Different Numbers, Different Stories: Problematizing "Gaps" in Ontario and the TDSB

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Abstract

As an urban district reform for equity, the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) was founded as a response to inequities in the city and opportunity gaps among groups of students. This study critically explores the equity discourses among various stakeholders in the MSIC Program between 2004-14, with a specific focus on how opportunity gaps are conceptualized. Critical discourse analysis was used with attention to how these discourses interacted within, and between, two sets of sixteen participant interviews and the analysis of twelve documents. Attention was also paid to how the discourses changed over time. A spectrum of thinking emerged from the data on opportunity gap discourses, with *Affirmative discourses* on the one hand, and *Transformative discourses* on the other, and included four distinct, yet interconnected components. Three of the four components were adapted from the work of Fraser's (2005) tripartite theory of justice (*Redistribution, Recognition and Representation*). The fourth component emerged from the data and will be referred to as *Re-education.*

Keywords: opportunity gaps, critical, equity discourses, district, reform

Ontario has seen consistent increases in educational outcomes as measured by standardized EQAO (Educational Quality and Accountability Office) scores as described below:

> Improvements began within a year, and now some eight years later its 900 high schools have shown an increase in graduation rates from 68 percent (2003-04) to 82 percent (2010-11), while reading, writing, and math results have gone up 15 percentage points across its 4,000 elementary schools since 2003…and achievement gaps have been substantially reduced for low- income students, the children of recent immigrants, and special education students (although not for "First Nation" students). In short, the entire system has dramatically improved. (Fullan, 2012, p. 1)

EQAO scores in the TDSB, the largest and most diverse urban school board in Canada and the fourth largest school board in North America, show a similar trajectory of fairly steady and in some cases consistent improvement over the past several years (EQAO, 2017). Between 2007-08 and 2011-12, TDSB data show slight improvement in achievement gaps on the basis of gender and place of birth, however, persistent gaps continue when student achievement data is disaggregated by social demographic indicators such as ethno-racial identity and parents' educational background (TDSB, 2014a). Despite commitments to reforms for equity, EQAO achievement data demonstrate gaps as high as 30% between populations on the basis of race and socioeconomic status (TDSB, 2014a) and graduation rate gaps as high as 25% between populations on the basis of race and socioeconomic status (TDSB, 2012a). Moreover, males in lower socio-economic groupings of Latin American, Middle Eastern, Black, and Indigenous backgrounds are amongst the populations most impacted by the achievement gap, as evidenced by standardized test

scores, report card data, credit accumulation, and dropout rates (McKell, 2010). These students are also more likely to have lower rates of attendance and higher rates of suspension (McKell, 2010).

While the achievement gap is one indicator of systemic and institutional inequities, one has to go beyond the narrow, instrumental, and technical view of education as achievement scores in order to more fully understand the implications of educational inequities (Apple, 2006; Ross & Gibson, 2006). The student experience for students who are not white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male is significantly diminished because they are more likely to face discrimination, harassment, and exclusion (Ryan, 2010). TDSB data reveal similar trends and correlates school experiences with student demographics for students in grades 7 to 12. For example, Zheng (2009) found that while a greater percentage of female students feel comfortable in TDSB schools, male students indicated higher levels of class participation. Black, Latin, and Mixed students' levels of school satisfaction were the lowest of all racial groups. Zheng also found that students from lower socio-economic groups felt less comfortable participating in class than students in higher socio-economic groups and that students who self-identified as LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) were significantly less comfortable in school compared to self-identified heterosexual students. Of the students suspended, 48% were black, while black students make up only about 12% of the population (TDSB, 2017).

How do we make sense of these seemingly different results? It could be that understandings of opportunity and achievement gaps at the provincial level do not account for a number of factors: a wide-enough variety of social identities (such as race, gender identity, etc.); the intersections between multiple and changing identities; and/or the larger socio-political, economic, and historic realities of each district and the communities within that district. According to Noguera (2006), large-scale system reforms, and the standardized tests that inform their progress, fail to account for the socio-political, economic, and historical inequities that plague urban and rural districts. In this age of accountability, large-scale testing initiatives mask the reality that reform efforts have worked against social justice and have disproportionately disadvantaged racialized and minoritized students (Noguera, 2006). Perhaps the differences in test scores can be further understood upon examination of the different purposes behind standardized tests in the evidence-based movement. It is often argued that the evidence-based movement is constructed on principles of injustice, social and economic sorting, stratification, and domination. Gorski (2008) commented on evidence-based education by stating, "despite overwhelmingly good intentions, such a perspective on evidence-based education accentuates, rather than undermines, existing social and political hierarchies in education" (p. 516).

Many scholars also draw our attention to the fact that achievement gaps are affected by opportunity gaps, which speak to the uneven distribution of resources and learning opportunities (Milner, 2012; Noguera, 2006). Theories of educational opportunity and its distribution vary widely. Ladson-Billings (2006) extended the argument of opportunity gaps and suggested that these gaps are a logical consequence of the education debt—a collection of the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral debts accrued against marginalized and racialized peoples and children. According to Ladson-Billings (2006), a focus on achievement and opportunity gaps is predicated on short-term deficits and solutions, whereas a focus on the education debt calls us to recognize the accumulated sum of all previous deficits in education (p. 4). Drawing on Fraser's (2005) Tripartite Theory of Justice, Turner (2015) suggested that "opportunity gaps can be conceptualized in terms of three dimensions of inequality: inequality in the material conditions of children's lives, denial of cultural belonging or equal social status, and inequitable voice in decisions that affect one's well-being" (p. 31). Fraser noted that there are two main approaches evident within each of these three dimensions: Affirmative and Transformative. While Affirmative approaches aim to remedy the outcomes of inequitable structures and practices, Transformative approaches aim for more equitable outcomes by addressing the underlying logic and structural root causes of inequities. Understanding opportunity gaps in this very broad sense demands the need to examine educational discourses in a broader historical and socio-political context.

