

A Clash of Interests: Neoliberalism in Education

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Public schooling is the very foundation of democratic society. Thus, public schools must be imagined as sites of social justice, change and transformation, and students must be educated as “citizens capable of defining and implementing democratic goals such as freedom, equality, and justice” (Giroux 2007, 195). The health of a democracy depends on its education system remaining free from capitalist, market-driven ideology and the interference of corporate interests.

However, it would be naive to conceive of a utopian ideal of education totally free from power struggles and the clash of ideologies. There are no neutral spaces, and as Giroux (2016, 356) makes clear, there are inextricable “relationships among knowledge, authority, and power.” Public schools are entrenched in a struggle over “who has control over the conditions for producing knowledge” (p 356), and neoliberal policies and practices have been both overtly and surreptitiously infiltrating the democratic roots of public schools all over the world, including Canada. For example, as Froese-Germain (2016, 1) discusses, “education privatization has grown in tandem with the spread of neo-liberal ideology around the globe,” and privatization “undermines educational equity and quality, and it erodes the principles of education as a basic human right and a public good.”

Public school boards, school districts, administrators, teachers, parents and students must be aware of the characteristics of neoliberal policies and the threats they pose to the quality of education that students receive. Our democracy depends on it.

The Rise of Neoliberal Policies in Education

Neoliberalism began to influence traditional education policy in the 1990s, as it rose to prominence as the accompanying ideology to globalization (Tucker and Fushell 2021). Neoliberal policies directly challenge conceptions of the public good and instead adhere to the primacy of individualism and the fulfillment of self-interests. As Sharma and Sanford (2018, 341) explain, neoliberalism is concerned with “extensive economic liberalization and policies that extend the rights and abilities of the private sector over the public sector, specifically shutting down state and government power over the economy.” More specifically, neoliberalism is characterized by “fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade, privatization” (p 341) and labour cuts, as well as “withdrawal of government from provision of social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient” (Thinnes 2013).

The basic tenets of neoliberalism have manifested in education discourse through a shift away from the perspective of education as a collective public good and toward discussions of economic “rationality, efficiency, and accountability” (Parker 2017, 44). In this commodified vision of schooling, students are viewed as future workers in a capitalist market system. Thus, policy-makers see public schooling not as a democratic exercise leading to potential emancipation and greater equality but, rather, as a skills-based training endeavour that will prepare students for success in the 21st century.

Education has increasingly been viewed through a business lens, with major cuts in spending; attacks on teachers' unions; and increasing standardization of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Policy discourse around education has moved away from humanist notions of responsibility and interconnectedness toward a neoliberalist conception of accountability and individualist competition (Parker 2017). Policies in favour of economic growth have been prioritized over social welfare policies that uphold notions of the public good and protect marginalized communities. Parker explains,

There is a difference between accountability and responsibility. . . . Accountability excuses our lack of participation in democratic spaces by offering scapegoats and shallow policy solutions. It connotes a sense of authority: that there is someone to compel action and to punish for failures. It allows citizens to think that there is someone who is supposed to act, to be responsible, and to blame. It pretends at transparency while obfuscating complexity and excluding diverse voices from the discussion. (p 54)

This conception of education is eroding education systems and the quality of curriculum, instruction and assessment, and is having very real impacts on the lived experiences of students and teachers internationally and in Canada.

The rest of this article will explore how the hegemony of neoliberalist thinking has overtly and covertly affected the quality and integrity of education through both policy and practice.

The Commodification of Education

Neoliberal policies and practices have reduced education to a commodity, and through such a lens, students and parents are viewed as consumers. Markets operate on the underlying economic assumption of supply and demand, and under neoliberalism, public schools are viewed as one consumer good to be chosen among many.

School choice is a cornerstone of the neoliberal approach to education in the United States, and although less overt in Canada, measures that encourage school choice have been increasingly offered in provinces such as Alberta. Canadian scholars, such as Yoon and Daniels (2021), note that these measures include diversifying public school options for parents and students, including charter schools, busing vouchers, tax credits and public funding for private schools. Allowing parents and students to choose what school they attend, the argument goes, fosters

competition between schools, increases accountability and improves student achievement.

In reality, school choice undermines equity and equality in public education. Rather than raising the quality of education, "popular schools in affluent neighborhoods become oversubscribed, while unpopular schools in low-income neighborhoods are becoming undersubscribed" (Yoon and Daniels 2021, 1289). As a result, class and racial inequalities are further entrenched. In Canada, as Yoon and Daniels make clear, Indigenous children lose out the most, and "in the regions of historical and contemporary racial divisions, school choice has worsened racial segregation and racial hierarchy as parents tend to choose along racial lines" (p 1289).

