

Privatization and the Exacerbation of Educational Inequality in Canada

Jasmine Pham, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education - University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract: Currently, over one-third of Canadian families have opted to enroll their children in private education. This shift is concerning as school choice has the potential to create homogenous student populations by segregating children of differing socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Selective public schools also have the potential to become exclusive spaces for students among the social elite to obtain cultural capital that other students have no access to. In fact, the emergence of a more competitive and selective public schooling system has already created a new hierarchy of elite students in Canada. In the following position paper, I explore how the promotion of school choice and the rise of privatization have exacerbated educational inequalities in Canada. I also address how the rise in privatization has led to the weakening of Canada's public education systems and the creation of homogenous school systems. Thus, it is imperative for educational researchers and policymakers to not only recognize how the rise of privatization and school choice has changed the landscape of Canada's education systems, but also address the equity and quality concerns that have arisen as well.

Keywords: privatization, school choice, public education, alternative schooling, neoliberalism, equity, Canada

Introduction

Private education has long been portrayed to increase access to and quality of education. The private education model is perceived to promote competition between private and public schools which in turn enhances the quality and effectiveness of education systems (Verger, Bona, & Zancajo, 2016; Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo, 2017). However, empirical research on the impact of private education on educational equality and achievement, namely in the United States and Chile, has raised equity concerns (Brehm, 2016; Ichilov, 2012; Verger et al., 2017). For instance, Verger et al.'s (2016) research on the role and impacts of public-private partnerships in the Chilean education system found that voucher schools exacerbate educational inequalities with schools by limiting the type of students who can enroll in certain private institutions; schools use added tuition fees and entrance exams to increase the homogeneity and performance of their enrollment (Verger et al., 2016). Likewise, Eastman et al.'s (2017) research on charter school politics and choice-based education policy reforms in New Orleans reveals that charter schools not only underperform when compared to similar public schools but also create homogenous socioeconomic school spaces by charging fees that low-income families cannot afford (Eastman et al, 2017). Therefore, not only has privatization not increased educational quality, but it has also led to the exacerbation of educational inequalities.

Despite all this research indicating such problems, we have seen a gradual increase in privatization and the promotion of school choice and competition in Canada. Currently, over one-third of Canadian families have opted to enroll their children in alternatives to regular public schools (Davies & Aurini, 2011). This decision is concerning as school choice has the potential to create homogenous student populations by segregating children of differing socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Selective public schools of choice also have the potential to become exclusive spaces for students among the social elite to obtain cultural capital that other students have no access to (Yoon, 2016). In fact, the emergence of a more competitive and selective public schooling system has already created a new hierarchy of elite students in Canada (Yoon, 2016). In the following position paper, I explore how the promotion of school choice and the rise of privatization have exacerbated educational inequalities in Canada. I argue that the rise in privatization has led to the weakening of Canada's public education systems, the creation of homogenous school systems, and the reproduction of social and structural inequalities. Thus, it is imperative for educational researchers and policymakers to not only recognize how the rise of privatization and neoliberal school choice policies have changed the landscape of Canada's education systems but also address the equity and quality concerns that have arisen as well.

Theoretical Framework

Various practical and theoretical problems have come to the forefront of educational research with the rise of private education. In Canada, school choice policies are at the forefront of privatization. Policies around school choice involve regulations around the provision of aid (or lack thereof) for establishing private schools, as well as the options that parents and students have for schooling outside of government-funded public schools. While offering parents and students additional options for their schooling seemingly promotes education quality at its surface, the problem lies in school choice policies guided by neoliberal theory. Attributed to Milton Friedman, neoliberal theory is an ideological commitment to market forces, competition, and free trade (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Connell, 2013); neoliberalism seeks to make existing markets wider and create new markets where they did not exist before (Connell, 2013). In education, this means an injection of market principles where we decrease government regulations, cut public funding, and increase private education to meet the needs and demands of students and parents (Connell, 2013). Since the 1980s, education systems across the globe have implemented pro-market reforms under the neoliberal assumption that the promotion of choice and competition between public and private schools would enhance the quality and effectiveness of education systems (Verger et al., 2016). In doing so, parents become consumers who shop around for the best schools for their children instead of trusting the quality of their neighborhood public school.

