Toronto: A new global city of learning

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Toronto, Canada, is emblematic of a new stratum of global cities. Unlike many world capitals, the city has gained stature only over the past half century, having successfully post-industrialized into a new economy and become a major world centre for immigration. Paradoxically, education has emerged as both a major driver of change and a divider of social wellbeing in the city. To interpret this paradox, we discuss: (1) how Toronto is a node in a global education policy network, particularly as an exporter of equity-oriented reforms; (2) how the city's own school system reflects ongoing tensions between forward-looking ideals and its own historical legacies; and (3) how goals of integration are being challenged by new pressures for educational differentiation, which are themselves driven by competing conceptions of multiculturalism and movements for school choice.

Keywords: Canada; educational policy; multiculturalism; policy diffusion; school choice; Toronto

Introduction

The rapid progression of globalization has given rise to a new tier of global cities beneath older major world centres like London, Paris, Hong Kong, and New York. Newer global cities such as Dubai, Singapore, Sydney, and Toronto have become nodes in the world economy and major centres for finance, technological innovation, and migration. Amid rapid change, public (i.e. state) education in these cities is touted as a primary channel for maintaining competitiveness and social prosperity (McCann, 2011). These centres are increasingly interlinked to international flows of policy ideas that get exported and imported across different contexts (Massey, 2007).

Toronto in Canada is emblematic of the new stratum of global cities. It is smaller, younger, and less internationally renowned than world capitals such as London, having grown and gained stature only over the past half century. In recent decades, it successfully transformed its old industrial base into a new 'knowledge' economy, becoming considerably more affluent in the process. The 6 million people living in the Greater Toronto Area represent nearly one-fifth of all Canadians, making the city North America's fourth largest metropolis. Toronto has also become a major world centre for immigration, drawing migrants from all over the world rather than a particular set of countries, while also avoiding the large-scale ghettoization that plagues many other major urban centres. Culturally, Toronto differs from major European capitals by strongly downplaying its heritage in favour of proclaiming multiculturalism and diversity as its defining features. Many international rankings now rate it as one of the globe's most liveable cities. *The Economist* recently rated Toronto the world's top city in terms of safety, cost of living, food security, democracy, and business environment (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015).

These factors have helped make Toronto a hub in an emerging 'global' education network. Unlike London, Paris, and other European cities that have famous ancient universities,

Toronto's universities gained international stature only recently, and did so without having elite private universities as in the United States (i.e. in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia). Each of Toronto's universities engage in various internationalization initiatives, attracting thousands of foreign students; almost half of all doctoral degree holders in Canada are foreign-born with many having been trained in Toronto (Friedland, 2013; OECD, 2010). One of the city's three universities, the University of Toronto, now places highly in world rankings, and is known for its research productivity in medicine, engineering, and business management (Friedland, 2013). At the K-12 (i.e. primary and secondary) level, the city and its surrounding region fares quite well in indicators of learning (e.g. Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA). It has also become an exporter of equity and diversity initiatives, attracting the attention of an international network of educational policymakers and consultants (Levin *et al.*, 2008; Mourshed *et al.*, 2010; OECD, 2010).

In this paper, we use ideas about globalization (Davies and Guppy, 1997) to examine the evolving role of education in Toronto, viewing it as a case study of new global cities. We contend that education systems in world cities are implicated in an array of global forces: they are recipients of transnational flows of migrants as well as international policy discourses, yet also play key roles in generating wealth and structuring social opportunities. Through international policy networks, globalization brings to international cities a series of standardizing and rationalizing discourses about human rights and ways to rebuild state institutions. But globalization also brings economic pressures and opportunities that local actors seize upon in different ways. We argue that Toronto's education system, as a consequence, has become both a major driver of change and a divider of social wellbeing. Toronto, like other global cities, is struggling to reconcile unifying and standardizing discourses with pressures that bring new forms of social differentiation. In one instance, Toronto is an exporter of forward-looking educational reforms under the banners of diversity, integration, and equity, which have attained a high degree of symbolic potency. But in another instance, many trends point to the limited capacity of these reforms to integrate the city: patterns of attainment largely mirror the stratification of transnational migration patterns; school politics still reflect local religious, linguistic, and indigenous histories; and new pressures abound to further differentiate schooling in the city. These mixed trends in Toronto broadly resemble those occurring in other new global cities.

