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Defending and Strengthening Public Education as a Common Good Toward Cross-Border Advocacy

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Introduction to Special Issue: Defending and Strengthening Public Education as a Common Good

Abstract

For decades, there has been a well-coordinated effort to unmake public education in Canada and around the globe. Neoliberal reformers have undermined public education through increased privatization, marketization, and managerialism. Government austerity measures have shaped policy that falsely necessitates, validates, and legitimizes the privatization of public education. All of these forces that fuel the neoliberal reform movement diminish the collective aims, benefits, and responsibility of public education. Instead, the movement encourages systems that ration education. The moves to emulate business models in education systems exacerbate inequities and run counter to the purpose of public education. Indeed, attempts to marketize, commodify, privatize, and dismantle public education are well-organized and coordinated. Yet, in Canada, provincial and territorial fragmentation has veiled the well-organized rhetoric and tactics of neoliberal education reforms. As a result, community and political responses have often been confined within borders. The reformers have been centrally organized, but the resistance has not. Recognizing that provincial and territorial borders can act as barriers to collective advocacy, this special issue is intended to share activities, research, and writing from across Canada about the tactics and impacts of privatization, to recognize the efforts being made to organize a collective response to privatization efforts, and to encourage national conversations beyond borders.



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We must not view America's failed privatization experiment as an aberration that couldn't happen here, but as a cautionary tale. (Ganshorn, 2022)

For decades, there has been a well-coordinated effort to unmake public education in Canada (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006; Parker, 2017; Ross & Gibson, 2006; Winton, 2022). Neoliberal reformers have undermined public education through increased privatization, marketization, and managerialism (Poole et al., 2021; Yoon & Winton, 2020). Government austerity measures have shaped policy that falsely necessitates, validates, and legitimizes the privatization of public education.

As a result, education is increasingly “defined as an industry, and educational institutions have been forced to conduct themselves more and more like profit-seeking firms” (Connell, 2013, p. 102). Governments have absolved themselves of their responsibility to consistently and robustly fund public education and have forced school divisions to rely on: advertising; partnerships and sponsorships (e.g., exclusive contracts); incentive programs; corporately sponsored resources and curriculum materials; sales of services (e.g., renting out rooms, sale of curriculum materials, and recruitment of fee-paying international students); user fees; and fundraising (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006). In order to make up for persistent underfunding, schools have been forced to resort to fundraising and public-private partnerships to finance the building and maintenance of school facilities, resources, and extracurricular activities—all essential aspects of schools that aim to meet the needs and interests of increasingly diverse groups of students (Yoon et al., 2020). The public appears to passively accept (or perhaps to be unaware of) these private influences, as they are positioned as the only option for offsetting budget shortfalls; in turn, consent for privatization is manufactured (Fallon & Poole, 2016). Resultantly, education has been reframed from a public good funded by the government to a private good reliant on private funding.

Alongside cuts, the neoliberal reform movement has imposed a business model on public education in order to advance its commodification (Ross, 2017). To do this, ideas and practices have been imported from the private sector to design and deliver aspects of education (Ball & Youdell, 2007; Fallon & Poole, 2016). In turn, privatization in/of education has legitimized more private influence. This market logic has been used to celebrate and motivate “choice.”

In addition, rhetoric surrounding parental rights and “ideologically motivated teaching” has simultaneously been used to encourage choice in education (Schneider & Berkshire, 2021). Privatization has been presented as a way to preserve parental cultural authority (Ganshorn, 2022). Beyond stoking moral panics, reformers have manufactured crises surrounding student achievement, test scores, and the need to “modernize” schools (Parker, 2017). Coincidentally, reformers have used the panic created by these supposed crises to undermine teacher professionalism and public boards (Ganshorn, 2022). These manufactured crises have been used to shake confidence in the current system, veil underlying issues (such as poverty and underfunding), distract the populace, and encourage buy-in for reforms that advance marketization and privatization.