Canada's School Choice Landscape

School Choice: Definitions and Types

To clarify, school choice in its most basic form “involves giving parents the right to choose approaches to education beyond those offered through the school assigned to their children based on their neighborhood” (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 3). The general distinction between public and private schools found in literature often refers to the “provision and funding of education” (Ichilov, 2012, p. 291). To clarify, public schools in Canada are tuition-free schools supported by taxes and run by a locally appointed school board. Public schools are open for enrolment to all children who live within the provincially mandated catchment zone. Meanwhile, nonpublic schools are known as private schools in some jurisdictions and independent schools in others (Allison, 2015; Clemens, Palacios, Loyer & Fathers, 2014; Holmes, 2008). In general, independent, and private schools charge tuition fees, permit the selective admission of students, and are governed by an elected or appointed governing board. The regulatory frameworks and funding for independent schools vary among provinces (Allison, 2015; Clemens et al., 2014; Holmes, 2008). Parents also have the option of homeschooling their children. Sometimes referred to as un-schooling, de-schooling and elective learning, the underlying hallmark of homeschooling is “that parents take the final responsibility for the selection, management, provision and supervision of their child’s education program” (Van Pelt, 2015, p.3).

Canada's School Choice Movement

Currently, the vast majority of research conducted on school choice in the Global North is often based on the American school system. While there is much to learn from the American system, the aims and motivations of Canada's school choice policies differ from the United States. For one, Canadians have a stronger sense of confidence in their public schools than Americans do (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). For Canadian school choice advocates, the issue with standard public schools does not lie with the lack of academic rigor or curricular content, but the fact that the one-size-fits-all design of standard schools are unable to meet the diverse needs of Canadian children (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Canadian school choice advocates assert that “school choice provides a vehicle for promoting diversity within a broader pluralist society” (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 24). Thus, school choice policies in Canada have focused on the provision of “educational opportunities that respond to the diversity in Canadian culture” (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 112).

While Canada has had a history of adopting school choice policies to accommodate minority language rights and meet the needs of students with different religious and cultural backgrounds, “Canada has not been immune from the

global wave of neo-liberal inspired education policy reform agendas” (Bosetti et al., 2017, p. 3). In the last two decades, school choice policies in Canada have slowly pivoted towards educational reform guided by pro-market practices (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Since then, “there has been a growing movement towards providing more schooling options” to meet the academic demands of how parents want their children educated (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 112). Critics of school choice argue that such policies often commodify education and create a market that responds to the interest of “parents as consumers” as opposed to meeting the needs of diverse students (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 26).

School Choice Within the Public Sector

While privatization in education has manifested itself to varying degrees across the country, its core features the promotion of school choice and competition through the provision of alternative and specialty schools within the public system. Such options include minority language public schools, French immersion schools, Catholic separate schools in Alberta, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, as well as alternative schools in Alberta, British Columbia, and Manitoba (Bosetti et al., 2017; Holmes, 2008). Alternative schools offer specialized programs and additional support in specific academic curricular content, innovative approaches to teaching and learning, and serve the needs of specific student populations.

When looking at the public-school choice legislation in Canada, Alberta offers the most robust choices and supportive legislation for choice within the public sector (Allison, 2015; Bosetti et al., 2017; Holmes, 2008). Reforms adopted in 1988 allow parents to enroll their children in “any suitable program at any public school in the province” (Allison, 2015, p. 290). In the year 2000, Alberta’s School Act then further enabled school boards to offer “alternate programs of choice to satisfy local demand” (Allison, 2015, p. 290). From bilingual elementary schools to schools with a focus on specialized programming like art or sports, Alberta’s public system offers a wide range of options for students and parents to choose from (Allison, 2015; Bosetti et al., 2017; Clemens et al., 2014).

Following Alberta’s lead, British Columbia (BC) also “adopted an open enrollment legislation in 2002” (Allison, 2015, p. 291). BC’s School Act enables school boards to offer “specialty academies” and alternative schools such as Vancouver’s mini schools which focus on academic rigor (Yoon, 2016, p. 375). Meanwhile, Manitoban legislation that emphasizes the right for students to attend “any public school in the province” (Allison, 2015, p. 292). However, their legislation “lacks accompanying laws or incentives requiring or authorizing boards to establish programs beyond the four official programs established by the province” (Allison, 2015, p. 292).

