


Three Case Studies of the Language Used to Justify Recent Neoliberal and Neoconservative Curricular Reform

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Article abstract

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Three Case Studies of the Language Used to Justify Recent Neoliberal and Neoconservative Curricular Reform

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Abstract

The overarching objective of this study is to become more closely attuned to the politics of curriculum by identifying the discursive practices employed by governments to position curricular reform. In particular, this analysis aims to show how the twinning of neoliberalism and neoconservatism has served to justify shifts in curriculum at three North American sites in recent years. Further, using rhetorical analysis as a form of critical discourse analysis, the study demonstrates how discursive tools are used to advance neoliberal and neoconservative values under the guise of a taken-for-granted sense of education's purpose and role. Rather than an analysis of curriculum documents as texts, this study focuses on government rhetoric describing the rationale for curricular reform so as to better recognize which values are gaining formal power, offer clarity into what is oppressed or ignored, and, ultimately, provide insights into where resistance might be aimed.

Keywords: neoliberalism; neoconservatism; curricular reform

Introduction

Curriculum reform is not a neutral and apolitical process. As Pinar and Bowers (1992) summarized, concerted efforts to bring a critical perspective and highlight the politics of curriculum began in the 1970s. At the time, scholars focused on reproduction theory, wherein schools served as sites to support capitalism's economic imperatives and act as conduits to reproduce class structures seen in society more broadly. The academic literature regarding the politics of curriculum during this period also foregrounds the importance of ideology. Pinar and Bowers (1992) described how, in the early 1980s, scholars developed resistance theory, which drew attention to social facets and individual agency in resistance to dominant structures. Resistance theory, sometimes seen as linked with reproduction theory (Apple, 1982), emerged because scholars believed reproduction theory alone was limited by its heavy emphasis on the economy and a lack of consideration for individual agency. During this period, concepts of hegemony and hidden curriculum became important elements of the politics of curriculum literature. Further evolution in the literature occurred by the mid-1980s, with a focus on political and pedagogical practices and their impact on race, gender, and class (Pinar & Bowers, 1992). Drawing on this foundation, and of particular relevance to our study, is the writing of Michael W. Apple (1991), who noted, "rather than being a neutral enterprise, schooling is through and through political" (p. 279). Apple (e.g., 2001b, 2005, 2017) also highlighted the decades-long, continued political influence on curriculum and education reform in the US through an alliance he describes as conservative modernization. Combining neoliberals, neoconser-

vatives, authoritarian populists, and a specific segment of the professional and managerial new middle class, the alliance finds common ground with legislation that has increased marketization through school choice, school voucher plans, and increased privatization, as well as increased government control over curriculum through the standardization of curriculum and standardized testing. One outcome is the generation of data, which then form the basis for supporting the aforementioned reforms.

Internationally, scholars have studied various manifestations of curricular reform that have an explicit or implicit political agenda. Savage and O'Connor (2014) traced decades of curricular reform across the US and Australia and noted that, since the 1980s, there has been a concerted effort to establish national curriculum standards to become economically competitive in the global market. The drive to develop standardized curriculum has led to the increase of scripted curriculum. For instance, Hodge (2017) described how the "Curriculum to Classroom" paradigm implemented in Queensland, Australia, provides prescribed lesson plans and programs for teachers to deliver curriculum, thereby diminishing teacher professionalism. Castro et al. (2023) detailed a similar situation in the US where there has been a rise in prepackaged, standardized curriculum to better align with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Common Core State Standards' (CCSS) accountability mandates. They noted that such initiatives limit social justice efforts. Neumann et al. (2020) described how the neoliberal and neoconservative movements exert influence on recent curricular reforms in England. The authors' study focuses on the English Baccalaureate program at the high school level and found that neoconservative influences have produced narrowed curriculum and subject hierarchies. The curriculum prioritizes core subjects (i.e., English, math, science, history) leading to the reduction in time, attention, and offerings of the arts, social sciences, and vocational subjects. The overall effect is a curriculum that is less responsive to student needs. This trend is similar to Lynch and McGarr's (2016) study of Irish curriculum reform, which also highlighted how neoliberal ideals have produced subject hierarchies, with an emphasis on the relationship between economic needs and the prioritization of mathematics education.

In the US, one of the major political influences in curriculum reform appears in the drive to develop a standardized curriculum that highlights neoliberal and neoconservative goals. Au (2016), building on Apple's conservative modernization concept, described how the professional and managerial new middle-class segment has had a growing influence within the alliance. Led by actors such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and private entity education conglomerate Pearson, the growing influence of the professional middle class is evident in the development of the CCSS. Au (2016) highlighted that the drive to develop standards and measure them against standardized tests increases the use of data analytics. As such, CCSS, backed by data gathered from testing, has created a market that can be best serviced by the expertise of this group. The data analytics become the basis for arguments for particular types of curricular reform that are then further entrenched through the development of textbooks and classroom materials. Neoliberals are satisfied because the CCSS allows for increased marketization of education while neoconservatives are supportive because the CCSS represents their desire for rigor and state control of curriculum. While the managerial class has been able to increase their power, there has also been a rise in neoconservative and authoritarian populist influence. The rise in neoconservatism and authoritarian populism, focused on preserving Western knowledge and its traditions (Apple, 2005a), is evident in recent curricular reforms that seek to exclude any concepts that may call those traditions into question. For example, López et al. (2021) described how, in 2021, 26 states across the US brought forward legislation looking to ban curriculum that fell under 'divisive concepts' including Critical Race Theory (CRT). The authors note that these bans affect employee training programs, K-12 curriculum, and student activities. They found that "such legislation clearly requires that schools promote the story of the United States in inaccurately positive terms, ignoring documented historical and contemporary injustices and inequities" (López et al., 2021, p. 9). As Samuels et al. (2023) highlighted, 44 states—as of February 2023—have passed or are trying to pass anti-CRT or related legislation. Overall, the established and proposed legislation seeks to restrict or ban curriculum, texts, and instruction related to topics of racism, sexism, and gender identity (Polikoff et al., 2022). In Florida, legislation has been passed that bans classroom instruction on sexuality and gender identity in kindergarten to Grade 3 (Polikoff et al., 2022). In addition, as per a research report by PEN America, the 2022-2023 school year saw 3,362 school and library book bans (Meehan et al., 2023), with a particular target on "books on race or racism or featuring characters of color, as well as books with LGBTQ+ characters" (Meehan et al., 2023, para. 4).

