not assume positional authority because as the Chair she does not need to flaunt it. She is already in a position to influence.

**Historical Context and Power Dynamics: Coercion**

Examples of coercion also were demonstrated earlier in the board’s history. Apart from the description of the previous Chair berating others if they voted against her, other trustees indicated that they knew that their position held power and they used it in a coercive way. Trustee Wheeler demonstrated an awareness of this power dynamic. When speaking about one board employee, she stated, “They used to always say don’t piss off the trustee and she pissed me off. Well she went up one side of me and down the other about something. I can’t remember what it was now…I said do you know who you are talking to” (T-3)? Another incident was reported in an interview with a principal. In this circumstance, the principal was opening a garden in his school and had invited both the mayor and the trustee. When a conflict arose, he chose to organize the ceremony around the mayor’s schedule. The trustee was very upset and phoned the superintendent who then relayed the message back to the principal. The principal indicated that he learned
very quickly that the trustee is the political figure for the school district.

**Historical Context and Power Dynamics: Referent Power**

Personal power sources also contribute to the social power dynamic within the school district. Although each trustee only counts as one vote at the table, some trustees are more influential than others. Trustees Sutton and Wheeler both expressed the sentiment that “you get more flies with honey than with vinegar,” meaning that they value forming relationships in order to create consensus among school board members. Several individuals described Sutton as a strong advocate who was hugely influential in the board. She had a measured way about her and a compelling defined presence. She never shied away from issues. Sutton’s personal influence was demonstrated in the board’s recent attempt to approach the provincial Ministry of Education to review the Special Education funding model. The trustees believed that because of the use of old statistics, the school district was being severely underfunded. Sutton used her personal connection with the Minister of Education to set up a meeting to discuss the funding inequities. As a result, the Ministry changed the way that Special Education funding was allocated and the school district received substantially more money.

Respect and influence are two words that were used frequently with regards to several of the trustees, suggesting that their personal power had a substantially impact on the board culture. Trustees spoke of using this personal influence to move their equity agendas forward, whether to provide busing for a specialized program in the north or to advocate for building renovations. In this regard, one trustee equalling one vote did not necessarily apply. Whether getting other trustees to vote as a block, or using the
relationships that they had built throughout their times as trustees, some had more voice than others. One superintendent spoke to the different approaches that some trustees have:

So there are some that are much more collaborative and in their approach and they will raise questions and ask her questions but do it in such a way that it still feels that you're part of the team and are working together for the solutions. It doesn't feel quite so adversarial…There's others that can be quite adversarial and quite provocative in the way that they go about it. But they get attention and because it's a public forum you know the director can't ignore it. And sometimes it feels like the ones that are more provocative can make you feel more defensive. And then you have to learn to sort of step back from it and look at it at its face value and say are there some things that we need to look at and think about here? (T-1 SA-2)

Collaboration, listening and building relationships are key components of being an influential trustee. Those individuals who are able to capitalize on these skills have the ability to control the board agenda. Their motivation and personal values impact whether or not this control leads to maintenance of the status quo or to change.

**Historical Context and Power Dynamics: Information**

The Special Education funding campaign, which led to the meeting with the Minister of Education and the subsequent funding reform, illustrates the way in which trustees control information to shape the views of others. The current Chair of the board led this campaign. In order to control the message, she held town council meetings and invited all of the school district’s School Council Chairs to give parent representatives information as to why trustees were advocating for this change, and what the School Councils could do to support it. The current Chair spoke about how the message was framed in such a way as to garner support from parents, the media and the local members of parliament. Controlling the message to both the media and the public allowed trustees
to shape the conversation and contributed to achieving positive results. Having more special education funding supports the agenda for making the school system more equitable by redirecting support to the needs of Special Education students back into the mainstream classroom.

Historical Context and Power Dynamics: Expertise

Expert power is the skill and knowledge that one person might hold through personal expertise or experience. Many trustees came to the role with backgrounds in occupations that would support them in their role as trustee. For example, Trustee Wheeler was an accountant and Trustee Smith worked in business for a long time, which gave them different perspectives when approaching educational problems. However, perhaps more significant in terms of expertise was the longevity of many board members in the role of trustee itself. One principal noted:

When you have somebody that's been a trustee for 25 years and the Chair of the board, and is for a long time there and is well respected and is capable as we have, that person is inevitably going to have more power and influence. I don't think she has that power and influence because being the chair. I think she has it because of being her. Because she has the skill set of experiences that she has…you can actually leverage the knowledge and skills of your trustee to your school’s benefit. (T-3 P-1)

This leveraging of power due to longevity in the role was most notable in the example of the appropriation of land in order for buses at one school to not have to wait along a busy highway. Although this situation was dangerous, the project took over thirteen years to complete due to the costs, the multiple agencies involved, and the complexity of the
permits required. The principal noted:

If it wasn't for somebody who had a longstanding understanding of the situation and desire to seek do something about it, first of all superintendent who was there for thirteen years wouldn't have had the political clout to make it happen. And nobody's the superintendent for this in the same place for 13 years. So they don't have the historical stake in it. (T-3 P-1)

Utilizing the expert power of the trustee allowed for continuity and the ultimate success of this project.

All of these examples of power are at play within the historical context of the board itself. In regard to trustees specifically, the use of individual power is balanced with group power. Group power dynamics may conflict with individual power dynamics causing stagnation or turmoil. Alternately, if the strongest power base in the board of trustees wants things to remain the same, change becomes more difficult. Dominant groups “may more or less resist, accept, condone, comply with, or legitimate such power, and even find it ‘natural’” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 354). This dominant group power dynamic may also be instituted into the policies, norms habits and group consensus, creating hegemony by more powerful trustees. Stealth power can be insipid in the everyday running of the organization, as much as legitimate power and influence.

In regards to the agenda of equity within the board, these different power bases can be in conflict depending on the motivation of dominant members of the group. Some members of the group are more influential because of their longevity with the board or their personal persuasive attributes. If they are actively trying to maintain the status quo as opposed to advocating for change, the equity agenda may be impeded. In the case of expert power, newer voices tend to be silenced. However, recently in this
board, the power dynamic has begun to change. One superintendent notes:

We have a new diversity in trustees in terms of – I'll talk about racial diversity, which we haven't had. As a racialized person, that makes me quite content. We have people that represent the communities that we serve and I'm finding there are trustees now kind of bringing those to the forefront. So one of the projects we’re working on right now is the struggles and the successes of black male youth. This would not be something that we as a board would probably be taking on as research but we are. Because I think there are trustees out there that are saying wait a minute here, there is an inequity here. And instead of just saying yeah there's an inequity and then moving on – there is an inequity. What is it, what are the barriers? And what are we going to do to address it?

(T-4 SA-4)

The Director also acknowledged that the change in the group dynamic in the current board could be challenging. He noted, “The new trustees are also shaping the current trustees and that's positive and as it should be in a democratic society” (T-5, SA-5). Although there are still several experienced trustees on the board who have a lot of influence, there is a change in the dynamic of group power due to the large number of newer trustees and because of their own personal backgrounds, are able to challenge some standing practices that are embedded within the board culture. As there is a larger group of newer trustees, the group dynamic that was in place thirty years ago is shifting and newly elected trustees have a greater capacity to exert social influence.

The longstanding nature of many trustees can be perceived as both a strength in terms of continuity but could also be seen as a detriment due to the potential influence that they have on newer trustees and possible vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Conflicting Ideologies
The literature review for this study identifies and outlines Joshee’s (2008) work on prevailing equity discourses. This is important to the analysis of data for this study as ideological beliefs play a role in shaping trustee understanding of equity by acting as an external pressure on decision making. Through the analysis of the interviews for this study, elements of the neoconservative, neoliberal and social justice discourses were observed.

Elements of each of these ideologies were interwoven throughout the interviews for this study, although the neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies are much more prevalent in the responses of trustees, principals and senior administrators. Two of the trustees came from a background of poverty. They attributed their success in life to their own dedication, hard work and ability to make the most of the opportunities presented to them. One example shared by a trustee illustrates his outlook on individual’s responsibility for their own successes:

I'm always in a position where I'm reacting to the white privilege thing. Because I would've liked to have had some privilege. I would've liked to have had some money. I would've liked to have had shoes when I was a kid that didn't have holes in them…So I don't think it's a skin color thing for me. It's really about individualizing individual cases and individual situations…You might look at me and say you have a nice house, you live in a very nice area, you made some choices that were good… I can remember when I was little, like 10 years old living in the inner-city and saying to myself when I get older I'm never gonna live here. And I don't live there. You know a part of me learned really early on about self-responsibility. (T-3 T-1)

This individual and others in the study attributed their success in life to making the most of the opportunities and, through sheer determination, changing their life outcomes. Adherents to this ideology do not acknowledge systemic inequities such as white privilege that may impact outcomes. This outlook fits into the expressed ideal of levelling
the playing field – that the role of the education system is to create opportunities and that it is up to the individual to take advantage of these opportunities.

**Conflicting Ideologies: Neoconservative Discourses**

The neoconservative view of seeing cultural diversity as a problem that needs to be addressed is also evident throughout a number of the interviews. The acknowledgement of accommodations for religious holidays and other needs are consistent with this view of diversity as well as demonstrating the concept of the tolerant Canadian who is supportive of fixing these “problems” through the changes that they institute:

> We never changed board meetings for religious holidays until now...Now we will reschedule interviews (to)... address your religious needs...A number of years ago if you were a child in a wheelchair you would be accommodated on the ground floor...now we build schools with accessibility in mind ...We are now building schools that are accessible to all people. We don't just move kids around, if you're in a wheelchair you just can't go upstairs...We even hire teachers that are challenged, and we address that. (T-1)

More than anything else in this quote, the word even indicates that these accommodations are viewed as concessions in order to support those more needy.

Interviews with current trustees indicated that the school district is now struggling with how to accommodate religious holidays and still have time to have all the meetings and professional development opportunities necessary to run the schools. Board members, superintendents and the director are working with religious leaders to problem solve through this and come to a consensus as to how to be respectful of other cultures.

The board is currently working to create a plan to bring awareness to the issues around second generation English language learners (ELL) not achieving at the same rate as others in the board. Currently, approximately 25% of the district’s population are
English Language Learners, who require additional support, but only half of those receive funding from the government as first generation Canadians. Although the board presents itself in the media as valuing the strength in diversity, this evidence illustrates that the board members problematizes providing for this segment of the population through requests for additional funding. Trustees have played an important role in funding awareness campaigns in the past, utilizing personal relationships with the Minister of Education at the time to create opportunities to promote their viewpoints. These strategies have been highly successful and have led to province-wide changes. However, this approach illustrates the view of English Language Learners, and Special Education as problems that the board needs to fix.

As the board attempts to focus on students with greater needs, there is a subsequent lack of focus on students who achieve academically. Currently, the board is working to examine why black male youth are not graduating at the same rate as other students. Model programs have been established for “boy only” and “girl only” classes to examine whether this will have an impact on academic success. At this point, as no data have been collected regarding race, the success of these endeavours is based on anecdotal observations and teacher perceptions.

While this approach is valuable in attempting to correct imbalances, it is problematic for a number of reasons. It diminishes the focus on students who may be achieving academic success but are at risk in other ways. The criteria for success is limited to a very narrow definition and as such, attention is redirected off of other students. This may result in a number of outcomes: students may reach provincial standards, but may not be fulfilling their academic potential; students may not feel
connected to the system and therefore are not encouraged to pursue higher education; and students who are suffering from emotional or social concerns are not given the benefit of additional support because the definition of success has been linked solely to academics. The focus on those with the greatest needs may, in actuality, have the opposite effect than intended, contributing to the perpetuation of “otherness” within these marginalized groups. There needs to be a more systematic way of identifying if these programs are successful in obtaining their targeted outcomes.

**Conflicting Ideologies: Neoliberal Discourses**

Neoliberal values were also prevalent throughout the interviews. Several interviews spoke to the function of the trustees to make the board more accountable. Currently EQAO data based on the standardized tests given in Grade 3, 6, 9 and 10, is the resource in terms of defining success throughout the school district. Success is defined narrowly as academic success, and outcomes are measured through academic achievement. Several trustees identify that a major function of their role was to provide accountability. One trustee indicated that as a trustee, he served as the public eyes, acting as a watchdog. Trustees want evidence that the board is providing high quality education to students. This view alters the traditional understanding of the function of the trustee through the lens of accountability. As such, trustees look for the bottom line as to how programming in the school district is creating success by using an outcomes and evidence-based definition of academic achievement. Framing the discussion in terms of accountability creates an environment where the focus is on the effectiveness and economic benefits of supporting diversity. The charity discourse that was prevalent through several interviews
aligns most closely with liberal and neoliberal approaches. It is founded on the one-size-fits-all belief that everyone needs the same things and assumes that they should achieve the same outcomes. This approach marginalizes students and exacerbates inequalities by not looking at other inherent dynamics within the system, which may contribute to student disengagement or feelings of having no voice in their own educational process. It does not take into account cultural or systemic influences that may be impacting student self-worth.

The difficulty with moving away from this thinking is that currently, there are no measures in place that would allow for broadening the definition of success. Currently equity and excellence are pitted against each other as competing values. Within the context of this ideological framework, trustees and senior administrators want a tool to measure the board effectiveness in regards to equity and inclusion. Several indicate that a possible solution to this would be to collect demographic data. Currently, there is only voluntary self-identification in terms of Métis and First Nations students. Concerns with racially based data collection relate to privacy and how the data is collected, secured, used and released. The current Director expressed support of further data collection to support equity initiatives, indicating that it would be a way of providing differentiated support for individuals. This would base decision-making in fact as opposed to speculation. The work in the board will be to educate internal stakeholders, such as unions, as to the benefits and purpose for this data.