As part of a larger study on district reform for equity, this study explores Turner's recommendation through the lens of equity discourses on opportunity gaps in the MSIC Program. The MSIC Program was founded as a response to educational inequities both within and outside of the TDSB, namely related to poverty and marginalization. This study will begin with an analysis of Fraser's (2005) Affirmative and Transformative discourses as they apply to educational inequities and efforts to close opportunity gaps. This will be followed by a description of the MSIC Program, the methodological approach and study

findings. The findings will explore the Affirmative and Transformative equity discourses to closing opportunity gaps in the MSIC Program along four dimensions: redistribution, recognition, representation, and re-education.

Affirmative Discourses to Closing Opportunity Gaps

Affirmative discourses to closing opportunity gaps are most closely aligned with liberal and neoliberal discourses in education. These discourses ascribe to the myth of neutrality, which assumes that every student has the same academic, socio-emotional, and physical needs, and should aspire to the same outcomes in skills, dispositions, and attitudes. This leads to a one-size-fits-all model of education (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). From this vantage point, the goal of closing the opportunity gaps in the MSIC Program is to get all students to the same level of achievement. This requires taking care of the effects of poverty, such as tending to basic needs (healthcare, nutrition, social-emotional needs, etc.), which is foundational to student success and well-being. It also involves providing more resources and opportunities to students with less social and political capital, so that they have access to similar experiences as students in the dominant culture (white, middle-class). It does not, however, attend to the effects of ideological and systemic causes of opportunity/achievement gaps, nor does it directly affirm the value of a diversity of experiences and ways knowing.

Those ascribing to neoliberal approaches to education comply with these same principles, but for the purpose of serving market forces and exacerbated by the desire to be competitive in a global economy. Neoliberalism constructs justice as preparing all students for the workforce. Some critics suggest that "unsuccessful students" are constructed as untapped resources. As such, investing in them will reduce social costs associated with income and other disparities (Anderson, 2001). Neoliberal practices occupy educational settings in very rational and instrumental ways, such as: standardized testing, the commodification and narrow understanding of literacy, and ascribed curricula that is apolitical and ahistorical (Apple, 2006).

The Affirmative discourse on closing opportunity gaps essentializes the experiences of marginalized and racialized students and families, and in effect, blames them for their oppression (Valencia, 1997). The "gap" lies with the student, family, and community, and comprises student readiness, student outcomes and success, and student potential for achievement. In many liberal and neoliberal discourses, deficit thinking arises when the fault or blame for the gap is placed on the student and the family. For example, an interview participant suggested that one cause of the gap for students living in poverty was "being raised in a broken family." Liberal discourses also focus on individuals (as opposed to collectives and communities) and fail to account for both the root causes of inequities and the system's role in maintaining them.

Transformative Discourses to Closing Opportunity Gaps

Transformative discourses are most closely aligned with critical discourses in education. Critical discourses question how constructions of reality legitimize the knowledge and culture of dominant groups and result in the elevation and ensured continuity of it's body of knowledge, at the expense of others (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). From critical perspectives, equity focuses on how larger socio-political, economic, and historic forces maintain and exacerbate power imbalances in schools, instead of focusing on individual students, families, communities, teachers, (Portelli et al., 2007) or leaders. There is a strong focus on understanding how various forms of oppression influence students, families, and communities, and their experiences of schooling. Differences in knowledge, culture, and ideas are valued and continually co-constructed in fluid and dynamic ways through language, power, and praxis.

In Transformative discourses on closing opportunity gaps, the gap lies with the school system itself, as well as socio-political, economic, and historical inequities in the larger society. The gap here refers to: discriminatory and deficit mindsets that educators and society at large have about, and towards, racialized and marginalized students and families; ineffective teaching methods and strategies that fail to affirm students' lived experiences or teach them to identify, critique and respond to inequities; the absence of strong and respectful relationships between educators, students, and families; and systemic barriers to equity within schooling systems (e.g., standardized testing, streaming, inequities in funding, inequitable policies, exclusive hiring and promotion processes, etc.). The gap also includes larger socio-political and economic

factors such as lack of access and opportunity to material, socio-cultural and political resources and capital. In this discourse, the major cause of the gap has to do with what critical discourses assert is the role of the education system: to reproduce societal inequities, to preserve marginalization, and to protect the status quo. There is recognition in this discourse that gaps are created because schooling is set up to serve white, middle-class children, interests, and worldviews (Portelli et al., 2007). Transformative approaches remove barriers that prevent a focus on the brilliance, capacities, and excellence of students “in the gap”.

Transformative approaches to education support students in having access and opportunity to a wide range of choices in life and career (instead of having choices made for them or having to choose from limited, pre-determined options). Students are also supported in their development as engaged citizens who can participate fully in a democratic society. In Transformative discourses, educators seek to work in solidarity with marginalized groups to expose privilege and to disrupt the power relations and structures that undermine and exclude them (Kincheloe, 1999). As such, community partners and governments also have a key role to play in identifying, understanding, and closing these gaps.

The next section will provide a description of the MSIC Program, followed by methodology and an analysis of how Affirmative and Transformative discourses manifest in understandings of opportunity gaps in the MSIC Program.

