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Local context and immigrant bureaucratic incorporation: insights from Amsterdam and New York City* 

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ABSTRACT
This article explains how bureaucratic inertia and resistance to accommodating immigrants were overcome in Amsterdam and New York City. Scholarship on ‘immigrant bureaucratic incorporation’ is based largely on research conducted in U.S. suburban and rural areas and tends to highlight the importance of bureaucrats’ professional ethos – at times amplified by inclusive state and federal policies. Building on this work, our examination of Amsterdam school policies and New York City language access policies underscores instead the importance of local political and civic context in explaining why and how bureaucracies responded to the needs of immigrant communities in these established gateway cities. While Amsterdam and New York City bureaucrats initially resisted accommodating immigrants’ needs largely due to big-government inertia, their interactions, synergies, and conflicts with other local governmental and nongovernmental actors active on immigrant issues eventually resulted in more inclusive school and language access policies and practices.

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Introduction

Growing immigrant populations have pushed questions about managing immigration-generated diversity to the top of the political agenda in both Europe and the United States. A burgeoning literature on the ‘local turn in immigration’ examines how different municipalities address the challenges and opportunities posed by increasingly diverse populations, especially now that anti-immigrant sentiment has firmed its grip on national political discourse and policy (Dekker et al. 2015; Filomeno 2017). Scholars have long studied the electoral and coalitional mechanisms of immigrants’ incorporation into local politics (e.g. Bousetta 1997; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Dahl 1961; Ireland 1994). Newer, though, is their interest in how local bureaucrats develop inclusive policies and practices that address the needs of immigrants, including undocumented immigrants (Jones-Correa 2008; Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007; Marrow 2009; Williamson 2018). Scholarship
examining this phenomenon of ‘immigrant bureaucratic incorporation’ seeks to explain why municipal agencies and local bureaucrats have acted to accommodate immigrants, who often lack political power and are excluded from the electoral process and governing coalitions.

This article explains how bureaucratic resistance to accommodating immigrants was overcome in Amsterdam and New York City, two large gateway cities where immigrant issues have long been visible and salient. Leading scholarship on immigrant bureaucratic incorporation draws heavily on research conducted in U.S. suburban and rural areas that are relatively new to dealing with immigrant issues. This work tends to highlight the importance of bureaucrats’ professional ethos – at times amplified by inclusive state and federal policies – in their decisions to support accommodation. By contrast, our examination of Amsterdam school policies and New York City language access policies underscores the importance of local political and civic context to account for the bureaucratic responsiveness to immigrant communities in these established gateway cities. Amsterdam and New York City bureaucrats initially resisted accommodating immigrants’ needs largely due to the inertia of big-government bureaucracies undergoing change (Downs 1965). However, their interactions, synergies, and conflicts with other local actors active on immigrant issues eventually resulted in more inclusive school and language access policies and practices. We thus make the case that to understand immigrant bureaucratic incorporation dynamics at the local level, scholars should pay attention not only to municipal bureaucrats’ professional ethos and the state and federal policies that shape their work but also to the governmental and nongovernmental actors in their local context.

In what follows, we first review the literature on municipal bureaucratic responsiveness to immigrant communities. After describing the study’s methods and data, we discuss how the local political and civic context – with a focus on assorted local governmental and nongovernmental actors – gave rise to accommodating school policies in Amsterdam and language access policies in New York City. The article concludes by reflecting on how the bureaucratic incorporation dynamics in these two established gateway cities can help us theorise the drivers of immigrant bureaucratic incorporation more generally.

Municipal bureaucracies and immigrant communities

With growing immigrant populations and resurgent anti-immigrant populism at the national level in Europe and the United States, scholars are increasingly examining immigrants’ incorporation into local politics and local government responses to immigrants (de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016; Garbaye 2005; Williamson 2018). Immigrants’ mobilisation and participation in local electoral politics and urban governing coalitions have long been studied (Boussetta 1997; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Dahl 1961; Ireland 1994). However, growing populations of noncitizens and undocumented immigrants have expanded the research to focus also on immigrants’ political incorporation via non-electoral mechanisms (Hochschild et al. 2013). Notably, there is growing interest in municipal bureaucrats as agents of immigrant political incorporation who strive to accommodate the needs of immigrants (including undocumented ones) – at times
without the blessing or support of legislative or judicial officials (Belabas and Gerrits 2017; Jones-Correa 2008; Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007; Marrow 2009).

Such instances of ‘immigrant bureaucratic incorporation’ have puzzled migration and urban politics scholars, who have long theorised that immigrants’ electoral participation and demographic representation precede their substantive or policy representation (e.g. Dahl 1961). In fact, established theories of immigrant and minority political incorporation – whether based on European or U.S. scholarship – rarely address the role of municipal bureaucracies. Instead, they underscore the importance of electoral politics (Dahl 1961); the timing and rapidity of immigration-induced demographic change (Hopkins 2010); class and ethno-racial inequality (Rex and Tomlinson 1979); immigrant, ethnic, and social movement organisations (Voss and Bloemraad 2011; Wong 2006); political parties (Garbaye 2005; Jones-Correa 1998); and assorted local institutional factors (Boussetta 1997; Ireland 1994). If theories do mention municipal bureaucracies or municipal bureaucrats, these tend to be portrayed as insulated agencies or harmless actors with little influence on immigrant political incorporation processes or outcomes (Dahl 1961; Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007).