The neoliberal view of education as a commodity has not only manifested in school choice but has also evolved to increasing levels of privatization *of* and privatization *in* education (Education International 2015).

The privatization *of* education has been of primary concern in the United States, although Canada has also seen the increased involvement of private corporations in education that are operating for profit in various contexts, including "using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education" (Education International 2015). In the United States, as Giroux (2016) makes clear, billionaires such as Bill Gates, the Walton family and Art Pope have been at the forefront of decisions regarding education reforms that have opened public schooling to corporations profiting from the previously untapped "market" of education.

This sort of "philanthropic" involvement also takes place in Canada, as do public-private partnerships, whereby public schools partner with corporations to deliver curriculum tailored to the interests of those corporations. These programs operate as skills-based job training and are often sold using rhetoric touting the power of technology and 21st-century learning skills to transform students into entrepreneurs and innovators.¹

There has been a proliferation of online learning and student information management systems owned by huge education corporations, such as Pearson. Pearson's influence has become more and more pronounced in Canadian education through its vertical supply chain, which involves the company in every aspect of education, including collecting data; providing instructional content, standardized testing and teacher licensing tests; and operating schools (Froese-Germain 2016, 1).

The New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA) has noted concerns about Pearson's student information system PowerSchool and possible data-collection issues. Additionally, the NBTA is concerned that further government spending cuts to education could result in more

privatization measures (Froese-Germain 2016, 4). These concerns are not unfounded. In the United States, the rise of surveillance capitalism has led to video cameras being installed in classrooms and efforts to ban the teaching of critical race theory.

The New Brunswick government is also involved in the privatization of education, selling New Brunswick curriculum as a licensed commercial entity to international schools under the auspices of Atlantic Education International (AEI). AEI's partners include Flywire, Medavie Blue Cross, MacLellan and Moffatt Financial, True North, and Vital English.² Its board of directors (which includes provincial government ministers, the director of Opportunities New Brunswick and superintendents of schools) is dependent on the approval and whims of the corporate sponsors.³ The language AEI uses is couched in neoliberal ideals, and it sells New Brunswick curriculum to schools in countries such as China, Brazil, Bangladesh and Saint Lucia by promising to “maximize . . . educational, economic, and social benefits.”⁴

Privatization *in* education is less overt but, in some ways, more insidious. Education International (2015) explains that these are “forms of privatisation [which] involve the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector in order to make the public sector more like business and more business-like.”

A neoliberal approach in education is well established in the United States, thanks to policies such as No Child Left Behind, which holds teachers and schools accountable for student achievement through measures such as merit pay, teacher evaluation and dismissal, and a shift in the role of administrators from instructional leaders toward business-focused managers.

In Canada, privatization *in* education has taken place to a lesser degree than in the United States. Nevertheless, this article will explore the topic further in a discussion about the neoliberal influence on notions of accountability and standardization.

Slashing Spending

Neoliberalism prioritizes economics, efficiency and accountability over social welfare policies. As Parker (2017, 46) explains, politicians typically view schools as “‘black holes’ (Apple, 2005, p. 214) that consume large amounts of money but fail to produce adequate results.”

Reflecting this view, in 2019, Alberta's then premier Jason Kenney made good on the United Conservative Party's campaign promise to conduct a review of the curriculum, even though the previous government had recently completed a new draft curriculum. In a Q&A session on

Facebook, Kenney justified the review by stating that there had been a “huge decline in numeracy and math competency amongst our students” and also spoke about “addressing the decline in reading proficiency” (Craddock 2019).

Alberta's government did increase education spending slightly; however, as of 2022, the province still ranked last in Canada in terms of public school funding (*ATA News* 2022). Under neoliberal policies, education systems typically face major spending cuts that often result in structural changes and the centralization of school boards and school districts under the guise of cutting costs and increasing accountability.

As Tucker and Fushell (2021) assert, centralization reforms delegitimize and devalue the professional knowledge of teachers and administrators and, in Newfoundland, have “shifted power from schools and local boards, ignoring professional knowledge and the needs of local communities” (p 364). They go on to explain that centralization leads to increased bureaucracy and one-size-fits-all business-style decision making that ignores the nuances and diverse makeups of individual school communities. Policies made from the top down, with a focus on the bottom line, leave teachers and administrators with their hands tied when it comes to making decisions that will best serve the learning needs and the social and emotional well-being of their students.