Toronto's path: From industrial port to centre for transnational migration

For most of its history, Toronto was an undistinguished industrial port situated along major trading routes flowing through North America's Great Lakes region, part of a network of manufacturing towns that included Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Buffalo. Toronto lacked clout not only internationally, but also domestically, standing second in economic importance and population to the city of Montreal until the late 1970s. However, a confluence of factors in the 1970s sent Toronto on a new trajectory, transforming it socially and economically.

Toronto's economic conversion was partly propelled by a francophone separatist movement in the neighbouring province of Quebec in the early 1970s. Separatist politics encouraged some of Canada's largest investment banks to transfer their headquarters to Toronto from Montreal, fuelling Toronto's business sector and supplanting Montreal as Canada's financial capital. Financial services now account for 14 per cent of Toronto's economic output (Burt *et al.*, 2011) and the sector helps the city compete for international trade and capital with the likes of Singapore, Dubai, Sydney, and other newer world cities. Toronto and its surrounding suburbs also generate 20 per cent of Canada's total gross domestic product (Hoornweg and Pope, 2014; Toronto Region Board of Trade, 2014). This economic transition stands in contrast to conditions in Detroit, Cleveland,

and several other former manufacturing centres in the Great Lakes region, where depopulation, physical disrepair, and economic degradation persist. Toronto's economic transformation also appears to have lessened the scale of racial segregation, concentrated poverty, and high rates of crime experienced by many American cities in the region.

Toronto's economic expansion, coupled with national-level policy changes, brought dramatic demographic changes in the city. Prior to the 1970s, Toronto's population was relatively homogenous in racial and class terms. The vast majority of people living in the city claimed Western European and working-class roots (Relph, 2014). But rising post-World War II affluence, along with federal policies that targeted immigration to further drive economic growth (Fong, 2006), attracted scores of immigrants. The origins of immigrants also changed in several ways. First, long-standing restrictions on non-European migrants were lifted (Troper, 2003). These new immigration policies also recruited across a wide range of nationalities compared to those in Europe, which tended to recruit immigrants based on post-colonial ties. Large numbers of newcomers began arriving in Toronto from East and South Asia, the Caribbean, Africa, and South America (Relph, 2014). Second, policies changed the class origins of immigrants. Whereas previous generations of European immigrants had overwhelmingly peasant or working-class backgrounds, the new generation of immigrants was far more mixed, with half recruited on the basis of family reunification or refugee status – often filling needs for lower income labour (e.g. personal care workers) – while the other half was recruited to enter business and professional roles (e.g. entrepreneurs, engineers, IT specialists, medical professions). Third, a policy of multiculturalism was officially adopted in self-conscious contrast to the neighbouring 'melting pot' philosophy espoused in the United States (Anisef and Lanphier, 2003; Cummins, 1992; Fong, 2006; James, 2001; Relph, 2014).

Following these changes in policy, Toronto's population grew rapidly, becoming the fourth most populous in North America. Toronto has also become one of the world's most ethnically diverse cities, represented by over 200 ethnicities (Anisef and Lanphier, 2003; Michelson, 2006). Nearly half of its residents are foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2011; Toronto Region Board of Trade, 2014), a figure that is much higher than in other North American hubs like Mexico City and New York (Fong, 2006; US Census Bureau, 2015). Amid this social and economic change, Toronto's public education system has by many measures performed well. It has avoided the types of declines that have beset nearby cities such as Detroit, Buffalo, and Cleveland. Toronto's students are above-average achievers in a province that has one of the world's highest performing urban school systems according to test scores, graduation rates, and post-secondary attendance (Mourshed *et al.*, 2010; OECD, 2010). Further, achievement gaps between students of high- and low-income backgrounds are less steep in Ontario than in most other international jurisdictions (OECD, 2010; Levin *et al.*, 2008). Over the past decade, Toronto's schools have raised graduation rates and post-secondary attendance (Ungerleider, 2008; Levin *et al.*, 2008).