In the Canadian context, recent research reveals aspects of political influence on curriculum reform.

For instance, Winton (2013) highlighted the neoliberal-neoconservative trends in a character education policy document in a Greater Toronto, Ontario-area school board. The author described how the policy document sought to achieve objectives such as improving academic outcomes, school safety, and employability by explicitly teaching attributes rooted in neoconservative notions of traditional values and pedagogy. Butler and Milley (2020) analyzed four updates to citizenship education at the high school level in Ontario over a 20-year time frame (1999-2018). They found each revision placed less focus on active, collective civic participation and more emphasis on individualized responsibility and skills needed for a globalized workforce. Miles (2020) highlighted how recent revisions to the social studies curriculum in British Columbia include content addressing historical injustices. These reforms, however, mainly serve the government's political agenda to demonstrate to constituents its commitment to social justice while leaving systemic issues resulting from colonialism largely unresolved. In Ontario, the 2015 Health curriculum included updates such as Grade 1 students learning about proper terms for genitalia as well as Grade 3 students learning about gender identity (Bialystok, 2019). These changes were not sustained. The sections of the curriculum devoted to sex education were rescinded and a reversion to 1998 standards for students in Grades 1-8 was instituted as soon as the newly elected Conservative government assumed power of the legislature in 2018 (Bialystok, 2019). Bialystok (2019) noted that many conservative parents and religious groups, opposed to the health curriculum changes, ensured that the changes were a hot topic issue during the election campaign. A revamped health curriculum released by the conservative government in 2019 includes proper genitalia terms in Grade 1 while specific curriculum on gender identity begins in Grade 8 (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2019c).

While curriculum has always been a reflection of the political zeitgeist, we note that, in recent years, debates about certain curriculum topics have been a front and centre focus of political discussion and have fallen along partisan lines (Polikoff et al., 2022). In light of the ongoing politicized nature of curriculum debates, our study aims to become more closely attuned to the politics of curriculum by identifying the discursive practices employed by governments to position curricular revision. In particular, this analysis aims to show how the twinning of neoliberalism and neoconservatism has served to justify shifts in curriculum at three North American sites in recent years. Further, using rhetorical analysis as a form of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study demonstrates how discursive tools are used to advance neoliberal and neoconservative values under the guise of a taken-for-granted sense of education's purpose and role. Rather than an analysis of curriculum documents as texts, this study focuses on government rhetoric describing the rationale for curricular reform so as to better recognize which values are gaining formal power, offer clarity into what is oppressed or ignored, and, ultimately, provide insights into where resistance might be aimed.

Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by neoliberal and neoconservative theory and its influence in education.

Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism

Neoliberalism is rooted in the adherence to and application of market-based logics and practices to ostensibly benefit everyone's welfare. While neoliberalism seeks to minimize government intervention, it also sees a particular role for government. The minimal involvement of government is designed to implement and support policies and legislation that promote and strengthen free markets, rights to private property, and free trade (Harvey, 2007). In this way, neoliberalism prioritizes the entrepreneurial spirit (Harvey, 2007). Therefore, neoliberalism and the application of market rationality encompass economic, legal, and political policies that promote market-based logics including privatization, deregulation, and the dismantling of the welfare state (Callison & Manfredi, 2020). The rise of neoliberalism can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s with the administrations of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (Harvey, 2007). In Canada, neoliberalism started in the 1980s with the MacDonald Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada (Clark, 2002). In its ascendancy since the 1970s, neoliberalism has become a totalizing governmentality (Brown, 2015, 2018; Foucault, 2008; Peters & Green, 2021). It is a rationality that economizes every aspect of human life (Brown, 2015, 2018), including social and political agendas (Brown, 2020; Callison & Manfredi, 2020). More specifically, neoliberalism promotes the idea that all issues are best addressed if citizens view themselves in strictly human capital

terms that individualize responsibility and promote continuous competition (Brown, 2015).

Neoconservatism, on the other hand, is rooted in the preservation of a morality paradigm premised on a romanticized past (Apple, 2005a, 2006). Neoconservatives believe that society in the West is unravelling. They seek to restore social order—back to a time when things worked—through the promotion of “‘correct’ knowledge, norms, and values” (Apple, 2006, p. 21). The mechanism for the promotion of these values is, in their eyes, strong government control (Apple, 2005a). As Stanley (2007) detailed, neoconservatives believe that the crisis in social order can be ascribed to cultural relativism and nihilism. Thus, restoration efforts by neoconservatives focus on anti-multiculturalism reforms and anti-immigration sentiment (Apple, 2005a). As Brown (2020) highlighted, these moral values are premised on white, patriarchal, Christian traditions that challenge principles of social justice, and entrench economic, racial, gender, and class inequalities.