While provincial legislation in Alberta, BC, and Manitoba encourages program and school diversity within the public sector, it does not necessarily “enhance” school choice as the provision of alternative schooling is still “heavily dependent on initiatives by local boards” (Allison, 2015, p. 305). Moreover, the private sector of all three provinces has continued to grow despite their legislation encouraging public school choice (Statistics Canada, 2022). Conversely, Ontario, which has not adopted legislation that encourages school choice within the public sector, offers additional choices within the private sector (Allison, 2015; Bosetti et al., 2017; Clemens et al., 2014).

Implications

Weakening of the Public System

In 2000, the first year of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Canada turned in one of the strongest records of student achievement in the world with high rankings in literacy as well as mathematics (NCEE, 2021). There was also a lack of large disparities in student scores across socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial lines (NCEE, 2021). Yet, despite the clear strength of Canada’s public system, there has been a gradual increase in the allocation of government funding to the private sector and a decline in funds for public education across various provinces.

Alberta, BC, Manitoba, Quebec, and Saskatchewan which account for 54% of total Canadian K–12 enrollment, all provide financial support to nonpublic schools that meet their qualifications criteria (Allison, 2015). All five provinces have seen a gradual increase in independent school enrolments. Meanwhile, “each of the five provinces that offer no financial aid to nonpublic schools has evolved their own distinctive rules and regulations governing the operation of these school choices” (Allison, 2015, p. 295). Of those provinces, Ontario, “has the least restrictive and least sophisticated policies toward nonpublic schools” where students can receive any form of schooling as long as “they are receiving satisfactory instruction at home or elsewhere” (Allison, 2015, p. 296). As a result, Ontario has had the steepest incline in independent school enrolment as well as the steepest decline in public funding. The allocation of public funds to private institutions as well as nonrestrictive guidelines has not only enabled the building of additional independent schools across Canada but has also weakened the public system. According to Statistics Canada (2022), for the first time in 17 years, expenditures for K-12 education in Canada declined. In the 2019 and 2020 school years, spending on K-12 education dropped by 1.4%. The decrease was mainly attributable to lower spending on instruction and educational services in Ontario and Alberta (Statistic Canada, 2022).

In blurring the demarcation between public and private education systems and increasing market-driven forms of finances in education, privatization across Canada has brought up the issue of fungibility; this points to the issue of “mutual interchangeability of one thing for another” (Fallon & Poole, 2014, p. 315). If the decrease in government funding for public education becomes a “long-term trend, school districts will need to resort increasingly to private sources” (Fallon & Poole, 2014, p. 315). In fact, various provinces across Canada have already been experimenting with the encouragement of private and hybrid forms of education providers such as the promotion of private fundraising or market-driven funding mechanisms at school and district levels (Adamson et al., 2016). For provinces like Ontario, Alberta, and BC where public funding in education has been on the sharpest decline, “informal family and community fundraising efforts” have been on the rise to offset these decreases in funding (Zajda, 2006, p. 9).

Unfortunately, budget cuts have also “left many school boards unable to cope adequately with the rising costs of education” (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017, p. 2). These cuts have resulted in the reduction of important educational services, technology, and labor that serves the most disadvantaged and marginalized student groups. Changes to how government funding in education has also fueled “increased militancy by teacher unions leading to disruptions in school operations, restrictions in extracurricular activities and depressed morale” (Fallon & Poole, 2014, p. 317). These changes have contributed to both parental and student dissatisfaction with the standard public school system which, in turn, has encouraged more families to consider alternative school choice options (Fallon & Poole, 2014). According to Statistics Canada (2021), enrolments in private and independent schools have been increasing at a higher rate than both the increase of Canada’s school-aged population and public-school enrolments every year since the 2015 to 2016 school year. In fact, from 2019 to 2020, private and independent school enrolments rose by 1.7%, compared to the 0.8% increase for the school-age population. While seemingly small, this increase points to growth in the private sector. In fact, studies conducted on school choice in Ontario indicate that disadvantaged families tend to be more pro-choice because they feel underserved within the public system (Davies & Aurini, 2011).