Case: The Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program

The MSIC Program serves the students, families, and communities in 150 elementary and middle schools (and at one point seven secondary schools) in the TDSB. Students in these 150 schools are determined to face the greatest external barriers to student success, such as family income level, as determined by the Learning Opportunity Index (LOI). The MSIC Program was initiated in 2005, when a group of community partners, senior administrative board staff, school trustees, parents, local university staff, and educators, came together to address the growing income gap in the city of Toronto and the subsequent achievement and opportunity gaps in Toronto schools. The Inner City Task Force Report was passed at a board meeting in the spring of 2006 with the first three schools to receive one million dollars in funding in the 2006-07 school year. An additional four schools were added in 2007-2008 with more additions from 50 schools, to 112 schools, to 150 schools. With the addition of more schools, there were changes to funding, initiatives, partnerships, staffing, and program directions. As of 2014, the program received close to $9 million to support these initiatives in 150 elementary schools. With new research findings and with changes to demographics in Toronto, the Learning Opportunities Index is recalculated every two years. Over the years, schools have been added and removed from the program due to their ranking, which has had a major influence on the differential conceptions of equity, opportunity gaps, and the purpose of the MSIC Program.

The 150 schools serve approximately 75,000 students of diverse identities and are divided into seven clusters of schools. Some efforts were made to include secondary schools in the Program, however that proved difficult over time. In 2014, there were approximately 50 staff members supporting the seven clusters including Central Staff, Lead Teachers, Teaching and Learning Coaches, and Community Support Workers. It should be noted that there have been several changes to program staffing and vision since 2016. While the following essential components have remained the same, the examples listed below were part of the Program in 2014:

1. Innovation in Teaching and Learning. Creation of MSIC interdisciplinary units of study focused on social justice, summer school opportunities for students in grades 1 to 8 for 3.5 weeks in July, and monthly professional development with teachers and administrators.
2. Support Services to Meet the Social, Emotional and Physical Well-Being of Students. Hearing and vision clinics, paediatric clinics in schools (one school per cluster), nutrition programs, access to information on the social determinants of health by neighbourhood, and access to recreational activities throughout the city at highly reduced costs.
3. School as Heart of the Community. Parent Academies (networks “by parents for parents”), an annual Parent Academy Conference led by parents and supported by MSIC staff, community/faith walks for educators led by parents and community leaders, and expanded opportunities for parents to develop workforce skills.
4. Research, Review, and Evaluation of Students and Programs. MSIC staff/parent/student perception surveys, student resiliency surveys, CAT4 Testing (national standardized test-

ing) for students in grades 2 to 8, use of the Early Development Instrument in Junior and Senior Kindergarten, and ongoing program monitoring and evaluation.

5. Commitment to Share Successful Practices. Monthly cluster meetings with school principals and staff; regular opportunities to share best practices and information between MSIC schools, with the larger school board and internationally; and, the ongoing development of a technology hub to share information and effective practices.

The direction of MSIC was heavily influenced by the Inner City Advisory Committee, the political arm of the program that played the role of asking important questions, providing feedback, holding the board accountable, and lobbying for changes at the district, provincial and federal levels. Many members of the Inner City Advisory Committee were original members of the Inner City Task Force in 2005, and included similar stakeholders as the original group.

Methods

This study is part of a much larger, single case study on urban district reform for equity that analyzed 12 Program and board documents and two sets of 16 interviews. The larger study explored the conceptual framework, Districts as Institutional Actors in Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008), which is based on a synthesis of research on district reform over the past 20 years and includes the following interdependent, co-evolving, and variably-coupled themes: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 307). This conceptual framework was used to explore how the MSIC Program was initiated and sustained between 2004-2014 and built on the conceptual argument by identifying the political, pedagogical, and leadership conditions necessary for urban district reforms for equity.

As a former Lead Teacher in the MSIC Program between 2009-2014, this study constitutes insider-outsider research. Conducting insider-outsider research may call into question its reliability and validity, especially by researchers who ascribe to more traditional, positivist stances. However, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe the complexity and legitimacy of insider-outsider research in the following way:

> The notion of the space between challenges the dichotomy of insider versus outsider status. To present these concepts in a dualistic manner is overly simplistic. It is restrictive to lock into a notion that emphasizes either/or, one or the other, you are in or you are out. Rather, a dialectical approach allows the preservation of the complexity of similarities and differences. (p. 60)

Being an insider provided me with an historical and socio-political context for this program and insider knowledge of the range of stakeholders and documents. I consider this insider knowledge a tremendous privilege in my role as researcher. It is important to note that I was not working for the MSIC Program from the point I started collecting data, because I needed space from the day-to-day operations to be able to hear and truly respect the voices of participants, as well as read the documents with some distance. I engaged in deep reflexivity throughout the conceptualization of this study, as well as during data collection, data analysis, and the communication of results, by considering my own thoughts, emotions, and reactions. I took notes during the interviews to gather initial thoughts, inferences and hunches, and audio-recorded transcripts were sent to participants for member checking. As part of a doctoral thesis, the analysis was shared with three members of my thesis committee, which increased research validity. Furthermore, this was an explanatory study and not an evaluative study. As such, my role as an insider researcher allowed me to understand the complexity and nuances of the case when answering the research questions, without evaluating the effectiveness of the program. Finally, engaging a dialectical approach to capture complexity (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) is also evident in the presentation of the findings as a spectrum of thought, recognizing that participant responses, and my responses, traversed this spectrum across all four dimensions of opportunity gap discourses in the MSIC Program at different times.

Interviews and Documents

This study focused on documents and interviews with key participants between 2004-2014. As an insider, I was able to invite participants into this study with a broad range of views and experiences from the following stakeholder groups connected to the MSIC Program: senior administrative board staff in the TDSB, elected school board trustees, key administrators, key partners, and MSIC staff. Participants were

chosen on the basis of maximum variation in experience and perspective, so as to capture core experiences and central, shared dimensions of district reform for equity (Merriam, 2009). Two key informants were requested to provide ideas for the selection of participants (Merriam, 2009) based on the criteria below; I also considered myself a key informant in this process, given that I had worked in this program for five years and was involved in multiple aspects of its development. To maintain anonymity, the key informants were not aware of the identity of the final participants. The following criteria guided the consideration of participants:

- They had been actively connected to the program for a minimum of two years between the years 2004 to 2014.
- They represented one of the key stakeholder groups.
- Other stakeholders would agree that their involvement in the program had demonstrable impact on its initiation, stability, and/or progress.
- Overall, the participants represent a range of perspectives and experiences in the Program.