Notably, while neoliberalism and neoconservatism developed as distinct rationalities, there is increasing evidence that neoconservatism is being taken up in tandem with governing neoliberal hegemonies. Brown (2020) described the bringing together of these logics in her analysis of Friedrich Hayek’s articulation of neoliberalism. Brown (2020) described Hayek’s model as a markets-and-morals paradigm where market-based logics are applied to all aspects of life and upheld by traditional morality in order to ensure freedom. Brown (2018) found that elements of neoconservatism are folded into neoliberalism based on Hayek’s claim of “traditional moral values” (p. 65), which are rooted in heterosexual and patriarchal family norms and, in the West, based on Christianity. Apple (2005a) also addressed the neoliberal and neoconservative alliance; he remarked on its inherent contradictions. For instance, he described how neoliberals strive for less government intervention, while neoconservatives want just the opposite. Apple (2005a) argued, however, that by pursuing the development of common standards, standardized curriculum, and standardized testing, both factions are appeased. Neoliberals accept greater government control through standardization efforts, but gain opportunities for the marketization of schooling. In this way, neoliberalism continues to evolve to maintain its dominance. As mentioned above, the neoliberal agenda has extended the notion of personal freedom and privatization from the economic to all facets of society to the detriment of most people. Most broadly, neoliberal and neoconservative trends have led to the ongoing hollowing out of the middle class and a concomitant concentration of resources and power in the hands of fewer individuals (Stiglitz, 2013). The neoliberal “Frankenstein” (Brown, 2018, p. 60) that has evolved to encompass neoconservative ideology also exacerbates inequality of the historically disenfranchised, including people of color, women, and the LGBTQ+ community (Brown, 2018).

As noted in the discussion of curriculum reform, education is not immune to neoliberal and neoconservative influence (Apple, 2012, 2017; Biesta, 2019; Bourassa, 2020). In addition to curriculum revisions, Canadian and American governments have focused on developing a suite of education policies based on competitiveness, privatization, and accountability (Apple, 2001a; Pinto, 2012). One policy that emphasizes competitiveness is standardized testing (Apple, 2000; Ricci, 2004). The emphasis on competition then engenders assessment policy that ties learning to economic outcomes (Parker, 2019). Apple (2005b) described how privatization and marketization undermine public education through vouchers, tax credit plans, and charter schools. In education policy, the marriage between neoliberalism and neoconservatism is best exemplified through the tenet of accountability. In a similar vein to Apple (2005a), Biesta (2004) noted the current state of accountability in education is a peculiar one in that it combines marketized individualism (neoliberalism) with central control (neoconservatism), exemplified through standardized curriculum and standardized testing. As a result, accountability in education has shifted from a political relationship concerned with the common good to an economic relationship. Lastly, just as in the broader macrocosm of society, neoliberalism has increased inequality in education (Apple, 2012, 2017; Biesta, 2019; Bourassa, 2020). For example, the push to marketize the school system negatively impacts students from culturally diverse and socio-economically disadvantaged families (Parker, 2019; Lubienski & Yoon, 2017). These policies favor middle- and upper-class students and families who have the time, resources, and social capital to navigate a marketized system (Apple, 2001b).

Methodology

“Politics, as everybody knows has for a long time ceased to be the science of good government and has become, instead, the art of conquering and maintaining power” (Bianciardi as cited in Virno, 2004, p. 57).

This research engages critical discourse analysis to explore the positioning of three cases of curricular reform in North American jurisdictions in recent years. CDA, drawing commonly from James Gee, Norman Fairclough, and Gunther Kress, is notably varied in both animating objectives and in practice (Rogers, 2011). In this study, we work with an approach to CDA as conceptualized by Fairclough, who emphasized the dialectical character of the relationship between social change and discourse (Fairclough, 2007, 2013a) and foregrounded the importance of language in propagating capitalist systems (Fairclough & Graham, 2002). As Fairclough (2013b) noted, CDA is *critical*. That is, it is aimed at providing insight into systems or structures that cause harm, injustice, or alienation by showing how language, or discourse, can engender support or replication of such systems. Put more simply, this research approach is emblematic of the “view that changing the world for the better depends upon being able to explain how it has come to be the way it is” (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 10). In a time of global, neoliberal capitalism, we argue that policies—and, in this case, curricular reforms—take on the character described by Bianciardi (as cited in Virno, 2004, p. 57). Governments often undertake policies or reforms with a view to maintaining power, and with the inflection of market-based ideologies. CDA is a methodologically suitable means of engaging with the nexus of these expressions of power, at the site of policy, discourse, and social impact. Accordingly, CDA has been employed in diverse applications to study education policy (Rogers, 2004) and curriculum reform (Fore, 1998; Kosińska, 2022; Simmie, 2014). In recent years, scholars have employed CDA to examine school policies on behaviour (Colorado & Janzen, 2021), internationalization (Bell et al., 2023), and parent-school relationships (Cranston & Crook, 2020). In addition, a robust and growing body of literature now employs CDA to interrogate neoliberal trends in education, including Babaii and Sheikhi’s (2018) study of English teaching materials, and several studies featured in Sturges’ (2015) edited collection,

Neoliberalizing Educational Reform.

In keeping with this study’s goal of illuminating neoliberal and neoconservative influences in education, and with a particular focus on how governments position reforms in an ongoing pursuit of power, we employ a variation of CDA known as the rhetorical analysis approach (Winton, 2013). Broadly, rhetorical analysis, derived from argumentation studies, offers insight into the persuasive characteristics of speech. Leach (2000) provides a useful background for working with rhetorical analysis in the social sciences. She notes that rhetorical analysis comprises both rhetorical situation and parts of rhetoric. The rhetorical situation identifies the exigence and audience, or context for the persuasion. It also describes how the speech act is temporally oriented. That is, the rhetorical situation can include debates about past events, discussions about the qualities of current events, or deliberations about future decisions and actions. The parts of rhetoric include: invention, which is concerned with where arguments come from; disposition, which addresses how discourse is organized; style, which is the rather ephemeral quality linking form to content; memory, how well the speaker retrieves their content; and delivery, or style of address (Leach, 2000). In this analysis, we first establish the rhetorical situation, and then focus exclusively on invention as a way of concentrating efforts at the intersection of where the arguments originate and the undergirding influences of neoliberalism. Invention can be analyzed along the lines of logos, pathos, and ethos. Bauer (2000) wrote,

Logos, pathos and ethos are the “three musketeers” of persuasion ... Logos refers to drawing conclusions from premises and observations; pathos stirs the emotions of the audience; and ethos refers to display of the speaker’s own authority and claim to fame. (p. 142)

By analyzing texts along these lines, we are able to contextualize the rhetorical context or situation, of the curricular reform as well as analyze the rhetorical tools that politicians used to appeal to the public. Using rhetorical analysis, the study was guided by the following questions: 1) How does the government position the need for curriculum reform (rhetorical situation)? 2) What are the discursive tools or practices that allow for the reforms to gain support (rhetorical appeals)?