Newer analyses of immigrant bureaucratic incorporation tend to draw on two larger explanatory frameworks. On the one hand, the political control, overhead democracy, or principal-agent framework theorises that municipal bureaucrats respond to different political forces, taking cues from electoral outcomes and following legislative and judicial policies (Redford 1969; Wood and Waterman 1994). Municipal bureaucrats, though not popularly elected, are nonetheless pushed to act democratically and respond to their constituents’ needs by various political principals with more direct ties to voters, including legislative and judicial officials and even nongovernmental advocacy organisations. On the other hand, the bureaucratic professionalism framework theorises that bureaucrats in fact enjoy considerable autonomy from their political principals (Lipsky 1980; Meier and O’Toole 2006). Because enacted legislation often has broad mandates and agencies have responsibilities exceeding their resources, bureaucrats’ behaviour is necessarily discretionary. They draw on their agency’s mission, rules, and customs, as well as their professional and personal values and technical expertise, to inform their priorities and make decisions.

Studies of immigrant bureaucratic incorporation show that both frameworks are relevant, though collectively they place great emphasis on bureaucratic professionalism. Briefly, the argument is that municipal bureaucrats are driven to accommodate immigrants, including undocumented ones, by strong professional norms and inclusive agency missions. However, bureaucratic behaviour appears to be more complex. For instance, bureaucrats have been shown to act at times without following any clear electoral, legislative, or judicial mandates (Jones-Correa 2008; Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007). In other instances, their work is also guided or inspired by inclusive state and federal policies and federal court decisions (Marrow 2009), in what Williamson (2020) refers to as ‘intergovernmental policy feedback’. More broadly, data shows that bureaucratic responsiveness to immigrant constituents cannot readily be explained by variation in types of government agencies, such as service and regulatory bureaucracies, or differences in partisan control of local government. Bureaucrats in municipal agencies dealing with education (Jones-Correa 2008), law enforcement (Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007), health and social services
(Marrow 2009), employment and workplace rights (Gleeson 2012), and library services (Williams 2015) have all responded positively to immigrants in both liberal and more conservative municipal settings (Gleeson 2012; Jones-Correa 2008; Williamson 2018).

Many of these findings draw on research conducted in U.S. suburban and rural areas. Lewis and Ramakrishnan (2007), for example, examine language access policies in police departments in suburban and small California communities. Jones-Correa (2008) discusses how schools in two suburban communities ringing Washington, D.C., have reacted to students’ increasing ethnic and racial diversity. And Marrow (2009) analyzes how different service and regulatory government agencies in two rural North Carolina communities address the needs of foreign- and native-born Latinos. Many U.S. suburban and rural communities are relatively new to receiving large numbers of immigrants, and overall these ‘new immigrant destinations’ provide a challenging context for immigrants’ political incorporation (Marrow 2005). These newcomers include many poor and/or undocumented immigrants of colour. The vast majority of local legislative officials have backgrounds different from their new constituents, many without much experience engaging in immigrant issues or the desire to be inclusive. New destinations also tend to be places with few community organisations that advocate for immigrants, their political climate can be anti-immigrant, and local media often portray immigrants negatively (Brown, Jones, and Becker 2018; Marrow 2009; Winders 2012).

Thus, key insights about the dynamics of immigrant bureaucratic incorporation are based on research conducted in particular U.S. municipal contexts, namely those where local political controls that could push or incentivise local bureaucracies to accommodate immigrants – whether exerted by local elected officials, local party or community organisations, local media, or local public opinion – are weak or absent. Indeed, given this context, it is surprising that bureaucracies in rural and suburban areas are accommodating immigrants at all, which explains why scholars have been especially drawn to these cases. Largely, they point to proactive and inclusive municipal bureaucratic behaviour as the driver of accommodation, emphasising the role of professional ethos, which at times is amplified by inclusive state and federal policies and federal court rulings. However, do these findings also hold for bureaucrats operating in other local contexts?

We are particularly interested in how the government bureaucracies of established gateway cities address immigrants’ needs. Such cities provide notably different and arguably more dynamic and diverse contexts in which municipal bureaucrats operate alongside a large number of other municipal actors active on different immigrant issues. These cities have long histories of immigration, relatively larger immigrant populations (Singer 2004), and notable infrastructures of immigrant advocacy organisations (Hung 2007; Michon and Vermeulen 2013). Their local legislators tend to be more demographically diverse (de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016), and many are activated on immigrant issues, especially in the current national context of rising anti-immigrant populism (de Graauw 2018, 2021; Kaufmann and Strebel 2020; NAE Cities Index 2018). Also, residents of established gateway cities tend to have more positive opinions about immigration (Fennelly and Federico 2008; Walker and Leitner 2011). In all, there are likely stronger accommodative pressures from these assorted local political and community actors on municipal bureaucrats in established gateway cities than in newer immigrant
destinations. Such local pressures, in combination with bureaucrats’ professional ethos and amplifying intergovernmental policy feedbacks, could indicate that government bureaucrats of established gateway cities are more accommodative of immigrants than their suburban and rural peers.

However, the picture is more complicated. Established gateway cities are much larger municipalities than the suburbs and rural areas highlighted in leading scholarship on immigrant bureaucratic incorporation. As such, their government bureaucracies are larger, more complex, and more hierarchical (Judge, Stoker, and Wolman 1995), which increases the likelihood of bureaucratic inertia, presents more opportunities for bureaucratic discretion, and insulates bureaucrats from political pressures. In this context, therefore, the government bureaucrats of established gateway cities could actually be less accommodating of immigrants than their suburban and rural peers. Indeed, in our investigation of immigrant bureaucratic incorporation dynamics in Amsterdam and New York City – cities with generally immigrant-friendly local contexts – we observed notable bureaucratic resistance to accommodating immigrants. This resistance was rooted not so much in normative opposition to immigrants but rather in big-government inertia – related to, for example, prioritising and funding new initiatives, retraining or hiring staff, and changing how large government agencies work. Consequently, we chose to focus on how this bureaucratic resistance was eventually overcome.