All of these forces that fuel the neoliberal reform movement diminish the collective aims, benefits, and responsibility of/public education. Instead, the movement encourages systems that ration education. The moves to emulate business models in education systems exacerbate inequities and run counter to the purpose of public education. Indeed, attempts to marketize, commodify, privatize, and dismantle public education are well-organized and coordinated. Yet, in Canada, provincial and territorial fragmentation has veiled the well-organized rhetoric and tactics

of neoliberal education reforms. As a result, community and political responses have often been confined within borders. The reformers have been centrally organized, but the resistance has not.

Recognizing that provincial and territorial borders can act as barriers to collective advocacy, this special issue is intended to share activities, research, and writing from across Canada about the tactics and impacts of privatization, to recognize the efforts being made to organize a collective response to privatization efforts, and to encourage national conversations beyond borders.

This introduction is organized as follows. First, we discuss the national symposium we held on the privatization of education in Canada. We delineate the symposium according to three themes: ideological motivations beneath the reform movement, portrayals of privatization across provinces, and resistance to reforms. Next, we focus on the nine articles included in this special issue. We pull out major themes and key contributions of the articles to highlight their contributions to the scholarship that aims to illuminate the contemporary forces of education marketization and privatization in the context of Canada. We then share our concluding thoughts on future advocacy.

National Symposium

The symposium was both the planned end and hopeful beginning of a national conversation about the privatization and erosion of public education. In 2023, we, the co-editors of this special issue, were awarded Social Science and Humanities Research Council funding to host a symposium about efforts to privatize public education, entitled *Public Conversations About Privatization: Rejecting the Marketization of Public School Systems*. The purpose of the symposium was to bring together academics, educators, graduate students, teacher unions, and community groups from across Canada to discuss: a) the ideological motivations of educational reforms; b) the way these reforms are manifesting in each province; and c) the resistance to these reforms. Held in the spring of 2023 in Toronto, the symposium involved presentations on each of these themes, followed by dialogue between the presenters and attendees. These presentations and conversations were captured in real-time by a graphic recorder who was present throughout the event and whose visual recordings of the thematic discussions are included below.

Theme 1: Ideological Motivations

Reforms in/of public education are motivated by neoliberal rationality. Neoliberalism positions knowledge as a commodity, students as consumers, education as workforce training, and schools as businesses (Brown, 2015). This market logic necessitates increased managerialism, which manifests in a data-focused audit and surveillance culture (Ball, 2003; 2016; Giroux, 2013; Smyth, 2012). These ideologically driven reforms ignore the purpose(s) of education, undermine the public system, and intensify and legitimize social inequities (Brown, 2015). Education systems across Canada are increasingly impacted by neoliberal reforms. However, these reforms are not exclusive to Canada; rather, they are part of a broader movement called the *Global Education Reform Movement* (GERM) (Sahlberg, 2012). Sahlberg has used GERM to reveal the global scope and shared tactics used by reformers and to raise awareness of the way these reforms infect our public education system with standardization, competition, commodification, and accountability. By recognizing the ideological foundations of the reforms, public education advocates can challenge their rationale, purpose, and tactics.