We have purposefully selected three cases of curricular reform that are recent and that demonstrate the political framing of curricular reform as presented by the governments leading the changes, as well as the spectrum of engagement with neoliberal and neoconservative values. The first case study is of

Alberta, Canada, where the United Conservative Party led reforms for elementary curriculum. The second case study is of Ontario, Canada, where the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party introduced curricular revisions in elementary and secondary curricula. The third case study is of Florida, where we examine the curricular reforms brought about by a Republican government.

To generate data sets for each case, we searched government websites and employed Google News searches on “curriculum” plus the terms “Ontario,” “Alberta,” and “Florida,” as relevant. Once we had a block of artefacts for each district, we culled only documents that were authored by the sitting government or by representatives of the sitting government. For each of the searches, we limited results to English artefacts from 2019 onward. In the majority, these data included speeches, press releases, and quotes by members of the government in newspaper articles. For Alberta, we sought examples of government voice, including artefacts housed on the *K-6 Curriculum Renewal* website from the Alberta Ministry of Education (AME) (e.g., AME, 2022a; AME, 2022b), press releases, and speeches made by the Minister of Education. For Ontario, we drew on the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) curriculum website (2022), press releases (e.g., OME, 2019b) and quotes from the Premier and the Minister of Education. Finally, for Florida, we collected government-authored presentations, speeches or quotes from politicians in news articles, and Governor’s Press Office (GPO) releases. One of the more influential texts for the Florida case, we identified, was a speech delivered by then Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran at Hillsdale College. This text is significant not simply because of the length of the speech act, and the influence of the speaker, but also because, in the months that have followed, the Government of Florida has become more explicit about the role Hillsdale College plays in shaping Florida’s education reform. As detailed in a profile in *The New Yorker* (Green, 2023), Hillsdale is seen by conservatives as a “shining city on a hill” (Green, 2023, para. 3) and in recent years the college has begun exporting its curriculum to K-12 schools across the US. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has commented that he would hire alumni from the school because “they have the foundations necessary to be able to be helpful in pursuing conservative policies” (Green, 2023, para. 1) and DeSantis’ Chief of Staff has explicitly stated that their government would like to transform a Florida public liberal arts school into a “Hillsdale of the South” (Green, 2023, para. 1).

The data were read broadly, coded, and analyzed thematically using rhetorical analysis with four main coding themes: First, what is the rationale for the curricular revision or rhetorical situation/context of the curricular reform? Second, third, and fourth, in a similar vein to Winton (2013, 2018), what are the discursive strategies exploiting logos, ethos, and pathos? As such, when reading the texts or listening to speeches, we noted language that appealed to rationality (logos), trust in the speaker (ethos), and emotion (pathos). We coded phrases, key words, and whole sections according to how they reflect neoliberal and/or neoconservative influence, and how they act to persuade the audience.

Findings

Our findings are thematized according to the two central questions of our critical inquiries, focusing on how the government positioned the rhetorical situation and drew on particular rhetorical appeals to generate public support for their curricular reforms.

Rhetorical Situation

A rhetorical situation comprises the context for persuasive speech, as well as the audience and the temporal orientation of the deliberations (Leach, 2000). The discourse for policy debates in general, and in each of the cases of curricular reform discussed below, is largely characterised as deliberative rhetoric, which seeks to inform future decision-making or courses of action. The audience for the three cases of curricular reform rhetoric is the voting public who elected the governments to power and who will determine whether that government retains control in the next election. The audience can be distilled to, not just the general voting public, but particularly parents who have concerns about the quality of their children’s education. In the case of the Hillsdale College speech, delivered by then Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran, the audience extended beyond state boundaries and indicates the nationwide ambitions of both Ron DeSantis (who went on to run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2023) and the conservative movement in US education more broadly.

The exigence, or need for curricular revision, can be rooted in any range of social, political, or eco-

conomic challenges or opportunities. In the case of the three curricular reforms analysed here, the context is dominantly shaped by an existing discourse of neoliberalism and capitalism, as well as by the material conditions neoliberal capitalism has produced. In 2006, Apple made the following observation:

many of the rightist policies now taking centre stage in education ... embody a tension between a neoliberal emphasis on “market values” on the one hand and a neoconservative attachment to “traditional values” on the other. From the former perspective, the state must be minimised, preferably by setting private enterprise loose; from the latter, the state needs to be strong in teaching “correct” knowledge, norms, and values. From both, Western society is falling apart, in part because schools do not do either of these. (p. 21)

As Apple suggests, neoliberal and neoconservative influences are growing more entrenched in education, and our analysis of the rhetorical situation of each of the three districts finds evidence of these values in the governments’ positioning of the rationale for curriculum change. The dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative values means that other facets of social or political need are elided. That is, in each of these cases, when these governments call for curricular revision, they do not foreground support of social justice, reduction of inequality, sustainability of planetary life, or cultivation of democratic society.

In Alberta, multiple documents on K-12 curricular reform highlight both traditional knowledge as an expression of neoconservatism and economic competitiveness as a function of the neoliberal economy. The government suggests that curriculum change is needed to address the demand for “foundational knowledge more than ever” to “succeed in a changing economy” and in a “rapidly changing world” (AME, 2020b, p. 3). In almost all discussions of the renewed curriculum, the government invokes the theme of job futures and economic success. Alberta’s *K to 6 Curriculum Renewal* website describes the need to reform math in economic terms. They seek to be competitive in markets, particularly STEM-related markets, noting, “Alberta’s students need to be competitive in the emerging science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields if they are to participate in these job markets” (AME, 2022b, para. 2). In additional reforms for financial literacy, the government contextualizes good curriculum in terms of capitalist success and economic responsibility. For example, when viewing the *Organizing Ideas* section of the Social Studies curriculum, financial literacy is positioned as “Responsible choices to build a thriving life for self, family, and society are supported by knowledge, skills, and understanding of earning, investing, spending, borrowing, and financial security” (LearnAlberta, n.d.).