Neoliberal spending reforms also often involve the outsourcing and further privatization of services in schools. For example, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, big education corporations, such as McGraw Hill, were pushing blended learning as the perfect solution for school boards looking to cut costs. They made promises about “blended learning—combining the use of new technology with face-to-face instruction—as the wave of the future in education” (Froese-Germain 2016, 2), a myth that has been unpacked by McRae (2015). Once the pandemic made implementing blended learning a reality, it became obvious to parents, students, teachers and administrators that nothing could replace in-person learning. Thankfully, policy-makers seem to have heard the message. Nevertheless, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) will monitor how frequently provincial governments lean on blended learning models in the future, as the potential cost savings and cuts to teacher positions that these models afford certainly fit the neoliberal model.

Spending cuts have also been made by successfully manufacturing a crisis through neoliberal rhetoric calling for a return to the basics and to the core subjects of literacy, numeracy and science. These appeals have led to decreased spending and teacher reductions in the arts, sports and other subjects seen as nonessential. Class sizes have also

increased, putting even more pressure on teachers who are already overworked and undervalued, particularly in the United States.

The hegemony of neoliberal policies in education is evidenced by the normalization of school fees and fundraising in Canadian public schools. Winton and Milani (2017) note that nearly all public schools in Ontario engage in fundraising efforts to pay for normal operations, as well as to supplement extracurricular activities. However, there is great disparity among schools in terms of how much money they are able to fundraise, and “critics assert that fundraising perpetuates and exacerbates inequities between schools and communities by providing different kinds of educational opportunities and increasingly different schools” (p 3).

Accountability and Standardization

Before the rise of neoliberalism, education was viewed as a political endeavour. However, “the neoliberal mandate has transformed what was once a political concept into an economic one” (Parker 2017, 46).

In Canada, strong teachers’ unions and a cultural acceptance of social welfare enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms have resulted in fewer cuts and better working conditions and salaries for teachers than in the United States. However, provincial education systems have not escaped another hallmark of neoliberalism’s influence on educational policy: the standardization of curricular outcomes and accountability measures such as mandatory testing.

Adherence to curriculum standards and standardized testing places pressure on teachers. Although Canadian teachers do not face the prospect of losing their jobs based on students’ test scores (as their American colleagues do), the focus on test scores nevertheless undermines the professional integrity of the teaching profession and can perpetuate a system in which teachers are increasingly viewed as “specialized technicians” (Rigas and Kuchapski 2018), threatening their identities as professionals.

Critical Pedagogy as Resistance to Neoliberalism

Teachers who are interested in pursuing critical pedagogies that promote social justice and increased equity and equality for students face many challenges within neoliberal education systems. Neoliberal principles and ideals are ubiquitous and hegemonic. Unless teachers are

explicitly taught to identify neoliberal patterns in education, policies most often go unchallenged—and are even viewed benevolently.

Meshulam and Apple (2014) call for a “counter-hegemonic” (p 650) critical multicultural approach to neoliberal education that “can illuminate how schools act as a site of constant struggle and compromise between different, at times contradictory, interests, agents, and ideologies” (p 651). They make clear that even schools and teachers who are committed to antiracist, critical pedagogies face challenges in balancing the onslaught of reforms and cutbacks with their commitment to social justice and equality.

Neoliberalism has made it difficult for teachers to prioritize the common good and the responsibility that we all have toward one another over the demands of the market. This is why the work of teachers is so important. As Giroux (2016, 359) so eloquently reminds us, public education “is one of the few public spheres left . . . in which formative cultures can be developed that nourish critical thinking, dissent, civic literacy and social movements capable of struggling against those antidemocratic forces that are ushering in dark, savage and dire times.”

Notes

1. See, for example, <https://c21canada.org/robert-martellacci-presents-fellow-cofounder-c21-canada-david-roberts-shifting-minds-award-innovation-human-spirit-contribution-21st-century-learning-skills-unparalleled/> (accessed April 11, 2023).
2. “Partner Organizations,” Atlantic Education International, <https://aei-inc.ca/about-aei/partner-organizations/> (accessed April 11, 2023).
3. “Board of Directors,” Atlantic Education International, <https://aei-inc.ca/about-aei/board-of-directors/> (accessed April 11, 2023).
4. “About Us,” Atlantic Education International, <https://aei-inc.ca/about-aei/about-us/> (accessed April 11, 2023).

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