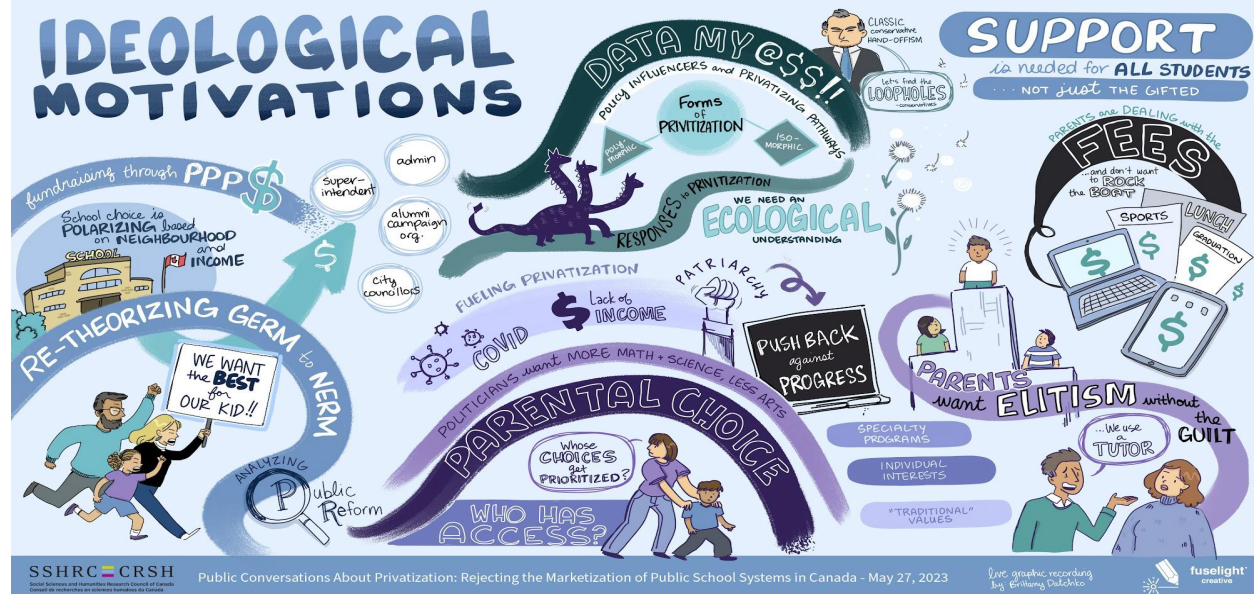


Figure 1. *Graphic Recording of Symposium Presentations and Roundtable Conversations on Ideological Motivations of Privatization.*¹

Theme 2: Provincial Privatization

As education is a provincial and territorial responsibility (except for education on First Nations, which remains a federal responsibility), discussions about public education, including concerns about its erosion, are often confined within those borders. The seemingly disparate attacks on public education occurring within provincial borders share many similarities. However, the way these reforms manifest provincially creates the illusion of distinction; for example, the increased reliance on charter schools in Alberta may seem distinct from mandatory online learning in Ontario (Moore & Winton, 2023). Yet, both are motivated by neoliberal reforms that seek to undermine public education and motivate increased privatization.

¹ This figure visually represents the presentations from the symposium given by Ee-Seul Yoon, Erika Shaker, Pamela Rogers, and Nichole Grant surrounding the ideological motivations of privatization and the roundtable discussions that followed the presentations. All graphic recordings were completed by Brittany Datchko from Fuselight Creative.



Figure 2. *Graphic Recording of Symposium Presentations and Roundtable Conversations on Privatization at the Provincial Level.*²

Theme 3: Resistance

While provincial borders have hindered a national response against the privatization of public education, there have been important moves to resist reforms within provinces. Whether through the actions of teachers (and, in some cases, their unions), school boards, provincial advocacy groups, academics, or the general public, people are rejecting neoliberal reforms.

At the time of this symposium, there were no centralized or coordinated national efforts to counter the activities aimed at undermining public education. We hope that the national collective that formed through this symposium continues to grow; in fact, many of the attendees of the symposium are involved in the [Public Education Exchange \(PEX\)](#), a new project coordinated by Dr. Sue Winton to build networks of public education advocates, to engage the public in conversation about education privatization, and to create knowledge.

We also hope that this special issue will encourage readers to participate in public dialogue about education privatization and to join in our collective efforts. If we do not collectively work to protect public education, we will lose this valuable public good; “few things are more important to a society’s long-term success than a strong and inclusive public education system” (Hemingway, 2022).

² This figure visually represents the presentations from the symposium given by Adamo Di Giovanni, Lana Parker, Heather Ganshorn, and Ellen Bees surrounding provincial privatization and the roundtable discussions that followed.



Figure 3. *Graphic Recording of Symposium Presentations and Roundtable Conversations on Resistance to Privatization.*³

This Special Issue

The symposium presenters were invited to contribute to this special issue so that we might document and share the research and resistance occurring across the country. As a result, this special issue combines opinion editorials, scholarly essays, and a book review. The pieces have been organized within the themes that were used for the symposium: ideological motivations, provincial privatization, and resistance.