Conflicting Ideologies: Social Justice Discourses
Social justice discourses described by Choules (2007), such as charity, human rights and privilege were also prevalent throughout the interviews. Many trustees expressed personal beliefs regarding an individual’s responsibility to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” (T-3 T-1). This belief substantiates the view that the board’s responsibility ends with providing opportunities for equity as opposed to achieving equitable outcomes. Equity decisions within the board based in this context eliminate the board’s responsibility to look at inherent systemic barriers to marginalized individuals. This has a substantial impact on decision-making in terms of spending and resource allocation.

Although neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies are prevalent throughout many of the interviews in this study, there is a small but growing movement within the board towards the social justice stance. The current board makeup has been described as inharmonious in that a number of the most recently appointed trustees are questioning established norms within the board culture and challenging the status quo. In addition to this, a number of senior administrators in the board have equity portfolios. Through focused conversations, system leaders are examining definitions of equity and the underlying assumptions behind board decisions and broadening their understandings. An example of this can be seen in discussions that took place regarding using a church as a venue for graduation. Although this was a contentious issue, board members took the opportunity to examine their practices and when framed in the context of even one student potentially being uncomfortable with the decision, ultimately changed the venue. Examples such as this one illustrate a growing movement towards looking at systemic forms of inequity and having the courage to change decisions that perpetuate
marginalization. Being able to engage in these conversations demonstrates mental flexibility, problem solving and a willingness to move towards a better understanding of cultural diversity and divergent perspectives.

Discussions such as this bring conscious awareness to these innate biases. This is a tangible example of how micropolitical interactions can utilize the existing power structures to reconceptualize historic preconceptions and move thinking forward. Coming from a position of power and being willing to question current practices allows trustees to utilize persuasion to improve educational outcomes. Having senior administrators and trustees who are representative of divergent cultural perspectives and who are conscious of how they feel marginalized is a significant way to alter current practices.

The Intersectionality Between Micro, Meso and Macro Levels

Personal values, historical context and prevailing ideologies are all at play when trustees use their influence. Whether or not trustees achieve more equitable results for the board is based on the goals or motivations of each trustee and the relative strength of their voice at the trustee table. Each of these elements plays a role in shaping the motivation of each trustee and each element weighs differently in the decision making process depending on the trustee involved:

**Micro Level of Interaction: Personal Values and Beliefs:** In this study, personal values and beliefs were discussed by all participants. The personal beliefs of these interview candidates appeared to be shaped by cultural background (either being of the dominant culture or a historically marginalized group), personal poverty, work experiences, political aspirations, or family connections in politics.
**Meso Level of Interaction: Historical Context:** Local school board history was also identified as having an impact on the ability of trustees to influence outcomes. Trustees who worked in the board thirty years ago indicated an “old guard” mentality, in which new trustees were told to keep their mouths shut. This is quite different from the current social dynamic in which newly elected trustees feel more comfortable challenging the traditional way of doing things. Historically, the influx of different cultures in the board in the early 1990’s and the rural/urban divide has also played a role in the trustees’ ability to move agendas forward.

**Macro Level of Interaction: Ideological Influences:** In addition to personal values and local historical context, ideologies which are embedded within the policy development at a provincial level, influence the decision making process. Ideological influences may include the narrow definition of success as meaning academic success only, the accountability agenda, and viewing diversity as a problem to be solved. Coupled with this is the small voice of social justice discourse which is currently not expressed by many.

Each trustee demonstrated a different degree to which each of these elements played a role in their decision making. As a result, the triangle of influence would look different for each one. The circle graphic on the next page is representative of the relative amount that each factor influences trustee decision making. The center of the circle represents the least amount of influence, while proximity to the outside represents the most influence. Although all three are interrelated, each trustee demonstrated a tendency to base their own decision making more on one than the others. Through the use of influence, this could potentially lead to more or less equitable results if personal biases or
historical context alter board direction. The graphic representing this relationship for each trustee, is identified below. These graphs are utilized as a way to demonstrate that all of these factors are at work with each trustee to a greater or lesser extent. They are not meant to quantify the data or draw conclusions but rather are used to illustrate that all of these factors were observed to some extent in each of the interviews. The strength of each of the elements was identified by the trustees themselves in three of the interviews. When analyzing the data and this theme became apparent, more data were collected in the secondary interviews. Although the use of one element over another did not alter outcomes, it did play a role in how trustees navigated the decision making process and garnered support.

**Trustee One**

For Trustee Sutton, historical context appears to play a much greater role in her decision making process than personal values or prevailing ideologies. This was largely due to her extensive time as a trustee. In terms of her decision making, this caused her to rely heavily on relationships to influence outcomes. It also makes her ability to influence
greater, as she was able to draw from her past experiences and relationships. This reliance on historical context also altered the strategies which she used. Her longstanding position as trustee made her more influential than others and allowed her to personally shape board direction. Reliance on historical context also caused her to blur the lines between operations and governance because prior to the introduction of Bill 177, trustees routinely were involved in operational matters. This was demonstrated in her desire to influence decision making in regards to principal hiring and placement.

**Trustee Two**

**Personal Values**

Although Trustee Smith identified how his personal experiences as a male nurse shaped his values in regards to understanding how people can feel discriminated against, his outlook on equity appears to be shaped more by the prevailing neoliberal ideology of accountability. Although he used his knowledge of board history to advocate for projects such as the removal of portables, he did not rely on alliances and personal relationships
that he built through his time as a trustee to move agendas forward. He did not discuss motions prior to them being brought forward or trade votes. He framed his interview answers in regards to equity in terms of closing achievement gaps and viewed himself as a public “watchdog.” This accountability framework allowed him to identify deficit thinking and socio-economic barriers to equity. As such, he took a more global approach to his role, and was more able to separate the functions of administration and governance.

**Trustee Three**

**Personal Values**

![Diagram](image)

**Historical Context**

**Ideologies**

Trustee Wheeler also relied heavily on her own personal values. An example of this was the drug awareness program that she championed which she admitted to advocating for due to her own son’s drug addiction. Her decisions also relied heavily on her knowledge of board history and her relationships with other board members. Her own tough upbringing shaped her views on equity, seeing equity as fairness. As such, her
advocacy was often grounded in local need and she did not see accountability as a framework when it came to altering the status quo to create improved outcomes for other socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds in other areas. Her decision making was based on her own personal relationship with members of her community that had lived in the same area for generations. Such alliances caused her to make decisions that were not always equitable, such as when she advocated for a group of parents on one occasion to fundraise to purchase a portable for their school. Her views were also deeply entrenched within the historical context of the board. As a longstanding trustee, she learned to utilized her relationships both with her constituents and with other trustees, in order to move forward her agenda. Relying on personal values and historical context in this case, often led to inequitable results.

**Trustee Four**

Trustee MacDonald relied almost exclusively on her own personal values in decision making. Although she demonstrated political acumen in her ability to lobby and
frame her agendas to garner support, she did not rely on personal relationships to the extent of Trustee Sutton and Wheeler. In her interviews, Trustee MacDonald demonstrated cultural insensitivity and values that were steeped in Eurocentric views. This was demonstrated in many examples, such as her telling a constituent to stand up and pretend to sing O Canada, and her refusal to acknowledge other religious holidays when setting meetings. Her understanding of equity was narrow, falling into the category of the tolerant Canadian. She demonstrated this through her decision making around holding events that allowed for accommodation for other cultures, but not for understanding and inclusion. Using personal values as a tool for decision making in this case was detrimental to equitable outcomes.

**Trustee Five**

Personal Values

As Trustee Singh did not spend a long time as a trustee, her reliance on historical board context was minimal. She relied more on her political acuity as opposed to
personal relationships to advance her agenda. She viewed the role of trustee as a stepping stone to other political aspirations and as such, aligned her decision making to “politically correct” views. This meant that often, her views reflected those of the dominant ideologies. As a result, she framed her answers regarding equity around employment equity. This culminated in her promotion of policy development which would see more representational hiring. This policy focus was also grounded in her own personal values. She viewed her role as bridging the gap that she perceived between the board and her own ethnic background. As such, she promoted policies and practices that would allow racialized people to advance. In the case of Trustee Singh, this policy thrust did result in the creation of a more equitable hiring environment for the school district.

There was no correlation between which factors influenced trustee decision making in terms of outcomes. This is not because these factors are more or less valid, rather it is because often the trustees’ understanding of equity was ill-defined. Relying on long standing relationships and histories creates the opportunities for unexamined biases and opinions to impact decision making. Although equity may still be improved, it may also be hindered depending on the stance and intent of unexamined beliefs. Ideologies also establish frames through which the world is viewed. Coming from the stance of tolerance as opposed to acceptance creates its own set of criteria which can lead to less equitable outcomes.

PART TWO: NAVIGATING POLITICAL CLIMATE
The first three discussion sections addressed how trustees understand equity and are influenced by their personal beliefs and the historical context of the board. This section is concerned with how they impact others. This section addresses the question *What do trustees perceive as their role in implementing a more equitable education system?* In order to answer this, it is important to identify how trustees navigated their political climate and what strategies they used when attempting to achieve greater equity within the school district. As a result, it will also explore how they established support and how their political acumen support their role as trustee.

This section specifically relates to the concept of “power over” versus “power with” as identified in the conceptual framework (Blase and Blase, 1997, p. 139). As identified in the Findings section, prior to the decrease in positional power through government initiatives, trustees used a “power over” model of leadership. Trustee Sutton described her early days as a trustee and the fear that was used to push motions through by intimidating less experienced trustees. As the climate changed within the school board, a “power with” model became more prevalent as trustees described the use of many strategies to create change. These are depicted in Table 5.0.

**Table 5.0 Strategies Utilized by Trustees**
Strategies

Alliances
Attending Public Events
Backroom Conversations
Bargaining
Championing Causes
Framing
Garnering Support
Listening Carefully
Lobbying
Making Recommendations
One-to-One Conversations
Personal Connections
Picking Battles You Can Win
Political Astuteness
Reading the Room
Relational Skills
Strong Personality
Utilizing Relationships
Voting Blocks

Although personal values and historical context influence and shape understandings, the ability to motivate others to support an agenda is largely impacted by the trustee’s persuasive skills. These can be both consciously and unconsciously used. Trustees identified a number of different techniques that they used to influence others. Some were soft skills that were applied on a regular basis, such as listening, relationship building or reading the room. Others skills were more measured and deliberate, such as being tenacious in their advocacy, such as Trustee Wheeler’s persistence in trying to create a safer busing situation at one of her schools, which took almost thirteen years to achieve.

Exerting Influence
Other micropolitical techniques that were described in the interviews were more coercive. Exerting pressure was one technique described by many interviewees. This came in many forms. Attending community functions, connecting with religious leaders in the area and meeting individually with other trustees and politicians were all ways to garner support that could be leveraged in the future if necessary. The rollout of the new Health and Physical Education curriculum is an example of this that was described by one superintendent in the study. There was a large public outcry when this curriculum was first introduced. Students were being withheld from school in protest and many parents requested that the sexual education unit not be taught to their children. Trustees utilized the support of religious leaders to work with families towards better understanding and acceptance. Utilizing these connections garnered the positional power of those religious leaders to support awareness.

Several trustees described exerting influence through overt tactics such as lobbying, developing loose alliances, exchanging votes and massaging the situation in order to manoeuvre people into supporting their agendas. They also described putting pressure on the planning department in order to get changes made to existing buildings or to give their project priority in terms of when it would be completed. This was done either by sitting on the planning committee or by personally attempting to influence the planning officer. Throughout the use of all of these techniques, adaptability and political awareness were identified as key strengths. In addition to this, acting as a collective unit was recognized as the true power of the trustee group. Individually, each trustee is one voice at the table. In order to truly affect internal change in the board, the power of the collective must be utilized.
Political Literacy and Framing

Another category of micropolitical interactions was sophisticated and subtle in nature and might fall into the idea described by Ryan as political literacy (2006). Such skills demonstrated a higher degree of understanding of both the political structure of the school board and the awareness of how to manipulate others at a deeper, more personal level. Some examples of this were described in terms of understanding the nuances of how the organization runs or using emotional intelligence to be aware of when or when not to interrupt a conversation. Others spoke about building connections with provincial politicians and other influential people through networking informally while smoking together.

Perhaps the key example of how this is demonstrated within the trustee group is through the use of framing. Several trustees described using framing to help people understand situations from a different perspective. One trustee described:

Someone might say look I'm not gonna vote for that because that's not fair to everybody. Your kids should not get a bus ride to French immersion when we have a policy that says nobody in secondary get the bus in French immersion studies. So why should we change the policy or why should we create an exception to the policy just for those kids? But another way to say that is in my area, I have a single mom who has three children. They have to take two buses to get their school. That's how far away their boundary to French immersion school is. So for me, the framing of that really hit home. I saw that in a personal, interpersonal struggling way. Maybe I still think of my own mom with three kids who has to go long distances and doesn't have any money to do that. So I think from an empathy standpoint if you can put yourself in peoples’ situations, you would take a little step back and go okay, I understand that a little bit better. So framing – the way people use words. The more experienced a trustee is I think the more they are capable of doing that. (T-3 T-1)
Framing the situation personalizes the argument and can appeal to people on an emotional rather than a logical level. Political literacy is the most influential form of micropolitical persuasion and can be used to make more substantive changes. Framing is particularly effective when personal preconceptions and cultural blind spots are present and has been used by trustees to impact deep-seated beliefs and prejudices. In the case of the Health and Physical Education curriculum rollout, the director described the use of framing to get parents to see things from a different perspective. He described three reasons as to why most parents were protesting the curriculum: either they had misinformation, or they felt that the board was trying to change their beliefs, or they felt that the topics should be discussed in later years. Trustees and administrators worked strategically to frame this discussion with parents in terms of the curriculum expressing the common ideals and understandings of being safe, valued and respected. In this example, framing to the media was also very important. Framing opens individuals to view problems from a different perspective, allowing them to make sense of underlying feelings. It can compel them to examine their beliefs. Strategic use of framing is an important micropolitical technique that is utilized by trustees to move forward agenda. The negative aspect of framing is that it obscures other aspects of the problem from people’s view. Depending on the motivation of the person utilizing it, it can be used to either challenge or maintain existing power structures.