In Ontario, the rhetorical situation echoes that of Alberta, in that it establishes the need for curriculum to return to traditional values and to support economic goals. Math reforms are linked with a “back to basics” approach that will ensure “everyday” skills are acquired by students (OME, 2019). The Premier of Ontario (OME, 2020a) and the Minister of Education (OME, 2020a) reinforce the rhetorical situation in their speeches, which foreground a return to traditional pedagogical methods rooted in rote learning using terms such as “back to basics” and “everyday” skills. As in Alberta, where the government refers to “foundational knowledge,” Ontario’s curricular reform draws on traditional notions of schooling and education aligned with accreditation and economic contributions to society. In Ontario, more than the neoconservative language seen in the two other jurisdictions, a significant emphasis is placed on developing the economic rationale, even when other societal benefits could be named. For example, science and technology curriculum reform positions cures for cancer as an economic asset:

From finding new cures for cancer, to space robotics that reach new planets, and the development of artificial intelligence and technologies that are changing the economy, Ontario’s new science and technology curriculum is focused on giving young people the skills to think critically, dream boldly and chart new pathways forward for our economy. (OME, 2022a, para. 5)

In Florida, some of the rhetorical context is rooted in both accountability discourse and in inter-state competition. For example, in Commissioner of Education Corcoran’s Hillsdale College speech, he rationalizes the need for reform in Florida based on low National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. Corcoran explains that the reforms were needed because only 39 percent of Grade 4 students passed the NAEP (Hillsdale College, 2021, 11:25); this outcome is despite the fact that, as Corcoran

himself notes, the Republicans have overseen state education in Florida since 1998 (Hillsdale College, 2021, 22:56). He speaks about “dangerous” people who he equates to those students whose parents failed to read to them for at least 20 minutes a day and who received a 1 or 2 on the grade 3 state literacy exam (Hillsdale College, 2021, 12:08). In Florida, more than either of the two Canadian sites, curricular and pedagogical reforms are contextualized through the lens of traditional values. For example, Corcoran framed the entirety of his speech around the traditional ideas of a nuclear family and a two-parent home, returning to the theme to justify conservative values. The theme of neoconservatism also features heavily in justifications of Civic Education reform. The speeches and press releases place a heavy emphasis on nationalism, American exceptionalism, and an explicit call to champion capitalism so that Floridian students know “about the evil of things like communism and socialism” (DeSantis quoted in Sokol, 2021, para. 4).

Rhetorical Appeals

In this section of the findings, and with the context for how the government positioned these curricular reforms discussed above, we go on to detail the discursive tools used to develop public support for the government’s agenda for curricular reform.

Canadian Cases

Logos. After establishing a context for curricular reform, the government employs persuasive speech, including appeals to reason, to position its solutions for educational concerns as the most rational and appropriate. In Alberta, for example, appeals to reason are based on entrenched neoconservative notions of curriculum and pedagogy with an emphasis on traditional approaches. The *Ministerial Order on Student Learning* suggests that curriculum reforms will allow students to develop mastery in “foundational, subject-specific content” (AME, 2020a, para. 4) and “practical skills” (AME, 2020a, para. 9). The Ministerial Order goes on to suggest that “Knowledge Development” will be equated with familiarity and appreciation of “the great works and ideas of world history” with a focus on “cultures and institutions that have shaped the history of Canada” (AME, 2020a, para. 4). The section on “Character Development” describes how students will recognize truth “through exposure to the best and most enduring art and writing across different time periods and places” (AME, 2020a, para. 6). Though the terminology about “enduring art and writing” is ambiguous and subjective, this language has traditionally referred to Western, colonial narratives and the Western canon. Using terms like “great,” “best” and “enduring” appeals to neoconservative ideology because it provides a justification for a return to the way things were, as well as notions of higher standards and common culture. The discourse on traditional values and preservation of old ways tends to be mirrored in a preference for traditional expressions of pedagogy. In substantiating the revisions to the math curriculum, for example, the government describes a “renewed prioritization of tried-and-true best practices as seen in leading jurisdictions” (AME, 2022b, para. 3). One of the explicit strategies mentioned is rote learning of multiplication tables (AME, 2022b). Overall, a return to traditional values focused on teaching “foundational knowledge” and “essential knowledge and skills” is highlighted by the Minister of Education in her letter *Seeking feedback on draft K to 6 curriculum*:

As the minister of education, my role has been guided by a simple phrase: do the right thing for the right reason. I know we have taken the right steps with the kindergarten to Grade 6 (K to 6) draft curriculum, and put Alberta students on a path to success. After years of declining student academic performance in literacy and math, the new curriculum will renew the importance of teaching foundational knowledge across all subjects to better prepare students for the future. Alberta’s new K to 6 curriculum focuses on teaching essential knowledge and skills that students need. We need to make sure our children do not fall behind and we can ensure this by refreshing a curriculum that has not been updated in decades (LaGrange, 2021, para. 1).

The letter captures neoconservative sentiment and notions of high standards achieved through a return to both traditional pedagogy and traditional values. The government’s solution to perceived de-

clining academic performance and the risk of falling behind is a revised curriculum that renews focus on teaching essential, foundational knowledge. The Alberta government also uses appeals to reason to emphasize a kind of taken-for-granted argument for curricular response to neoliberal economic imperatives. For instance, the Alberta government describes the need for mathematics curriculum reform in order to compete in STEM-related job markets (AME, 2022b). Further, they place emphasis on ensuring the curriculum allows students to demonstrate “competence in managing personal finance” (AME, 2020a, para. 4) and demonstrate “an understanding of economic development and entrepreneurship” (AME, 2020a, para. 7).