Section 1: Ideological Motivations

Yoon opens this issue with an exploration and extension of Sahlberg's (2012) theorizing about the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). In "From GERM to NERM (Neoliberal Education Reform Madness)," Yoon draws on Foucault to elucidate the maddening effects of neoliberalism, a madness that eliminates reason, creates desperate passion, and makes us unable to see inequities. Drawing on a decade of their own research, Yoon poignantly points to the ways in which school choice proponents create identities around neoliberal reforms. Yoon writes, "Neoliberalism has become part of who they are; neoliberalism is their newly adopted ontological position" (p. 21). Under the guise of "passion," parents and guardians prioritize the education of *their* children over *all* children within a system that is supposed to be for the public. By using Foucault's concept of madness, Yoon demonstrates the way that neoliberal reforms encourage "madness in ego, in ignorance of others, and in dismissal of the common good (and our

³ This figure visually represents the presentations from the symposium given by Beyhan Farhadi, Justin Fraser, Vidya Shah, Stephanie Tuters, Sachin Maharaj, and E. Wayne Ross surrounding resistance to privatization and the roundtable discussions that followed.

interconnectedness)” (p. 18). As Yoon argues, the embrace of market principles that re/produce inequities within a system that is designed to encourage equity, is a form of madness.

We can see signs of this ego-driven madness in Maharaj, Tuters, and Shah’s opinion editorial, “Anti-CRT Attacks, School Choice, and the Privatization Endgame.” The authors elucidate the way that controversies surrounding equity and justice initiatives, and anti-racist initiatives in particular, are used to undermine public education and advance privatization. Maharaj et al. state, “Attacks against Critical Race Theory (CRT) are a hallmark of right-wing advocates’ efforts to decrease support for public education. The attempt to sow discord about public education is part of a broader movement to defund public programs, cut taxes, and increase private influence” (p. 31). School choice is presented as a solution to the fabricated controversies around the “politicization” of schools. The authors draw on American parallels to expose these tactics as part of a privatization playbook. This piece serves as a warning to anyone who perceives the marketization and commodification of education as an American problem. Instead, it asks readers to see how attacks on equity initiatives in the Canadian public school system contribute to inequity.

In the essay that follows, Rogers and Grant raise similar concerns about the inequities created through neoliberal governance and privatization. The title of their essay, “Data My Ass,” was inspired by the public resignation letter of New Brunswick Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, Dominic Cardy. Using the public letter as a rhizomatic node, Rogers and Grant reveal “how neoliberal governance becomes strategically embedded in public education systems in Canada” (p. 39). They problematize the inner workings of neoliberal governance that rely on “hands-offism,” undermining democratic structures and processes. They argue that neoliberal governance and privatization in education are unethical and “symbolically violent, as they undermine foundational societal structures necessary for sustaining democratic institutions” (p. 3). In doing so, the authors provide unique insights into the under-explored areas of cabinet-level politics in a neoliberal government. While the bulk of the essay is anchored to New Brunswick, the authors point to similar tactics used to dismantle democratic processes, advance neoliberal reforms, and reduce education budgets in other provinces. Their analysis thus sheds light on how the connections between provinces and territories can inform our understanding of the ways that education is being undermined across Canada. As Rogers and Grant make clear, issues across provinces may appear distinct, but they are similarly motivated and legitimated.

Section 2: Provincial Privatization

This section focuses on “multiple privatisations” in public education across Canada that have created new tensions while undermining the fundamental values and structures of public education systems since the 1970s (Yoon & Winton, 2020). The articles in this section highlight how neoliberal-leaning governments have manipulated the language of choice and equity to advance the interests of capitalists and neoconservatives while the materiality and funding of the education system have been diminished and hollowed out, destabilizing the core mission of public education, namely, to create inclusive educational spaces where all learners can thrive together despite their differences. To defend against the privatization of education, the authors of these penetrating analyses argue for the importance of critically comprehending the destructive forces that lie behind the rhetoric of neoliberalism and neoconservatism across different sectors, but especially in policy and curriculum reforms.