**Relating Influence to the Implementation of Equity Initiatives**

In order to make substantive changes in terms of equity, board leaders must
challenge the common sense constructions that are at play and reflect in a critical way as to whether or not the social processes inherent throughout their practices are fixed and if they meet the needs of marginalized groups. From a critical lens, Foster contends that leadership must be oriented toward social change. As such:

Leadership is at its heart a critical practice, one that comments on present and former constructions of reality, that holds up certain ideals for comparison, and that attempts at the enablement of a vision based on an interpretation of the past. In being critical, then, leadership is oriented not just toward the development of more perfect organizational structures, but toward a reconceptualization of life practices where common ideals of freedom and democracy stand important. (Foster, 1989, p. 52)

“Leadership, simply put, is politics” (Foster, 1989, p. 46). The skills discussed by the trustees in this study can be used to move forward the agenda of social change or to maintain the status quo. How they impact the equity agenda in the board is determined by the motivation behind the skills that are being used.

For trustee leadership to create social change, it must be critical, transformative, educative and ethical. Self-examination and the motivation to challenge the status quo must be coupled with awareness of how to navigate the political climate in order to make significant social gains. As democratic representatives of the school district, trustees are in a unique position to use their role to impact changes. Self-reflection allows them to fulfill the democratic function of their role by valuing and listening to all community members. Through representation, trustees can act to allow everyone to actively participate in the decision making process to ensure that every child has access to quality education and has their basic needs met. Addressing social issues can be done superficially or in such a way that substantive change can occur. Micropolitical awareness allows trustees to carry out this function more effectively.
Equitable Outcomes: Local vs. Regional Concerns

In navigating their political climates, trustees utilize micropolitical strategies and demonstrate their awareness in many different ways. One of the themes identified through data analysis was the tension for trustees between acting as a representative for their local area as opposed to addressing concerns of the entire region. Using the micropolitical lens of the conceptual framework, the strategies that were demonstrated when addressing this tension illustrated how political awareness affected equitable outcomes in these circumstances.

Trustee decision making differs when approaching concerns from a local view as opposed to a more regional perspective. There are many factors specific to this particular district which amplify this difference in perspective. The school district’s large geographic area, coupled with its areas of urbanization versus the rural north, both impact the trustee advocacy focus. This underlying factor was exacerbated in the early 1990’s by a demographic shift when an influx of a racially diverse group entered the region. This, coupled with affluent areas in the north and extreme south with pockets of socio-economically depressed areas in the middle region, caused trustees to advocate for their specific region in many instances.

The local advocacy focus was particularly evident in this northern region. This was partly due to the personal connections that trustees held with community members, many whom had lived in the area for a number of generations. Another factor was the less dense population in the north, resulting in only one trustee for the entire upper third
of the school district. The longstanding histories of the families in the area also made the region more unresponsive to change. This created a conservative political culture.

Examples of how trustees promoted local equity needs over whole board needs related largely to busing issues. Trustee Wheeler utilized her political acumen through overt tactics regarding getting the busing zones changed for one of her schools. This was a complicated situation, which involved the provincial government appropriating land from the Catholic Church and selling it to the school district to give them the room to create the new busing area. Wheeler argued for this project for over thirteen years. She brought the planning department, as well as other trustees and the Associate Director out to the site. Her longevity as a representative in the area gave her the historical reference for this situation. In order to advocate for her community, she utilized personal relationships and framed the issue in terms of student safety in order to mobilize the political will of other trustees, whose constituents would not benefit from this situation being resolved. Understanding how to navigate the system and exerting influence enabled her to successfully convince other trustees to support allocating substantial resources for this local decision.

Another busing example was also given regarding how local and regional concerns can compete for support amongst the trustee group. A current trustee who was a secondary interview in this study spoke about a recent issue over busing in the north for the high school French Immersion program. Although busing is not provided within the school district for any regional programs, the trustee felt very strongly that an exception should be made for students in the north. His rationale was that the program was run out of a school in the far northeast corner of the district. Students from the west
end were not attending the program because there is currently no regional transportation in the area and parents found the driving distance too far. Trustees from the south who were opposed to providing these students busing argued that although there is public transit in other parts of the region, often the programs are inaccessible to students for the same reason. Public transit would require students who lived far away from the program to take more than one bus and hours of transportation, making the program inaccessible for them as well. The northern trustee used framing and a great deal of lobbying to make his case. He found allies in some of the newer trustees and ultimately was successful when the issue went to a vote.

This is a clear example of how micropolitical awareness and skills can result in inequitable outcomes. Although the trustee attempted to make the situation more equitable, in doing so he removed the ownership from the parents to transport students and gave the responsibility to the school board. This essentially is an example of “switching sides” to balance a perceived injustice. It is not levelling the playing field because it has set up an inequitable situation in order to right a perceived injustice. In effect, the more affluent north end of the school district received a benefit not afforded to other socio-economically depressed areas, suggesting that those with money and power are able to circumvent the equalizing effects of policy.

A superintendent suggested that the longer trustees are in office, the more tempted they are to advocate for their region rather than seeing the whole board picture. This is partially due to their awareness that it is the community that keeps them voted in and partially because they get very attached to the work that they are doing for their constituents. In both of these cases, political acumen helped the trustee be a more
convincing advocate for their community. However, in terms of producing equitable results, the use of power and influence resulted in furthering the interests of the trustee but not necessarily fulfilling the agenda of equity.

PART THREE: RESISTANCE, CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

The final discussion section will answer the question “What resistance, challenges and barriers do trustees face in advancing an equity agenda and how do they overcome these challenges?” This will be explored by examining barriers within the trustee group itself, within the board and local community, and within the system. This discussion will be followed by an analysis of how policy, which is the output of the equity discussion, fits within the discussion of trustees implementing equity.

Potential Resistance, Challenges and Barriers: Within the Trustee Group

Personal values and cultural biases were identified as potential challenge for trustees. The data indicate that trustees are more willing to acknowledge and identify issues of class than issues of race or gender when understanding the issues of the district. One superintendent spoke about her experience while interviewing for her current role. Trustees wanted her to frame equity answers in terms of socio-economic factors as opposed to addressing racial inequities. Examining personal biases is more challenging unless training is provided. Currently the board provides a few training opportunities for trustees. When trustees are first elected, there is a weekend of training provided as an overview as to how the board operates. Once a month, the trustee group meets to discuss
issues on a deeper level. Although equity is discussed, there is no established training program either through the school district or Ontario Public School Board Association that specifically creates opportunities for trustees to challenge their belief systems. Deficit thinking and competing understandings of how equity is defined also have an impact on group effectiveness.

Trustees are very aware of their position as elected officials and as such respond to the concerns of their community. This can potentially act as a barrier to achieving equitable outcomes, particularly in circumstances where their constituents or they themselves have intolerant beliefs. An example of this is the “white flight” that was discussed by one superintendent referenced in a previous chapter. The trustee in the northern area may experience difficulty challenging the status quo or creating an inclusive environment particularly as new housing developments, which bring more diversity to the area, are encroaching on the northern area.

There are also potential challenges within the trustee group itself. Several trustees cited the difficulties that they had when new to the role in terms of their treatment due to their lack of experience. Although currently there is not the “sit there and shut up” attitude that Trustee Sutton experienced when she first was first elected, trustees still face the issue of being treated as “newbies” for their first term. As such, they believe their voices are not valued as much at the trustee table. For example, as cited earlier, there has been a past practice that principals with reputations for being problematic were placed into less experienced trustee’s areas. Another example is the stigmatization of the label new as opposed to recently elected.
All of the retired trustees indicated that in the past, the trustee group has been extremely cohesive. Although there was sometimes a difference of opinion, generally, there was not a lot of dissention within the group. Although they saw this as positive, it actually acted as a barrier to change. In the past, most trustees in this school district come from a white, middle class background, creating the potential for socio-economic and cultural disconnect. The trustee group within the last five years is described by the participants of this study as less cohesive than in the previous twenty-five years. Although there is the potential for polarized voting, the advantage to the current cognitive dissonance is that board norms are being tested and rethought. Particularly if a trustee from a non-mainstream background speaks from the perspective of their own personal narrative and frames their arguments so that others understanding, it allows for thoughtful dialogue and potential growth in understanding.

**Potential Resistance, Challenges and Barriers: Within the School District and Community**

Trustees identified many potential barriers to equity within the school district and the community. The geography of a large school district has an impact on the trustees ability to influence change. This is particularly true for the northern rural area, where there is only one representative and student needs are so different from the other two areas. This inequity of voice is exacerbated by the disproportionate power of longstanding trustees. Although each voice is one vote, some voices are more influential than others. By utilizing micropolitical strategies, some trustees are more successful at convincing and garnering votes than others. One superintendent spoke to the strong
attachment that trustees develop to the regional work. She indicated that newer trustees are more flexible in their thinking and are less tied to their own constituents.

Several trustees also identified bias within the community as a challenge that they have had to deal with. In addition to the white flight phenomenon, Trustee Smith spoke to the stereotypes in his community regarding the low socio-economic group of largely black people. Others in the community saw this group as having uncaring parents and said that these families would bring guns to the area. This deficit thinking is not as overt in other areas of the school district, but there is still a lack of understanding and sensitivity about other cultures. The question of whether or not it is acceptable for the board to use a church facility as a graduation venue is a good example of this. In addition, the prevalence of the neo-conservative idea of the tolerant Canadian in the northern and southern areas demonstrates the resistance that exists to the rapidly changing school board demographic. There is a need to build acceptance around cultural and religious differences that exist and to break through language barriers to give more voice to marginalized groups. All of these inform the future direction of the district. To examine this problem more carefully, staff and student censuses are being undertaken in order to create measurable data as to how these situations impact student success.

The culture of the board itself also acts as a potential barrier to equity. With so many longstanding trustees, there is a strong inclination to maintain the status quo. Equity initiatives within the board inform but do not necessarily challenge underlying beliefs. The difficult conversations become ones where trustees must look at changing board practices due to existing systemic inequities. For example, the board is currently training to create understanding of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgendered Queer
culture. Trustees are less comfortable talking about how certain racial demographics of students are underperforming. One superintendent felt that a possible reason for this is white guilt. She uses the example of the First Nations and Métis to demonstrate that when school district leaders get trapped in feelings of guilt, supporting certain student demographics becomes more difficult. Trying to be a saviour as opposed to an ally doesn’t allow the opportunity for self-reflection regarding biases and stereotypes.

**Potential Resistance, Challenges and Barriers: Systemic Biases**

McCaskell’s research identifies a “new kind of racism” based on institutional or systemic biases, individual expressions and common ideas (2005). Although some individual actions are visible, others lie below the surface. This concept is illustrated through examples such as during the secondary interviews for Trustee Two when one Superintendent spoke of “talking white.” McCaskell’s quote identifies that there is an aspect of racism that is not directed at individuals but embedded within the current culture of our society. Acting or talking white is a pejorative term, implying a betrayal of culture and heritage. In the circumstance described by the Superintendent, the person who told her that she could “talk white” was implying that it would be an advantage to her during her promotion process interviews. This may be partially because others on the hiring committee are uncomfortable with races and cultures that are foreign to them or that there is a perception that if a candidate has no accent they are seen as being better educated. These preconceptions identify an underlying racism that disadvantages and create racial marginalization.
This example also relates to Dei’s concept of social power and white privilege. Dei (2010) states that school plays an important role in creating personal and social identity. Negating the culture of marginalized races or valuing “white culture” acts to subordinate other groups. It also is an example of the patterns of advantage which are intrinsically embedded in institutional practices identified in the work of Ryan and Rottmann (2007). Initially, the Superintendent was offended by the implication that she spoke “white” but later expressed that she needed to see this as an opportunity for engagement in dialogue that would open conversations to create a better understanding of inherent preconceptions ingrained within the school system. Building on the work of Larkin and Staton (2001), she saw this as an opportunity to bring awareness which would challenge practices and conceptions that are integral to current beliefs and lead to a more inclusive environment with a safe and supportive environment for all.

McCaskell states that there are two ways to oppose racism. The first is to create better circumstances for individuals through equal access and the second is by fixing the conditions that people face by removing barriers, changing life conditions and aiming efforts toward equality of outcome (McCaskell, 2005, p. 246). Equal access was a term commonly used when defining equity in all interviews for this study. One principal describe board efforts towards achieving equity:

Somebody started with the metaphor a number of years ago of a building being made more accessible to people and I like that and I built on that. Think about automatic door openers, think about wheelchair ramps, think about wider doors; think about public accessibility to a building. And then relate that to how we've tried to implement equity. The idea that we've removed barriers and at the same time made entry easier for people that are either disabled or are members of the visible minority or even women for Pete's sake. So what we've done is we've increased the entry points. We've made the entry point easier and we've made it more accessible. And
I think that's a pretty good working definition of what we're trying to do.
(T-5 P-4)

Numerous examples found through this study indicate that the school district has largely focused equity initiatives on providing access. Finding examples within the board of McCaskell’s alternate approach to opposing racism are more difficult. Removing barriers by changing life conditions is more difficult to achieve due to cultural blind spots and resistance within the system. It is difficult to distinguish inequities and biases from within a system. Often, they exist as common practices within the board or are reflected in the language of policy. Secondly, shining the spotlight on systemic conditions that create inequities can cause defensiveness. As stated before, trustees take ownership of their initiatives, and to admit that there are inequities in the system would mean that they would have to look critically at their own work. This inability to acknowledge or see inequities from within is exacerbated when board employees direct professional development opportunities. External agencies are not immersed in board culture and would not be influenced by historically embedded perceptions.