The first set of interviews was semi-structured and based on the conceptual framework of the larger study, *Districts as Institutional Actors in Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity* (Rorrer et al., 2008). These interviews explored the factors involved in implementing and sustaining practices and pedagogies in the MSIC Program. After the first set of interviews, it became evident that while the participants had similar ideas about the purpose of the program (i.e., closing opportunity gaps on the basis of socio-economic status), participants' understandings of equity differed dramatically. Therefore, the second set of interviews explored the paradoxes, contradictions, and wonderings of participants' conceptions of equity and opportunity gaps, and if/why they believed it was important to close these gaps. This study is based almost exclusively on the data from the second set of interviews and document analysis.

Document analysis highlighted these same paradoxes and contradictions. Twelve documents were analyzed for changes over time in the following ways: how they constructed students, families and communities; understandings of equity and opportunity gaps; and participant understandings of the purpose of the MSIC Program. The 12 documents were chosen based on their significance to the MSIC Program between 2004 and 2014, or TDSB documents that had a direct impact on MSIC initiatives and directions. The MSIC Program documents also focused on the program philosophy, history, and its applications in day-to-day activities.

Most of the analyzed documents and websites were available publically or on internal websites that were accessible to staff members of the TDSB. I asked interview participants and the key informant to provide access to some of the older documents connected to the program that have been archived over time. Some of the documents were prepared by the TDSB's Research Department and summarized findings and outcomes of the program over a given period of time. I also analyzed changes over time in some of the structural and organizational documents in order to identify differences in ideas and discourses. In addition, some of the documents were other people's accounts of important aspects and lessons learned in the program, providing data on how others understand, interpret, and learn from the program.

Grounded Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis

The analysis of participant responses from the second set of interviews and document analysis began using grounded theory because it is "compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research" (Glaser & Strauss as cited in Merriam 2009, p. 199). It was clear early on in the data analysis that there were radically different conceptions of equity and social justice that needed further exploration. Categories were formed and re-formed at the various stages of coding: open coding (creation of large, expansive categories), axial coding (relating categories and their properties to each other), and selective coding (development of core category and hypotheses for suggested links between categories or properties) (Merriam 2009). Categories emerged that explored the construction of students and families, notions of success, and individual and systemic responses to inequities. What connected all of these ideas, and what accounted for the range of participant responses, was how opportunity gaps were being conceptualized. I returned to the literature for direction. I noted that drawing on Fraser's (2005) Tripartite Theory of Justice, Turner (2015) suggested that opportunity gaps can be conceptualized in terms of three dimensions of inequality: redistribution, recognition, and representation. Fraser's spectrum of Affirmative and Transformative approaches as well as the elements of justice closely captured many of the findings on the

differences in conception of opportunity gaps. At this stage, the data were explored through Affirmative and Transformative discourses. What was not captured in Fraser's theory and emerged in this study, was a fourth dimension of opportunity gaps: re-education.

While grounded theory supported a descriptive or explanatory analysis of the findings, it could not fully capture the nuances and complexities in the spectrum of thinking across each of the four dimensions. Furthermore, it did not allow for a critical adequacy, which "presupposes social norms and values and introduces a social or political ethics (what we find wrong and right) within the scholarly enterprise as such" (Van Dijk, 1995). At this point, I turned to Critical Discourse Analysis.

In speaking to the epistemological and ontological nature of critical discourse analysis (CDA), Van Dijk (1995) states:

> CDA is essentially dealing with an oppositional study of the structures and strategies of elite discourse and their cognitive and social conditions and consequences, as well as with the discourses of resistance against such domination…It is not surprising that such a view is often seen as "political" (biased) and hence "unscientific" ("subjective") by scholars who think that their "objective" uncritical work does not imply a stance and hence a sociopolitical position, viz., a conservative one that serves to sustain the status quo. Critical Discourse Analysis, thus, emphasizes the fact that the scholarly enterprise is part and parcel of social and political life, and that therefore also the theories, methods, issues and data-selection in discourse studies are always political. (p. 19)

This study draws on the Discourse Historical Approach of Critical Discourse Analysis, which explores how language is used by those in power to maintain dominance (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). It is interdisciplinary, problem-oriented, involves fieldwork and ethnography, accounts for historical context, considers intertextuality and interdiscursivity over time, moves between theoretical and empirical data, and focuses on the application of results.

My analysis in this study aimed to explore particular concepts from multiple angles and look for contradictions and tensions both between and within participant responses and documents. Words, phrases, and combinations of words were explored within the three dimensions of Discursive History Analysis: identifying the specific content or topics of a particular discourse, investigating discursive strategies, and the contextual linguistics realizations of stereotypes (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The following five discursive strategies proposed by Reisigl & Wodak (2001) were used to identify ideological positioning:

- Nomination (discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, and processes).
- Predication (discursive qualification of social actors, objects phenomena, and processes as positive or negative).
- Argumentation (justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness).
- Perspectivisation, Framing, or Discourse Representation (positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance).
- Intensification, Mitigation (modifying – intensifying or mitigating – the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic status of utterances).

Maclure (1994) reminds us that taking texts apart might be a powerful weapon of critique when directed "outwards" at public policy, politics, media, etc., but that there is a need to apply this critique "inward" to our own truths, models of representation, discourses, and understandings of education. Positioned as an insider-outsider researcher, I had a greater ability to blur the lines between outward (actual policies, documents, texts) and inward (truths, discourses, understandings, etc.) critiques while analyzing the second set of 16 interviews and the 12 documents.

