

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE:
MANUFACTURING CONSENT FOR THE PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION IN
CANADIAN CONTEXTS

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The discourses of neoliberalism “have been at work on and in schools in capitalist societies since at least the 1980s” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 247), leading governments and other key private and not-for-profit actors to create policy discourses and environments supportive of market incursions into public education, and enabling and encouraging the establishment of various forms of privatization. Neoliberalism refers to an ideology that emphasizes the application of market-oriented mechanisms to all aspects of social life, “the turning of all and any activity into a commodity that incorporates value” (Rikowski, 2002, p. 5). Sandel (2012, p.7) also points out that “the reach of markets, and market-oriented thinking, into aspects of life traditionally governed by non-market norms and considered [to be] public goods is one of the most significant developments of our time.” What traditionally were thought to be public goods like education now become commodities constituted and traded through market processes. For Olssen (1996), neoliberalism has also transformed the role of government in the provision and funding of public services from sole provider and funder to enabler of market-driven provision and funding of public services.

In education, neoliberal reform promotes discourses of parental choice, competition, accountability measures, performance goals, and standardized assessment regimes. It creates consensually shared definitions of problems in public education for which inclusion of private

actors operating within or in parallel to the public education system is presented as a legitimate policy solution (Ball & Youdell, 2007). Techniques and practices from the private sector are portrayed as the most effective and efficient means of addressing issues related to equity, labour market needs, and funding challenges (Spren & Valey, 2014). Neoliberal discourse paves the way for privatization in education, which can take many forms.

Forms of Privatization

Privatization refers to two main means of commodifying public education: endogenous and exogenous forms. *Exogenous* privatization means bringing the private sector into public schools, whereas *endogenous* privatization refers to public schools acting business-like (Ball 2007).

Typically, exogenous privatization is understood by members of the general public to mean the direct transfer of ownership of public schools or other public educational assets to the private sector. However, it can take other forms. Exogenous forms of privatization involve the opening up of public education services to private sector involvement on a for-profit basis, including the design, management, or delivery of aspects of public education (Ball & Youdell, 2007; Lubienski, 2006). Examples are allowing private management organizations to operate public schools or contracting out certain public education services, such as transportation, cafeteria services, building maintenance, and professional development (Poole & Fallon, 2015; Lubienski, 2006). Another example is the lease of unused public schools to private and non-profit organizations, sometimes referred to as repurposing of public schools (Poole & Fallon, 2015).

Endogenous education involves the importing of ideas, techniques, and practices from the private sector in order to make public education institutions function more like business entities (Ball, 2007; Catlaks, 2014; Lubienski, 2006). An example is opening the public education policymaking process to networks that include private organizations (Ball 2007, 2009, 2012), paving the way for more extensive introduction and institutionalization of market-oriented education policy. Diversification of funding sources for public education institutions (mixing private and public funding), school choice, and competition between public schools are other forms of endogenous privatization (Lubienski, 2006; Poole & Fallon, 2015).

Exogenous forms of privatization are visible, except in the case of the direct transfer of ownership to the private sector. Endogenous privatization is less visible to the public and often does not attract public attention. The relative invisibility of most forms of privatization creates the illusion that the public nature of education remains intact, which in turn fosters passive public acceptance. In the absence of critical reflection, neoliberal and privatization policies potentially become discourses that colonize minds. Gramsci's (1971) concept of *hegemony* refers to the discursive control of cultural understandings to persuade the general population that social arrangements are normal, natural, and "common sense," even though those arrangements may be exploitative (Langman, 2015). Paradoxically, members of the general population may willingly consent to arrangements that actually work against their best interests. Thinking along these lines, we deem a policy-as-discourse theoretical perspective to be appropriate for conceptualizing this special issue focusing on the manufacture of consent for the privatization of public institutions like education.

Policy as Discourse

A policy-as-discourse perspective views discourse, in a Foucauldian sense, as “a particular way of looking at, and of structuring, the world (or some discrete aspect of it), with all the associated vocabulary and concepts” (Gillies, 2013, p. 28). Discourse is a conceptual framework for both understanding *and* producing the social world. Discourse implicates power. However, dominant groups may be those who successfully use strategies to construct regimes of “truth” and “knowledge,” presenting them as common sense that operates in the best interest of all members of the society.

The policy-as-discourse perspective emphasizes “how the initiation, contestation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation of any policy are shaped by the discursive, narrative, symbolic practices which socially construct our understanding of problems, methods of treatment and criteria for success” (Schram, 1993, p. 252). Governments do not simply develop policy in response to problems that exist. “Rather ‘problems’ are ‘created’ or ‘given shape’ in the very policy proposals that are offered as ‘responses’” (Bacchi, 2000, p. 48). Policy and discourse are mutually constitutive. Public policy discursively constitutes problems and legitimizes policy directions. Researchers employing a policy-as-discourse perspective examine what makes it onto the political agenda, “how the construction or representation of those issues limits what is talked about as possible or desirable, or as impossible or undesirable” (p. 49), as well as limiting who can speak and with what authority (Ball, 1990). Policy as discourse is a useful lens for an examination of how public consent for privatization of education may be discursively manufactured.

