

Book Review

Understanding School Choice in Canada

Lynn Bosetti and Dianne Gereluk

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In a well-written introduction to the policy debates on school choice, Lynn Bosetti and Dianne Gereluk move readers away from the “strong emotional responses” (p. 3) that many scholars, educators, policymakers, and parents have on this subject. By examining the philosophical roots of school choice debates in Canada, the authors provide a well argued, reasoned, and highly readable text on what is normally a divisive subject. The authors start their discussion of school choice through examination of an important assumption in many of the debates underway currently on school choice. “Normative assumptions regarding the aims and purpose of schooling are not always acknowledged by detractors or advocates of school choice theory” (p. 5), and the introduction argues that many reports and studies fail to “attend to unique contexts in which particular policies originate” (p. 7). These two foundational points help explain the uniqueness and significance of the book: rooting school choice discussion in the original purpose of public education and how each local educational agency is allowed to enact this duty to prepare students for a future engagement with the world at large.

What was fascinating to me as an American is the number of school choice opportunities available in many Canadian provinces. School districts have latitude in providing school choice to citizens, a situation that is not present in the United States. The Canadian Constitution protects which rights “Francophone, Anglophone and Aboriginal people” (p. 8) possess concerning schooling, in contrast with the absence of educational rights in the U.S. Constitution. In Canada, the success of the school system, as measured on international tests, is beyond repute. In the United States, as Bosetti and Gereluk observe, many supporters of school choice are trying to remove children from a “failing school” and provide placement in a better educational opportunity. The authors want their book to “move beyond the polemic debates about whether school choice is good or bad and towards how it can be conceived and implemented to complement and enhance public education in a democracy” (p. 8). This objective is significant in its goal of improving public discourse on school choice in the western hemisphere.

The introduction concludes with a two page set of definitions of various terminology associated with school choice. The authors’ decision to include these definitions strengthens the book by providing a set of definitions that students and scholars may utilize in the school choice discussions. A set of standardized definitions is a critical factor in any policy debate, and the location of these terms in the book is a convenient reference for scholars. International readers are likely to appreciate this glossary as they create comparisons between their home educational systems and Canadian ones. The definitions of school choice terminology are especially relevant

for scholars seeking to compare the Canadian educational system with federal or state level policies in the United States or the United Kingdom.

The first chapter examines the philosophy behind schooling and school choice. Bosetti and Gereluk point out that “both sides use the same arguments to justify their positions” (p. 15). This point keeps the reader focused and reminded that evidence can be used to support multiple positions, and data are the raw materials of interpretation. The authors begin their chapter by ensuring readers are aware of the tensions inherent between public goals for students in the educational system and private goals for education from families. Family, community, and government all have a stake in educating the next generation.

As a publicly funded good/service, the educational system needs to balance the needs and wants of families who send their children and taxes to schools, the communities that help fund schools, and the government, which needs to socialize children into contributing individuals to society. To structure these discussions, the authors introduce and explain three philosophical themes: Communitarianism, liberalism, and neoliberalism. In examining these three philosophies in detail, the book provides students new to the field of education an important grounding in the underpinnings within communities and national educational systems.

The first philosophy, communitarianism, is the belief that schools strengthen communities and promote their human assets. Within this notion, the idea of a common good emerges; namely, that all members of a community should benefit from its educational system. Furthermore, a common school socializes children of all backgrounds to improve their society. As the authors point out, critics of the communitarian philosophy rightfully raise the point that a single vision of education tended to emerge out of the “[A]nglo-[C]anadian elite ... anyone who did not belong was excluded from or marginalized within the mainstream educational contexts” (p. 19). In the United States, minority populations and marginalized communities have suffered for almost 100 years the effects of an elite vision of education. Jonathan Kozol (2012), David Larabee (2012), and Jay Macleod (2008) have examined the problems of the current American education system and its failure to meet the needs of non-majority ethnic populations. These three researchers have focused on the academic achievement gap between white and minority students. Their research has identified how the public education system has allowed the achievement gap to continue unchanged for a significant length of time.