The government also emphasizes curriculum reform that focuses on practical skills to prepare “students for success in the real world” (AME, 2022c). “Real world success” is aligned with schooling as accreditation for the purpose of job attainment and supporting the economy. As such, the government highlights practical skills centered on financial literacy and computer coding. Overall, the Alberta government implies that their curricular reforms, guided by neoliberal and neoconservative ideology, are the best solutions for better education by suggesting that these are unquestioned best practices: “The updated curriculum is also aligned with top-performing jurisdictions, both within Canada and internationally, and those with knowledge-rich curriculums” (LaGrange, 2022, para. 3). This statement reflects the competition mantra supported by neoliberalism and the “high standards” discourse that is linked to “tried and true” practices and rigor sought by neoconservatism. It also reflects the taken-for-granted sense that these neoconservative and neoliberal reforms are common sense solutions.

In Ontario, similar terms are used to evoke appeals to reason. The government does so by twinning neoliberal economic competitiveness with neoconservative traditional notions. When launching the revised math curriculum, the Premier of Ontario states:

I made a promise to parents that we would fix the broken education system we inherited, get back to basics, and teach our children the math fundamentals they need for lifelong success... Today, our government is delivering on that promise with the first-ever math curriculum in Canada for Grades 1-8 that includes the teaching of coding and financial literacy, both critical skills that will help our students prepare for and succeed in the modern world and in the modern workforce. (OME, 2020a, para. 3)

The government positions these changes as the most rational solutions to the “problems” identified in the rhetorical situation by continuing to employ neoliberal and neoconservative values. They tie curricular goals unquestioningly to neoliberal economic imperatives (i.e., modern workforce) and aver that these goals are best achieved through neoconservative approaches to essential knowledge rooted in traditional ways of learning (i.e., recall of number facts). Similar to Alberta’s appeals to neoconservative reason, the Ontario government states that there is a need to go “back to basics” (OME, 2019b; OME, 2020a) because students lack “everyday math” skills (OME, 2020a). The government argues that this plan will solve the issue of students “still struggling to meet provincial math standards” based on Ontario’s standardized test scores (OME, 2019b). They describe their “back to basics” strategy as prioritizing “fundamentals” (OME, 2020a) by putting “a focus on fundamental math concepts and skills, such as learning and recalling number facts” (OME, 2020a, para. 4). In addition, in a more neoliberal appeal to reason, and once again in congruence with Alberta, the Ontario government highlights the teaching of coding and financial literacy as “critical skills” added to their math curriculum reform so that students are prepared for and “succeed in the modern world and in the modern workforce” (OME, 2020a, para. 3). By identifying coding and financial literacy as “critical skills,” the government positions these curriculum reforms as common-sense changes that support a taken-for-granted desirable objective of education. They also equate “critical” skills with the rather limited purview of economic outcomes, rather than outcomes for a healthier life, a more sustainable planetary existence, or improved participation as citizens.

Ethos. If a government provides a taken-for-granted sense of their solutions by employing logos, they develop a sense of trust or credibility in themselves as authors of the changes by drawing on ethos. This is front and centre in Alberta’s United Conservative Party (UCP) platform, where they position themselves as fiscally responsible stewards, job creators, and guardians of services like health care and education. They position their platform as common sense in contrast with the left-leaning New Dem-

ocratic Party, who they accuse of making decisions based on ideology (UCP, 2020). The UCP (2020) claims they will show the world that Alberta is “open for business again” (p. 9). In keeping with these political positions, the Alberta government developed a website, *LearnAlberta*, which is a resource for parents and guardians to learn more about the new curriculum. The language on this site reveals that the UCP aims to reinforce trust in their position by drawing on ties between math reforms and the economy. The math *Subject Overview* ends by highlighting how “studying and mastering mathematics can lead to jobs in computer science, construction, artificial intelligence, teaching, engineering, and many other fields” (LearnAlberta, 2022a, para. 2). The same is found when describing the new science curriculum. The science *Subject Overview* introductory section states “studying science equips students with the skills needed to evaluate information they encounter every day and make evidence-informed decisions. It can lead to careers in research, medicine, computer science, geology, engineering, astronomy, agriculture, and more” (LearnAlberta, 2022b, para. 3). One of the main updates to the curriculum that the Alberta government highlights is the explicit incorporation of financial literacy. Here, financial literacy is described in consumerist terms, which is in accordance with the UCP’s political commitments. The government states “Students will learn, in age-appropriate ways, that money has value and allows them to purchase things they need or want” (AME, 2022c). The government also anchors their messages in trustworthiness by linking the curriculum to similarly minded educational organizations. This includes: the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education (CFEE), whose vision is “every Canadian has the capability and opportunity to build a successful economic future” (CFEE, n.d., About Us section); for-profit enterprise Enriched Academy, whose mission is “we make financial freedom accessible to everyone” (Enriched Academy, n.d., About Us section); and Junior Achievement Southern Alberta (JASA), which is a part of the “world’s largest NGO dedicated to educating young people about business” (JASA, n.d., Home Page section). The government positions these partnerships as enhancing student financial knowledge and training which will contribute to their future and the economy (AME, 2022e):

Students are our future entrepreneurs, innovators and creators. Understanding essential concepts such as income, expenses, interest, investing, saving and taxes will set them up for success and help them prosper in today’s changing world. This investment into financial literacy programming will give Alberta’s next generation the much-needed financial knowledge and skills for personal and professional success. (AME, 2022e, para. 2)

The overt declarations to serving the economic imperative function as a feedback loop: the government makes promises to voters based on neoconservative values and neoliberal goals and then ties policies, including shifts in curriculum, to those promises. This serves to both build the government’s credibility when in power and to shore up trust in the government for the future.

