

## Introduction

# The Impact of Neoliberalism on Teacher Education in Canada

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This special issue is a collection of four conceptual papers and one empirical paper that explore ways that neoliberalism, both explicitly and subtly, influences teacher education programs, in relation to content, marketing, and delivery. Four of the papers in this special issue were initially presented on a panel exploring the issues of neoliberalism as it impacts teacher education at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education annual conference in 2016. This special issue draws attention to the need for teacher educators across the country to be mindful of the influence of neoliberal ideology on teacher education; first, as an economic strategy/policy that shapes education—through funding, leadership, reward structures, and evaluation—and second, as it has the potential to reinforce inequities and reify power structures across class, race, and gender lines in our programs. The freedom that neoliberalism offers, which sounds so beguiling when expressed in general terms, can mean freedom for those who are already privileged and excludes those who have already been oppressed by societal and systematic inequities.

### A Brief Overview of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism advocates for 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. Neoliberalism supports fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade, privatization, and greatly reduced government spending. Thinnes (2013) defined neoliberalism as

*an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient [emphasis added]. (para. 5, citing Lipman, 2011, p. 6)*

Martinez and Garcia (2000) described five key features of neoliberalism, including (a) the rule of the market, (b) cutting public expenditures for social services, (c) deregulation, (d) privatization, and (e) elimination of the concepts of “the public good” or “community.”

It is possible to consider, then, how neoliberalism exerts control over publicly-funded, mandatory education for all children and youth, which in Canada has been a mainstay of

democratic life. Public education that has been funded by taxation and is thereby free and mandated for all children is, then, under attack. According to King and Keeping (2012), who explained consumer choice as an increasingly dominant aspect of educational systems, neoliberalism becomes a significant challenge to public education. They noted that “it is important that choice in public education be conducive to the attainment of both public policy objectives and the needs of the student” (para. 4) rather than a market response to consumer demand or accommodation of the elite. They identified several characteristics of public education, suggesting that it offer a model of civil democratic society; inclusion for all children with a community that is responsible for being inclusive; involvement, along with parents, in the upbringing and education of children; diversity of ability and worldviews; encouragement of ongoing equity for all children; and equal opportunity regardless of economic status (King & Keeping, 2012).

However, these values are in conflict with neoliberal interests. As Ross and Gibson (2006) noted, citing Kuehn (1999),

education is a key target of the neoliberal project because of market size (e.g., global spending on education is more than \$1 trillion), education’s centrality to the economy, and its ‘potential to challenge corporate globalization if education succeeds in producing critical citizens for a democratic society.’ (p.4)

Neoliberal educational reforms, seen throughout the Western world, have a three-pronged approach to shifting public education. First, these neoliberal reforms offer for-profit educational management organizations a claim on educational services; second, they reduce educational costs (e.g., special education resources, closing school libraries, offering online courses, and increasing class sizes); and third, the reforms emphasize “accountability” and create curriculum standards that focus on outcomes-based education and mandatory testing (Ross & Gibson, 2006).

Thus, the papers in this issue raise significant issues for teacher education in Canada that indicate the need for vigilance as we move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century delivering and revising our teacher education programs. The papers also offer responses to the neoliberal influences on higher education and teacher education programs.

### **An Overview of the Articles in this Special Issue**

Grimmett’s article, titled “Neoliberalism as a Prevailing Force on the Conditions of Teacher Education in Canada,” provided a rich backdrop by way of an historical-to-current-day literature review on the meaning of neoliberalism. Grimmett discussed how neoliberalism impacts higher education institutions, in particular teacher education programs, and then presents three themes that demonstrate the impact of neoliberalism in teacher education:

the conflicted challenge between institutional legitimacy and professional identity that working in a higher education context presents to Canadian teacher educators; some unresolved issues of accessibility and accountability in Canadian teacher education programs; and the ways in which a commitment to social justice with its emphasis on inclusion, diversity, and multiculturalism that Canadian teacher educators name as important are frustrated and sometimes impeded. (this volume, p. 355)

In response to these three themes Grimmett argued, “if economic rationalist accountability ends up trumping professional judgment, then teaching will potentially lose its professional status” (this volume, p. 346).