Findings

The data revealed that competing and complimentary notions of equity and social justice are enacted differentially in the MSIC Program. The discourses in the MSIC Program were conceptualized using Fraser's (2005) Tripartite Theory of Justice as a starting point, which includes the following three dimensions: inequality in the material conditions of children's lives (redistribution), denial of cultural belonging or equal social status (recognition), and inequitable voice in decisions that affect one's well-being (representation). In addition, a fourth dimension emerged in the data, which was inequalities related to schooling experiences, pedagogy, and learning that will be referred to as Re-education. Both Affirmative and Transformative

approaches were evident in participant responses and documents. These two discourses represent opposite ends on a spectrum of thinking in the data and participant responses were located at various points on this spectrum and often changed over the course of the interview. Documents analyzed also demonstrated elements at various points along the spectrum. Hence, a perforated line in the chart below captures the fluidity in changing ideologies. Table 1 provides an overview of the spectrum of Opportunity Gap Discourses in the MSIC Program along four dimensions of inequity: Redistribution, Recognition, Representation, and Re-education.

Table 1. *Overview of Opportunity Gap Discourses in the MSIC Program*

Affirmative discourse	**Transformative discourse**
• Liberal and neoliberal approaches to education. • Notions of: sameness (one-size-fits-all), individualism, meritocracy, neutrality, standardization, • Apolitical, and ahistorical. • Notions of deficit thinking • Addresses symptoms of inequities	• Critical approaches to education. • Notions of: difference, recognition, rights, collectivism, systemic barriers, and context (socio-political, economic, historic). • Notions of strength-based thinking. • Addresses systemic and ideological root causes of marginalization and racialization (e.g., anti-oppression, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-classism, etc.
Redistribution (Inequalities in the material conditions of children's lives: Economic dimension)	
• Discourse of sameness (equality) and individualism exists at a school level in the program's response to addressing socioeconomic inequities between MSIC and non-MSIC schools in order to get all schools to the same level.	• Discourse of difference (equity) is evident at a system level with regards to the redistribution of funds and staff required to establish the MSIC Program in response to larger societal inequities (poverty) and system inequities (achievement, opportunity gaps). • Levelling the playing field with regards to opportunity gaps outside of the school system. • Levelling the playing field with regards to the material conditions within the school system. • "Opportunities" are considered broadly and constructed beyond those common to white, middle-class students.

Recognition (Inequalities in cultural belonging or equal social status: Cultural dimension)	
• Inclusive notions of multiculturalism that do not threaten the status quo, surface-level recognition that does not require the critical engagement of competing values, and multiple and opposing truths. • Students and families are positioned as being "in need" and ex/implicitly through a deficit lens, sense of pity, single story of poverty. • Program constructed as a saviour and a tool for empowerment.	• Equitable notions of who and what is considered "different" and why (accounting for socio-political and historic contexts), examination of what constitutes the status quo and how policies, practices and ideologies deny, maintain, or resist the status quo. • Deep and fundamental differences are acknowledged, valued, viewed as strengths and serve as catalysts to change the fundamental structures of schooling practices. • Students and families are positioned as agentic, with capabilities, strengths and contributions. • Program constructed as an ally in challenging injustice (individual and systemic).
Representation (Inequalities in voice in decisions that affect one's well-being: Political dimension)	
• All students, parents/guardians, community members, and staff count as equal members of the schooling community in theory. • Increased stakeholder voice in decision-making that does not have the ability to change board/program structures and foci.	• All students, parents/guardians, community members and staff count as equal members of the schooling community in theory and in practice. • Interventions to increase political voice are created to address the needs of students, families, and communities that are currently, and have historically been mis/under-represented. • Stakeholder voice has the ability to change board/program structures/foci.
Re-education (Inequalities related to schooling experiences, pedagogy, and learning: Educational dimension)	
• Schooling leads to student success (as defined by standardized tests). • Equity in education constructed as: sameness in outcomes, success, readiness to learn, potential, and choices (as determined by school system). • Excellence (as defined by standardized test scores) leads to equity.	• Schooling prepares students to take their rightful place in a democratic society and leads to broader notion of student success (choice, opportunity, well-being, achievement). • Equity in education constructed as: • Same rights, recognition, and choices (determined in conjunction with students, families). • Differences in approaches, resources, and opportunities. • Equity leads to "excellence", but that is not the goal of education.

Redistribution

At the start of the program, there was a greater focus on Transformative discourses to redistribution. The MSIC Program was founded on the awareness that there were growing income inequities in the city of Toronto and significant achievement gaps in the TDSB. This language is echoed throughout the MSIC Task Force Report (TDSB, 2005) in statements such as, "The goal of public education is to level the playing field for all children regardless of their socio-economic circumstance or cultural background" (TDSB, 2005, p. 4). Another example is the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), an instrument developed to identify the differences in degrees of external challenges faced by students in schools to determine which

schools would be part of the MSIC Program. The LOI considers factors that are correlated with student achievement, such as: median income, percentage of families whose income is below the low-income measure (before tax), percentage of families receiving social assistance, adult education levels, adults with university degrees, and lone-parent families. It is a measure of relative need and provides a comparison between schools at a specific point in time. The LOI Questions & Answers document states:

> Because of its commitment to achieving equitable academic opportunities, the TDSB wants to ensure that every student has an equitable opportunity to succeed. This means ensuring all students have access to available resources. The LOI helps to ensure that children who have access to fewer resources at home and in their neighbourhoods have increased access to available resources in their schools. The LOI will assist with steering additional resources to the schools serving students who face greater challenges. (TDSB, 2014b, p. 1)

As the program developed, a discourse of sameness seemed to permeate much of the initiatives and responses to poverty, which was evident in the standardization of programming, initiatives, and resources made available to schools in the MSIC Program. The MSIC Deliverables (MSIC, 2014) clearly outlined what every school with a high percentage of families living in poverty should do to create more equitable outcomes for student success and demonstrated a strong, integrated commitment to addressing systemic gaps and barriers to accessing health care and community resources. Nutrition programs in every school, paediatric clinics in seven schools (one per cluster), mental health initiatives, hearing and vision clinics, free eyeglasses, and audiological support helped to address gaps in basic health care for students in MSIC Schools. Furthermore, before and after school programs, early years supports, guides to community resources, newcomer settlement support, parent outreach and education, and extensive partnerships with community agencies addressed the effects of poverty on students and families in Toronto and some of the causes of unequal schooling outcomes.