To better understand instances of immigrant bureaucratic incorporation in established gateway cities, it is important to account also for the many local political and community stakeholders in bureaucrats’ environment who champion immigrants and exert pressure on bureaucrats. Because immigrant issues have long been at the forefront in established gateway cities, municipal bureaucracies in these cities are necessarily embedded in local political and community dynamics around immigration and programmes benefitting immigrant communities. These municipal bureaucrats are therefore best thought of as strategic and adaptive political actors in their own right. To get things done, they draw on their professional norms, personal values, and agency expertise and resources, while also navigating intergovernmental policy feedbacks and the many active political and community stakeholders in the local system.

Methods and data

This article investigates immigrant bureaucratic incorporation dynamics in two established gateway cities, with a focus on school policies in Amsterdam and language access policies in New York City. Amsterdam and New York City allow us to analyze how local political and civic context – with a focus on assorted local governmental and nongovernmental actors – affects how municipal bureaucrats address immigrants’ needs and interests. Both cities have long histories of immigration, large current immigrant populations, and many local governmental and nongovernmental actors who are active on immigrant issues. We opted to study bureaucratic incorporation dynamics in two different policy areas of great practical importance to immigrants – school and language access policies – to analyze how different local contextual factors shape municipal bureaucratic behaviours and outcomes. As such, we see Amsterdam and New York City as exploratory, rather than comparative, cases that shed light on the importance of local political and civic context in shaping local bureaucratic responses to immigrants.
These initial cases can guide future research on immigrant bureaucratic incorporation in other established gateway cities and also in other policy domains of great importance to immigrants, including housing and social services (Garbaye 2005).

Amsterdam and New York City are different in several key respects from the suburban and rural areas highlighted in leading scholarship on immigrant bureaucratic incorporation. First, they are long-established gateway cities with large populations of immigrant-origin residents, i.e. first- and second-generation immigrants. Amsterdam is the largest city in the Netherlands with 863,000 residents, of whom 32% are foreign-born and 54% are of immigrant origin; over 60% of Amsterdam’s 104,000 school-age children between the ages of four and eighteen are of immigrant origin (OIS 2019a). New York City is the largest city in the United States with 8.4 million residents, of whom 37% were born abroad and nearly 60% are of immigrant origin. New York City has significant language diversity: collectively, city residents speak more than 200 languages. Approximately half of the city’s foreign born aged five and over lack fluency in English (MOIA 2020).

Second, immigrants have received a warmer institutional welcome in Amsterdam and New York City than in other areas, even as national political leaders in the Netherlands and the United States have grown more critical of – if not downright opposed to – immigrants in recent years. Both are liberal cities with left-leaning governments supportive of immigrant communities (Rath et al. 2014). In each, immigrant-origin communities have also attained considerable levels of political representation, both in the legislative and administrative branches of government (de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016). In Amsterdam, immigrant-origin politicians have captured between 16 and 35% of the forty-five city council seats since the late 1990s, while 31% of the fifty-one New York City council members were of immigrant origin in 2018. Furthermore, in 2019, about 25% of Amsterdam’s 15,000 civil servants were of non-Western immigrant backgrounds (Diversiteitindex Overheidssectoren 2019), while foreign-born individuals aged sixteen and over made up 33% of New York City’s municipal workforce in 2017.1

Third, Amsterdam and New York City have much thicker infrastructures of immigrant-serving organisations than most suburban and rural areas. In Amsterdam, several hundred immigrant organisations have been founded since the early 1970s (Michon and Vermeulen 2013), many with a religious character. The city is also home to several nongovernmental schools that focus on particular immigrant-origin or religious communities, including eleven Islamic schools, two Jewish schools, and one Hindu school. A New York City directory lists more than 250 immigrant organisations (MOIA 2007). They include politically savvy and powerful organisations like the New York Immigration Coalition and Make the Road New York that have long advocated around immigrant issues, including language access (de Graauw 2015). These pro-immigrant local governmental and nongovernmental actors inform key insights about immigrant bureaucratic incorporation dynamics.

While Amsterdam and New York City have notable demographic, political, and civic similarities that set them apart from suburban and rural areas, their local contexts also differ in ways that may influence how municipal bureaucrats address immigrant issues: notably, in population and government size. New York City’s population of 8.4 million is roughly ten times larger than that of Amsterdam, and New York City’s municipal bureaucracy of about 400,000 workers is roughly twenty-five times larger than Amsterdam’s. They also differ in the size and origins of their immigrant populations.
Amsterdam is home to about 277,000 foreign born, including about 10,000 undocumented immigrants, mostly from Muslim-dominant Morocco and Turkey, as well as the former Dutch colony of Surinam (OIS 2019a). New York City counts 3.2 million foreign born with very diverse national origins, including an estimated 540,000 undocumented immigrants (MOIA 2020). The largest group, composing just 14% of all foreign born, comes from the Dominican Republic, followed by China (11%), Mexico (5%), and Jamaica (5%). Finally, there are differences in local government structure. Amsterdam’s mayor, for example, is appointed by the Dutch national government, while New York City’s mayor is popularly elected by local voters. Additionally, Amsterdam’s city councilors are elected at-large, while New York City’s council members each represent a district of about 160,000 residents.