Having described the background for Toronto's growth, the following sections present four newer attributes of education in the city. Taken as a whole, we believe these attributes illustrate challenges for global cities. On the one hand, as cities aim to integrate and unify populations, they often develop and import or export policies around equity; but on the other hand, they also face an array of pressures that serve to differentiate schooling.

Emerging educational stratification

One key educational characteristic that Toronto shares with other global cities is a changing and complex pattern of educational stratification. In some respects, patterns of educational attainment in the city remain quite predictable: student performance remains strongly correlated

with socioeconomic status and family structure (Anisef *et al.*, 2010; Brown and Sinay, 2008), and higher income students are disproportionately entering more prestigious universities and lucrative fields of study (Davies *et al.*, 2014; Deller and Oldford, 2011; Willms, 2004). These disparities are interrelated with challenges of growing inequality in income, health, access to services, housing, and transportation found in many other world cities (Hulchanski, 2010; Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2009; Urquia *et al.*, 2007).

But patterns of educational stratification in Toronto show certain unexpected directions. Immigrants as an aggregate are more than twice as likely to have a university degree than are native-born Canadians, and immigrants are over-represented among highly educated professionals (King, 2009). 'Visible minorities' (Canada's term for non-white persons), as an aggregate, are similarly advantaged in all measures of educational attainment (for Toronto see TDSB, 2012; for Canada as a whole see Thiessen, 2009). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010) has even trumpeted the academic performance of the city's immigrants.

However, we argue that, in most respects, these reshaped patterns of educational stratification reflect global migration flows much more than the efforts of Toronto's schools. Data have long shown sizeable differences in the fortunes of Canadian immigrants by their nation of origin (e.g. Thiessen, 2009), similar to those found in other immigrant-receiving nations (Rothon *et al.*, 2009). More recent data suggest that these variations reflect recruitment patterns. Children of immigrants who were recruited through business and professional criteria have by far the most superior educational and economic outcomes (Hou and Bonikowska, 2016). In contrast, immigrants who entered as refugees, family dependents, or caregivers have far worse outcomes. In Toronto, these immigrant minorities are among the city's poorest and least educated, lacking footholds in either Toronto's new economy or its fading manufacturing sector, which was a destination for poor immigrants in previous generations.

Thus, this class-differentiated immigrant recruitment policy is manifesting itself in Toronto. Visible minorities have increased their share in both low-income and high-income districts (Brown and Sinay, 2008; Reitz and Lum, 2006). Upward mobility among newer immigrants, especially those working in personal services, appears to have slowed (Preston *et al.*, 2003; Reitz and Lum, 2006). Students with ancestry in different parts of Asia enjoy above-average attainments, whereas those of Caribbean and Latin American backgrounds experience below-average attainments (Anisef *et al.*, 2010; Brown and Sinay, 2008). These disparate trends offer a nuanced portrait of education in a global city in that becoming a node in global migration, and adopting class-differentiated recruitment strategies, tends to manifest itself in the classroom and to shape disparities in student outcomes.

A node in a global educational reform network

How do policymakers respond to educational stratification? Policy goals and innovations now circulate in a complex international network, moving from one political context to another, influencing not only their surrounding regions but also those much more distant (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; McCann, 2011; Stone, 2012). Many newer global cities are nodes in these networks, acting as both exporters and importers of educational policy (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009; Mundy and Ghali, 2009). However, international policy as shaped by politicians, international organizations, think tanks, and consultants tends to be refracted by local institutional, historical, and cultural factors (Appadurai, 1996; Klingler-Vidra and Schleifer, 2014; Mundy and Ghali, 2009).