Addressing larger systemic inequities in the material conditions of children's lives can be an example of a Transformative discourse on closing opportunity gaps. However, it falls under the Affirmative discourse when the fault of the inequities is attributed to individual students and families, without recognition of larger, socio-political and economic inequities (e.g., housing and labour policies, food deserts, minimum wage, housing insecurity, etc.). Five of 15 participants attributed significant responsibility of material inequities to the poor choices and lack of skill/knowledge of individuals, as evident in the following quotation:

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

This example of deficit thinking suggests that an inability to budget effectively, "deal" with life struggles, and find productive ways to spend time and energy, is the fault and shortcomings of those most marginalized in the system, instead of the system that has intentionally created that marginalization.

Affirmative discourses to redistribution also suggest that success for all is possible if students have access to the same experiences and the same access to material goods. This logic fails to consider that students and families may not want the same things in the same ways. Six of 15 participants responded to inequities in material conditions from this perspective of sameness. One participant commented:

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

If a lack of opportunity is understood from the perspective of a pre-determined standard, then it renders invisible the rich opportunities and experiences that students bring with them to school. As one participant noted, "Not that you don't want to have a food program and go to the Science Centre. That's all nice. But that's not what fundamentally needs to change. That will not address the root causes of gaps or poverty." It is also unclear how some of these initiatives supported all children in all schools to participate fully and equally in a democratic society or how they protect the rights of marginalized students and families.

Recognition

This discourse explores how recognition, misrecognition, or absence of recognition (Taylor, 1992) surfaced in the MSIC documents and interviews, from both Affirmative and Transformative discourses. This includes differences in ideological constructions of students and families being served as well as constructions of the MSIC Program.

Affirmative discourses to recognition. In the Affirmative discourse on recognition, students and families were described as having "poor" life circumstances and required "saving" from the program and the school board. It is clear from this excerpt of the 2012 MSIC Backgrounder (TDSB, 2012b) that students living in poverty are constructed through the lens of deficit and lack:

- Children living in poverty face hunger, emotional trauma and homelessness. They often have limited access to regular health and dental care. These pressures serve as obstacles hindering their ability to learn.
- Children living in poverty have less exposure to mainstream cultural, recreational and enrichment programs, less access to technology and are less like likely to achieve recognition in the arts than middle and upper-class children.

While some of the points raised here may describe experiences of some students living in poverty, they tell a single story of poverty. The description fails to recognize the strengths, capabilities, resiliency, and contributions of students and families living in poverty. Three of 15 participants noted that communities have been further stigmatized with the label of "Model Schools for *Inner Cities*". This description also portrays a simplistic understanding of poverty and of the various factors, experiences, and social constructions of individuals in "inner-city" communities. Poverty in Toronto: exists both in the city and in the surrounding inner suburbs; can be both generational and situational (e.g., many newcomers to Toronto are living in poverty); is relational, intersectional, and fluid; can include homelessness; is connected to capitalism and consumerism; is visible and invisible; is economic, social, and cultural; and includes experiences of, and opportunities for resistance, change, and consciousness-raising. Most notable was the absence of any reference to race and the racial achievement and opportunity gaps, and the deep and complex intersections between social class, race, and gender. One participant remarked:

> The program doesn't give the same attention to race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.…but I do believe that it's important for all of those areas of equity to find discussion and response because all of those issues exist in inner city communities. It's not just poverty... We can't say, "No we're just dealing with poverty folks and I'm not touching that other stuff."

With race and class so intricately connected, a failure to address racial achievement gaps in the program serves to silence the experiences of racism operating in and through the Program.

Finally, participants in all 5 stakeholder groups demonstrated Affirmative discourses to recognition, which constructed the MSIC Program as a benevolent support for students, families, and communities. As one participant noted,

> What happens in situations with lots of poverty and disruption of family support, is schools have come to some degree to take on the role of supports that are missing. And that's where MSIC comes in. That's what we're trying to make up for.

In six of the 15 participant responses, the MSIC is positioned as a "saviour". This finding was more prominent with senior staff, elected trustees, and school principals. It was least obvious with community partners and MSIC staff, suggesting that differences in power in influence the construction of students and families as "in need" and "weak" to justify and maintain its existence.

Transformative discourses to recognition. Transformative discourses to recognition have more to do with what Inglis (1997) refers to as emancipation. Inglis states: "empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power" (p. 4). Transformative discourses to recognition are evident in the TDSB Equity Foundation Statement (TDSB, 2000). This document recognizes the "contribution of all members of our diverse community of students, staff, parents and community groups to our mission and goals" (TDSB, 2000). The document also recognizes inequitable treatment based on systemic bias and states, "inequitable treatment leads to educational, social and career outcomes that do not accurately reflect the abilities, experiences and contributions of our students, our employees, and our parent and community partners" (TDSB, 2000). The TDSB Equity Foundation

Statement (TDSB, 2000) states that it is the role of the school system to interrogate systemic policies and their implementation; protect the rights of all students and families; ensure equitable access to programs, information, services and resources; and value and respect differences in identities, knowledges, perspectives, and values.