In analyzing how Amsterdam schools have responded to the needs and interests of immigrant-origin students, we draw on four semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2020, with high-level school and city officials who since 2005 have been directly involved with initiatives to make Amsterdam primary and high schools more responsive to their rapidly diversifying student populations. Interviews focused on how these officials thought Amsterdam schools and local politics dealt with changing student demographics, the challenges these changes posed for schools, and the interactions of school boards, school managers, and school teachers with local party organisations, parent organisations, and other local actors activated on school and immigrant issues. Additionally, we draw on newspaper reports in local and national media, assorted policy reports, local party platforms published during municipal elections, and prior research on Amsterdam schools (Kleijwegt 2009, 2014), including studies on how immigrant-origin children have fared in them (Crul and Heering 2008; Karsten et al. 2006; Kuyenhoven and Boterman 2020; Leeman 2008). This article builds on these existing studies by focusing on key explanatory factors shaping how the Amsterdam school bureaucracy responded to immigrant-origin students.

To analyze how New York City agencies have dealt with language access issues for limited English proficient individuals, we draw on twenty-two semi-structured interviews, conducted between 2010 and 2019, with two sets of respondents who were directly involved with initiatives to make city agencies and public services multilingual: six interviews with staff from local immigrant organisations and sixteen interviews with elected and appointed officials and other local government employees. We queried staff from community organisations about their motivations to advocate for local language access initiatives, their advocacy strategies, and the challenges they faced along the way. Interviews with city officials focused on how they thought about language access in city government and what they had done to improve it. We complement the interview data with newspaper reports in local and national media, court records, city council legislative files, documentary evidence from immigrant organisations, and prior scholarship on language access in New York City and San Francisco (de Graauw 2015).

**Improving low-performing, immigrant-dense schools in Amsterdam**

Since the 1980s, many primary and high schools in Amsterdam rapidly diversified due to immigration – notably from Turkey, Morocco, and Surinam – and subsequent White flight. Immigrant-origin students, particularly those of low socio-economic status,
have since struggled: they are segregated into low-performing schools, overrepresented in low-level vocational tracks, and have high dropout levels, making school improvement an important topic in Amsterdam politics (Crul and Heering 2008; Karsten et al. 2006; Leeman 2008; Shewbridge et al. 2010). To address the growing problem of low-performing, immigrant-dense schools, Amsterdam city officials created specific programmes – notably the 2008 ‘Quality Approach Primary Education Amsterdam’ (QAPEA, ‘Kwaliteitsaanpak Basisonderwijs Amsterdam’) and the 2012 ‘Quality Incentive for Secondary Education’ (QISE, ‘Kwaliteitsimpuls Voortgezet Onderwijs Amsterdam’) initiatives. In the end, while school segregation remains a problem in Amsterdam (Kuyenhoven and Boterman 2020), these programmes have helped to make city schools more responsive to the needs of immigrant-origin students, for example by improving teacher cultural sensitivity and teacher communication with immigrant-origin parents (OIS 2018, 7).

The school improvement process, however, was not easy or straightforward. While most Amsterdam school managers and teachers cared about immigrant-origin students, the rapid accumulation of problems and lack of resources led to hesitation in accepting and implementing immigrant-inclusive school policies and practices. In fact, overcoming this inertia required external political and community pressure. Thus, to understand why and how these schools eventually became more responsive to immigrant-origin students, it is important to consider the local context in which they operate, notably the historic independence of Amsterdam schools, the reluctance and even resistance of some school managers and teachers to implement externally mandated programmes, and the different political and community actors pushing schools to become more responsive to immigrant-origin students. To show how this process unfolded in Amsterdam in the mid-2000s, we first discuss how heavy-handed local party politics addressed school manager resistance to the QAPEA and QISE programmes. Second, we discuss how political and community pressures help explain why the management of one immigrant-dense high school decided to replace its teachers in an effort to become more responsive to its immigrant-origin students.

Antagonising school independence: city-mandated school policies frustrate school managers

The number of low-performing Amsterdam primary schools reached alarming levels in the early 2000s, when more than 15% of schools were designated as ‘weak’ or ‘very weak’ (MOCW 2010). In 2008, after publicly acknowledging this crisis, Amsterdam city officials created the QAPEA programme in line with similar national policies targeting primary schools. The QISE programme, a comparable initiative for Amsterdam high schools, followed in 2012. These programmes were mandatory for all weak city schools, requiring that they develop an improvement plan including specific goals, activities, and evaluation criteria to be implemented by teachers who would undergo new training addressing their curriculum, teaching, and professional ethos (Emmelot et al. 2015). The programmes monitored all aspects of weak schools – from management to teachers – and ran until 2014 for an annual cost of more than €3.5 million (on a total annual city school budget of €155 million). These notable expenditures were approved in the middle of an economic crisis that forced the city to make drastic budget cuts elsewhere (Binnenlands Bestuur 2009).
Local school officials reacted with caution to these programmes for several reasons, first and foremost because QAPEA and QISE called on city officials to interfere directly in school affairs. This was controversial given that Dutch schools, even public ones, enjoy high levels of constitutional independence and are accountable only to the Dutch Ministry of Education. Dutch schools, including those in Amsterdam, determine their own educational programmes and personnel policy, with municipal governments officially responsible only for constructing and managing school buildings. Another reason for skepticism was the strict nature and tone of the QAPEA and QISE programmes, which frustrated many school managers and teachers. ‘In the [19]90s, Amsterdam authorities privatised all public schools’, commented a former director of one of Amsterdam’s largest school organisations responsible for dozens of schools and thousands of students.3 ‘By 2008’, he added, ‘while still in the process of privatisation, city officials suddenly argued: ‘There are too many weak schools in Amsterdam, and the schools and teachers are to blame’. That was unfair’.4 Conceding that ‘educational improvement in immigrant-dense schools was definitely needed’, he argued that teachers needed to be involved in this ‘cultural change’ and that it could not ‘simply be imposed in a top-down manner’.5

