

KEEPING IT TOGETHER:

CHALLENGES FOR INNER CITY EDUCATION IN VANCOUVER

...Part of an ongoing research project at the UBC Department of Anthropology

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Prologue

This paper builds on ongoing research by graduate students at the University of British Columbia (UBC) that began in 2002. This portion of the study addresses the effects of the current Provincial government's conservative fiscal policy on parents and educators in the inner city. The intent of this project was to gain practice in field research methods by elucidating some of the current conditions. Here, we present some of our research findings, identifying a number of areas which educators and parents identify as problematic. These findings are offered as a guide to focus further research on some of the salient issues in Vancouver's inner city schools. It is hoped that the various stakeholders in inner city education will find this research useful for understanding the diverse challenges, triumphs, strengths and weaknesses that make up the inner city education system in Vancouver today.

Research Methods—Difficulties and Reflections on Methodology

This research builds on a previous report entitled "Effects of the Wrecking Crew: Maintaining the House of Education in Vancouver's Inner-City" (Bjorgan et al. 2002), which described the state of inner city education as massive policy changes and funding cuts sweep through school systems throughout British Columbia. That report outlines

extensively the socioeconomic challenges of inner city education, and defines and describes the different stakeholders in inner city education – groups like ESL-students and families, special needs children, immigrant families, low income families and others.

This year, we strived to place emphasis on some of the individual stories that comprise the experience of inner city education today. As Connelly et al. (2003: 365) have pointed out, even if individual voices are presented in ethnographic research, “an individual is not treated as an individual as such but, rather, wears the qualities and characteristics of the group. What is said about that individual is said about the group the individual represents.” We adopted Connelly et. al’s method of “narrative inquiry” as they call it, and chose to study instead “the individual experience and its potential to contribute to the understanding multiculturalism in education” (ibid.). Using this method meant to us to avoid “producing social silences through the social sciences” (Fine in Wason-Ellam 2001:18).

Our task was to approach school administrators, teachers and parents from inner city schools and record their story based on individual experiences. Overwhelmed with multiple tasks and high workloads (discussed later), administrators and teachers simply did not have time for us. One of us tried to approach one multicultural neighbourhood assistant, who was highly recommended by parents as a valuable informant. However she

expressed the frustration of not having the time and not seeing the beneficial purpose of our study.

The number of Inner city ESL parents who actively engage in parental groups is limited. Language barriers and cultural differences are reported to be responsible for the near absence of ESL parents in PACs and other organizations. Since the lack of ESL representatives in the public sphere precluded reaching ESL parents using snowball methods, we resorted to personal networking to gain access to them and were able to contact two ESL parents for interviews. One was interviewed in person, and the other was interviewed by phone. Interviews were conducted in ESL parents' mother tongue.

The cautious attitude among these ESL parents was noticeable. They agreed to being interviewed only on the condition that the name of schools that their children attended would not be revealed under any circumstances. Even after the interviewer guaranteed that all real names would not be released for any reasons, they still hesitated to disclose the name of schools and expressed their concern of possible risk in cooperating with this research. With this attitude, it was not surprising that they never unfolded their experiences voluntarily. They answered questions in extremely brief forms, which made thick description or thorough analysis of their opinion difficult, if not impossible.

The challenges we encountered in this research illustrate a question of reliability that is related to the time scope in which it was conducted. When it comes to short-term research, the process of establishing rapport is very much restricted. As a result, the informants available for researchers are usually those who are active, who are eager to let their opinions be heard, and consequently whose voices are already in the public sphere. It is probable, therefore, that this short term research to some extent reaffirms the opinions of particular dominant, active and vocal groups of individuals. In other words, sometimes short-term research with a limited circle of informants can be used as an avenue through which the status quo is reaffirmed and consolidated: the voice of the majority becomes more in mainstream, while that of the minority becomes more marginalized. The difficulties we encountered in making contact with “real” inner city parents leave us concerned that our research findings exhibit this type of bias.