One trustee related a personal story, which acts as a metaphor for the ongoing journey from tolerance to acceptance:

My husband and I had to find a new doctor because my doctor retired. Anyway, I did eventually find this doctor (and he had a South Asian name). So my husband went first...and he came home and I said what is he like? Oh he said, he's really a nice guy. I said, good is he turbaned? I don't know why I asked that but I did. He said no, no, no he's not. He's not turbaned. I said oh, did he have a beard? He said no, no he didn't have a beard. He had really nice eyes. And he said I really liked him. And I said oh, well that's good because you know, because I believe I'm very open (but) I could not imagine myself going for a medical to somebody who I didn't feel comfortable with, you know? So, and it wasn't the name, and it wasn't the color or the race, it was the visuals...so I walked in. Out comes this doctor and he walks across the room with the big blue turban on...So then I go and that's Dr. Singh - blue turban, full beard. Actually I really
like him (but I said) to him, look doctor I may as well tell you I'm not comfortable. You can do everything above the waist and below the knees. (T-1)

This example illustrates a number of points. First of all, this trustee views herself as an open and tolerant individual. Her ward had a very diverse population and she advocated for them fiercely. And yet in terms of her comfort level, she admits to having biases when dealing with intimate issues. Personal bias of trustees inhibits their acceptance of other races. This can result in what McCaskell refers to as bifurcated consciousness in which outwardly, the board is struggling to achieve more equitable education for all, while inwardly, personal biases inhibit the actual achievement of these goals. As a result, Anglicized minorities are more accepted, and excel within the education system while those who are appear more culturally diverse – through accent or appearance – need to prove themselves more than others. This is particularly the case in terms of teaching staff obtaining jobs and rising to positions of authority. One superintendent was told that she was “gonna be okay through your promotion process because you can talk white” (T-4 SA-4). As an Anglicized individual, she had an advantage over others because she was not seen as being as threatening to the established culture and climate of the board.

**Potential Resistance, Challenges and Barriers: Institutional Structures**

Trustees identified a number of challenges that they needed to navigate within the system itself in order to create a more equitable educational environment. Trustee Smith indicated that at a school level, teacher unions acted as systemic barriers to improve equity and believed that unions were a way of keeping creative teachers in check. He was concerned that if one teacher stood out as being exceptional, it would make others look
bad, which would inhibit the development of programming to improve student equity. He stated that, as with the trustee group, teachers were viewed by principals and other teachers as “newbies” for the first five years, which caused them to feel undervalued. In addition, he identified not being able to get a permanent position for numerous years because of the impact of Bill 274 (2012), which puts parameters around hiring practices, as a barrier to programming continuity.

Finally, the issue of standardized testing impacted achievement levels for marginalized students. Trustee Smith cited that the test had differing levels of difficulty each year, invalidating the significance of the data. He saw this as a barrier to equity. Although some accommodations are allowed within the test, such as giving more time or using a computer to record student responses, he felt that there were other student needs that were not addressed, and that also there might be inherent biases within the test that would have an impact on some children’s success.

Financial constraints also proved to be a challenge. Of particular note for the trustee group were the funding inequities present in the system and the provincial requirement to not run a deficit budget. Several trustees spoke to the issue of special education funding being allocated based data from twenty years prior. Due to this school district’s significant growth after this time frame, trustees were borrowing money from other pockets of resources in order to make up the shortfalls. As they had lost the ability to increase tax rates to make up this difference, other areas were being underfunded in order to provide for the most needy students. Currently, the board is also looking to approach the ministry in regards to more funding for second-generation students. Although these students have lived in Canada all of their lives, they are not achieving to the same degree
as other students. English language learner programming is necessary to improve this gap; however, trustees have no control over providing this resource.

District policy-making takes place within a set of relationships characterized by unequal resources and power relations. There are political and organizational influences on district policy and interactions which can cause responses and outcomes that don’t challenge racial or class inequality. Prevailing discourses point efforts in one direction while diverting the attention from others. Some of these include budget cuts, lack of resources, poverty, and families leaving the school board to go to private institutions or the Catholic system. The media was also mentioned as a challenge.

Time was also cited as a contributing challenge to making the system more equitable. An example of this can be seen in religious holiday accommodation. Over the past ten years, the board has made an effort to not hold meetings or professional development on any of the major religious holidays. Several interviewees indicated that this is proving to be a challenge as there are not enough days left to get everything done. Trustees want to work with faith leaders in the community to work through how to be respectful of all faiths and yet still have enough time for meetings. These systemic pressures, in turn, shape policy response. Trustees expressed that through all of these barriers, the role of the trustee was to ensure accountability, acting as a watchdog to monitor and break down these systemic inequities.

An Example of Barriers Creating Inequitable Outcomes: Trustees and Hiring
One of the major themes that came out in the study was the trustee’s role in the hiring and placement of board leaders. This board currently utilizes trustees on the hiring committees for principals, vice principals, superintendents and the director. Interview subjects were split as to whether or not it was best practice for trustees to sit on these committees. Two of the retired trustees indicated that it should not be a part of their role, viewing it as a strictly administrative function. However, the current Director cited two reasons for trustees to remain on the committee. Historically the board always allowed trustees to participate in hiring and he believed that it gave trustees insight into what criteria was used in hiring leadership. He also expressed that if trustees were a part of the decision-making process, they would be less likely to challenge these decisions at a later point in time.

Attempts were made to create standards to make hiring less subjective. Over the past thirty years, practices evolved in an attempt to rectify biases in hiring. Trustee Sutton discussed hiring practices in which candidates from culturally diverse backgrounds were given preference in being given an interview. This is similar in many ways to the practices associated with affirmative action to promote more women and diversity within the board. Recently, based on a survey that was conducted a few years ago by an independent company, the board eliminated the necessity for prospective leadership candidates to have a principal recommendation to move forward. The promotion dinner was also discontinued as it potentially could impact opinions of candidates outside of the interview process. Senior administrators establish the questions to be asked during interviews and create a rating scale to regulate hiring practices in an attempt to remove bias from the interview process. Promoting diversity
within board leadership is now being addressed through mentoring relationships and a series of workshops for racialized candidates to explore leadership opportunities and have networking opportunities. These workshops are directed at allowing these candidates to talk about their personal narratives in regards to their work environment and identify systemic issues that may inhibit their successful promotion. In these ways, the board has attempted to use policy changes to lessen the impact of personal influence on the hiring practices and to address the lack of community representation in board leadership.

Yet, hiring is an area which still appears to be inequitable. Several principals who were interviewed mentioned the concept of hiring for fit in individual schools. Although they qualified that “fit” meant what works in relation to the other team members in the school, there is the potential that this also means maintaining the status quo in terms of ethnic and cultural diversity. Particularly in areas where communities are less tolerant or accepting of other cultures, this creates a paradox in terms of moving thinking forward and broadening acceptance. Attempts to maintain the status quo have exacerbated hiring inequities.

Both trustees and senior administrators indicated that it was a concern that leadership in the board was not culturally reflective. Hiring for diversity has been a challenge within this board that has been amplified by the demographic shift that took place in the early 1990’s. Principals in particular indicated this push towards having a more diverse staff. One principal illustrated this by indicating that when interviewing two candidates and “all other things being equal,” the feeling was that they were to hire
for diversity. However, all other things are never equal. As a result, principals felt that hiring for diversity was often pitted against hiring for excellence.

Although measures have been put in place to regulate hiring procedures, trustees continue to demonstrate strong influence in the hiring process. Perhaps the clearest example of this relates to the example of how Trustee Wheeler used her influence to introduce a candidate to other trustees over lunch prior to the interview process. She also stood as a reference on this candidate’s promotion package. The superintendent did not feel that this was inappropriate because what was discussed at the lunch was not “secret information.” During this lunch, they chatted informally and discussed what the room was like and how many people would be there. Although specific interview questions were not discussed, this gave her an unfair advantage to other candidates for two reasons. Firstly, it allowed her to be more comfortable with the interview process, which could impact the results. Secondly, it allowed the candidate to make a personal connection with an influential trustee prior to the interview. In terms of equity, this interaction gives this candidate an advantage over others. Several of the secondary interviewees in this study indicated that in the past, it was often who you knew that would get you promoted as opposed to what you knew, although some measures have been put in place to counter this, allowing trustees to use their influence decreases equitable outcomes in terms of hiring. In this way, preserving the historical context of trustees being a part of the hiring process can lead to micropolitical influence through personal connections and agendas to promote those that they know and approve. The “we’ve always done it this way here” argument is invalid if the result is the creation of less equitable hiring practices.
Equity needs to be an important consideration in regards to hiring and placement; however, this continues to be an area where trustees demonstrate influence and where micropolitical interactions are routinely utilized. This creates a barrier to equitable outcomes. In particular, trustees expressed using micropolitical strategies in regard to principal placement. Currently there is some confusion as to whether trustees are informed of placements or are a part of the decision making process. Trustees indicated that particularly earlier in board history they would lobby ferociously for candidates that they supported. Trustee Sutton in particular took great interest in both hiring and the placement processes. She indicated that she had vetoed candidates if she heard about difficulties in other locations and that “less desirable” principals would be placed in the wards of newer trustees. This clearly demonstrates how personal, historical and ideological power dynamics influence decision-making and how micropolitical interactions impact macro decision making and can potentially lead to abuses of power and inequitable results. Hiring and placement practices illustrate clearly how, in this board, personal values, historical context and ideologies mix with forms of power and micropolitical skills creating competing agendas.

**Addressing Barriers Through Policy Response**

Policy responses are one way that trustees can influence school board direction. Policy responses are often enacted as a result of systemic pressures. The following section examines the policies that have been created within the school board to address the systemic pressures of attracting and retaining students and being accountable for student achievement. By examining the specific responses to these external pressures, a
better understanding is created as to whether or not school board policies place equity at the forefront of decision making.

**Addressing Barriers Through Policy Response: Policy Discourse**

Policymaking is a social process defined by beliefs, values and attitudes. Interpretive policy analysis examines policies in order to create awareness of how these discourses are embedded within policy. Policies are then used to make decisions locally. District policy makers create meaning through policy within the political and organizational context of the district. One senior administrator clarified the trustee’s role in policymaking and how personal beliefs and attitudes shape policymaking:

And that is really where policy gets changed, and where attitudes get changed at the trustee level. Because trustees in and of themselves don't – they don't create policy. Policies are typically developed by administration, who then work with trustees to make sure that it fits their personal views but that it reflects current practices and policies of the government. And so it's invariably the case that my personal professional views would help eventually shape the policies of the board. And shape the attitudes of the trustees. Of course no one does it alone. (T-5 SA-5)

Policies reflect personal values, are embedded within the local culture of the school system, and are situated within the historical context of the board. They are the culmination of how beliefs are lived on a daily basis within the institution. An examination of the policy direction and discourse of this board illuminates how the underlying challenges and barriers to equity are being thought of and addressed.

In this board, policies are focused in one of two ways: either through formal structural management strategies, such as strategic planning, or through attempts to change individual and group culture. Trustee Smith alluded to this when analyzing his perception of where the board must focus efforts in order to achieve equitable outcomes.
He stated that structure times process equals outcome. In this equation, structure refers to strategic planning and ensuring that the policies that are approved address systemic inequities. Process refers to the meaning making that policy actors do to enact the structures that are put in place. He stated that these factors are multiples, not additions: the more effective the processes are, the greater the outcomes will be and vice versa. The impact of both are contingent upon the other and ultimately, both are required in order to move the agenda of equity forward within the board.

**Addressing Barriers Through Policy Response: Structures**

Strategic planning is one way in which the school board uses structures to improve equity responses. Currently this board is undergoing the process of revising their five-year plan. The school success planning process is implemented at the school level, but is contingent on the direction provided by the overall plan. Senior administrators spoke to the value of creating fewer goals. Working on fewer areas more deeply and in a coherent fashion allows equity work to be targeted and explicit. In previous drafts of the strategic plan there was a focus on eight goals. This previous approach created a disconnection between the board policy structures and the schools by spreading resources too thinly across too many competing priorities. Administrators at the board level are working to strategically narrow their focus to allow for a more unified plan with the lens of equity as an umbrella concept embedded within all goals. Equity will not only be work unto itself, but it will permeate all other aspects of the board directions.

The board reviews all board policy every four years. In addition to this, policies are revised based on changes in legislation, ministry requirements or the changing landscape
of the area. Policies help to drive the operation procedures, guidelines or practices. The current work on policies such as one for gender identity, are representations of the values of the board. Trustees can move the equity agenda forward by questioning the values embedded within the policies when reviewing them and ensuring that equity is a part of the strategic plan and that financial resources are directed toward achieving this goal.


Policies are discursive manifestations of the process of meaning making within the district. In terms of equity, policy responses may address disparities in any areas that are viewed as lacking in relation to the education system. Typically, these inequities relate to materials, denial of cultural belonging or social status or an unequal voice in decision making. This section will specifically address the policy responses to issues of inequity in this particular district. Specific policy responses recently introduced, and their relationship to the district being more equitable will be examined as the conversation in the board has moved from diversity towards inclusion.