The second philosophical base for educational systems is liberalism. In their explanation, the authors identify three major themes from this philosophical base: individual rights, equality of opportunity, and tolerance for different ways of life. Citing John Locke and John Stuart Mill, the authors find that adherents of liberalism emphasize that the “primary purpose of education is to foster autonomous individuals...able to make informed judgements about how to lead their lives” (p. 21). Individuals in a liberal society choose how to accomplish a goal with minimal state interference in its pursuit. As families decide how to educate their children, liberals remind them that they must respect the rights of others. In some ways, then, as people decide what is right for their families, others’ equality of opportunity may suffer. Equality of opportunity is the idea that everyone should possess the same chance in life through education as everyone else. According to liberals, one’s ability to pay for different educational opportunities in the form of tuition gives rise to a positional advantage, and this advantage diminishes the capacity of the whole community in its development of children as successful contributors to society. The final part of liberalism theory is reasonable pluralism or the concept of how a local educational agency should allow families to preserve their own traditions and values when “the historical record suggests public schools have demonstrated little respect for diversity” (p. 24).

Within the notions of liberalism, the context of a rational decision making system emerges. A rational decision making system emphasizes that parents need to make educational decisions based upon what is best for their family and not necessarily the community as a whole. For many critics, the view of education as part of rational decision making system results in some parents left out of benefits which emerge from participation in schooling. For example, parents may lack the necessary social capital that one needs to participate in the educational system. For instance, some parents may experience difficulty navigating the school district bureaucracy and interacting with offices to help their child be successful. A second instance may occur when parents are not aware of the steps required for college education because they did not attend college themselves. Further barriers include access to information that would help parents make informed decisions about educational choice. The lack of social capital exacerbates the positional advantage that middle and upper class parents have in the educational world.

The third philosophy, neoliberalism, emerges when the process of governing an education system is linked with distribution of funds for it. In this philosophy, parent choice opportunities increase when publicly funded vouchers, or inter-district enrollment, is introduced within a school district or the province by the government or school board. It is within this philosophy that market based and public accountability reform efforts have emerged. Touching briefly on this philosophy, the authors indicate that “market based mechanisms are inappropriate measures” to use in school reform (p. 29).

Chapter two discusses the role that school choice has played in the education of Canadian minority groups. The study of Anglophone and Francophone minorities in the provinces and nationwide is one of the chapter’s core parts. The second section of the chapter addresses the right of Indigenous Canadians to administer their own schools. It is a powerful chapter that examines the tensions that have evolved in Canadian history of education between Indigenous peoples and newcomers. One pointed phrase identifies that “education [is] crucial to ensuring the survival and continuation of Aboriginal peoples and communities” (p. 37). The same understanding could be applied to the French speaking minority groups across English Canada. This chapter describes the techniques used in provinces that allow constitutionally recognized groups to control their schools. A helpful part of the chapter identifies some of the guidelines that govern admissions to these schools of choice. The chapter identifies critical moments in the evolution of language protection in different national documents. This chapter serves as a guide that allows non-experts to gain a basic understanding of the history and evolution of language protection policy over time.

The second chapter also discusses two important historical examples of injustices committed against First Nation peoples in Canada. The first example describes abuses of the Aboriginal nations. The authors describe residential schools, where staff stripped the cultures, languages, and heritage of Aboriginal students. By not shying away from this dark period in Canadian history, the authors provide a salient reason why First Nations have a legitimate reason to ask for federal government support of their own schools. What is interesting to note is the underfunding that many schools on reservations experience. While commissions and prime ministers have apologized for residential schools and investigated the past, in hopes of improving future relationships, this stark fact places an obstacle towards reconciliation. This chapter is an important one for an international audience to read. A number of residential schools existed within the United States, with aims designed to strip students of their languages and heritage.

The second example in chapter two examines the difficulties Francophone groups have in

ensuring their children can maintain their language and culture. In an interesting example, Anglophone parents are very interested in sending their children to French immersion schools due to the high level of funding that these facilities receive. For the French speaking families, they want their children to attend classes in French schools so that they can maintain and pass on their heritage. “While non-French-speaking parents often view French Immersion programs as an opportunity to enrich their children's education, francophone parents tend to view French-language education as a matter of cultural and linguistic survival” (p. 46). This point is a critical one for researchers on identity and education to understand. Language is often the vehicle for cultural survival.

The third chapter explores Canada’s attempts to work with the other minority groups who have arrived from around the world. These groups include refugees fleeing war, economic immigrants looking to start anew, or others who have “voluntarily [come] to Canada” (p. 50). This chapter describes the evolution of assimilation into a policy of fairer integration. As discussed in chapter two, language forms the root of culture and identity and for newly arriving immigrants abandonment of their heritage and native languages was a difficult and disturbing experience.