Cuts to Education

Inner city education in Vancouver has been deeply affected by widely publicized changes to provincial fiscal policy under the Liberal government. A policy agenda that emphasizes fiscal conservatism and restraint has resulted in changes to the funding formulas of not only the Ministry of Education, but also to the Ministry of Family and

Child Development (which provides extra funding for inner city schools) and the Ministry of Human Resources (which administers social assistance).

In all cases, these changes have resulted in a reduction of funds available to inner city schools and communities. Particular frustration has been expressed because “cuts” to the Ministry of Education have been framed in government rhetoric that does not acknowledge them as such (see, for example, Ministry of Education Press Releases, 2003). Rather, the Provincial government claims it has only “frozen” education spending, and that, according to its figures, per-student spending on education in British Columbia has actually risen in recent years. This explanation seems to be at odds with the claims of the parents and educators we interviewed, who pointed to the offloading of additional costs to school boards, including a teacher salary increase and infrastructure and administrative costs previously covered by the Provincial government under other funding arrangements (see, for example, Lee, 2003; BCTF, 2003).

It's Not “Just Education” In The Inner City

Inner city education, like inner city communities, reflects both an embeddedness within, and a reliance on, a complex web of government services that reach beyond the Ministry of Education. Inner city schools serve communities with a higher proportion of

people dependent on government services such as social assistance, disability, immigrant support services, and childcare subsidies. Social assistance is perhaps the most important of these services – the number of families on social assistance at most inner city schools ranges from 25% to over 80% (Administrator, 2003). Cuts to these services can thus have profoundly deleterious effects on inner city families and schools. This is because financial stresses at home are manifested by children in the school environment. Educators deal with this reality on a daily basis – a topic discussed later in this report.

In addition to the changes government services, more direct cuts to funding are forthcoming, and are of grave concern to inner city educators and parents. Inner city schools receive extra funding from both the Vancouver School Board (VSB) and the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), funds which are used to provide extra support staff, field trips, special needs services and a hot lunch program for students (VSB website, 2003). Currently these funding programs are up for review, and cuts are anticipated. While it is difficult to speculate on the extent to which these programs will be cut, some estimates range as high as fifty percent (Save Our Schools, 2003). The Ministry of Children and Family Development, for example, is considering cutting inner-city school funding in Vancouver by \$1.2 million this year and \$2.9 million next year.

Each of our interviewees – parents and educators alike – expressed concern that

planned cuts to other government departments, combined with those to education, will have devastating effects on the already fragile state of education in the inner city. One parent put it this way:

The poverty is rampant, and the schools have been able in the past to take up some this slack. Public education and the School district have always made sure that the most at risk kids can stay in school, can get the help that they need, because it is the only way out, through education (Inner city parent).

Inner City Schools Are More Than “Just Schools”

Concerns about inner city education reflect more than worries about the state of the school itself. Rather, research participants expressed a profound appreciation for the important role inner city schools play in the community. Inner city schools are perceived by community members as a “way out” of pervasive poverty. Schools also function to reinforce the unity of inner city communities and to provide crucial support services to parents. One school, for example, offers ESL programs for parents in the evening, and its neighbourhood assistants, counselors, and social workers all spend an increasing amount of their time providing community and familial support. These services include immigrant settlement, liaison, advocacy and counselling. Some of these community support services were previously provided under other government programs. Inner city

schools have, much to their credit, taken up some of the slack for services no longer offered.

What this suggests is that an analysis of the effects of “cuts” in the inner city must reach beyond a description of changes to the Ministry of Education and the Vancouver School Board. Though these institutions play a key role in the funding and administration of inner city education, inner city schools and families are deeply embedded within a complex web of government services, and the compounding effects of cuts to these programs must be considered if we are to achieve an accurate picture of the current state of inner city education. Moreover, the important role of inner city schools in providing community support must be acknowledged by policymakers, who have historically tended to view schools from an institutional rather than a community perspective.

Inner City Parents – “Bearing an Increased Burden”

In all cases, parents expressed concern that funding cuts to the education system are affecting the quality of education. The most salient concern is that the time teachers can devote to students has been reduced drastically. Parents reported that they must now “bear the burden” by devoting more and more time to instruct their children while

helping them to do their homework – teaching they feel is not being provided effectively by the education system. Anecdotally, this phenomenon has been noted by parents across the Vancouver School Board.