**Addressing Barriers Through Racial Meaning Making: From Diversity to Inclusion**

Addressing racial disparities has not been a comfortable subject of conversation for board members. The preferred lens for shaping these conversations is focusing on economic disparities. An example of this was described by one superintendent during her interview for promotion. She was asked how the school board could improve equity.
She answered the question by stating that the school board needed to have a better understanding of the intersectionalities between race and class. She was asked to reframe her answer. Her next response identified the need for the school board to understand better the differences of the various religions within the region. The trustee who had asked the question asked once again if she could respond in terms of a different frame, specifically regarding class. This identifies a tendency to recognize racial categories without acknowledging systemic inequalities. The conversation within the frame of socio-economic disparities is an easier one because in this case, the finger is pointed outward. The question focuses on how the board can address external influences to make things more equitable for those students. If the question focuses on race, then the finger tends to be pointed inward as to how people within the board need to reflect and change in order to be more accepting. During their interviews, trustees were more willing to talk about providing equitable resources and opportunities than about addressing achievement gaps. This seemed to be a blind spot within the board culture.

Although the school district markets diversity as positive and enriching, there is an underlying belief within the trustee group that diversity is a challenge that needs to be overcome. A difficult conversation that occurred recently was regarding the use of the church facility for graduations. Trustees had a difficult time understanding that some students might feel marginalized or uncomfortable about this situation. It was only when this was framed in terms of “If we use this church this year, we must use a mosque next year” that trustees started to understand this situation from a different perspective. These examples demonstrate how cultural and religious diversity is construed a problem. From this perspective, language and culture are deficits to be
overcome. Past practices in the district have not been as progressive as more recent conversations.

Recently, the district has taken some positive steps to address these areas and focus the conversation in a very courageous way towards deeper meaning making. Superintendents frame their conversations around achievement gaps and models using policy to ensure consistency in decision-making. One senior administrator noted:

I think we have garnered courage in the last 30 years. I think we are currently having some courageous conversations. I look at the aspiring racialized leaders program...I think that is courageous. I don’t think that would have happened 30 years ago because we whispered about race 30 years ago. (T-1 SA-1)

The accommodations for religious holidays would be a recent example of how racial and cultural meaning making has become a central theme within board discussions. In addition to this, a few trustees have been putting pressure on other trustees and the board to focus on the achievements of black male youth. Mentoring programs are being offered for racialized staff members to learn more about the promotion process.

**Addressing Barriers: Meaning Making Regarding Other Marginalized Groups**

Recently the district has been aggressively opening up the dialogue around LGBTQ initiatives. The policy thrust behind this has been the introduction of the new provincial health and physical education curriculum. Conversations around this have been heated. Much of the opposition regarding this change has been due to the introduction of same sex relationships within the curriculum. Initially some parents and community groups protested vehemently, withholding students from attending school and demanding that
sections of the curriculum be removed. The district has looked to frame this conversation in terms of finding commonalities. The Director noted:

And that's the policy around wanting to ensure every student and every child feel safe, valued, welcomed and supported. And regardless of whether your faith believes in someone being gay or transgendered, your faith absolutely believes that regardless, they should feel safe. They should be safe. They should be supported. So it was about finding what it was that they all had in common which was their belief in wanting children to be safe and successful. It's not about whether they believe in someone being gay or lesbian.

These discussions around the Health and Physical Education curriculum and acceptance of other sexual orientations have centered on inclusion as opposed to diversity. One superintendent noted that diversity is a passive concept. As much as we can talk about diversity, we can’t change our classroom demographics. Inclusivity can be improved on. In this way, the conversation incorporates praxis.

**Systemic Pressure Impacting Policy Responses: Attracting and Retaining Students**

This section looks specifically at a few policies that have recently been developed or revised within the board and at how these changes reflect prevailing discourses and systemic pressures at this time. Addressing these pressures results in the creation of policies that may or may not move forward the agenda of creating a more equitable educational experience.

One pressure that motivates a number of policies is the ongoing loss of students, either through attrition in mature neighbourhoods or through competition with alternate districts or independent schools. Funding is based on per-pupil ratios and therefore losing students is equivalent to losing funds, which inhibits the board’s ability to provide
programming. A number of policies and programs have been established that reflect this pressure. Although the board has begun to market the advantage of being in the home school, recent policies regarding flex boundaries and regional programs demonstrate the attempts to address declining enrolment. The following section will use two policies as examples of how the agenda of attracting and retaining students do not support more equitable student outcomes.

**Policy Response: Flexible Boundaries**

The board’s flexible boundary policy allows students to apply to attend a school that is not their home school. This policy was written in 1971 and revised most recently in 2013. Having a policy that offers flexibility to parents in terms of daycare arrangements helps the school district to retain its students. Parents have more choice and are able to incorporate school arrangements into their work and family lives more conveniently.

The negative aspect is that parents use the policy to “school shop.” A number of principals interviewed indicated that parents often call and request school tours at several different locations and then “vote with their feet” as to what they believe is the best school. How they measure a “good” school is based on first impressions of office staff and administration, the condition of the school, media perceptions, discussions with other parents in the area, standardized test scores and the Fraser Report. The Fraser Report ranks school based on these standardized test scores and parents use this information when selecting a school. The effect of this is that if a school has a special needs program, a small population, or a poor test year, many parents reject the school as
these anomalies contribute to some scores being lower. The school is drained of resources as the student population diminishes, creating a self-perpetuating downward spiral of brain drain and lower staff morale. This ghettoizes smaller schools and schools that serve the most needy students. In effect, although this policy creates more flexibility for parents, it also is creating a two-tiered education system. All students’ needs are not being met.

Promoting choice as the solution for a better education system is at the heart of the neoliberal free market ideology. This is seated in the concept that “market forces foster superior marketability” (Strauss, 2014). In this way, parents are seen as consumers. Parents shopping for schools creates an imbalance within the system wherein there are winners and losers. This creates inequality and doesn’t ensure a higher level of education. A better solution is to promote home schools as innovative environments. In order to be equitable, policy decisions must improve education for all students. The current flex boundary policy of this board is an example of how policy decisions reflect the current ideologies and may in fact detract from equitable outcomes.

**Policy Response: Regional Programs**

Another way the board is attempting to attract and retain students is through regional learning choices. These programs act like magnet schools for different specializations, such as the arts, the International Baccalaureate program, science and technology. Acceptance for each specialized program is based on a number of criteria: previous report card marks, learning skills, writing or digital tests and submissions and an audition or assessment evening. The geographic areas that each program pulls from are
very large. There are a limited number of spots and after all of the testing and marks are assembled, the students who meet the expected criteria are put through a random selection process. Those who are not initially selected are put on a waiting list. No busing is offered for these programs, although often parents set up a private bus, which costs approximately fifteen hundred dollars for the year. In addition to this, there is a fee for auditioning and a program fee for each year of the programs. These programs exist as a way of offering different options to families in order to keep them in the public education system. There is a regional learning choices steering committee that trustees sit on that examines the nature of these programs regarding equity, among other concerns.

Recently, work has been done to standardize fees for all programs throughout the school district. In previous years, different programs charged different amounts. However, there are still a number of concerns regarding program acceptance. The difficulty lies in ensuring that people with socioeconomic challenges, or family or health issues have equal access to the programs being offered. The lottery system that is used to select candidates randomly from the pool of those that meet all of the criteria is an attempt to make the system more equitable. However, if the criteria being used are inherently providing advantages to some students, there is still equity work that needs to be done.

In interviews, trustees questioned where the board’s responsibility lies. Distance, transportation and whether or not some students are disadvantaged through the nature of the testing process all influence equitable outcomes. For example, one principal indicated that many of the programs require a group work component as a part of the testing process. Although the task is skills based, students are evaluated on their group work
skills. In many cases, when a girl was put into a group with boys, she would not perform well, as often the boys were allowed to take the lead. This is potentially a cultural expectation and as such girls may be disadvantaged through the inherent acceptance process. Currently there are no policy guidelines as to whether or not fees for the program can be waived or what testing for each program is used. This is at the discretion of the principals in charge of the program. One questions whether the programs are truly accessible to everyone.

One superintendent indicated that she attended a graduation ceremony at a regional program recently and most of the awards went to students within the specialized program. The principal argued that the students in the program received many of the awards because they were extremely involved. However, this is an indication that there is a difference between the home school and the experience of those students selected into the program. The superintendent indicated that it is “the biggest segregation tool that is used in the board” (T-4 SA-4), creating a climate of “haves and have-nots.” In addition to this, a large majority of the students who went to this specialized program for grades 6 – 8 had been accepted into another program for the high school years, perpetuating the inequity.

Much of the policy response in this district worked to address specific cultural needs due to the changing demographics and the varying regional needs of this particular area. The question was raised as to whether the district should be reserving a number of spots for students that might be inherently disadvantaged by the application criteria. One Superintendent B addressed the value in looking into this:

I think the questions that we have to ask before we ask those questions are is there an underrepresentation of girls in science programs? Is there an underrepresentation of racialized students or females in high-performance programs? And if the answer is yes and if that community individually
tells us there's an interest – there's more of an interest in girls being part of science programs, then maybe it needs to be – it wouldn't be in it that giving an advantage to girls. It would be about giving them a ladder so that they can see over the fence to see the baseball game. (T-1 SA-2)

This brings up a couple of points. Firstly it indicates that it might be advantageous for the board to collect data on students in terms of race and gender. The other point that is significant is regarding what is done with this data. For example, in the case that there are not enough girls being accepted in science programs, the superintendent indicated that a possible result of finding inequities in the acceptance process might be allocating a certain number of spots for girls. This researcher questions whether or not this would be a good use of data. This would be another example of the board “switching sides” instead of levelling the playing field. One group would temporarily be advantaged or protected rather than challenging the existing structures or systems that are creating the inequity in the first place.

Systemic Pressure Impacting Policy Responses: Accountability

Examining the practices of the board around regional programs leads directly into the issue of accountability. An accountability framework shapes policy decisions and accountability is ensured through process. The superintendent responsible for regional programs has put a number of measures in place to provide consistency between programs. For example, the district has a number of International Baccalaureate schools but originally each had different standards for evaluation. By standardizing these processes, the district makes its practices more transparent and increases accountability. Senior administrators are looking for direction from the
ministry in regards to accountability when the new equity and inclusion strategy came out.

It is difficult to measure equity and inclusion as the values upon which programs are structured as they are intangible. The board is exploring the possibility for racial data collection for students; however, the biggest challenge has been to help all stakeholders understand the purpose of collecting the data. The board’s attempt to have a staff census has met with cynicism from the unions as to why this is occurring. Some of the retired trustees indicate that there is an unofficial target of having 25% of staff represent South Asian culture although superintendents vehemently deny that this is the case. Although the purpose of the census is to give the district more data to address inequities, senior administrators feel that there may be pushback from the outside community. In regard to a student census, several senior administrators confirmed that the district would be moving in this direction. The former director of the Toronto District School Board has been seconded into the Ministry of Education to do preliminary work around this issue, indicating that the province is also moving in this direction.

Using a census as a means of data collection feeds into the neoliberal accountability agenda. The question then becomes how will that data be used. Senior administrators believe that society is past the fear that the collection of this data will lead to targeting and singling out of certain groups. The other side of this, however, is that if racial background is not known, it is difficult to address the inequities that may exist. Collecting demographic data would allow for analysis of systemic trends and the ability to provide differentiated support. Census data collection supports accountability by providing tangible evidence whether a group is being disadvantaged in some way in order to
provide the resources and supports that they need. This will allow the school district first
identify inequities that may be inherent within the education system, and then increase
targeted support to improve equity within the region.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to answer the question “How do trustees who self-identify as
equity-minded promote equity within their school district?” This was explored through
qualitative interviews with retired trustees using one school district and its five retired
trustees in the case study. The experience of these trustees spanned thirty years, and
provided examples of the evolving role of the trustee as provincial legislation reduced
their positional power through the removal of responsibilities regarding operational
aspects of their role. This reduction in power led to an increase in the utilization of
interpersonal micropolitical strategies to influence change. Through the lens of the
conceptual framework, this change in power structure alters the micro/meso relationships,
creating an environment in which personal, social interactions have a greater influence on
decision making than positional authority. Trustees who know how to navigate the
political climate are more successful in achieving their goals. This, however, does not
ensure that these goals are more equitable. Power shapes social interaction; power relates
to interest and intent; power is present at both the micro and meso level of school board
interactions. Trustees who seek to achieve greater equity for students encounter resistance
within the trustee group itself, within the community and through systemic or
institutional barriers. This study explores how this complex dynamic can be better understood in order to achieve more equitable outcomes.

**Understanding Equity**

Trustees had various understandings of equity. Through the examination of the themes that emerged from the interviews, it became apparent that personal values, historical context of the school district and prevalent ideologies shaped trustees’ understandings. Having large rural and urban areas, diverse cultural backgrounds and both wealthy and extremely poor socio-economic areas shaped the discussions on equity within the board, depending on which area the trustee represented. Within this small sample was a vast range of understanding as to what equity means. One trustee defined equity as somewhere between opportunity and fairness, while another saw equity as being equal to fairness. Another could only define equity by what it was not, stating that “equity to one person is not equity to another. Equal is not equity” (T-4). All but one of the trustees framed the equity discussion in terms of equity of access. In this way, they felt that the school district was achieving a mandate for equity by providing access to resources.

Trustees in this study all equated equity with fairness, although even the concept of fairness meant different things to each of the participants. One trustee defined it as “treating all people equally” while another felt that it was providing the same opportunities to all students. For one trustee, fairness meant bending the rules in order to
meet local needs, such as allowing a parent group from a wealthier area the opportunity to purchase new portables for their school. It was interesting to note that although fairness as a concept is often meant objectively as a means of judging without the influence of feeling, trustees in this study interpreted fairness subjectively. For the trustees in this study, fairness was a fluid concept used to justify why exceptions should be made to policies and procedures. These understandings about equity shaped decision making. For example, trustees who believed that equity equals fairness also believed that having state-of-the-art schools for all students should be a board priority. The data suggested that although all of the trustees in this study wanted to achieve equity for all students, many of them did not have a well developed understanding of how to define what equity is. Their responses were shaped by their own values, history with the school board and the prevailing ideologies.