Ludewijk Asscher, at the time Amsterdam’s Deputy Mayor of Finance, Education, and Youth Policy affiliated with the Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA, the Labor Party), headed the development and implementation of QAPEA and QISE. The PvdA, the social-democratic party historically supported by the working class, has long viewed education as a way to create equal opportunities in an increasingly stratified society (Becker et al. 1998). When weak schools became a topic of tense public debate in Amsterdam politics, Asscher and his PvdA colleagues embraced QAPEA and QISE as ways to realise their vision of a more equalitarian society inclusive of Amsterdam’s disadvantaged immigrant communities. One of the senior civil servants who worked closely with Asscher in developing QAPEA remembers his strong commitment to the programme: ‘[Asscher] felt it was unacceptable that the schools of immigrant-origin students were weak, whereas schools in other neighborhoods didn’t suffer the same problems. This pushed him to force schools to join his programmes, because he felt that otherwise change would happen too slowly’.6

Asscher and the PvdA succeeded in pushing QAPEA and QISE through over the concerns and initial reservations of school officials because they were by far the largest party in Amsterdam politics. With the PvdA leading the Amsterdam city council, Asscher was the city’s most influential elected politician at the time, exceeding the stature of even the city’s appointed mayor. One respondent commented that Asscher and his PvdA colleagues sought to govern by mandate, proceeding in a way that ‘completely [ignored] the law and existing agreements’.7 Given the constitutional autonomy of Amsterdam schools, however, Asscher felt forced – according to one of his former senior advisers – to resort to unorthodox tactics to get weak schools to accept and implement his programmes. He engaged in the blatant ‘naming and shaming’ of specific weak schools and their responsible managers in the local media.8 While this strategy resulted in even more frustration, anger, and resistance among school managers, eventually they begrudgingly accepted the need to comply with QAPEA and QISE mandates to improve their schools and make them more responsive to their growing immigrant-origin student populations.9
The process of change in Amsterdam schools described here cannot readily be explained by bureaucratic ethos or incentivizing policies, explanatory factors emphasised in leading scholarship on immigrant bureaucratic incorporation. In fact, here local inclusive policies initially antagonised school officials, who generally were understanding of the plight of their immigrant-origin students. Eventually, school officials gave in to the demands of powerful PvdA officials, but only after considerable negotiation and contestation. Next, we zero in on Calvijn College – an emblematic weak high school in an immigrant-dense Amsterdam neighbourhood – to show that it also took notable political and community pressure for school management to hire new teachers who could address the needs of their rapidly diversifying student population.

**Implementing immigrant-inclusive programmes at Calvijn College**

Calvijn College used to be a Protestant high school for college-bound students from White working- and lower-middle-class families. In the late 1980s, the school’s Slotervaart neighbourhood underwent rapid demographic changes, with its student body changing accordingly. By 2015, almost all Calvijn students had an immigrant background, and over 90% of them were Muslim (Niemantsverdriet and Remie 2019). The school also moved away from offering a pre-university curriculum to focus only on vocational training. With these changes, Calvijn developed a bad reputation: it struggled with security issues (such as violence and police presence on school grounds), high truancy and dropout levels, major deferred facilities maintenance, uninspired teachers, and lack of parental involvement. The parents of most Calvijn students enjoyed little or no formal education, lacked Dutch language proficiency, and struggled with many social and economic problems. According to our respondents, this made it challenging for them to address their children’s school issues.10

In 2006, local activists and prominent PvdA members organised a public meeting, attended by the mayor, to address the highly problematic situation at Calvijn and discuss possible solutions. In a packed school auditorium, the district city mayor, senior civil servants, school management, teachers, students, parents, and community advocates discussed different pressing topics, including school security and the school building’s unsanitary and dilapidated state.11 This meeting was the direct result of community pressure and was led by Felix Rottenberg, a former PvdA leader, who used firm language to publicly shame the school board for letting the situation get out of control (Kleijwegt 2009). The pressure worked, as the city subsequently invested €2.5 million in Calvijn, with money coming partly from QISE’s budget. This funding was used for a new school building, as well as individual homework counselling, truancy prevention programmes, and teacher home visits to encourage parent participation in school affairs (Kleijwegt 2014).

Ten years later, Calvijn had made a remarkable turnaround and boasted near perfect graduation rates, successes due partly to these initial investments demanded by the community, PvdA leaders, and local media (Hogewind and El Jaouhari 2017). These outside pressures, however, also set in motion additional independent school management interventions that resulted in notable changes in Calvijn’s faculty. The school’s rapidly changing demographics created tensions between the majority immigrant-origin students and long-time teachers who had been trained to work with a less diverse, mostly college-
bound student population. A former Calvijn principal recalls that ‘the majority of the existing older White teachers felt collectively depressed about the loss of White students and blamed the growing immigrant-origin student population for the school’s problems’. Overall, these teachers lacked the cultural sensitivity and appropriate teaching methods to engage the school’s diversified vocational student population. Instead of taking steps to accommodate students, they created new rules for them, meted out harsher punishments (including school suspensions) for students they perceived as difficult, and isolated problem students in separate classes. This resulted in more violence on school grounds and more distrust between teachers and immigrant-origin students (Hogewind and El Jaouhari 2017). As a result, the school management realised that replacing certain teachers was necessary to make the school more responsive to its immigrant-origin students.