As the Canadian school system reacts to increasing numbers of non-Christians in school, and an increased level of secularism, the next chapter explains the conflicts and policy remedies used by provincial officials in schooling. One such desire from minority groups in Canada includes federal and provincial funding for religious schooling outside of the catholic faith. Other examples of increased funding requests come from language immersion schools for newly arrived immigrant communities. Immersion schools form an option for Islamic students from Middle Eastern countries. As increasing numbers of immigrant communities arrive in Canada, schools and governments have attempted to find more and better ways to accommodate the unique needs each group has in keeping their identities intact while becoming part of Canadian society.

The chapter explores how provincial governments attempt to balance minimalist and robust levels of multiculturalism in implementation of policy at the school level. “Minimal recognition entails a passive stance; the teacher takes into consideration a child’s cultural background or identity without necessarily calling attention to any special features but is sensitive to how this identity might affect the child's response” (p. 64). Robust recognition includes ways that strengthen affiliation to a particular cultural group. Affiliation is the feeling of attachment to one cultural group. Additionally a teacher will work with non-affiliated students to see and understand the lives and cultural practices of members within that group. Non-affiliated students are those who do not identify with the cultural group under study. Without specific awareness of students’ cultural backgrounds, the school system may continue to devalue minority groups through exercise of explicit and implicit biases. The third chapter ends by examining how Quebec is dealing with the idea of interculturalism or “the limit of how much a host society should be willing to accommodate cultural and religious differences” (p. 66). The discussion examines Ontario and Alberta’s efforts “proactively addressing the rights of minority groups through legislation and programs of choice in public schools” (p. 68). As the authors have shown in this third chapter, Canada is leading the western world in integration minority students into the public education system. As refugee and voluntary immigration increases, more students will need to find places that promote the liberal, inclusive, and democratic beliefs central to Canada in public schools. This chapter is especially critical for policy makers and school administrators to read and understand how passive and robust multiculturalism works in

theory and practice.

Chapter four provides the readers with an essential understanding of the historical and contemporary description of school choice in Canada. Broken into two parts, the chapter examines educational movements and contemporary school choice in Canada. The thesis within the chapter is that Canadian changes to education are a result of shifts in socio-political and economic realities within society. The authors define different types of school choice varieties available to parents in different provinces in Canada. Statistics are included which report on attendance figures.

For educational historians, the authors provide a well written and easily comprehensible description of reforms that Egerton Ryerson, a leading reformer of education led in Ontario. Through examination of the focusing criteria, or what should be the goal of instruction in schools, for education in the “intellectual and moral development for citizenship and workforce” (p. 71), the authors show the evolution of schooling from a reserve for elites to a mass movement in the mid-19th century. Normal schools and John Dewey’s influences changed education’s outlook on how students were taught. The focus moved from industrial scale education to individualized attention. The authors show also how conservatives and neoliberals reacted against reform and refocused education on the notion of economic success through educational preparation for individuals, groups, and the nation. During the 1980s, parents began to demand individualized education, and trust and belief in public education declined. The rise of conservative influence refocused education on benefits that families would receive and not on the overall community.

Chapter four’s final section describes the implementation status for school choice policies in each province. In their evaluation, the authors have concluded that Alberta is the “most responsive” to school choice initiatives and provides parents with the greatest school choice options. Engaging learners in the classroom is now the driving philosophy in primary and secondary education. Parents weigh schooling options that include home schooling, independent schools, charter schools, alternative programs, and open enrollments beyond the public and private schools. Some programs are affiliated with established schools, others are new and unique, outside province recognized systems. In weighing the different models’ advantages and disadvantages, Edmonton’s open boundary system forms a case study in enrollment management. The text does not flinch in addressing one of the pressing criticisms of charter schools: the ability to attract and retain the highest achieving students from public schools. The United States and other western school systems struggle with this idea that education, considered a public good by many, has turned into attempts by parents to ensure that their child becomes the sole beneficiary of high quality education to the detriment of others in the community

In chapter five, the authors examine school choice as an outward symbol of “middle class anxiety and advantage” (p. 94). In discussing socioeconomic stratification in Canadian society, the authors find that the degree of parental engagement in schools includes socio-cultural as well as psychological factors that play into educational choices. At the beginning of the chapter, the authors criticize the belief that Canada is a meritocratic society. Succinctly, their argument is that prior educational stratification has perpetuated class based educational achievement. The authors task the Canadian government to amend this injustice. The authors describe the process that allows middle and upper class families the opportunity to ensure that their children are successful. Of interest to the readers may be the concept of habitus: “cultural expectations, values and beliefs” that allow “parents’ ability to negotiate alternative educational programs in

diversified school districts ... Parents' informal knowledge of the educational system and conception of the significance of post-secondary education is central to students' successes in navigating the application process" (p. 97).