The Ontario government employs ethos to persuade the public that the government is a credible expert in their curricular reform decisions, especially for the positioning of both math and science curriculum reforms. Specifically, the Ontario government situates curricular reform in neoliberal economic terms to build trust with its constituents. The Ontario government positions itself as a trustworthy fiscal steward of the province by claiming to have a window into future economic conditions. Their focus on establishing trust premised on economic imperatives is captured by a provincial rebranding initiative where they call themselves “Ontario’s Government for the People” (OME, 2019a) and includes a slogan for the province: “Open for Business” (OME, 2019a, para. 3). This business-forward mindset grounds the government’s claims to legitimacy in curricular reform documents as well. In *Ontario Introduces New Math Curriculum for Elementary Students*, the government claims to better prepare students for economic success five times using terms such as “jobs of tomorrow” and “jobs of the future” (OME, 2020a). In the news release, *Ontario Modernizing School Science Curriculum*, reference to the updated curriculum addressing job skills and/or economic needs is made at least ten times using terms like “job skills,” “economy” and “entrepreneurship” (OME, 2022a). The new math and science curriculum documents also espouse the need for entrepreneurship, stating, “An entrepreneurial mindset understands the importance of building and scaling ideas for sustainable growth” (OME, 2020b, p. 40; OME, 2022b, p. 38). The government suggests that they have insights into the future economic conditions of the province and that they are in the best position to revise curriculum in order to bring learning goals into alignment with economic forecasts. This includes aspects that are almost impossible to predict, like the role of en-

trepreneurship and job stability. The statements position students as human capital to compete in a global world. They also, ironically, brace for the volatility and precariousness inherent in market-based logics by positioning education reform as helping to offset recessions, corrections, and lay-offs by explicitly acknowledging the need for job flexibility and career re-orientations. The Ontario government attempts to position itself as trustworthy, working to make sure students are successful in a global economy and doing so by identifying solutions to a perceived current crisis and to impending turmoil by positioning neoliberal economic rationality as the panacea.

A more recent curriculum reform, effective September 2024, mandates that Ontario high school students earn a Grade 9 or 10 Technological Education credit to graduate. The government describes the new graduation requirement as a measure to address the labour shortage and provide a competitive advantage to Ontario students as they embark on a future career. Minister of Education Stephen Lecce states:

I am proud to announce another step forward to ensure all students learn the critical skills necessary to succeed and get a good paying job... By requiring students to take at least one Technological Education credit in high school, we are opening up doors and creating new pathways to good jobs in STEM and the skilled trades. All students will benefit from a greater emphasis on hands-on learning experiences and technical skills in the classroom so they can graduate with a competitive advantage in this country. (OME, 2023, para. 2)

Again, ethos is linked to the future of work. The government implies that the public can be confident in their decision to add a technological education credit because it meets an anticipated market need. They aver this addition will make Ontario students more competitive and financially successful.

Pathos. Critics of neoconservatism and neoliberalism in education note these movements are often underpinned by sentiments of fear. Giroux (2005) suggested that neoliberalism creates “a culture of permanent insecurity and fear” (p. 10). Apple (2017) described how neoconservative influences in education reform are often guided by fear of the “Other” (p. 150). Biesta (2017) argued that fear of being left behind plays a significant role in neoliberal reforms of standardization, measurement, and accountability. In the Alberta government texts, they use the phrases “rapidly-changing world” (AME, 2020a), “preparing students for success in the real world” (AME, 2022c), “after years of declining student academic performance in literacy and math” and “we want to make sure our children do not fall behind” (LaGrange, 2021, para. 1), which might cultivate a sense of panic that the existing curriculum is failing students. The critique of the existing curriculum, which the government wants to reform to include more traditional approaches and values, is a critique of progressive trends in education and drums up emotional support for a return to tradition and neoconservatism. The phrasing can invoke fear about social mobility, Alberta’s place in the global economy, and the ability for students to be competitive with their global peers, which echoes the refrain of competition that underpins neoliberal discourses. When the Alberta government discusses educational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, they cite the need for curricular supplements to help students catch up. A news release states:

The early years of education are critical to long-term learning success. Alberta’s government is committed to ensuring all Grade 1 students in Alberta develop the foundational skills they need to succeed in later grades. The government is providing an additional \$10 million this year to help Grade 1 students who need help catching up to grade level in the areas of foundational math and literacy (AME, 2023, para. 1)

The government notes that the early years are “critical” to long-term learning success and that students need “catching up”, which might exacerbate parents/guardians existing fears about their children’s learning experience during the pandemic. It ties solutions for this perceived falling behind to foundational skills.

The Ontario government texts reveal a nearly identical approach. They, too, focus on using language that could evoke fear as the most powerful emotion to elicit the public’s support. They use the term “rapidly changing world” when describing the math and science curriculum reforms (OME, 2020a; OME,

2022a). They also suggest that the public be concerned that this decline is becoming a chronic condition. For example, when discussing math curriculum reforms, the Ontario government uses phrasing such as “reverse a decade of declining math scores” (OME, 2020a, para. 1), “fix the broken education system” (OME, 2020a, para. 3) and “our students are still struggling to meet provincial math standards” (OME, 2019b, para. 2). The fixes—as noted in the section on logos above—are rooted in a return to tradition (back-to-basics learning). As in Alberta, the Ontario government has positioned the pandemic in ways that could further draw on the anxieties of parents/guardians by launching a *Plan to Catch Up* that uses local standardized test scores to suggest Ontario students are falling behind: “Following the release of EQAO results for 2021-22, which are consistent with global trends, it is clear that Ontario students need to remain in class without interruption, with a special focus on catching up in math, reading and writing” (OME, 2022c, para. 1). With such phrasing, the government creates a scenario where if their curriculum reforms are not implemented, Ontario students will be less competitive and will fall behind in the global economy. This narrative may feed into parent/guardian worries about the promise of intergenerational social mobility and play up the threat to the “Canadian Dream.”