In international school reform circles, reducing race and social class achievement gaps has been a long-standing objective (Campbell and Fullan, 2006; Davies and Guppy, 1997), spawning a range of reforms including multicultural and specialized curricula, standardized testing, school

choice, parental involvement programmes, and accountability measures. As a key node in this circuit, Toronto has prioritized some of these reforms and has largely eschewed others. Namely, for over two decades, the city's schools have developed dozens of funding, curricular, teacher-training, and community-oriented initiatives aiming to integrate and support English-language learners, students of diverse cultural backgrounds, and newcomer families (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993; Stewart, 2012; OECD, 2010; Brock and Edmunds, 2010; Flessa and Gregoire, 2012). In contrast, Toronto has rejected many exported reforms from the United States, such as high-stakes standardized examinations, school sanctions for low performance, value-added evaluations of teachers, and charter school and voucher programmes. However, in reflecting its priorities, Toronto has directly imported some US-styled equity reforms, including its two Africentric schools, and initiatives such as Black History Month.

Leveraging both its high standing in PISA and its reputation as a diverse city, Toronto-based consultants have become influential in international school reform networks in two areas: equity and inclusivity initiatives, and 'systems' thinking in education (Fensterwald, 2013; Fullan, 2012; Levin, 2014; Mourshed *et al.*, 2010). Equity-based initiatives conceived in the city have spread throughout Canada and to other parts of the world (Fullan and Boyle, 2014; Levin, 2014; Stewart, 2012). This diffusion can be seen as puzzling, as evidence suggests that although these initiatives may help create welcoming school environments for many students (Ladky and Peterson, 2008), they do not appear to lessen any of the most intractable student performance gaps, whether by socioeconomic status or race (Brown and Sinay, 2008). Rather, as mentioned in the previous section, racial patterns of student achievement strongly mirror the conditions under which various groups were recruited to Canada: immigrant and first generation students with highly educated and professional parents tend to fare very well in Toronto's schools, whereas those with less educated single parents working in personal services tend to exhibit below-average outcomes.

So why has Toronto been able to export many school reforms if such reforms have not proven to be effective? One possibility is that these reforms have a strong *symbolic* value. In global networks, policymakers are keen to learn about effective policies in other settings, while other policy entrepreneurs are eager to facilitate the spread of policy innovations. In a globalizing world in which cities are becoming increasingly diverse, and in which policymakers are expected to address rapidly changing demographics, policy can serve as a symbol for action, a way of signalling their commitment to global values. Toronto's policy actors have likely benefited from being associated with Canada's high standing in international educational rankings in tandem with Toronto's image of multicultural diversity.

Balancing new global outlooks and historical legacies

Newer world centres produce forward-looking ideas about creating innovative economies and integrating new populations (Ozga and Jones, 2006). Unlike many European world capitals that tout their distinct cultural heritages, and unlike American cities that have emphasized assimilation (at least until recently), Toronto has downplayed its cultural heritage in favour of a multicultural ethos that champions diversity (Segeren and Kutsyuruba, 2012). Indeed, some federal politicians have proclaimed Canada as having no core identity, being one of the world's first 'post-national' states (Lawson, 2015). But this bold outlook is at odds with some of Toronto's enduring educational structures. One striking aspect of Toronto's public schooling is that, despite massive economic and social changes in the city, its schools continue to bear the imprint of Ontario's relatively unique history of language and religion.

The city hosts four publicly funded school boards. The most prominent is the English-speaking Toronto District School Board (TDSB), which enrols 260,000 students and is the fourth largest school board in North America (Stewart, 2015; TDSB, 2015). But in addition, there are smaller publicly funded French, English Catholic, and French Catholic school boards. Public funding of Catholic schools stems from a mid-nineteenth century constitutional compromise aimed at protecting religious minorities, preserving separate schools for Catholics in what was a Protestant-dominated Ontario, and separate schools for Protestants in Catholic-dominated Quebec. This law has remained unchanged for decades and, as a result, Ontario does not fund non-Catholic schools, whether through tax credits, vouchers, or charter schools. Ontario is the world's only jurisdiction that fully funds schools for one religious minority group – Catholics – while extending zero funds to any other. More recently, Ontario sought to protect its main historical language minority by ensuring public funds for francophone schools. This gap between prevailing structures and new realities has led to criticisms of Toronto's state school system as out of step with broader demographic changes.