Di Giovanni and Parker's essay "Is It a Choice?: Examining Neoliberal Influences in Three Ontario Education Reforms" extends the discussion of choice raised by Yoon. Di Giovanni and Parker explain how "the concept of choice sits at the nexus of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, where, on the one hand, neoliberalism furnishes a market for entrepreneurial selves and where, on the other, neoconservatism guides individual choice through particular values" (p. 55). Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the authors interrogate the way that the language of choice has been used in Ontario to position mandatory e-learning, the growth of international students, and the revision of curricula. Language is employed by governments to draw public support for increased choice, but as Di Giovanni and Parker demonstrate, these reforms result in less choice through austerity and standardization. Instead, neoliberal choice supports both capitalist and neoconservative agendas.

Like Di Giovanni and Parker's essay, Ganshorn's opinion editorial speaks to the relationship between neoliberals and neoconservatives. Using a different provincial backdrop, "Connecting the Dots Between Extreme Ideologies, 'Parent Choice,' and Education Privatization in Alberta and Canada" reveals how many of the recent moves made by the provincial government reflect neoliberal values of choice and marketization, but "they also play to the concerns of socially conservative parents who wish to limit their children's exposure to ideas they find unacceptable" (p. 76). Despite their distinct aims, neoliberals and neoconservatives have united in their opposition of public education. As Ganshorn warns, the current two-pronged attack on education is at an all-time high, emboldened by a rise in extreme right-wing conservative politics in the United States. Specifically, Ganshorn speaks to the way that the *parental rights* rhetoric has been used to advance privatization through school vouchers, homeschooling subsidies, and charter school expansion. Like Rogers and Grant, Ganshorn ends their piece by speaking to the way Alberta parallels other provinces.

In "Co-Opting Equity: Advancing a Neoliberal Agenda in Manitoba Education Reforms," Bees also dwells on discussions of language, specifically the way that reformers use and co-opt language to promote their own agendas. Bees uses critical policy analysis to display how equity language has been used to promote a neoliberal agenda in Manitoba education reforms. While the piece focuses on Manitoba, Bees begins with an outline of market-driven reforms that have emerged across Canada. Like the other authors in this issue, Bees demonstrates the broader ideological aims of these provincial reforms. In the case of Manitoba, reformers tried to appease public critique by explicitly drawing on the language of equity; however, as Bees' analysis makes clear, the framing of equity was focused on individual needs rather than systemic improvement. For example, the proposed reforms focused on individual achievement, accountability, and work-readiness.

Section 3: Resistance

While the articles above highlight the actions of neoliberal reformers and ideologues, the theme of resistance is an important contribution in and of this special issue.

The two essays that close the issue offer insightful perspectives about resistance. While both pieces speak to the importance of plurality in resistance, the essay by Farhadi centres on the voices and experiences of individual advocates who work for and/or with diverse sets of advocacy groups in the context of Ontario. In contrast, Fraser's essay illuminates an emerging collective advocacy group known as People for Public Education in the province of Manitoba. The two essays

highlight how resistance can be imagined and enacted differently in fighting against destructive neoliberal forces that are dismantling the core of the public education system.

Farhadi's piece, "Resisting the Heartbreak of Neoliberalism in Education Advocacy," explores how public education advocates in Ontario have resisted neoliberal restructuring. Although resistance is often studied through the collective, Farhadi uses interviews with 23 self-identified public education activists to highlight "the range of ways advocates resist neoliberal market-oriented reforms in education within and across diverse social locations, communities, institutions, and geographies" (p. 105). In this way, Farhadi encourages a diverse understanding of resistance. Importantly, Farhadi speaks to the tension felt by public education advocates when the public education system they are advocating for does not meet the promise of public education—that is, when the practice of public education contributes to societal inequities and oppression. For many public education advocates, this is a common tension. This essay also raises important discussions about the cost of resistance to advocates.

Fraser's essay turns to a collective example of resistance. In "Exposing the Spectre: Resisting Neoliberal Education Reforms in Manitoba," Fraser frames their discussion of resistance in Manitoba through the recently abandoned legislation (Bill 64) and the actions of People for Public Education, a public advocacy group that actively opposed and organized against the bill. Bill 64, an aggressive and far-reaching piece of legislation, was dropped by the government as a result of public opposition. As Fraser makes clear, the abandonment of Bill 64 did not result in the end of neoliberal reforms in the province; rather, in the shadow of the victory, when most Manitobans thought the crisis had been averted, many of the reforms were repackaged and advanced more subtly. People for Public Education continue to organize to keep conversations about the future of public education in the public discourse. Fraser reflexively interrogates the actions of People for Public Education in order to inform and inspire future resistance against neoliberal education reforms.