Personal values shaped trustees’ understanding of equity. Individual trustees identified that growing up in poverty themselves, or experiencing personal hardship, being a member of the dominant culture or a marginalized group all had an impact on equity definitions and how trustees perceived they could use their role to make the education system more equitable. Personal biases also influence trustee responses. For example, one of the trustees demonstrated cultural insensitivity by shaping many of her responses to issues such as religious accommodations in terms of how other cultures should conform to the norms of society by not asking permission to be excused from the room during the playing of O Canada or not scheduling meetings on religious holidays. Her inherent view of other cultures needing to adapt to the current system shaped her response to parent inquiries. Being from a non mainstream culture was also reflected in
decision making, as seen in the discussions with Trustee Singh in regards to hiring for diversity. Singh’s view that there was a cultural disconnect for her culture shaped her response in board decisions.

These personal views were situated within the local historical context of the school district. Historically, this particular district has many longstanding trustees. The data indicate that more value was given to the voices of those with more years. Another trend that was identified was trustees acting in favour of more local concerns as opposed to regional thinking the longer that they held the position. As the legislation over the past thirty years has limited the trustees’ role, longstanding trustees have had difficulty adjusting to a reduction in power. This has led to some confusion about the role, as well as trustees using their personal influence on situations to sway outcomes towards being more locally beneficial, as opposed to viewing their role as more regional. As trustees demonstrated a lack of clear understanding of the terms equity and fairness, and as they tended towards advocating more for their own local concerns, often the end result of using personal influence to move agendas forward was not equitable for the school district as a whole. A clear example of this would be the decision to give busing for French programs to the northern area of the school district, but not to the middle and southern areas. Also, the representation on the board has been largely white, causing a disconnect between the decision making occurring through the trustee group and other system leaders and the currently culturally diverse population in many areas.

Pervasive ideologies also influenced equity discussions. Charitable discourses were prevalent in many of the interviews. Inherent in these views are the idea of the tolerant Canadian and viewing marginalized groups, such as special education students and
English language learner as a deficit that the system needs to address through the allocation of additional resources. Several of the trustees constructed success and failure in the system as academic only. This was based on their own history of being from a low socio-economic background and becoming successful later in life. As such, they based student success on resilience and meritocracy, locating the source of academic failure with the individual as opposed to seeing the impact of cultural, political and historical context on outcomes.

A key question of this study highlighted the impact of trustee decision making and whether or not they were achieving equitable outcomes through their actions. One idea that arose through the interviews is the distinction between “levelling the playing field” or “switching sides.” Although trustees felt that their decisions resulted in more equitable outcomes for all students, in actuality, they were frequently making decisions that created advantages for one group over another. An example of this would be quota hiring. Although switching sides creates opportunities for other groups which are traditionally disadvantaged and may be effective in breaking a long standing issue such as hiring inequities, it does nothing to alter the underlying systemic conditions which ultimately perpetuate the inequities. Although this is an idealistic stance, if systemic inequities were addressed, the result would be more consistency of outcome between traditionally privileged and marginalized students.

One trustee specifically suggested that a way to do this was for the district to focus on structures and process to achieve equitable outcomes. He used this equation to define how he perceived the trustee’s role. He suggested that processes (policies) and structures (committees and system planning) inherent in the district are directly linked. If examined
together through the lens of equity, equitable outcomes would increase exponentially. (processes x structures = outcomes) He believed that if trustees and senior administrators focused on both of these aspects of system planning, then equity would improve. However, at this point, there is nothing to substantiate this view. Currently, there is no system data collected regarding race or culture. Although trustees and administrators express the desire to create a more equitable education system, whether or not the district is moving towards equity is completely situated within anecdotal accounts, which are steeped in personal understandings and local historical contexts. This study identifies a lack of training for trustees as a key inhibitor to creating a more equitable education system. Trustees need to have more awareness about their personal preconceptions, their historical board context and prevailing ideologies in order to make more informed decisions regarding board process and in order to examine underlying board structures.

Navigating the Political Climate

The second question that this study examined was How do trustees navigate their political climate? This discussion focused on the interplay between authority and influence within the role of the trustee and identified three arguments:

1. Power is present in all social interactions
2. Power as it relates to interest and intent
3. Power is present at the micro, meso and macro levels of interaction

Power is Present in All Social Interactions

This study identifies the movement away from the reliance on legitimate or positional power by the trustee group and towards the use of influence. The examination
of longstanding board members allows this study to trace the change in the power
dynamic throughout the past 30 years. Retired trustees described a changing power
dynamic throughout this time. Previously in the board, there was an “old guard”
mentality, where coercion was prevalent and newer trustees were berated and told to
“shut up and listen.” The impact of this climate was that change was difficult to be made
as there was a vested interest by those in power to maintain the status quo. Micropolitical
interactions were described as dependent on conflict and coercion.

Participants in this study described a gradual shift towards a more collaborative
environment where personal influence was utilized more than positional power to move
forward agendas. Although there are still influential individuals in the trustee group, the
climate is better in that there is less dominance of a few powerful voices. This change
occurred partly due to legislation that inhibited trustee positional power, and partly due to
longstanding board members stepping down from their trustee roles which allowed
trustees to become more reliant on their ability to negotiate, compromise and collaborate.
Although some trustees were described as being measured in their approaches (“you get
more flies with honey than with vinegar”) and others as more brazen with their views, all
described relationship building as being crucial to navigating the micropolitical board
environment. Although there has been a movement away from relying on positional
power, trustees and senior administrators alike identified the power of the Chair as having
a lot of influence.

As politicians, trustees demonstrated varying degrees of awareness of their political
climate and the strategies that they used, but all identified that they operated more
through influence and building consensus in more recent board interactions. Trustees
described many types of power within their role. Several described the concept of group power. Each trustee was seen as being only one voice at the table. Although this is true, the power of each trustee’s voice was seen as quite different. As one trustee simply stated, all trustees have equal voice, but some are louder than others. All voices are not equal when negotiating meaning in a social setting. Longstanding trustees were seen to have more influence than newly elected trustees. Also, trustees with a specific skill set or expertise may use expert influence to garner support. Individual attributes, micropolitical strategies and the ability to build alliances and mobilize group power all have an impact on the effectiveness of each trustee. The idea of power in this model of leadership is interrelated with the concepts of social exchanges.

Power as it Relates to Interest and Intent

The political-historical model emphasizes that leadership occurs within the context of the local social community, and is the result of interactions and negotiations. Hoyle states that interests are the “content of micropolitics” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 89) and are shaped by personal, historical and ideological beliefs. Whether a trustee advocates for a particular agenda is influenced by whether or not they are a member of the dominant cultural group, their gender, and their personal understanding of the world. Trustees in this study identify sources of personal power and group power. The difficulty with utilizing personal power to move the equity agenda forward is that personal and professional interests can overlap and personal interests can be stated as professional interests in order to garner support. Particularly if personal views remain unexamined, the potential to act in the name of equity has the potential to achieve very inequitable results.
Interests are more easily achieved in the board environment with collaboration with others. The success of a trustee is based on the strength of the alliances and loose associations that they build and their knowledge of the system. As such, longstanding trustees are viewed as being more influential. Power and equity are often at odds as those who have power do not want to give up control. The leveraging of power due to longevity in the role had a conflicted duality in regards to whether or not this promoted equitable outcomes. On one hand, having a consistent and persistent voice advocating for a particular outcome created continuity to projects and in some instances created the impetus for change over an extended period of time. At the same time, on occasion this longevity impeded change as trustees developed a vested interest in how things had already been established. Longstanding trustees can create a power system such as an “old boys network” where well-established relationships and hierarchies dominate decision making.

Policy making regarding equity, in particular, needs to be examined in terms of the interests and intent behind the policy. Recently, the board of trustees in this area has become more racially diverse. Because of this, different narratives have been introduced that have challenged longstanding and entrenched beliefs. This widening of personal interests and intent allows for conflicting ideologies to be introduced and challenge the status quo. Different narratives also introduce new preconceived notions, based on personal background and history. As a result micropolitical interactions become more challenging to navigate, but also have a greater potential for achieving equity for marginalized groups as their interests and intents are able to influence board direction as well. If reflected on in a thoughtful way, the diversity of representation on the board of
trustees has the potential to bring conscious awareness to personal biases, re-conceptualize historic preconceptions and challenge prevalent ideologies. This holds the promise of moving thinking forward towards changing the common sense constructions which marginalize some groups. Discourse has the potential to transmit and produce power, but it also has the ability to undermine and expose it.

**Power is Present at the Micro, Meso and Macro Levels**

The interrelationship between micro, meso and macro-interactions is integral to the conceptual framework of this study. This study focuses specifically on the interactions at the micro and meso layers. As positional power has been reduced and the impact of personal influence has increased, interests which are fabricated and manipulated at the micro level of power have become more crucial in terms of policy development and board directions. Through analysis of the data, micropolitical interactions have been identified between trustees and senior administrators, trustees and their constituents and amongst the trustee group itself. The results of this study find that power manifests overtly, covertly and in stealth forms throughout all of these groups.

Overt power can be interpreted negatively, if viewing power relationships in terms of manipulation and conflict. Competing priorities, or competing values can lead to power struggles. For the purposes of this study, overt power has been defined as power sanctioned through authority or as a result of institutional placement. Although as outlined in the literature review for this study and through anecdotal observation by trustees and other interviewees, overt power has been diminished, it still does impact board direction. For example, the power of the Chair of the board was described by
many interviewees. Overt power was also identified in the case of hiring. In this particular board, trustees still sit on hiring committees and are part of the decision making process. They continue to play a role in placement, and described their role as consultative or having the power of veto, depending on their longevity with the board.

The revised conceptual framework for this study identified the increase of covert power as a result of the decrease in overt power. Trustees who are no longer able to affect operational changes, such as increasing the board budget or changing the curriculum, are using personal influence to affect change in others. Numerous instances of this were identified through interviews. Covert power was used at the micro level to influence decision making in hiring and placement of principals and senior administrators. Perhaps the most notable instance at the macro level can be seen in the changes in provincial special education. The use of covert power is a more positive view of how power is used to advance agendas: this relies on micropolitical skills to advance agendas.

Several strategies were identified by this study’s participants as to how influence was used to move equity forward: lobbying, vote counting, backroom discussions, building alliances and block voting were are commonly described. In terms of gaining support from other members of the community, trustees attended functions, met with religious and other community leaders and maintained a positive media image to promote themselves and their views. In all situations, trustees identified more nuanced strategies, such as reading the room, networking, framing and personalizing arguments and being adaptable and politically aware as key ways to have an impact on others. Above all other methods, trustees attributed their ability to influence and thus their micropolitical success to their emotional and political intelligence and to being tenacious advocates for what
they believe in. Those who were able to identify their own micropolitical awareness, were also identified by other sources as being the most influential in terms of policy and board direction. This view identifies power as expanding rather than restricting actions. Political acumen increased trustee influence as it allowed them to navigate and utilize their environment to achieve micropolitical ends.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from this study comes from the examination of stealth power influences within the board. In this case, stealth power is defined as the institutional power that exists throughout the organization. It is invisible and difficult to distinguish and yet it shapes peoples’ interests subconsciously. This type of power is tied to marginalization and ingrained, historic practices and societal prejudices. The trustees did not seem to have an awareness of this type of power. Awareness is created through examination of inherent power structures and reflection on current practices. At this time, there is no in depth training for board trustees that can achieve this. Trustees saw their role as providing equity of access, but did not look at how the system itself might disadvantage some students.

Although there appeared to be a lack of awareness regarding institutional power structures within the trustee group, this did appear to be changing within this board. Of all the interviews for this study, one superintendent stood out as having social justice views and gave many examples of when she had challenged the status quo. Newer board members are also questioning how the district can be more equitable to students. This may be partly because the newer members of the board represent a more diverse population and are bringing different perspectives to the board table. Both trustees and superintendents described the current board as being less harmonious than in the past.
Most saw this as a negative – something to be overcome. However, conflict can create change. Cohesion and maintenance of order frequently occurs when one group successfully dominates. The disharmony amongst the current board members is an indication that there is a shift in the status quo. The hiring of external agencies to analyse hiring practices, the creation of a leadership group for racialized leaders, and the inquiry regarding why Black youths in the school district are not achieving strong outcomes are all indicators that the board is beginning to examine the stealth power that has been an organizational property for a long time. Stealth power is elusive to identify and has a tendency to support the interests of the prevailing group through the macro-political organizational mechanisms in order to achieve the micropolitical end of maintaining power. This points to how the micro- and macro- environments are interrelated and how power circulates between the two. Beliefs shape policy and policy validates beliefs.

**Resistance, Challenges and Barriers**

The final question for this study was “What resistance, challenges and barriers do these trustees face in advancing an equity agenda and how do they overcome these challenges? What strategies do trustees who self-identify as being equity-minded use within their political influence to achieve greater equity within their board?” Trustees identified challenges within the trustee group itself, within the community and systemically, that acted as barriers towards them advancing equity within the school district.
Within the Trustee Group

Personal and cultural biases within the trustee group were identified as barriers to creating a more equitable education system. Trustees were more willing to identify issues of class than race. Perhaps this is because in identifying issues of class, the gaze is pointed outward towards society, while if looking at inequities based on race, the gaze needs to be pointed inward. Financial inequities can be attributed to societal factors whereas racial inequities, while also societal, can be linked to practices within the school system as well. Trustees were much more willing to identify equity issues that were not focused on their own actions. For example, many trustees acknowledged how competing understandings of how equity is defined and their awareness of their role being an elected position when mediating concerns for their local community could inhibit equity. However, no trustees were able to identify examples of their own deficit thinking or lack of diversity within the trustee group as contributing to maintaining the status quo. This is particularly pertinent when the group being represented has innate biases, such as the white flight scenario. A trustee’s unwillingness to self-examine and look for their own biases or biases within the trustee group, creates a barrier towards the district becoming more equitable.