Yet, the city's political climate does not appear to encourage structural change. Over several decades, various groups have called for the extension of public funds for other religious schools (Davies, 1999). Growing numbers of Muslim, Jewish, Evangelical Christian, and other faith-based groups have questioned why Catholic schools alone receive government funding. Nonetheless, public opinion has sharply rejected these calls, most recently in a 2008 provincial election, with some even calling for an elimination of public funding for Catholic schools (Zinga, 2008). But that latter initiative has also fallen flat – no Ontario politician has ever dared to openly take that stance. Similarly, many are questioning why francophone schools are funded in a region where far more people speak Mandarin (and many other languages) than French (Statistics Canada, 2011).

One reason why these long-standing structures persist in an otherwise forward-looking culture is that families have adapted themselves to local school offerings. For instance, many non-Catholic parents in Ontario have long sent their children to fully-funded Catholic schools, believing them to offer a more disciplined brand of schooling. Today's Catholic schools have large numbers of Muslims who are seeking *some* sort of a faith-based environment and, in response, some Catholic school campuses have constructed Muslim prayer rooms alongside chapels (Brennan, 2012). Furthermore, today's francophone schools appear to be increasingly populated by students who are not descendants of Franco-Ontarians, but are children of affluent professionals who are congregating in these schools as an exercise in school choice (Sinay, 2010).

Historical legacies also surface in the prioritizing of indigenous education in Toronto. Throughout the twentieth century until the 1970s, Canadian authorities removed aboriginal children from their communities and into 'residential schools' that were created to assimilate aboriginal children in the English and French languages and Christian religion. This practice created considerable damage to aboriginal communities, and prompted the federal government to officially apologize in 2008 (Corntassel and Holder, 2008). But residential schools generated another historical legacy: aboriginals in Toronto and Canada continue to experience the highest rates of poverty and lowest rates of educational attainment among all ethno-racial groups (Statistics Canada, 2006), while also having a strong distrust in state schools. Today, there is renewed priority to build new educational partnerships with aboriginal communities by designing new curricula, developing new teacher training, and expanding social services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). These initiatives, among the most highly prioritized in Ontario's public education system today, are focused on resurrecting aspects of Ontario's cultural heritage, as opposed to forging an intrepid, all-inclusive post-national culture. They are altering prevailing understandings of inclusion and equity in ways that remove some emphasis from recent immigrants and re-direct it to Canada's first peoples.

New pressures for differentiation

At the same time that policies are being developed to promote inclusion and integration, demands for school choice and educational differentiation are growing in many world centres (Benson *et al.*, 2015). For several decades, proponents have proclaimed choice as a way to satisfy parents' needs, boost school performance, and reduce achievement gaps (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Nathan, 1996). However, research suggests that pressures for choice may reflect more of a process in which advantaged families seek differentiated niches in schooling as opposed to a desire for better academics. Choice schemes have been popular even in cities where the public education system is thought to be performing relatively well (Ergin and Sönmez, 2006; Kim and Hwang, 2014; Yoshida *et al.*, 2009). In high-performing urban centres, middle-class families have increasingly sought new ways to confer advantage to their children, often turning to private schooling or other public choice arrangements.

Toronto's public education system has long been differentiated into four school boards arrayed by religion and language. But, in addition, many families are seeking further differentiation. In response, the city's public boards are continually creating new schools of choice in an effort to retain families (Gaztambide-Fernández *et al.*, 2012). Although state schools have exhibited high levels of aggregate attainment, over 10 per cent of all students residing in the city are currently enrolled in private schools. This figure represents a doubling of the proportion of students enrolled in private schools in the past 20 years (Davies and Pizarro Milian, 2015).

Some pressures for differentiation also invoke notions of diversity. One outgrowth of the city's emphasis on multiculturalism has been an ongoing contest over the very meaning of the term in practice. One meaning is that singular public institutions should strive to accommodate all kinds of difference, and be fully inclusive, while tacitly expecting everyone to adopt progressive modes of living and embracing evolving notions of human rights for all kinds of racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities. Others extol a more pluralist meaning in which deeper group differences are to be preserved through a plurality of institutions, believing that the inclusive version of multiculturalism ultimately promotes assimilation and cultural loss (White, 2003).