Eventually, Calvijn’s school management – consisting of the principal and the board of the umbrella organisation responsible for Calvijn and many other schools in the city – decided to transfer a number of its older teachers to other schools with fewer immigrant-origin students, a process that took several years. In their stead, new teachers were hired, many of them of Moroccan descent and identifying as Muslim. Unlike the prior teachers, these newcomers understood ‘what is on students’ minds’, the former school principal explained, and ‘how to best guide students’ behaviour’. While only a few teachers had immigrant backgrounds before the 2006 public meeting that spurred the bureaucratic changes at Calvijn, less than a decade later more than half of the school’s teachers had such backgrounds (Kleijwegt 2014). Consequently, the school became more empathetic and welcoming to its majority Muslim students. Now, for example, it closes during major Islamic holidays, outdoor school camps are organised close to Amsterdam so that girls can sleep at home between camp days, and it has a quiet room where students can pray (Kleijwegt 2014; Niemantsverdriet and Remie 2019).

Similar shifts have also occurred at other immigrant-dense schools in Amsterdam. In 2005, prior to school practices becoming a heated local political issue, only 5% of Amsterdam school teachers had an immigrant background (Boes and Müter 2006). In 2019, after notable community and political pressure was exerted on schools to become more inclusive and responsive, this number rose to 20% (Diversiteitsindex Overheidsssectoren 2019). According to a recent report by the city of Amsterdam, the proportion of immigrant-origin teachers in primary and secondary Amsterdam schools is strongly related to the number of immigrant-origin students, and for some schools over 50% of their teachers are now of immigrant origin (OIS 2019b). Thus a significant part of the Amsterdam teacher corps has been replaced by new teachers coming from, and having knowledge of, the city’s different immigrant-origin communities. These changes resulted not only from bureaucratic ethos and inclusive policies but also from sustained community and political pressure on the schools to change how they engage their immigrant-origin students.

Creating multilingual city agencies in New York City

Our New York City case shifts focus from cultural to linguistic hurdles in immigrant integration. Only about half of New York City’s three million foreign born aged five and over speak English ‘very well’, while 94% of the native born do (U.S. Census
Bureau 2018). Lack of English proficiency makes it difficult for individuals to access government information and public services, while also creating barriers to educational and employment opportunities (López and Estrada 2007). Today, as a result of several legislative and executive city policies – notably Local Law 73 (2003), Chancellor’s Regulation A-663 (2006), Executive Order 120 (2008), and Local Law 30 (2017) – public-facing city agencies are required to offer information and services in ten non-English languages: Spanish, Russian, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Bengali, Haitian Creole, Korean, Arabic, French, Urdu, and Polish. Taken together, these city language policies make it easier for immigrant-origin residents to access local government information and services in a non-English language they understand, thereby facilitating their civic inclusion.

While most city officials are friendly towards immigrants and supported the idea of a polyglot bureaucracy, it still required two decades of advocacy by community organisations to increase language access in city government (de Graauw 2015). There were several reasons for this delay. Becoming language accessible required resources, which many city agencies either did not have or did not want to make available. Also, the sheer size of city government, with approximately 400,000 municipal workers, created notable bureaucratic hurdles in implementing and institutionalising language access initiatives that require ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 1980) to change how they work. Activists with community organisations thus had to overcome notable resource constraints and policy inertia, as well as power struggles between the city council and the mayor, in order to remove language barriers in city government services. These organisations, which have deep roots in the city’s immigrant communities, identified language discrimination as a widespread problem, advocated for new local-level language access policies, and monitored their implementation and enforcement. Finally, community activists worked with a range of legislative and administrative city officials – at times collaboratively and confrontationally – to ensure that New York City’s bureaucracy would become more accessible to limited English proficient (LEP) residents.

**Documenting language discrimination and putting pressure on city officials**

Community advocates have long argued that it is the government’s responsibility to make sure that government information and public services are language accessible. By the late 1990s, when advocates started organising around language access issues in New York City, certain city agencies – most notably the city’s public hospitals – were already making their information and services available in different languages, often in response to federal civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination on the ground of race, colour, or national origin in programmes and activities receiving federal financial assistance. However, many other city agencies – including the Human Resources Administration (HRA), which administers a range of welfare benefits – were not. In 1997, Make the Road by Walking (now Make the Road New York, MRNY) – a local grassroots organisation of low-income Latinos and African Americans – began documenting language discrimination at city welfare offices. They found that among welfare recipients in Brooklyn’s immigrant-dense Bushwick neighbourhood, 65% of Spanish-speaking respondents reported problems communicating with HRA case workers, and 55% of all respondents reported feeling frustrated by how they were treated at city welfare centres (MRW 1999).
Clearly, federal civil rights legislation alone did not incentivise city agencies to address their immigrant clients’ language needs.

In 1999, MRNY used their data to put top-down pressure on the city council, the mayor, and city agencies to improve language access in city government. Along with three other organisations – the New York Immigration Coalition, Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, and New York Legal Assistance Corporation – MRNY filed a civil rights complaint with the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, which found that HRA (and equivalent state agencies) had violated federal civil rights legislation. Additionally, in 2001, advocates won a federal class action suit, *Ramirez v. Giuliani*, about the city’s (and state’s) failure to provide interpreter services and translated documents to nearly 470,000 LEP food stamp applicants and recipients in the city. While community organisations engaged in other strategies – including community organising, media advocacy, and electoral pressure on council members seeking to attract the city’s growing immigrant electorate – the 2001 court decree proved crucial in spurring change. ‘City agencies will generally do things’, the Director of Immigrant Services at the city’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) commented, ‘because of litigation, or the potential of litigation’.