But shifting further responsibility to parents for the schooling of their children presents distinct challenges for inner city families that stem from the unique socio-economic demographics of inner city populations. Inner city schools serve a higher proportion of students from English as a second language (ESL) families, single parents, and parents working multiple jobs. This makes the task for parents to instruct and make up for missed knowledge in school difficult. Inner city parents expressed frustration that they often have to work two jobs to pay the bills and simply do not have the time to work with their children. Others felt that they did not have the expertise in subjects such as math and English to provide satisfactory tutelage to their children.

Wason-Ellam (2001: 7) points out that inner city parents tend to perceive school achievement in terms of its potential for economic and social advancement. Others, notably Borman (1998) have found that many parents, especially immigrant parents, also consider themselves to lack the skills necessary to actualize the potential and aspirations of their children (Borman in Wason-Ellam 2001:19). Concerns that parents would not be able to meet the educational needs of their children were a prominent theme in

discussions with inner city parents.

Inner city children seem to be placed at a disadvantage as a result of the increasing shift of educational responsibility on to parents. Language is perhaps the most important challenge that must be addressed. Research has shown that children from families who do not speak English as a native language are at a disadvantage when language barriers prevent parents from teaching their children the vocabularies, knowledge, strategies, and skills expected by teachers (ibid). The ESL parents we spoke with expressed frustration that teachers' expectations of their children were not being communicated effectively.

Cultural and language barriers to parent involvement in education were raised a number of times by both English and ESL parents alike. But it is important to note that they are recognized by school administrators and staff, who are making efforts and headway at encouraging ESL parents to take advantage of a multitude of support services offered by schools. One school, for example, has started offering tea to its Asian parents as they come to pick up their children from school, which has significantly improved dialogue. Educators understand that the key to building effective education, and to minimizing the impact of education cuts on children, lies in developing meaningful relationships with parents. This has always been a challenge in the inner city.

***Just what is an “Inner city Parent”? - Contesting Voices
and the Challenge of Representation***

A considerable difficulty we encountered in our research on inner city parents was the elusiveness of this category itself – an elusiveness we suggest both reflects and underlies the contested nature of parents views of inner city education. Interestingly, each of the parents we interviewed claimed that they were “not typical inner city parents”. Parents actively engaging in volunteerism, fundraising and advocacy for inner city education tend to be those who can afford their time and effort. Politically involved parents tend therefore to be those who are relatively more affluent, and who speak English as a first language. Despite the high number of ESL students in inner city schools, the lack of ESL parents’ presence in PACs or other organizations is noticeable.

This is especially troubling given the diversity in the inner city, which reflects a broad range of parents with different backgrounds in terms of education, occupation, social class, income levels, and ethnicity. This variation was reflected in parents’ views on education in general, and specifically on the issue of cuts to education. Capturing and representing this diversity remains an acknowledged challenge for Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), many members of which feel they are not able to speak for the majority of inner city parents who are simply not represented.

It was interesting that some native-English-speaking parents explained the non-involvement of ESL parents in cultural terms. One Euro-Canadian inner city parent commented:

If you are an ESL parent, you don't really understand language, or the culture, and you get, you know, anything to do with your child. As long as your child is doing fine, probably it's okay. But if there is any kind of issue, it's really hard to talk, to make parents understand what's going on...A lot of cultures don't dare question anything happening in the school. Just they are not comfortable to come to the school, they are not comfortable to ask questions that might be perceived as disrespectful, or any kind of criticism. It's not something that people always feel comfortable doing (Inner City Parent, 2003).