Section 4: Book Review

This special issue ends with a review of Sue Winton's (2022) book, *Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada*. Writing from the perspective of a public school teacher, Lopuck raises concerns about the way privatization erodes the collective benefits of education while succinctly summarizing Winton's book, which illustrates many examples of privatization across Canada. Lopuck further identifies "the individualistic race" in the current education system, concluding with important questions about the roles—and responsibilities—of individuals who are making choices that benefit *their* children. Like Lopuck, we think the discussion of individual choices with systems that promote ever-more choice deserves more attention.

Concluding Discussion

This special issue has brought together established and emerging scholars, public school educators, and public education advocates from across Canada. We have done this because we recognize that the work to defend public education requires cross-jurisdiction and cross-sector conversations and advocacy.

Through these essays and opinion editorials, authors have exposed the motivations and actions of education reformers across provinces. In doing so, they have revealed the tactics of the

playbook, which is the first step toward resistance. Notably, the authors have pointed out the common rhetorical strategies used by those who wish to dismantle public education in Canada. Reformers use crafty language to promote their market logics. Although public support for a well-funded public education system remains high among Canadian citizens, ideologically motivated reformers employ discursive tools and strategies to rationalize and promote reforms that undermine public education. Through “linguistic feints and purposeful abstraction” reformers veil their underlying motivation (Schneider & Berkshire, 2020, p. 3). Terms like *modernization*, *personalize*, *choice*, and *parental rights* are used to convey an *ofcourseness* (Rogers, 2004). Through these articles, the authors argue that public education advocates need to counter the active marketing of privatization, to expose the fallacies of equity and choice, and to demonstrate, instead, the *ofcourseness* of public education as a public good.

As public education advocates, we recognize that public education is not perfect. Current policies, practices, and curriculum can result in certain students being policed, marginalized, and oppressed while other students are further advantaged and privileged. These issues of inequity and oppression will not be addressed through increased privatization—they will only be alleviated through increased public investment in public education across Canada.

We hope that this special issue enlivens a “call to action,” provoking all of us to engage in and extend the conversations that are necessary to ensuring the future of public education in Canada—a future that maintains public education as a public good. We would also like the public sector and education advocates to consider how their own activism can contribute to equity and justice. While individual reflections and actions are necessary, we would like to encourage cross-border and cross-sector collective advocacy work in resisting, challenging, and reimagining the public sector. For instance, in 2022–23, we saw the power of change when concerned residents in Manitoba put up lawn sign after lawn sign, signed up at town hall meetings to have their voices heard, wrote op-eds and articles, and gathered to speak against a government that proposed sweeping reforms to dismantle public education, which eventually were withdrawn. Since then, as founding members of People for Public Education, we have organized Picnic for Public Education events, engaged media, and contributed op-eds to mobilize grassroots voices to strengthen the public school system (see <https://peopleforpubliced.com/>). The political mobilization that enables and emboldens democracy and equity, or equitable democracy, could bring advocates together to actively reenergize and refurbish the public sector, especially in education. Indeed, it is imperative to regularly inform and engage the broader public about the tendencies and trends that erode our collective safety net, namely the public sector. Therefore, we urge public sector and education advocates to take up diverse and creative ways to challenge and resist neoliberal education reforms by defending and rekindling the foundations and future of public education as a common good.

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Leena Robertson, *Middlesex University*
Sam Rocha, *University of British Columbia*
Edda Sant, *Manchester Metropolitan University*
Doug Selwyn, *SUNY Plattsburgh*
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Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*
Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*
Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*
John Smyth, *Federation University Australia*
Beth Sondel, *University of Pittsburgh*
Hannah Spector, *Penn State University*
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Mark Stern, *Colgate University*
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