**Advocating for new language access policies from the city council and the mayor**

Community advocacy paid its first dividends in 2003, when the New York City council adopted Local Law 73. This law required HRA to provide free interpretation services (regardless of the language) and to translate application forms and key notices into Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. It also created language access reporting requirements for three other city safety net agencies: ACS, the Department of Homeless Services, and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. While Local Law 73 provided a strong mandate for HRA in particular, it also ended up being ‘very prescriptive and regimented as far as elements of compliance’, according to the Deputy Director of the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA). HRA was not necessarily resistant to the new law, she explained, but as a huge city agency with over 14,000 employees and many service locations throughout the city, it was put in a ‘very difficult position’ to comply on short notice. Indeed, HRA continued to struggle with compliance even after Local Law 73 had been in effect for several years, with advocates documenting many instances of LEP individuals having trouble accessing HRA services (Taylor and Abichandani 2007).

Local Law 73, furthermore, only really affected HRA, and before long community advocates sought to expand language access requirements to other city agencies. Mini-coalitions of community organisations separately targeted the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the Police Department, and ACS, at the same time urging city council leadership to introduce more extensive language access legislation (de Graauw 2015). Mayor Bloomberg, however, feared that new city council legislation would unduly constrain the city bureaucracy under his control. Similarly realizing that Local Law 73’s prescriptive mandates were ‘not the best approach for dealing with language access in city services’, MOIA created an interagency taskforce on language access in 2005. Initially, about twenty agencies participated, but, sensing that
changes were coming, more than ten followed suit. At quarterly taskforce meetings, agencies learned about best practices, and, with time and additional coaching from MOIA, they articulated an interest in crafting a common policy that would guide their language access practices. According to MOIA’s Deputy Director, it was the combination of ‘external pressure from community groups and internal pressure from the taskforce’ for improved language access that laid the groundwork for Executive Order 120.21

Having largely remained on the sidelines, Mayor Bloomberg entered the fray in 2008 by issuing Executive Order 120, directing all public-facing city agencies to offer translation and interpretation in at least the top six languages spoken in the city (i.e. Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Italian, and Haitian Creole). Executive Order 120, according to the MOIA Deputy Director, was ‘more fluid and flexible’ than Local Law 73, instructing city agencies to take ‘reasonable measures’ to provide for language access and create a language access plan.22 Many city agencies appeared receptive to the order. For example, the Director of Immigrant Services at ACS – who had been trying to develop the agency’s language access initiatives since 2005 – explained that ‘the order gave me more clout to get things done’.23 Others, including the New York City Department of Education, mentioned that Executive Order 120 allowed them to tap into the technical assistance and support from the Mayor’s Office of Operations (MOO) and MOIA – the two agencies responsible for overseeing the order’s implementation – to improve their existing language access work.24 In this case, the mayor’s order prompted city bureaucrats to act more inclusively, a dynamic similar to the intergovernmental policy feedbacks that motivated the inclusive actions of some rural bureaucrats analyzed by Marrow (2009).

Certain city agencies did resist the order, however, primarily because, according to one MOO staff member, it was an ‘unfunded mandate’.25 Mayor Bloomberg’s order did not come with new funding, leaving city agencies to figure out how to use their existing budgets to cover the cost of expensive new language access services. ‘Now that the budget situation is tough’, the staff member added, ‘agencies that didn’t previously understand that adequate customer service includes language access’ faced difficult financial decisions. However, administrators with a strong appetite for improving language access were creative in finding the needed resources. ACS, for example, received financial support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to fund a staff position dedicated to departmental language access initiatives.26 Similarly, MOO received philanthropic support for a staff position to create a multilingual web portal where city agencies and community organisations could find translated documents commonly used by LEP city residents.27 This outside funding was only temporary but gave city agencies time to figure out how to incorporate the costs of language access into their own budgets moving forward.

**Monitoring implementation and keeping language access practices demographically relevant**

Besides pressuring the city council and mayor to create new language access policies, community organisations also expended great efforts on monitoring how city agencies actually implemented them. Where possible, community advocates used collaborative strategies. For example, they shared concrete recommendations for improved language
access practices from their own participatory research on the topic (e.g. MRNY and NYIC 2010; Taylor and Abichandani 2007). In some instances, community advocates have worked directly with city agencies to implement these recommendations together. In others, they have worked with and through MOO and MOIA to offer technical assistance to city agencies, helping them identify which forms needed translation most urgently and pushing them to pay more attention to front-line worker training. These collaborations have paid off. A review of agencies’ annual language access plans suggests that over time, they have improved their language accessibility as measured by the number of bilingual staff they employ, the frequency of telephonic and on-site interpretation, and the number of documents they translate.

At other times, however, community advocates have had to use confrontational tactics to force agency compliance with existing language access mandates. ‘I’m not one of those lawyers that think litigation is the answer to everything’, a Legal Services of New York City (LSNYC) advocate commented, ‘but we have tried to collaborate with HRA, and they’re at the level where they denied the accuracy of our data that clearly shows they’ve failed to comply with Local Law 73’. In 2009, LSNYC filed an unsuccessful lawsuit, Boureima et al. v. NYC Human Resources Administration et al., against HRA on behalf of six LEP clients. However, another one of their court cases in 2013 (Padilla v. City of New York) was more successful, motivating the New York City Police Department in 2017 to collaborate with LSNYC in developing and implementing new language access policies to facilitate communication with LEP individuals (NYPD News 2017). Similarly, other community organisations have used litigation to pressure city agencies, including the Board of Elections, to abide by existing federal, state, and local language access laws.