Another parent pointed to a "typical" problem with immigrant parents:

For the most part, they do not involve themselves in the political running of the school, like the parents advisory council, they are more than happy to help out with hot dog night or cultural lunch day, or whatever... Yes, sort of fundraising projects, or things that she can connect with them on. If you come from somewhere where you are not used to standing up and speaking publicly against the school or against any official, let alone, government policies, you are not going to do that now. They do not have, I would say, generally, and this may be a general...you know, they do not have an understanding of how the education system works in Canada. And if they do, they do not like it. OK, cause they think it is slack, very slack. (Inner City Parent, 2003)

Interestingly, however, this explanation did not seem to adequately explain the under-representation of ESL parents on PACs. ESL parents did not refer to cultural barriers to involvement, or a lack of understanding of the education system, so much as to

their concern that they have little in common with the political views of “gentrified” parents, whom some perceived to be representing teachers’ perspectives, rather than those of the “real inner city”. As researchers, we felt that views of this nature could be characterized as struggles over the definition of the inner city as an “imagined collectivity”.

The absence of “real” inner city parents’ voices warrants further research. A common theme in our interviews was that certain categories of people feel their voices are easily ignored when it comes to setting policy. Meeting the needs of these groups remains especially challenging given the barriers to becoming involved, both perceived and experienced.

Perhaps though, the unity provoked by drastic cuts to education is providing a catalyst to break down some of these barriers, as one parent points out:

I think as time goes on, people are becoming more aware of the situation and [ESL] parents are becoming more willing to get involved. Not just at the inner city level, but parents all over the system are horrified by what they see happening. A loss of libraries, the fundamental loss of reading materials. It is nasty. And I think you are going to find more parents involved. I think the movement is going to continue to build (Inner city parent, 2003).

Educators – Overworked and Stressed Out

Vancouver's inner city schools boast a staff of teachers, support staff, and administrators who are highly skilled and deeply committed to their work. One member of our research team (CC) had an opportunity to spend a morning at an inner city school, and was left with the distinct impression that inner city educators are truly excelling at meeting the difficult challenge of delivering education to an inner city population in today's context of under-funding. This deep dedication in inner city schools, however, does not diminish the effects and stresses that educators face as a result of policy changes emanating from the Provincial government.

As discussed earlier in this paper, we spoke with a number of inner city educators who expressed interest in our research but felt they were not able to participate due to lack of time. From our perspective as researchers, this difficulty in finding participants in itself reflects some of the stresses educators are experiencing as a result of staffing and funding cuts.

Cuts to funding have necessarily brought about a reduction in the number of teachers and support staff that inner city schools are able to support – a reduction that has not been accompanied by a decrease in student numbers or caseloads. In most schools, this has meant that administrators, teachers and support staff are performing multiple jobs,

and many staff are working full steam, devoting upwards of 60-70 hours a week, and most of their weekends, to their jobs.

School based administrators and teachers alike point out that much of their time is consumed with increased paperwork that is now required to justify the allocation of limited funds. For example, each ESL assessment now requires extensive paperwork in order to justify the extra resources required for each student. Likewise, Principals and Vice Principals feel they are spending an inordinate amount of time completing funding reports, and providing a rationale for each dollar spent. They point out that this increased administrative burden has not been accompanied by adequate staff support.

What this means is that staff burnout in the inner city has become a very difficult challenge. Administrators and teachers are being circulated in accordance with what has been referred to as a “revolving door” human resources policy. Burned out staff are frequently moved to schools outside of the inner city for periods of “stress leave”. The problem of circulating staff makes it more difficult to establish long-term relationships with other staff, with parents and with the community – relationships educators feel are particularly important in the inner city. Many educators feel that inner city schools would be better served by policymakers choosing to address the underlying causes of understaffing, rather than simply dealing with stress and burnout, which are widely

perceived to be symptoms of a much greater problem.

Alternative Sources of Funding

Cuts to education have forced schools across the Vancouver School Board to look for alternative sources of funding. Above, we discussed how many parents feel that the cuts have shifted greater responsibility for educating their children onto them. In a similar way, the cuts have also resulted in a shift toward increased reliance on parents for financing education through donations of money and volunteer fundraising time.