The fifth chapter examines societal pressure on parents to ensure that their children can demonstrate academic abilities in the best schools, thereby allowing generational access to credentials that ensure continued advantaged status. Parents want to ensure that their children's education allows for divergent career options. School choice policy attempts to address the activist voice of parents who seek better educational opportunities through transfers to selective programs, better schools in large urban centers, or charter schools. The sorting process, according to the authors, is a governmental strategy that ensures that middle class parents have greater control over their children's education and access to additional advantages, a system that may disadvantage families of the working and lower classes.

The authors proceed to identify the hidden costs that accrue from parental anxiety and school choice policy. For middle class families, the time and labour expended into research and follow-up is a price the family can pay to ensure their children find success. The family has the educational knowledge, time, and resources to spend on the pursuit of educational options. A family of the lower class or working class may not have the time, resources, or knowledge of the school choice system to help their children transition into a higher economic class. The authors then point out that families who elect to send children outside of the state sponsored school system may be liable for additional fees and expenses that may include extracurricular activity fees, transportation, uniforms, and opportunities for enrichment, such as music lessons and summer camps. The state sponsored school systems often coordinate schedules and timetables to ensure maximum efficiency on bus runs and attendance times.

The concluding chapter, "Ethical Principles to Guide School Choice Policy," provides the reader with a solid summary of the material in the text. The authors suggest that in an ideal state, "school choice policies are an instrument for educational reform" (p.112) through recognition of and support for diversity in language, culture, religion, and heritage. In their exploration of liberal multiculturalist and liberal theories and neoliberal principles, the authors give quality space to analysis of the three major waves of reform in Canadian and international school choice ideas.

The authors stress in chapter six that the nation state does not belong to the dominant group but to all citizens and residents. This point needs public and frequent reinforcement. In examining liberal multicultural discourse, the authors select Francophone, Aboriginal, ethnic immigrant groups, heritage language, Afrocentric, and faith based schools as areas to examine how Canadian School choice policy encourages non-dominant groups to participate fully in the educational process. Through promotion of diversity in Canadian schooling opportunities, provincial governments attempt to enrich educational experiences that are often quite lacking in other developed and industrialized nations.

The second section of chapter six, on liberal theory and school choice policies, explores the evolution of educational systems from parentally controlled enterprises to ones driven by state priorities. Within this evolution the concept of "flourishing" is explored. The idea of flourishing encapsulates the ability of a child to find a productive place in society. The tension between individualistic pursuits and a unified curriculum are explored in the study of alternatives to public schools where alternative ideologies and special needs programming have emerged. The authors point out that homeschooling and elite specialist schools exist outside of the school system and may hinder learners' chances for flourishing in education. These two examples

guard the privileges inherent within families who choose these schooling options.

The third section of chapter six examines neoliberalism and its impact on schooling decisions in Canada. Neoliberal rhetoric contends that metrics and accountability for meeting those metrics, not parental opinion, are important measures for determination of school success. When a school does not perform to standards measured on standardized tests, “the neoliberal framework would necessitate its closure” (p. 136).

Understanding School Choice in Canada is a must read text for students who research school choice movements in Canada and abroad. Beyond that, the text is a significant resource for students and scholars who seek a greater understanding of the history of schooling in Canada. With the recent resurgence of the extreme far right and racist groups in the industrialized world, this text is a gold mine of ideas, suggestions, and policy decisions that a more forward looking educational system can use to ensure that all students within a nation can thrive. Under the neoliberal reform movement, the United States has seen the introduction of school choice, standardized testing, and public efforts to hold schools publically and financially accountable for the academic achievement of all student groups, including traditionally marginalized ones (Ravich, 2010). Critics argue that the market should not hold sway in educational decision making. Rather, publically elected officials should make decisions based upon the public’s best interest. Schools serve unique roles as a public good and serve a purpose in society that moves beyond the market and business paradigms of profit and loss (Cuban, 2007). This book should be required reading in introductory programs for educational leadership due to its conciseness and well executed writing style.

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