Within the Community

As a school district which covers a large geographic area, community needs are vastly different depending on socio-economic differences, rural/urban differences and changing ethnic backgrounds. Being such a large district complicated how trustees could
create a more equitable system. Local concerns competing with regional concerns came out as a theme across several of the interviews: trustees struggled to act in the best interest of their constituents, as well as gain a whole district perspective. Their representational function was also complicated by the power of several longstanding trustees who had a vested interested in maintaining the status quo. The Chair was also identified as having more authority and thus was able to influence the direction of discussions and therefore outcomes. The interviews also identified a tolerant Canadian mentality, which separated constituencies along geographic areas.

**Systemic or Institutional Barriers**

Systemic issues were also identified as a barrier to equity. Trustees cited examples such as the financial constraints of special education and English Language Learner (ELL) funding from the ministry. One trustee stated that teacher unions also inhibited equitable outcomes by creating an environment where teachers were encouraged to not be outstanding in comparison to their colleagues. Several of the secondary interviews noted cultural blind spots were also systemic barriers as expressed through language, ideas and board policies. The most prevalent example of this was in the hiring of teachers. A great deal of confusion remains within the trustee group as to the best way to create a culturally representational work force and the benefits of the student population being reflected in teachers and senior administration. Because of this, having trustees on the hiring panel creates the opportunity for inequities to be exacerbated. Although efforts have been put in place to make hiring less subjective (identifying specific questions, using rubrics, getting rid of principal recommendations and the promotion dinner), hiring for fit is a
commonly accepted practice that has not been questioned to date. Trustees in this district still have a large influence on the hiring process, acting as references and affecting principal placements. The individual expression of the common idea of equity meaning equal access, points efforts in one direction while diverting attention from others. Pressures exist to provide equity of access and the board utilizes the media to frame its responses to equity issues in a positive light.

In relation to the role of the trustee, the last thirty years has altered the traditional role from one of community representation to one of advocacy and accountability. This shift alters their understanding of equity in education and alters the way they view policy. Positioning policy responses within the framework of equity creates a much different perspective than positioning from the framework of accountability. Current board policy responses reflect these current pressures of the system. Examples that came out of the interviews focused on the pressure to attract and retain students and be accountable to the public. Policies which specifically targeted this agenda were the flex boundaries and the regional programs policies that have been promoted greatly throughout the school district. Both of these policies lead to arguably less equitable results for students and yet are being promoted by the board in order to achieve higher student retention and better scores on standardized testing.

**Micro, Meso and Macro Responses**

The revised conceptual framework for this study examines the function of power at the micro, meso and macro levels of interaction within the school district. At the micro level, decisions are affected through influence. This is created through the interpersonal
relationships that are utilized to influence change. Micro responses are demonstrated through trustees utilizing personal influence to affect change. Examples of how this is done can be demonstrated through the use of framing and through an individual trustee’s ability to understand and navigate their political climate. The meso level of interaction are those occurring at the school district level. At the meso level, the district response is demonstrated through processes and product. Included in this is both the policy responses that occur through structures such as board improvement plans and policy development. This study indicates that in order to understand the macro phenomena in society – for example how can we make the education system more equitable for all - the micro and meso interactions must be examined. Policy responses are the result of the interrelationship between these three levels of interaction. Power circulates and develops first at the level of individual beliefs and choices. Understanding how power works within an organization is obscured if only examined at one of these individual levels. The value of this study is in the examination between the micro and meso levels of interaction while being aware of the pressure exerted at the macro level.

Within the trustee group, power is a bargaining relationship. This study identifies an inter-relationship between the power of the group and the power of the individual. Many trustees stated that the power of the trustee was in the group. Although this is ultimately true in that each trustee’s vote counts as equal, it neglects to identify the significance of personal power and the micropolitical interactions which influence decision making within the board. Power exists within the individual but also is a collective phenomenon. Personal power is dependent on political awareness and involves a personal, persuasive skill set. The characteristics of individual board members and the
strategies they employ affect educational outcomes. Whether or not these outcomes are more equitable depends on motivation, historical and ideological influences, personal understandings of the concept of equity and their ability to persuade others. Power circulates and emerges through the intertwining network of social relationships that overlap between the micro and macro interactions. This study identifies the dominant stances within the district, the resistance to these stances and situates policy responses within the context of micropolitics and power relationships. Awareness is crucial to better understanding how power impacts decision making and leads to more or less equitable outcomes.

Individual local actions, beliefs and influences have macro consequences. An examination of organizational change within the district at the macro level is incomplete without understanding the nuances of micropolitics which influence decision making. Interpersonal relationships are a driving force behind power and control. One need only look at the success that trustees within this district had with the Minister of Education in obtaining additional funding changes for special education students province wide to understand how personal relationships and interactions influence the macro environment. Through examining the micro relationships at play, we can come to a better understanding regarding the larger social patterns and strategies at work. It is for this reason that the original conceptual framework was revised placing the micro aspect of the organization at the top of the secondary binary equation. In examining the larger effects of local and personal power, it becomes clearer how decision making can be influenced in spite of contradictory discourses which have an impact on educational direction. The
multidirectional arrows indicate that power circulates between the macro, meso and micro levels, just as it does between authority and influence.

The manifestation of these influences is demonstrated through policy outcomes. In this study, several policy responses were identified as being a result of pressures on the system. For example, the pressure to attract and retain students triggered policy responses regarding flex boundaries and regional programs. By examining the role of trustee in terms of the authority/influence binary, it doesn’t just expose the inter-relationship between the two, it also allows for new conceptualizations as to how policy can be viewed.

Policy is often viewed as providing objectivity, control and imposing a standard of consistency of response. However, policy also reflects the values and ideas of the individual, the organization, and society in general. As such, it may reflect inherent biases, beliefs and underlying ideologies. In examining the role of the trustee in this regard, it becomes apparent why this has become a tension within the board. When discussing policy responses in regards to equity specifically, individual and systemic biases, and personal power through influence are at odds with objectivity. In addition to this, unless questioned, these personal assumptions and worldviews become mirrored in policy and systemic inequities and may be used to validate and endorse the “given” assumptions of the status quo. Power relationships exist outside of policy; micropolitical actions impact decision making and by extension policy responses. Policy responses capture the social dynamic or the organizational culture and reflect the dominant views within organizational leadership. In order for equity policies to create substantive change
at a board level, personal and institutional and ideological values must be acknowledged and examined.

The bigger question that this study addresses is “How does the role of trustee promote equity within the school board?” Does a trustee who relies more on personal values, historical context of the board or the prevalent ideologies create more opportunities for achieving equitable outcomes? This study suggests that although beliefs are shaped by all three, equitable outcomes are not reliant on the degree to which one is utilized over the other. Equity is more dependent on the awareness that individual policy actors have as to influences on their decision making. Whether looking at the example of altering busing policies to accommodate for regional differences or how trustees impact hiring and placement decisions, if this awareness does not exist, equity may become an incidental outcome as opposed to a board directive. Creating a climate in which challenging the status quo and awareness of personal biases is not only tolerated but encouraged allows for intentional change to occur both at an individual and a system level.

This is particularly important in boards where trustees serve multiple terms. Although each trustee counts for one vote around the board table, all voices are not equal in the social negotiation of meaning making. As longstanding trustees, there is a tendency to have a vested interest in the work that has been done in the past. Trustees use both authority and influence to move agendas forward. However, since legislation has reduced their positional power to that of governance as opposed to operations, this study indicates that influence and personal persuasion are utilized far more often to garner support for initiatives and policy planning.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The intent of this study is not to transfer the findings to other school districts. This study has a small sample size and it is situated within the specific circumstances of this school district. Within that context, the recommendations from this study are divided into five areas:

1. Recommendations for trustees
2. Recommendations for policy development
3. Recommendations for system leaders
   a) Identifying bias
   b) Consciousness raising
4. Recommendations for school districts
5. Recommendations and Implications for Future Research

Recommendations for Trustees

Findings from this study indicate that trustees have a strong awareness of how to navigate the political environment that currently exists within their board context. There are also indications, however, that their understanding of equity and the impact of personal beliefs, district culture and historical context, shape the educational system. To address this, a dialogue needs to be opened up to create opportunities for trustees to examine how their personal stances and the political atmosphere influence equity initiatives. Both formal power structures and the role of influence on decision making needs to be analyzed to create awareness of how decision making is occurring within the board. Current hiring practices that allow trustees to influence decision making of district leadership need to be re-evaluated from the perspective of equitable practices. This is an ongoing conversation that has been started in this board but needs to continue.
In addition to ongoing discussions, professional learning is another strategy in which to open a dialogue within the trustee group. Internal shifts in values involve deep discussions, opposing viewpoints and a willingness to challenge one’s beliefs. Listening to opposing thoughts and ideas and bringing in community leaders would allow for a greater reflection of the voice of the larger community and not just those groups that are represented through the elected officials who are largely middle to upper income levels and are less ethnically diverse than the greater population. Approaching equity from a critical lens, discussions about disagreements and differences of opinion create opportunities to challenge current and traditional practices. Many of the current trustees in this school board have remained in their roles for a number of terms. Although this has the potential to build continuity with board initiatives, it also carries the danger of trustees having a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. This suggests the possible advantage to limiting the number of terms that a trustee may serve. It also points to the need for out-of-house professional development. Using external sources for professional development will create a broader understanding for all board members and system thinkers regarding how board initiatives impact marginalized and racialized students. In addition to this, community stakeholders need to be given numerous opportunities to express their voice. This could be in the form of “town hall” meetings, parent and community surveys and focus groups.

Not only do trustees need to have a clear understanding of how values, the historical board context and current neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies perpetuate marginalization, they need to be aware of the inconsistencies and competing values that are shaping the education system. Broadening discussions about how to engage and
address the needs of the whole child, reframes equity to move beyond providing equity of opportunity towards the idea of creating equitable outcomes. Critical and transformative approaches provide the greatest ability for more inclusion. It is not enough for educational leaders to reflect the influences of society; they need to challenge inconsistencies and provide alternatives to traditional approaches to policy development. This suggests that there is a need to create strategic partnerships with faith leaders and municipal politicians, as well as trustees from other school districts in order to create clarity of understanding regarding how terms such as equity and fairness are defined and how these concepts impact system implementation and school board direction.

Another way to move this conversation forward, is to look at disaggregated data of different demographics to understand how there are currently systemic trends towards disadvantaging certain marginalized groups. Examining data by intersecting demographics allows for a deeper understanding of how the system prejudices outcomes for certain groups. Analysis of this kind would begin discussions to address the stealth form of power that influences policy development. This would not only allow trustees to understand inconsistencies and the various tensions which influence the education system, it would provide evidence which would focus discussions on how to move forward strategically in order to circumnavigate current practices in order to lead equity reform in society.

**Recommendation for Policy Development**

There is a need for system leaders to address barriers to equitable outcomes through policy development. This can be done both through creating policies that will
increase equitable outcomes and through creating a process for developing policy that is itself more inclusive.

In the current neoliberal climate, equity and excellence are often perceived as being irreconcilable. “People’s diverse identities have little value in the marketplace of that new world” (Larkin and Staton, 2001, p. 364). The discourse of merit, which is inherent in the philosophy of neoliberalism places little value on developing personal identity. “Whether or not policy perspectives are explicitly discussed, assumptions and theories of action underlie every policy design and implementation” (Datnow and Park, 2009, p. 348). There is a pervasive gap between the rhetoric and the reality of creating more equitable outcomes within the education system. The invisible policy – the existing practices and relationships within the organization - hinders equitable policy outcomes. “The formal policy does little to challenge the prevailing liberal-individualist discourse…there tends to be an equation of the status quo with merit hiring, and employment equity programmes with reverse discrimination” (Taylor, 1995, p. 131).

Similarly, Alison Jaggar (1983) argues that the discourse of merit serves to justify the status quo since those who currently occupy positions of power determine what is to count as meritorious performance and values” (Taylor, 1995, p. 131). Ghosh and Abdi (2004) state, “policy makers have created a false dichotomy between equity and equality and have often aimed at achieving one at the expense of the other” (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012, pp. 25 - 26). They contend that:

For education policy to be successful in creating an equitable education system, policy directives must acknowledge the social construction of diversity and its impact on identity formation, student learning, and achievement. However, if these goals remain framed within the discourse of liberal multiculturalism, the achievement of equity may continue to evade Ontario’s education system. (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012, p. 26)
Policy discourse captures the way in which “the established beliefs, values, and attitudes of various policy actors help construct policy problems and shape the solutions that are proposed as being acceptable and feasible” (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012, p. 9). The transformative stance argues for equitable outcomes through rights-based discourse. The transformative stance advocates that it is the right of every individual to have the opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability in the education system. Policy makers who wish to increase equitable outcomes need to identify and challenge underlying assumptions that are inherent within educational policies and practices and provide additional funding to address systemic inequities. (Portelli, Shields and Vibert, 2007, p. 57). They need to “understand and question the nature of people’s everyday lives and to challenge unequal forms of power” (Freire, 1970).

This view goes beyond admitting that bias and discrimination exist, and moves towards actions that are designed to interrupt that cycle. This study identifies that those in power have the ability to leverage and shape what is valued and how resources are allocated. In the case of school board trustees, some trustees are more able to influence and have more power to have an effect on the educational experiences of students by shaping what is valued or discounted (Datnow and Park, 2009, p. 351). We need to be aware of how personal understandings and local historical context is embedded within the policies themselves and how these beliefs influence educational outcomes. Policy formation from a transformative stance requires policy actors to “challenge the dominant neoliberal ideology” (Joshee, 2008, p. 32) and be more inclusive in the policy formation process.
Policy deliberations can be more inclusive in two ways. Firstly, inclusive values can be promoted through policy. Secondly, the policy creation process can become more inclusive through broader representation, and allowing all community members a fair opportunity to influence policy outcomes (Ryan, 2006, p. 140). In order for this to happen, policy actors, such as trustees, must have an awareness of how their own values and interests impact their decision making. They must also create opportunities for town hall meetings and board delegations to hear the interests and concerns of all that the policy affects (Ryan, 2006, p. 140).