Our research shows that, like the shift in responsibility for educating one's child, this trend has unique implications for inner city schools, which face challenges soliciting donations from parents. This is because the communities that surround inner city schools tend to reflect lower levels of income. The result is that inner city schools are increasingly dependent on other funding sources to supplement budget shortfalls for things like playground repairs and upgrades, new textbooks, field trips and library resources – items that used to be paid for from the main school budget. One school-based administrator put this challenge succinctly:

I could have a wine and cheese in Kerrisdale [a relatively affluent Vancouver community] and people would come and write cheques for \$1,000.00. You can't do that in an inner city school. You have to look elsewhere (School-based administrator, 2003).

“Looking elsewhere” can involve seeking donations and grants from local businesses and community organizations, a trend that worries many inner city parents, teachers, and administrators. Increasingly, schools are dependent upon exclusive sponsorship and marketing agreements with companies like Coca-Cola and Starbucks to fill budgets that were previously funded with monies from the Ministry of Education and Vancouver School Board. Some inner city schools have also solicited donations from film companies, local coffee shops and church organizations.

Concerns about schools’ increasing reliance on the corporate sector for funding are coincident with and reflect broader anxieties about the intrusion of corporatism and advertising on daily life. Most of our interviewees expressed concern about permitting this influence to intrude into the school environment, which many feel should be “safe” from potentially exploitative commercial influence. Here, corporatism is viewed as undermining notions of safety and protection that are commonly associated with children and with the school environment. Indeed, the issue of alternative sources of funding is a particularly salient concern for inner city educators and parents.

Family Stress and Cuts to Social Services – Problems at School

As mentioned above, inner city schools are affected not only by cuts to education, but also, and in some ways more profoundly, by changes to other government support programs and services. One important example is social assistance. Some inner city schools in Vancouver serve populations that have as many as 80% of families on social assistance, meaning that changes to these programs have a profound effect on education programs.

Inner city educators, like many parents, are deeply affected by the Provincial Liberals' conservative social agenda. Under the current social assistance arrangement, for example, a single parent with children ages nine and 13 in Vancouver receives approximately \$1,092.00 per month (SPARC, 2003), a figure which has dropped significantly under the current Liberal government, and which seems incomprehensible to those familiar with housing and living costs in Vancouver. Other proposed changes, such as the expectation that a single parent return to work after their youngest child reaches age 3 (down from age 7), imposed time limits for welfare coverage, and the redefinition of a "disability" for which one is eligible for assistance (to make it more restrictive) are of concern (Caledon, 2002; Klein, 2003). Indeed, "inadequacies" in social assistance funding were cited consistently by educators as impacting upon inner city schools.

But “inadequate” social assistance is nothing new. Concern about levels of welfare coverage are somewhat ubiquitous, at least in recent memory. We were thus interested to learn more about how changes to social assistance were felt by parents and educators to be tangible in the inner city classroom. One school based administrator pointed out that behavioural and disciplinary incidents in the classroom and on the playground are increasingly correlated with the time of the month, with increases just prior to those days on which social assistance payments were distributed. This correlation is widely believed to reflect worsening financial stresses being experienced by families dependent on government assistance. Educators felt that dealing with behavioural incidents attributable to difficulties at home formed a considerable part of their day, and were disruptive to the classroom.

Some Concluding Thoughts

A recently published Charter for Public Education, based on public hearings across British Columbia, pointed out that education by the community “To respect, encourage and foster the learner’s role as a full participant, together with others in the educational community, in developing their own goals, learning activities and curricula” (CCPE, 2003). It is inspiring that this document places the individual learner in its center.

Multiculturalism is an abstract term, which stands for the multitude of individual cultural voices. In the past three months we have read and listened to different narratives about Vancouver inner city schools. With few exceptions, our research was unable to reach beyond the “official” voices and the voices that already have their public forums. As researchers, it is clear to us that the challenges we encountered in learning about and giving voice to inner city parents reflected the challenges that Parent Advisory Councils and educators in the inner city face on a daily basis. Likewise, the difficulties we encountered reaching educators seem to reflect the fact that the inner city education system is under considerable stress. It is clear to us that research has to focus on the individual cases and make those unheard voices speak.

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