Overview of the Special Issue

Neoliberal education policy has gained ground far more slowly in Canada than in other contexts such as England, the United States of America, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand. The province of Alberta was the first to embrace neoliberal education reforms in the 1980s, but those reforms have since been modified to fit a political context more resistant to the privatization of education. For example, Alberta implemented charter schools, but most of them were absorbed into the public system and became more akin to magnet schools. Since the late 1990s, provinces like British Columbia and Ontario have embraced neoliberal education policy, significantly revising, among other things, education finance, the relationship between education and industry, and labour relations in education.

While the commitment to public education appears to remain strong, we have argued elsewhere that Canada tends to experience a more incremental or “creeping privatization” (Fallon & Poole, 2013). This special issue seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how policy-as-discourse operates in Canadian contexts where neoliberal education policy has met a certain level of success through discursive construction of policy problems and solutions based on a market perspective.

The contributors to this special issue expose, in their respective work, the existence and dynamics of privatization in many different forms. The constitutive articles represent varied contexts (e.g., national and provincial, K–12 and post-secondary) and focuses (e.g., social finance, school fundraising, co-op education, personalized learning, and international education), resulting in a rich and comprehensive discussion. Each contributes important insights concerning discursive practices utilized to legitimize and normalize privatization in education and the means through which public consent for the privatization of education is discursively manufactured. In

different ways, these articles explore how individual and collective actions of public, private, and not-for-profit actors generate and use systems of meanings through which privatization is presented as common sense in thinking about and addressing challenges in public education.

The seven articles are organized according to institutional context (post-secondary institutions and K–12 institutions). The first article spans these institutional boundaries; the next three articles focus on post-secondary education, followed by three articles centred around K–12 education.

In “Manufacturing Consent for Privatization in Public Education: The Rise of a Social Finance Network in Canada,” Poole, Sen, and Fallon employ social network analysis to trace the development of a network of public, private, and not-for-profit organizations in Canada that promote a form of public–private partnership known as social finance. Social finance enables private investment in the provision of public infrastructure and services with the expectation that outcomes will be in the form of social benefits for society and profit for the investor. Because it facilitates private sector involvement in the public sector, this leads to increasing privatization. Indeed, one particular network actor (the Work and Learning Cluster within MaRS Discovery District) actually serves as an incubator for education business start-ups. Using a policy-as-discourse perspective the authors critically examine how the network collaboratively shapes public policy and discursively and extra-discursively constructs social finance in ways that masks its privatizing effects. The discourse legitimizes social finance as a means of financing public services, including education, and establishes an enabling field that routinizes and institutionalizes social finance as a reality. These practices, the authors argue, contribute to increased privatization in the public sector, including public education.

Focusing on post-secondary education, Rigas and Kuchapski's article, "Strengthening Ontario Universities: A Neoliberal Reconstruction of Higher Education," critically analyzes the discourse of a particular government discussion paper entitled *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge*. This document is intended to shape conversations about the future of higher education in Ontario. By controlling the talking points and discussion questions, the authors argue, the discussion paper constructs, legitimizes, normalizes, and valorizes a neoliberal, commercialized vision of higher education. The role of universities is defined in terms of their ability to contribute to the development of the province's "innovation economy," and meet the demands of business and industry for a highly skilled workforce, research and development, and commercialization. Students are constructed as consumers paying for an education commodity for the purpose of acquiring marketable skills and credentials. Government expects higher education institutions to form partnerships with private industry to provide experiential co-operative education. Similar to Hoben's argument in an ensuing article, Rigas and Kuchapski note universities are held accountable through the measurement of student skills and competencies and by tying funding of institutions to their performance on these measures. In this manner, government reinforces its policy discourse through its willingness and ability to use its regulatory and public spending capacities to ensure compliance. The authors demonstrate how neoliberal discourses can steer public universities toward privatization by implementing commercial models of knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance, accounting, and management systems.

In "Whose Model Student? Learner-Centered Discourse and the Post-secondary Privatization Agenda," Hoben uses critical discourse analysis to examine state-based educational reform in post-secondary education in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario.

These reforms redefine the university's mission according to market-driven principles, such that market needs increasingly drive programming, research agendas, and governance structures. The discourse of these reforms conceptualizes students as self-interested educational consumers, eclipsing the development of critical agency, personal growth, critical intellectualism, and public democratic values. Hoben describes how funding for universities has shifted to an accountability-driven model, enforcing an emphasis on student satisfaction with the delivery of educational services that lead to employment in a globally competitive labour market. While the post-secondary policy discourse purports to be learner-centred, Hoben argues it actually masks a privatization agenda. The result, he says, is a radically decentered university institution, controlled by fiscal means and catering to corporate interests. Hoben calls for a counter-neoliberalism movement, building broad-based coalitions that share institutional power and create "affinity spaces" that promote critical activism on the part of engaged public intellectuals.