Four participants described how they want the MSIC Program to be constructed as vehicles that can disrupt inequitable trends in schooling outcomes. One participant noted:

> What I'd like it to be is a program that challenges the way things are done in schools and in society so that there would not be a need for a MSIC Program, because the causes of the inequalities that exist in schools would no longer be there. The MSIC Program should exist to put itself out of business…If social justice was the fundamental center of MSIC, then all of the systemic things that reinforce the achievement and opportunity gaps, (like the inequalities between schools), would be fundamental to the program.

The Board or program can also be positioned as a broker of social, political, and cultural capital. In recognizing that some people have social and cultural capital, that "may or may not be recognized by the dominant society as a valid form of currency within certain contexts" (Mansfield, 2014, p. 46), it is necessary to both value the existing social and cultural capital, as well as teach what is valued in the dominant culture.

Representation

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

Affirmative discourses to representation. In Affirmative discourses to representation, some effort is made to address inequalities of voice in decision-making, as long as it does not upset power structures in the program or Board. The MSIC Parent Academy is an example of this. The MSIC Parent Academy resource guide demonstrates a commitment to the third essential component of MSIC, School as Heart of the Community, in which "parents are welcomed and respected as partners in education" (TDSB, n.d., p. 4). Parent Academies bring together parents and caregivers from clusters of schools to share best practices, decide collectively what they want to learn about, and to some degree, share feedback with the MSIC Program and the TDSB. Parent Academies are "by parents, for parents" and the three main goals of the academies include: supporting children's learning and development, becoming familiar with and learning to navigate the education system, and workforce development (TDSB, n.d.).

However, several participants (some staff and the community partners) noted that this document fails to address how parents and caregivers can: collectively learn about and share concerns regarding the treatment and experiences of their children in the education system; acknowledge and hold the Board responsible for barriers to opportunities and access; advocate for their rights when raising and effectively resolving concerns and complaints with their children's school and the Board; and discuss how to address large-scale system failures such as sorting, achievement/opportunity gaps, the disproportionate representation of particular students in particular programs (e.g., higher proportions of Black and Brown boys in Special Education Behaviour classes), etc. This is most evident in what one participant refers to as the "safe" topics that are listed as examples of parent workshops such as "positive parenting, healthy eating and technology training."

Five of 15 participants commented on the depoliticized notion of parent engagement that has come to inform the MSIC Program. As one participant described: "Community Support Workers need to teach parents how to advocate and not simply provide them with workshops." This participant noted that at the start of the program, Community Support Workers helped parents and caregivers to understand and advocate for their rights and navigate the system, whereas in later years, they were trained to not put the Board at risk. It is important to note the senior board officials, trustees, and principals largely demonstrated Affirmative discourses to representation, and were very proud of their parent engagement efforts.

Transformative discourses to representation. Transformative discourses to representation are evident when structures or initiatives have the potential to change power structures in the program or in the Board, which were evident in the original MSIC Task Force Report (TDSB, 2005) that served to initiate the program. The Task Force Report required schools to engage in multiple assessments and evaluation

strategies that would be shared regularly with staff, families, and communities for evaluation and planning purposes (TDSB, 2005, p. 6). It was also clear that schools alone cannot eradicate the effects of poverty (TDSB, 2005, p. 5), and that the Inner City Advisory Committee (comprised of parents, trustees, community partners, university representatives, MSIC staff, and TDSB senior administrative board staff) should regularly oversee the working of the program and form strategic partnerships with other government ministries and community agencies to address broader structures affecting poverty (TDSB, 2005, p. 6). The ICAC emerged out of the original Inner City Task Force that wrote the MSIC Task Force Report (TDSB, 2005). In the ICAC Backgrounder, it states the mandate, as determined at the June 2007 meeting:

> The ICAC undertakes to advocate for the needs of all inner city students and level the playing field so that successful inner city students grow up with choices…ICAC activities include: deputations and motions to the Board regarding issues like the community use of schools, budgetary issues, the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), food security issues, and TTC equity for older students, as well as the participation in Cluster Parent Academy Committee Meetings, and advocacy for inner city issues at all levels of government. (TDSB, 2014c, p. 1)

Words and phrases like "advocacy," "deputations and motions to the Board," "all levels of government," "encouraged increased participation," and "right issues, right time" indicate the ability and legacy of this committee to challenge and change program and Board structures and policies. A Transformative discourse to representation also centers the knowledge and expertise of parents in identifying problems and generating solutions. One participant noted:

> The solution is parents participating in a process of real conversation about what the needs are, what the issues are and what they can bring to the table…the recognition that all partners have something to contribute and we identify what is the best way for them to make the contributions.

Over time, the program became more centralized and representation discourses became more Affirmative in nature. It is important to note that outside of student voice in the context of curriculum, no participants mentioned increased student representation in the MSIC Program in ways that would impact program goals, structures, and processes.

Re-Education

Changing discourses to re-education. Ideas about pedagogy, curriculum, and achievement surfaced the greatest tensions in the data. Affirmative discourses to teaching and learning centre on liberal notions of individualism, sameness, and meritocracy, as well as neoliberal notions of "excellence." In this view, the purpose of teaching and learning is to "get everyone to the same point," as one participant noted referring to achieving at or above the provincial standard on EQAO (provincial, standardized tests). While nine of the 15 participants noted challenges with using standardized tests scores as a sole measure of student success, four of the nine participants struggled with seeing success beyond achievement on standardized test scores.