Creating more inclusive policy processes can also give voice to traditionally marginalized groups. Currently, policy development is hierarchical. It demonstrates an exercise of the power of the dominant group in society. “The process of equity education policy development must be made a more inclusive process” (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012, p. 1). Joshee believes that all educators, scholars, community activists, or government officials should have the opportunity to contribute to policy development and influence the direction of educational practices (Joshee, 2008). She uses the metaphor of a policy web to articulate how in the area of social diversity, this layering of policies results in the existence of multiple policy discourses that create space for policy actors to interact and influence policy development. Inclusive policy formation and implementation are an interconnected process in which policy actors look to make changes through the examination of systemic inequities that continue to disadvantage traditionally marginalized groups. Policy actors have awareness that “differential access and use of power are affected by an actor’s position in the system” (Datnow and Park, 2009, p. 351).
Opponents of transformative theory criticize it as being “overtly rhetorical” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 76). They challenge the rights-based discourse for the “risk of reducing rights to legal only” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 76), as opposed to it being a moral obligation. The fear is that “some governments of developing countries have legally granted every child a right to education, but still millions of the children in their countries have no education at all, or might be officially enrolled but are not present in schools, or are present in schools where there are no teachers” (Tomasevski, 2003). Some education critiques have raised similar concerns with respect to the rights-based discourse at the global level (Robeyns, 2006, p. 76). The discourse of merit is also used to refute critical theory and undermine employment equity programs. Jaggar (1983) “argues that the discourse of merit serves to justify the status quo since those who currently occupy positions of power determine what is to count as meritorious performance and values” (Taylor, 1995, p. 132). Portelli, Shields and Vibert add “deficit discourses contribute to maintaining existing power relations by relocating social and institutional injustices into individual and family shortcomings” (Portelli, Shields and Vibert, 2007, p. 9).

**Recommendations for System Leaders**

Making the school system more equitable for all requires an examination on a personal level of belief systems, and personal understandings of the world, at the level of the school system, where personal preconceptions can become acted out in policy, as well as at a societal level where inequities are apparent through systemic barriers to some groups. Educational leaders need to understand how to identify barriers to equity in
ideologies, personal assumptions and systemically in their development of policy. There are a number of ways in which this can be addressed. At a personal level, educators and administrators must be made aware of personal biases and develop a means of raising their own consciousness awareness of inequities both within the classroom within the board. Systemically, policy actors need to develop perspectives on policy processes, which are “more sophisticated and multi-faceted to capture the complexity of educational reform” (Datnow and Park, 2009, p. 348). As quoted by McCaskell, Vanessa Russell states “we need trustees and community to apply political pressure to challenge institutional barriers” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 278) in order to dismantle a system of oppression. The next section will focus on these three elements: identifying bias, consciousness raising and creating more equitable outcomes through policy development.

Identifying Bias

Webster’s dictionary defines bias as “a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc., are better than others that usually results in treating some people unfairly” (Merriam-Webster, 2014, p. ). Biases are created both through interpretations of individual experiences, as well as through socially constructed narratives regarding perceived ‘otherness’. Biases impact equitable educational outcomes by projecting differences through a negative lens. McKenzie and Scheurich identify several equity traps as being indicators of biased thinking. Equity traps are “ways of thinking or assumptions that prevent educators from believing that their students of color can be successful learners” (McKenzie and Scheurich, 2004, pp. 601-602). Among these equity traps are Valencia’s concept of deficit thinking, Foucault’s idea of “the gaze”, or using surveillance for the
purpose of controlling behaviour, and Hooks notion of “racial erasure” (McKenzie and Scheurich, 2004, p. 613). Through these paralogical beliefs and behaviours, leaders are tempted to draw false conclusions about behaviour.

Identifying and challenging equity traps are one way of creating more equitable outcomes for all students. Educational leaders need to “reject the notion of unified and static...identities and communities (with) fixed sets of experiences, meanings and practices” (Henry, Frances and Tator, 1994, p. 99) and instead, recognizes the fluidity and contextuality of identity/identification. This approach provides a framework for interrupting cycles of oppressions and “articulating (new) goals and practices of liberation” (Riviere, 2008, p. 83). Acknowledging the way in which differences are interpreted, valued and judged “can have a decisively positive or negative affect on how students learn in school” (Ryan and Rottman, 2007, p.10). Addressing and reflecting on the ways in which these differences are configured will move policy actors to “challenge the recent waves of inequitable policies by providing a discourse that enables them to collectively understand and contest wide ranging oppressive practices associated with the current social context” (Ryan and Rottman, 2007, p. 11). McKenzie et al. (2008) describe the need for a two-pronged approach to improving equitable outcomes both at a personal and system level. “On one hand, we need to work toward improving a system that marginalizes students through the use of narrow measures based on standardization. At the same time, we need to recognize that these measures are the ‘currency of success’ at the present time, and therefore ensuring that all students achieve by these standards in order to move forward remains a priority” (Ontario Principal's Council, 2012, p. 27). Ontario has a need to improve practices with regards to bias within the education system.
“The fact that Ontario schools have had anti-racism policies for the past two decades has, in effect, done little to actually change the reality of racism in schools or within the institutional practices of the school board” (Zine, 2001, p. 256).

**Consciousness Raising**

Several transformative theorists address the need to raise the consciousness of policy actors within the system. Freire’s work speaks to the concept of conscientizacao. This describes “a process based on the belief that, given a chance to think through and work out the dynamics of our own and others’ experiences, people would be able to see through mystifying veils of ‘falso consciousness’” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 30). Freire asserted that with this clearer view of the world, learners would be motivated to challenge systems of discrimination and injustice that they were experiencing in their lives. This kind of education “was not about the transmission of knowledge from adults to children or from teachers to students. It was an attempt by students, teachers and facilitators to work together to create knowledge about their connected social worlds” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 30). Theoharis also speaks of “developing reflective consciousness” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 250). In his book Inclusive Leadership, Ryan explores the idea of developing a “critical consciousness” (Ryan, 2006, p. 127). He looks at how leaders need to reflect on ideas and practices through a critical lens to determine whose voices are being silenced, excluded or denied. Ryan (2006) speaks to the concept of practicing critical consciousness:

> Being critical means becoming more sceptical about established truths. Being critical requires skills that allow one to discern the basis of claims, the assumptions underlying assertions, and the interests that motivate people to promote certain positions…(C)ritical consciousness involves
more than just a set of intellectual skills. It also includes an eagerness to engage in this sort of critique and a willingness to follow through on positions. People who possess a critical consciousness have a desire not only to engage in critique but also to act in support of their views. (Ryan, 2006, p. 114)

If educational leaders can identify biases and develop a critical consciousness within all members of the educational community, the school becomes a place where “sensitive and controversial issues (are) not hidden but openly discussed, (where) students and community (are) expected to participate in fashioning the school, and the usual nervous silences on issues of difference (do) not pertain” (Vibert et al., p. 94). This way of infusing the curriculum with the exploration of sensitive issues leads to authentic cultural voice. This stage reflects the “critical humanist perspective that envisages schools as sites where all participants assume responsibility for changing inequitable social structures” (McMahon, 2009, p. 168).

**Recommendations for School Districts**

Policy should be open enough to allow it to adapt as societal views change and as our acceptance grows. In the future, trustees, and senior administrators identified the next steps for the board in terms of creating a more equitable environment for students:

1. **Data Collection and Training** – Senior administrators identify the need to collect data in order to identify what the school district is doing well and where improvements need to be made. As such there is a prediction that within the next ten years, the district will be moving towards a census for both students and staff. Professional development opportunities will be based on the information from this. Establishing structures for analysis of operational systems and whether or not they consider the equity lens will
allow the conversations to shift away from providing equitable opportunities towards closing opportunity gaps.

2. **Policy Coherence** – Through continuous updates, board policies are revised to be both responsive to the needs within the district, and to ensure that trustees are aware of these policies. The observed trend in this study has been that more recent decision-making has been grounded within the confines of policy more than in the past. Superintendents model the use of citing policy as a means of addressing individual concerns and trustees have begun using this strategy as well. The outcome of this is more coherence regarding outcomes and between policies. When issues come up that challenge policy coherence, more in depth discussions are taking place to ensure that policies align and reflect equity goals.

3. **Maintaining a Focus on Equity** – Senior administrators identified that in order for equity work to be significant, it is necessary to make equity the lens through which every initiative is viewed. In addition to this, a specific focus on equity work needs to be maintained. The school district has reflected a commitment to this ideal in two ways. It has hired superintendents and researchers with equity portfolios who challenge current practices and facilitate conversations regarding equity. This has made board meetings more contentious but has created opportunities for members to reflect on longstanding practices. Secondly, the board is currently in the process of reviewing the strategic plan, which will allow for deeper work in fewer areas. A focus on equity has been identified as being key to this plan. Senior administrators project that in the future, there will be greater links identified between achievement and equity and more focus on high expectations on student achievement. Student profiles created through census will link
this data to an equity plan for the school district, for each department and within each school.

4. **Turning the Elephant Around** – One current trustee spoke to the concept of turning the elephant around - reorienting the organization towards better understandings of equitable practices and reflecting on how systemic inequities play into diminished opportunities for some marginalized groups. This image reflects the slow pace and difficult nature of this work. Turning the elephant around or reorienting outlooks requires the ability to self-reflect and critically examine systemic barriers that impede equity. This is difficult because views on equity are informed by individual values and beliefs. The discussions are courageous and require that people are open to potentially challenging their own belief systems.

The board has started this work by changing the language of the discussions that are taking place. The language has moved from valuing diversity, to a focus on inclusion. The concept of inclusion supports a movement towards action. It also turns the direction of the inquiry away from what are inequities that we need to address in society, to how can each individual in the board support equity through their own actions. This can be done through listening to the narratives of others in the board, reflecting on those experiences and then using the new understandings gathered from this to direct future actions.

**Recommendations and Implications for Future Research**

This study is significant in that it is the first study of its kind to examine the role of the trustee in creating a more equitable education system. It is also unique in that it adds
to the growing body of educational research from a Canadian context. There would be value in duplicating this study at different school districts. This particular school district covers a large, highly diverse geographic area, consisting of both urban and rural areas, with an increasingly diverse student population. It would be interesting to look at a school district that was less culturally diverse to see if trustees in this context have a better or less defined understanding of equity and how they feel that equity is established and promoted within their own context. Smaller school districts with different demographics; school districts that are consistently urban or rural; school districts with more or less culturally diverse trustee groups or different political climates; or school districts with largely uniform populations would also generate different findings. The current make up of this board of trustees is somewhat reflective of the community, although in the past, it largely represented the middle class, white voters. All of these contexts would contribute to a better understanding of how Canadian students experience educational equity.

Other studies might include the examination of the relationship between other policy actors. For example, a study examining the relationship between the trustee and superintendent or the trustee and the director in relation to equity initiatives would provide for a broader understanding of how each of these roles inter-relate through the power structures within their own individual boards. The impact of influence in regard to these other groups and how micropolitics shape the relationship between the trustee and other policy actors would allow for a deeper understanding of how equity is expressed at the board level. A more in-depth study examining the impact of board history in decision making case study or a study from district leadership from a critical perspective would
also be of value in adding to the body of knowledge in regards to educational administration and leadership. There would also be value in exploring one of the concepts of personal beliefs, historical contexts and ideologies as a separate study to achieve a more in depth understanding of how each factor shapes perspective.

Finally, having a larger sample size would broaden the understanding of equity. Studies could focus on one specific aspect of influence. These might include looking at a larger sample, but specifically focusing on the influence of personal values or board context on decision making. Analyzing different narratives will broaden the understanding of equity and harmonizing how the agenda for accountability with the resurgence of standardized tests fits within the broader context of serving the whole child.

**Closing Statement**

Are trustees meddling, terrorizing overlords that reign with a culture of fear over their fiefdoms, or are they a marginalized group of elected officials that are maligned and powerless? The data from this study indicated that the truth lies somewhere in between. With the reductions to positional power, over the past thirty years, trustees are utilizing their personal relationships and ability to influence others to move their agendas forward. They do this in a number of ways: through creating alliances with other trustees, using their longevity as board members and framing their arguments in such as way as to sway the opinions of others. This study would suggest that trustees are very effective in setting board direction through these means.

The question then becomes, as a group, are trustees making the education system
more equitable? The trustees were selected for this study because they self-identified as moving forward the agenda of equity within the school district. However, by utilizing personal influence to achieve their goals, there is a distinct possibility that although they feel they are moving towards more equitable outcomes, in actuality, their own ingrained understandings and personal history with the board, may in fact be leading them to make decisions that are less equitable for all.

Achieving more equitable outcomes for students is a complex initiative. It requires an awareness of how personal values, historical context and prevailing ideologies shape perceptions and contribute to each student’s individual experience. In order to address the issues involved, school districts must actively pursue avenues which will increase awareness and challenge preconceived assumptions. Without a comprehensive plan to address the current inequities through awareness and training, this goal will remain elusive.
APPENDICES

TABLE GUIDE FOR REFERENCES

This table indicated the code used throughout this study for interview references.

Table 5.0 References Table Guide

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Current Director

Reference 3 for Trustee Singh

T-5 SA-5

Works Cited


Carrington, Bruce and Alastair Bonnett. “The Other Canadian 'Mosaic' - 'Race' Equity Education in Ontario and British Columbia.” *Comparative Education* 33.3 (1997): 441-431.