Community advocacy efforts to improve language access in New York City and keep bureaucratic inertia at bay are ongoing, requiring activists to engage regularly with the city council, the mayor’s office, and various city agencies. When, in 2016, Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito showed interest in codifying Executive Order 120 into city law, activists embraced the opportunity to advocate for adding Arabic, French, Urdu, and Polish – languages spoken by new or growing immigrant groups in the city – to the list of covered languages. Speaker Mark-Viverito was initially not interested in expanding language access provisions. However, President Trump’s January 2017 policy banning foreign nationals from certain Muslim-dominant countries from entering the United States convinced her and other city officials to guarantee language access to the city’s African and Arab immigrants targeted by this ban. City council thus approved Local Law 30 in February 2017. This new law also created an Office of Language Services Coordinator within MOO, and it gives MOO and MOIA more powers to ensure that public-facing city agencies provide information and services in the now-required ten non-English languages. Community advocates also continue to monitor the implementation of Local Law 30.

Conclusion

The decisions and initiatives of municipal agencies and local bureaucrats are crucial in addressing the needs and interests of immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, who are often shut out of the local electoral process and excluded from urban governing
coalitions. Scholarship examining the phenomenon of ‘immigrant bureaucratic incorporation’ has sought to explain why municipal agencies and local bureaucrats have accommodated these politically marginalised immigrants (Jones-Correa 2008; Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007; Marrow 2009). Leading scholarship on this topic, mostly based on case studies in U.S. suburbs and rural areas, points to bureaucrats’ professional ethos, at times amplified by inclusive state and federal policies and court rulings, as key drivers of such bureaucratic accommodation.

Our study of municipal bureaucracies in established gateway cities adds to this scholarship by highlighting the relevance of local political and civic context in immigrant bureaucratic incorporation. Compared to earlier scholarship situated in suburban and rural areas, the established gateway cities we studied offer a very different local context in which municipal bureaucrats operate. These cities have long histories of immigration, relatively larger immigrant populations, and established infrastructures of community organisations that advocate for immigrants. Their local legislators tend to be more demographically diverse, with many activated on immigrant issues through the mobilisation of immigrant communities. Also, residents of established gateway cities tend to have more positive opinions about immigration. In all, municipal bureaucrats in established gateway cities are more likely to encounter local political and community actors who will push them to accommodate the unique needs and interests of immigrants.

Indeed, our analysis of incorporation dynamics in Amsterdam and New York City shows that this outside political and community pressure was key to overcoming bureaucratic reluctance to implement policies and initiatives addressing immigrants’ specific needs. We found that this resistance stemmed not so much from anti-immigrant sentiment – although we did find traces of that in the Amsterdam case – as from big-government inertia: bureaucrats articulating different priorities, claiming insufficient funding for new initiatives, defending their autonomy against outside mandates, or lacking the training to deal with immigrants appropriately. In the case of one Amsterdam high school, this reluctance to change was so constraining that school management – in response to external political and community pressure – opted to replace many of its older White teachers with a new crop of diverse teachers more responsive to its growing population of immigrant-origin students.

We explain these outcomes – namely the resistance to inclusive bureaucratic change and external political and community pressures exerted to overcome it – by the fact that these established gateways cities have larger, more hierarchical, and more complex municipal bureaucracies than the suburban or rural settings from other case studies. Numerous governmental and nongovernmental actors influence the policy making in large cities, resulting in interactions, synergies, and conflicts between bureaucrats and local actors. Our examination of Amsterdam school policies and New York City language access policies underscores that immigrant bureaucratic incorporation dynamics in large gateways cities cannot be separated from the local political and civic context. More specifically, the pressure and prodding of powerful local party activists, community organisation advocates, concerned citizens, and local media have led to agenda setting, public meetings, court cases, local laws, and eventually the implementation of programmes and initiatives accommodating immigrants’ needs and interests.

We conducted research in two established gateway cities on either side of the Atlantic, looking at how local political and civic context influenced the work of two types of service
bureaucracies. Clearly, there is a need for more research, including in other established gateway cities, with a focus also on regulatory bureaucracies. Future research, though, should also consider the multiple drivers of bureaucratic behaviour, including bureaucratic ethos; federal, state, and local policies that can guide municipal bureaucrats’ work; and the local context in which municipal bureaucrats operate. In the end, the actions of municipal bureaucracies arise from the many decisions taken by bureaucrats: to define the problem at hand, prioritise an approach to address it, and design and implement policy solutions to resolve it. As they go about their work, municipal bureaucrats in large gateway cities must navigate and negotiate a diverse set of governmental and nongovernmental actors who have their own ideas, motives, demands, and resources for addressing immigrants’ needs. Future research should include this larger local political and civic context when examining how municipal bureaucrats choose to manage immigration-generated diversity in their jurisdictions.

Notes

1. Personal email communication with the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, 14-Mar-2019.  
12. Interview, 6-Oct-2020. Also see Kleijwegt 2014.  
15. Interview, 6-Oct-2020.  
17. Interview, 18-Jun-2010.  
22. Interview, 20-May-2010.  
23. Interview, 18-Jun-2010.  
25. Interview, 4-May-2010.  
27. Interview, 4-May-2010.  

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