While the decentralized nature of Canada’s education system means large-scale structural reforms are difficult to achieve, the general increase in private school enrollment suggests that pro-market reforms guided by neoliberalism have already started to weaken the trust people have in Canada’s standard public education systems. Moreover, from the divergence of public funding into private and independent schools in Alberta, BC, Manitoba, Quebec, and Saskatchewan to the promotion of school choice and decrease in public funding in provinces like Ontario, Alberta, and BC, financial aid for private education in Canada has been siphoned from the public sphere. This trend will only continue to further weaken Canada’s public education system.

Homogenous and Elite Spaces

As the school choice movement continues to gain momentum in Canada, there has been an increase in public demand for both the public and private systems to be more “responsive, effective, and efficient” (Bosetti, Van Pelt & Allison, 2017, p. 5). In response, all provinces have started to adopt more evidence-based reform agendas with accountability measures included in their quality assurance frameworks” (Bosetti, Van Pelt & Allison, 2017). While diploma exams and provincial assessments have already existed across Canada since the 1890s, the establishment of Alberta’s Achievement Testing Program in 1983 and the creation of Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office in 1996 among the administration of other forms of graduate assessments across Canada signifies a turn in the Canadian education system where performance indicators are fundamental to school choice (Allison, 2015). Currently, over one-third of Canadian families select alternatives to regular public schools with many citing academic achievements and specialized extracurriculars as reasons for their selection (Davies & Aurini, 2011).

This movement is concerning as selective public schools of choice founded on performance indicators have the potential to create homogenous student populations by segregating “children through the creation of value communities” (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 30). In fact, the emergence of a more competitive and selective public schooling system has already created a new hierarchy of “elite” students in Canada (Yoon, 2016). Alternative public schools and private schools that focus on academic rigor, these schools become “exclusive spaces where a select few can obtain exclusive cultural capital that enhances and elevates their educational and social standing” (Yoon, 2016, p. 376). In Vancouver, experimental schools which offer specialized instruction to its students known as mini schools have become “images and models of the most exceptional students” due to the recognition gained from “their high performance in school report cards and [...] district-wide standardized tests” (Yoon, 2016, p. 375).

Consequently, students who enroll in mini-schools see themselves as “academic elites” because of the reputation that these schools are exclusive places meant “for those who are high-achieving in school” (Yoon, 2016, p. 376). However, performance alone is not enough to gain access. Students who “aspire and are admitted into mini schools tend to come from advantaged backgrounds” (Yoon, 2016, p. 383). Thus, the aspirations of students who enroll in Vancouver’s mini-school are also a reflection of the “socialized practices of [their] advantaged social class rather than [the] natural individual qualities that help them advance” (Yoon, 2016, p. 383). Vancouver’s mini-schools are an example of how school choice in various Canadian provinces has created homogenous student populations where high-performing students from advantaged backgrounds gain access to exclusive and elite spaces (Yoon, 2016).

Reproduction of Social and Structural Inequalities

Critical reviews of school choice across Canada reflect that the privatization of education and injection of pro-market reforms have neither increased the quality, efficiency, nor accountability of Canada’s education system (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). On the contrary, market solutions that commodify education have seen the replication of social and structural inequalities within our schools. On average, “children of advantaged classes have more economic and cultural resources, perform better in school, have higher aspirations, and are more acquainted with the educational system” (Torche, 2005, p. 318). Moreover, the quality and prestige of the education attained also differs among children with different socioeconomic backgrounds with advantaged groups obtaining educational credentials that provide them with “enhanced opportunities for further attainment” (Torche, 2005, p. 318). Studies conducted on the impact of parental income on school choice also indicate that low-income families struggle with choosing schools far away from their homes because of the expenses associated with commuting (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). As a result, these parents select schools closer to their homes (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). In urban cities where social groups are divided by neighborhoods, “school choice is more likely to reproduce [social and structural] inequalities” (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017, p. 18). Unfortunately, this means the options for school choice differ across socioeconomic lines and the enhancement of both educational achievement and experiences are “limited to children of middle to upper-middle-class families” (Bosetti, 2004, p. 403).

Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh's (2017) study on enrollment in specialized art programs (SAP) in Toronto addresses this issue of social and structural inequalities within school choice policies. Their observations indicate that enrollment in SAPs is not "drawn equitably from across [the school board]" (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017, p. 21). Instead, enrollment is "disproportionately drawn from a handful of elementary schools" (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017, p. 21). Accordingly, SAPs in Toronto reflect one of the key problems of school choice where specialized schools "draw and serve students from specific segments of the population" (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017, p. 21). In a city like Toronto where economic segregation is significant, "the fact that most SAP students come from specific neighborhoods suggests that SAPs exacerbate rather than attenuate structural inequality" (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017, p. 21). The homogeneity of the SES and area of residence for SAP students suggests that SAP student populations do not consist of students who simply made similar academic and extracurricular choices but reveal the "hidden pathways that disproportionately lead students from some areas into privileged programs" (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017, p. 21).

Thus, school choice not only replicates social and structural inequalities but also exacerbates educational inequalities. Students who come from more affluent families tend to have more school choice options as affluent parents tend to have more knowledge regarding school choice as well as the ability to move to neighborhoods with higher-performing schools, that is if they were not already residing in the neighborhood already. While school choice advocates assert that an increase in school choice options can help meet the demands of Canada's diverse student body, evidence suggests that more affluent families are able to exercise a form of choice that lower-income families cannot.

Conclusion

Suggestions and Recommendations

Neoliberal influence and pro-market reforms have arisen in various forms across Canada despite the overwhelming support for public education in Canada. Studies conducted across provinces demonstrate that Canadian citizens view education as a public good and believe that government funding and regulations are necessary to ensure that our schools are not only meeting the diverse needs of Canadians but also accountable and providing quality education to our children (Neuman, 2018). Therefore, researchers and policymakers alike have the responsibility to ensure that school choice policies reflect the diverse needs of Canadian students without relying on pro-market reforms and school choice policies guided by neoliberalism as the default answer. The issue lies not in the provision of school choice, but in school choice policies guided by pro-market reforms. So, government intervention is necessary to balance individual rights with access to more opportunities, especially for the most marginalized and disadvantaged populations (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 27). In education, this means strengthening the public education system and providing avenues of choice where achieving equity and meeting diverse needs is the end goal as opposed to promoting competition. For provinces that offer to fund eligible private institutes, governments should be increasing access for the most disenfranchised by putting more funding into public and private programs in low SES areas, providing incentives to schools that diversify their enrollment, and offering transportation support for high-performing students who cannot afford to attend alternative schools outside of their catchment zones (Valenzuela et al., 2014). Finally, provincial policies must ensure that private and alternative schools increase access to education, instead of diverting them to create homogenous and exclusive spaces.

Moving Forward

Although the creation of federal guidelines to support provincial systems is impossible to achieve, the improvement and modification of provincial guidelines is possible. Provincial school choice policies must ensure that alternative schools do not become "competition" for standard public schools but serve as additional options for all students to

exercise their right to choose a school that meets their needs instead. For school choice to function equitably, “the general rule should be that while some students may be better off attending an alternative program, those students left behind should not be worse off” (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 139). As such, it is imperative that policymakers “ensure that mechanisms are in place to control choice through sufficient regulations, financial support, and services” (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 31). Ultimately, school choice policies should “enhance broader public education rather than threaten or undermine the public system” (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016, p. 139).

There is also a need for further research on the varying circumstances that would enable the de-commodification of education. Future research would benefit from investigating the policy processes and mechanisms that have been the most and least successful in meeting the diverse needs of Canadian students without exacerbating educational inequalities. In doing so, provinces can make improvements to their legislation on school choice. In conclusion, the modification of school choice policies previously guided by neoliberalism is necessary to create a more equitable education system. School choice must function as an avenue to offer a diverse range of equitable options both public and private for all students regardless of their background.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmine Pham: is a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). She is currently studying Educational Leadership and Policy in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. She holds a BEd in Secondary Education from the University of Alberta and an MEd in Educational Leadership and Policy with a specialization in Comparative, International, and Development Education from OISE. Her research interests include English language education, teacher development, native-speakerism, international education policies, culturally responsive teaching, critical race theory, anti-racist education, and gender socialization.