These competing interpretations of multiculturalism are being voiced in Toronto's school politics. A recent high-profile change to Ontario's sex education curriculum contained an evolving progressive understanding of human rights and diversity, one at odds with many faith-based groups' understandings and traditions (Gee, 2015; Sagan, 2015). This curriculum unearthed a tension between various faiths and progressive notions of gender and sexuality. Reports suggest that Islamic and other religious private schools are reporting large enrolment gains, partly in reaction to the province's sex education curriculum (ibid.). This episode offers an example of the tensions in Toronto's multicultural ethos over competing rights claims.[1]

Other pressures for differentiation come from new forms of educational competitiveness. Rising student attainments have driven affluent families to seek new ways to confer advantage to their children. In some respects, educational competition is less intense in Toronto than in other global cities. Canada has no post-secondary entrance exams such as the SAT in the United States. Its universities, almost all of which are public, receive relatively equal funding, creating a hierarchy of institutions that is markedly flatter than those in the United States or Britain, where there are more pronounced stratifications of institutions by resources, endowments, and prestige (Davies and Zarifa, 2012). Nonetheless, affluent parents in Toronto are increasingly enrolling their children in non-religious private schools (Davies and Pizarro Milian, 2015). A sense of heightened competition also appears to be sparking a growth in private tutoring in the city (Hart and Kempf, 2015), a market that is very large in major Asian world centres, such as Seoul, Singapore, and Shanghai (Aurini *et al.*, 2013; Ryu and Kang, 2013).

Toronto's state school boards have vastly expanded their menu of school options, creating a series of alternatives ranging from Africentric, aboriginal, alternative, business and technical, single sex, International Baccalaureate, science, and sport schools. The city now has the second largest number of publicly funded arts schools in North America (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010). Within regular state schools, curricula have also widely expanded to include high-skills majors, post-secondary for-credit courses, internships and apprenticeships, foreign language courses, and cooperative and experiential learning opportunities. Public educators have also expanded choice within their schools, believing that they must entice affluent families to stay in the public system rather than leave for the private sector. Unsurprisingly, the most prestigious state schools of choice, especially those with specialized arts programming, are accessed mostly by students from high-income backgrounds (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010; Parekh *et al.*, 2011). Overall, several pressures are emerging that are serving to further differentiate schooling options in the city, despite its official ethos of inclusion and equity. These dynamics resemble those that are occurring in many other global cities.

Conclusion

The city of Toronto is a new entrant to the ranks of global cities. Toronto prides itself on becoming one of the world's most diverse urban centres, embracing new global outlooks, and attracting large numbers of immigrants. The city's publicly funded education system has been internationally recognized for high levels of student performance and as a producer of equity and diversity reforms. In describing Toronto as a new global city, we have pointed to four important characteristics of its education system: how its emerging patterns of attainment mirror the stratified nature of transnational migration; how it has become an exporter of diversity and equity reforms; how new global outlooks stand in partial tension with historical legacies; and how new pressures are driving educational differentiation in the city. What implications might these characteristics have for other global cities?

The first characteristic might signal how Toronto, rather than being a creator of original reforms that have demonstrable effectiveness in reducing achievement gaps, is instead serving as a *symbol* in international discourse for ways to *talk* about and *enact* equity and diversity in education. The second characteristic exemplifies how, even in the most forward-minded contexts, historical legacies still greatly influence education systems. Old structures can remain intact even when they are seemingly at odds with newer outlooks. The third characteristic, we contend, is perhaps most typical of global cities: rising affluence often brings pressures for educational differentiation. To stem student losses, publicly funded education systems understandably respond by expanding their options, but doing so often brings new *structural* forms of stratification. In sum, Toronto is part of a new stratum of global cities in which education has driven much change – paradoxically generating discourses about equity and diversity – while at the same time, becoming a divider of social wellbeing.

Notes

1   When Ontario's Catholic schools recently baulked at allowing their students to form gay–straight alliance groups (GSAs), some re-questioned the province's funding of those Catholic schools, arguing that no school should receive public funds if it fails to align with secular notions of human rights (Donlevy *et al.*, 2014). However, this dispute was soon settled after policymakers passed legislation explicitly barring all publicly funded schools from preventing the formation of GSAs (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012).

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