A tension was highlighted in participant responses regarding the relationship between equity and excellence as to whether they are complementary or contradictory concepts. Ghosh and Abdi (2004) noted that if quality and excellence signify a comparison using norm- or criterion-referenced assessments (based on the cultures, values and norms of the dominant group, and universally applied despite the diversity of students), then equity and excellence are at odds. However, "if quality and excellence are viewed as self-actualization and self-improvement, then equity and quality converge into equality" (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, p. 50). Six of 15 participants explained that achieving excellence leads to equity because it changes the perception of what students in inner cities are capable of, however they struggled with making sense of the relationships between equity and excellence as evident below:

> I grapple with that personally. Sometimes, the equity conversation treats equity as an end in itself as opposed to using it towards achievement. There is an actionable piece missing. I don't know that starting at excellence and moving towards equity is necessarily wrong…there is a danger when we think about equity in education, because we are looking at education through just one approach.

Several others noted that equity and excellence are one and the same, and that if one's view of education is broad enough, the two concepts are not only complimentary, but the same. One participant noted: "Equity

is excellence. If you care about all children equally, then every child has equal access to achieving their highest potential. And, there is not just one definition of excellence."

Affirmative discourses to re-education see change in education happening as a result of internal characteristics, where individual success is accredited to hard work and perseverance. Therefore, successful students are constructed as "resilient and hardworking," while teachers and principals who are successful at "closing the gap" are revered. Researchers and policy makers think about how their mindsets and skills can be transferred and applied to all teachers and leaders. On the other end of the spectrum, Transformative discourses account for systemic imbalances in power and privilege in conceptualizing "success" and "failure" with regards to students, teachers, and leaders.

The use of resilience assessments for students in grades 4-9 in the MSIC Program was framed from strength-based perspectives and the questions, to some degree, assess: identity affirmation, feelings of belonging in school, perceived notions of ability, student perceptions about whether their voices are valued, and long-term engagement that assesses whether students feel that education will serve them in their future. While this assessment challenges traditional notions of individual resilience, and while students in MSIC schools generally score higher on resiliency tests than students in non-MSIC schools, there was limited evidence that these assessments were being used in the program to support student achievement, well-being, and experience. In describing frustration with how the resiliency is conceptualized, one participant noted:

> These students are more resilient than other students. It is not a gap that needs to be filled. It's their strength. A huge strength. These students don't need more resilience or more grit. They need a fair chance. They need schools that are going to treat them fairly and that will keep them safe, and educators that care about them and see their potential. They need to learn how to navigate a world that may not see their gifts and may not care about their rights or well-being. They need to learn how to see and act on racism and classism directed towards them and their families.

Furthermore, there was very little exploration into how families and communities influenced these increased scores, which is a marked difference from participant responses when explaining perceived "deficits" in achievement and engagement.

The most notable tension between the discourses was the MSIC Units. The MSIC Units were described as tools that empower students to be agents of change. Nine of 15 participants described the MSIC Units as excellent tools to support educators in improving their teaching and learning practice with regards to current best practices in literacy, numeracy, and social justice. Six of the 15 participants noted that the units positively reflected different lived experiences because of its focus on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), however four of 15 participants stated that the version of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy presented promoted simple acts of benevolence, limited notions of civic engagement, and required students to be agents of change without an adequate deconstruction of larger socio-political, economic, and historic forces that resulted in inequities in the first place. One participant noted:

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

As well, without explicit deconstruction of various and intersecting forms of oppression, the units fell short in their ability to acknowledge, challenge and resist forms of injustice. Furthermore, the same units were expected to be implemented across classrooms in all 150 schools, removing the importance of local and lived experiences in informing curriculum. It should be noted that a unit template was created to encourage educators to follow a similar format in creating units that were more specific to their students, however it is uncertain how many teachers actually made use of the unit templates, and for that purpose.

Conclusion

This study highlights the need to expand and interrogate our understandings of opportunity gaps for students who are racialized and marginalized in, and by, the school system. While much of the current dis-

course on opportunity gaps speaks to differences in the material wealth of students, this study identifies some of the cultural, political, and pedagogical opportunity gaps for students and their families. Some of the participants also frame dimensions of opportunity gaps in both present and historical contexts, which is consistent with notions of the education debt that recognizes the accumulated sum of all previous deficits in education (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4). Two main discourses (Affirmative and Transformative) informed a spectrum of thinking to closing opportunity gaps across the four dimensions: redistribution, recognition, representation, and re-education.

Reforms that address redistribution and re-education gaps alone, remain largely Affirmative in nature. Access to material wealth may be shared and pedagogy may be improved upon, but without a strong focus on recognition and representation gaps that challenge both ideological discourses and socio-political structures, redistribution and re-education will almost always occur within the context of benevolence. Furthermore, without an intentional focus on how students, families, and communities are constructed and the degree to which they influence and make decisions that affect them, new forms of inequity will emerge in the distribution of material wealth and engagement with curriculum. Instead of working to improve equity within the current socio-political and economic structures, new structures and systems are required that critically analyze, critique, and respond to injustice.

This study also highlights how ideological differences in understandings of equity lead to dramatically different programs, practices, and structures in schools and school boards. Affirmative discourses can be valuable when they are short-lived and offered alongside Transformative discourses, but detrimental when they are the overarching equity discourse presented for an extended period of time. When Affirmative discourses are dominant, they may: neutralize and render invisible other approaches to equity, serve to maintain the status quo with some attempts at benevolence and social cohesion, and frame discourses of resistance as oppositional.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of critical dialogue in understanding the complexities, paradoxes, and contradictions inherent in understandings of equity. Many participants demonstrated multiple and contradictory ideological frameworks throughout the interviews, and several noted that this was a difficult interview because of the dissonance that emerged from the interview process. There were also several instances when participants described practices and initiatives as promoting Transformative discourses when they actually promoted Affirmative discourses to closing opportunity gaps. For educators and district officials, this study highlights the importance of dialogue for increased clarity and to delineate the differences between equity discourses to ensure a more comprehensive and collective vision towards transformative notions of equity. These ideological distinctions underpin systemic changes in policies, practices, and structures. Within a framework of critical awareness and critique, and with respect for context and history, paradoxes and contradictions can be explored.

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