In “Professionalism Discourses and Neoliberalism in Teacher Education,” Marom and Ruitenberg suggested that the term “professionalism” has been uprooted by neoliberalism and yet can also be reclaimed to bring dignity back to the profession of teaching when redefined and reclaimed. To draw out this distinction, the authors used two theoretical frameworks: Derrida’s discussion of the pharmakon, which can be understood as toxic or medicinal based on how the pharmakon is used, to what end is it used, and by whom it is used; and Bourdieu’s discussion of symbolic capital, which “refers to social resources such as one’s network of connections and political power. In addition, ‘symbolic’ capital is the symbolic power—in the form of prestige or recognition” (this volume, p. 370). The authors concluded that professionalism, seen through the lens of these two theoretical frameworks, can be used either in support of neoliberalism or as an anti-neoliberal approach.

In “Neoliberal Elements in Canadian Teacher Education: Challenges and Possibilities,” Portelli and Oladi argued that “the neoliberal agenda is incompatible with critical educational practices. As a mode of critical resistance to educational instrumentalism, the paper offered recommendations as part of its critique on the deleterious impact of neoliberalism” (this volume, p. 378). The paper incorporated Portelli’s teaching experiences in three Canadian provinces—Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Ontario—and how Portelli saw the impact and influence of neoliberal values and policies permeating higher education and teacher education programs in particular. The authors argued that neoliberal themes are apparent in teacher education programs and have eroded social justice initiatives and examinations of systematic inequities in three ways. First, they revealed these issues through “the misinterpretation of the relationship between theory and practice in the teaching profession” (this volume, p. 381). Second, they showed “the bias against philosophy of education and foundations disciplines as well as a bias in favour of psychology” (this volume, p. 381). Finally, Portelli and Oladi demonstrated the simplistic and misguided interpretation of praxis” (this volume, p. 381). To address these themes of neoliberalism, they “propose[d] a praxis built on the notion of ‘utopian pedagogy’ and an ‘ethics of subversion’” (this volume, p. 381).

Kuchapski and Rigas’ “Educating Preservice Teachers in a Neoliberal Era: Specialized Technicians or Public Intellectuals?” argued that the era of neoliberalism has changed the identity of what it means to be a teacher; in particular, they contend that teachers are now seen as specialized technicians. These authors provided a literature review providing an overview of neoliberalism and then focus on an analysis of teacher education reforms and trends in the United States and England in order to provide a caution to Canadian teacher education programs. By offering the insights present within American and British reforms, Kuchapski and Rigas hoped to

provoke thought on how [Canadian] teacher educators can negotiate the conflicting demands of the current neoliberal policy climate to help ensure teacher education programs move beyond a view of teacher training as technique ... and on conceptualizing the teacher as a public intellectual. (this volume, p.394).

Moreover, Kuchapski and Rigas further considered these above insights by examining how the three modes of governance—professional, political, and institutional—contribute to the image of

teachers' work that neoliberalism tends to promote. The authors argued that the image needs to be refocused on teachers as public intellectuals.

In their empirical study "Neoliberalism in Websites of Public Canadian and American University-based Schools of Education and Teacher Education Programs," Yosef-Hassidim and Sharma argued that websites of Canadian and American public universities with Schools of Education and Teacher Education Programs promote and feature themes of neoliberalism, both intentionally and unintentionally. Moreover, the authors suggested that websites, often the first place many future students or external visitors go to gain information on teacher education programs, do not speak directly to educational goals, but rather fall into marketing strategies or campaigns that commodify their programs. In particular, Yosef-Hassidim and Sharma's findings revealed five neoliberal-related features in the sampled institutional websites: marketing, business terminology, employability, economic orientation, and outcome-based approach; the latter two features only found on the American websites. The authors conclude that "teacher educators are encouraged to take the findings seriously as there is a concern that neoliberal trends and practices will continue to seep more deeply into Teacher Education Programs" (Yosef-Hassidim & Sharma, this volume, p. 411).

### Concluding Remarks

As guest editors, we feel fortunate to edit the papers included in this special issue that draw attention to the potential and real impacts and dangers of neoliberal ideology on Canadian teacher education programs. Moreover, we believe that the different perspectives and approaches taken to explain, exemplify, and challenge the resounding impact of neoliberalism in teacher education will raise the consciousness of teacher educators, administrators in teacher education, and others who work with and in higher education institutions, thereby encouraging increased awareness and responsiveness. We believe we must reclaim, redefine, and reimagine goals of teacher education that encourage equity and justice, while also encouraging deep thinking about the role of teacher education in politically turbulent times and challenging "common sense" neoliberal ideologies. If we do so, the possibilities for our future teachers and hope for all educators will be strengthened and renewed.

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