In his article entitled "Commercializing Higher Learning Through the Discourse of Skills in University Co-operative Education: Tensions and Contradictions," Milley uses a Habermasian conceptual framework to conduct case studies of three co-operative (co-op) education programs at a Canadian urban university. Co-op programs, which are partnerships between public higher education institutions and private industry, alternate periods of study with paid work experiences. From Milley's perspective, co-op programs are discursively presented as providing benefits to students, employers, and universities. Milley claims this is a discursive "win-win" strategy that masks the immersion of students in "the commercial activity of packaging, exchanging, and accumulating their human capital, in part by using the language of skills as discursive currency." While Milley is critical of co-op programs because of these

dynamics, he believes they are important and should be reconfigured such that their economic emphasis is balanced by the sociocultural purposes of higher education.

Shifting to the context of K–12 education, Sen’s article, “Towards Customized Privatization in Public Education in British Columbia: The Provincial Education Plan and Personalized Learning,” critically examines the notion of personalized learning at the centre of the new Education Plan of British Columbia. As framed by the BC government, personalized learning is in keeping with 21st-century conditions and enables flexibility and choice for students. Sen convincingly demonstrates the Education Plan is largely influenced by a neoliberal social imagination promoted by a global network of political, social, and economic actors. Personalized learning is predicated on child-centred and technology-based learning, and also is rooted in the market logic of self-interest, private choice, and consumption. The Education Plan, Sen posits, conceptualizes education in primarily economic terms, reducing it to the development of the labour force and the economy, disregarding the socio-cultural dimensions of education, and reducing teaching to facilitation and coaching. Sen argues that it atomizes students and turns education into a customizable consumer product, a process that he provocatively terms “customized privatization” in public education. Curricular, pedagogical, and assessment decision making moves away from public schools to private providers of commercial technology and digital learning platforms.

Privatization stemming from international student programs is the subject of Cover’s contribution, “The Discursive Framing of International Education Programs in British Columbia.” Fee-paying international student programs have been employed by K–12 school districts in British Columbia to generate revenue from private sources to support public educational programming. In this sense, they act as a form of privatization. He contrasts two

motivations behind international education: internationalization, which he defines in terms sociocultural benefits; and marketization, which produces economic benefits. He uses Jager's approach to critical discourse analysis to examine media articles and policy documents from various government departments, comparing how they discursively construct and co-construct public understanding of international education. While the media constructs international education in almost exclusively economic terms, government departments (Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Advanced Education) discuss economic benefits and risks as well as sociocultural benefits. However, evidence presented by government departments to legitimize international education focuses on its economic benefits, which suggests that economic concerns have received greater attention. There is little sign of public reaction to international education, and Cover attributes this to the normalization of neoliberal values and marketization in the BC context.

In "The Normalization of School Fundraising in Ontario: An Argumentative Discourse Analysis," Winton applies Hajer's argumentative discourse analysis to examine the arguments about the politics of school fundraising presented by two parent coalition groups in Ontario: one group that views school fundraising for K–12 schools as both necessary and desirable; and the other that argues government needs to assume greater responsibility for adequately funding public education in order to address inequities in the capacities of schools to raise funds. Winton argues that the former coalition has been more successful in promoting its discourse, based on two sources of evidence: increasing levels of fundraising despite the campaign against it, and legitimation of fundraising through the development of government policies intended to regulate it. Neoliberal discourse has contributed to the normalization of fundraising by advocating the values of individualism, privatization, and reduced government spending on public services.

Provincial governments have rationalized the continuation of fundraising using various discursive strategies, including presenting it as a means of addressing the gap in government's ability to fund education, blaming it on school district resource allocation decisions, framing it as an opportunity for school–community engagement, and arguing that fundraising is used to support enrichment experiences and not basic education. School fundraising, Winton purports, results in increased privatization through reliance on private sources of revenue to fund public schools. To promote adequate government funding of schools, Winton suggests that parents opposed to fundraising should mobilize at the local level, aiming to change the practices of schools and school councils, while also lobbying at the provincial level.

The provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario figure prominently in the research presented in this special issue. This fact leads us to ask, What is happening in other Canadian provinces and territories? Due to its global hegemony, we expect that neoliberal reforms have emerged across Canada. More research is needed on the subject of privatization in Canadian education and the means being used by various parties to get the general public to accept it. As public intellectuals, researchers have a responsibility to develop alternative narratives about public education, not as a market-driven endeavour, but as a public good open to all and crucial for the development of a democratic, socially just, and sustainable society.

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