US Case

Logos. The appeals to reason in Florida are imbued with a taken-for-granted valence that the neo-liberal and neoconservative solutions reflect common sense and lead to desirable outcomes in education. This essentializing is evident in appeals rooted in neoconservative values as the correct epistemic underpinning for education and in the removal of common core from Florida curriculum in exchange for Florida’s B.E.S.T. (Benchmarks for Excellent Student Thinking) Standards (GPO, 2022, March 22). The Corcoran speech, for example, brings together the standardization elements from neoliberalism with the neoconservative perspective as the *de facto* correct position for educational success by making ongoing references to a taken-for-granted set of solutions that could be applied to curriculum and pedagogy across America. Corcoran repeatedly suggests that his government’s curricular standards and assigned books are the acceptable standards, and that a one-size-fits-all approach from “classical” schools like Hillsdale College should be applied and replicated across the country. In this vein, he says, “I’d love to see the same Hillsdale model, but to rapidly expand and go into pre-K to 3rd grade and go into every single state as fast as we can in a big way” (Hillsdale College, 2021, minute 14:57)¹.

These themes of taken-for-granted solutions, grounded in a blend of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, are also evident across Governor DeSantis’ speeches and press releases on curricular reform. The framing includes a combination of accountability and transparency language with a focus on neoconservative preservation of traditional values. These themes are evident in several GPO releases, including one on “Curriculum Transparency” (GPO, 2022, March 25) that positions oversight of school texts as a parental right. In the release, Commissioner of Education Corcoran claims, “Governor DeSantis has shown time and time again that he is not afraid to fight for the rights of parents and understands the importance that they have a seat at the table when it comes to their child’s education” (para. 5). In addition, House Speaker Chris Sprowls is quoted as saying,

We depend on our K-12 schools to teach facts and age-appropriate subject material. We expect them to be transparent about the contents of the curriculum in our classrooms and to value parent feedback. ... This legislation will improve accountability, curriculum transparency and trust, and it will ensure that Florida continues its tradition of maintaining the highest expectations for our education system. The addition of term limits helps to weaken any political motives and shifts the focus of school boards back to the best interests of our children, as it should be. (GPO, 2022, March 25, para. 4)

The Sprowls quote seamlessly blends neoliberal logos—equating high expectations with accountability and transparency, for example—with a suggestion that conflicting political perspectives should be “weakened” and that people holding those perspectives cannot be entrusted to teach curriculum using facts and age-appropriate materials. A similar shorthand is evident in the justification for recent financial literacy curricular reforms. The GPO release justifies the revision by casting capitalism as the best economic system and the US’s approach to individual financial literacy as superior to those from other parts

¹ Quotes from speeches have been cleaned to remove any minor stutters or repetitions. All meaning has been preserved.

of the world. The first is accomplished by quoting Chief Financial Officer Jimmy Patronis, who suggests that “these lessons are also critical to training future generations of Americans to appreciate America’s capitalist system” (GPO, 2022, March 22, para. 4). The second is reflected in Yanelly Espinal, Director of Educational Outreach at Next Gen Personal Finance’s remarks: “I am a daughter of immigrants and my parents ran a household that was cash only. ... The world of money is changing so fast and if we don’t help our children keep up, the next generation is going to repeat cycles of a lack of financial literacy” (GPO, 2022, March 22, para. 10).

Ethos. If the logos provides the taken-for-grantedness of one set of “rational” solutions to complex problems, the ethos aligns those solutions not simply with rationality but also with the credibility and trustworthiness of the Republican government. In the case of Florida’s texts about curriculum reform and policy change, this trust is established through a partisan shorthand. That is, confidence in the speaker is established through their commitment to right-wing, traditional values rather than liberal, progressive values. One example of this approach is found in the rhetorical appeals of Corcoran’s speech, and, more specifically, in his use of political partisanship to position curricular reforms as correct or trustworthy. In the speech, he pairs Republican values with the Science of Reading. Despite a lack of consensus amongst literacy scholars (Yaden et al., 2021), Corcoran argues that the Science of Reading is the correct way to teach reading, compared with the “abject failure” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 16:05) of the whole language or balanced reading approach, which he equates with progressive education. In the approximately 20-minute speech and 20-minute follow-up, Corcoran mentions the Science of Reading five times. Each time, he pairs it with traditional family values, positions it as a corrective to lack of family support or poverty, or contrasts it with left-wing approaches. For example, in response to the first question of the Q&A period, Corcoran makes the partisan position stark. He says, “the world that we live in education, it’s 100% ideological” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 23:57); he argues that they must move quickly to defend against “the radical left” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 22:36).

The idea that the audience can trust the speaker because, as a Republican, his views align with their existing beliefs is perhaps most evident in the fourth and fifth mentions of the Science of Reading. Corcoran responds to an audience member who is ostensibly worried about how, at her Thanksgiving party (Hillsdale College, 2021, 33:40), the children in her family did not know what the Mayflower was and criticized the “pilgrims” role in colonization. She was concerned about whether the children’s “progressive school” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 35:05) was “indoctrinating” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 35:06) them with books “that present things a certain way” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 35:21), and about the use of the 1619 project and Critical Race Theory. She asks, “Who decides what books are going to be used in instruction?” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 35:48) In response, Corcoran says, “That’s a great question. So, we’ve just fought that battle, and we still fight it on a daily basis. And there’s multiple ways you can fight it” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 35:54). He elaborates on the whole process of book revision, further casting it as a battle for ideological control of classrooms:

... we rewrote all of our standards. We did all of that stuff. And then we do a book adoption, which we—now all the publishers are just infested with liberals. And so we would have to say to them in our bid specs, we’re not going to take your or approve your bid unless you have a certain percentage of our reading list has to be in your text. You can have no whole language or blended literacy or anything and it has to be the Science of Reading. And we went through a whole criteria. And then when the books came in, we evaluate the books on the criteria we said. ... So now the books have come back and... I didn’t think to say OK and keep all of the crazy liberal stuff out. And so now we literally have them and they hide it in what’s social emotional learning. So it doesn’t say critical race theory, but you could definitely have a teacher who teaches critical race theory. So now we have to go back to them and say if [the text’s] electronic, we want it out. And then on top of that we’re passing a rule this coming month that says you can’t—for the 185,000 teachers—indoctrinate students with stuff that’s not based on our standards, the new B.E.S.T. standards. So all of that. But you have to police them on a daily basis. It’s 185,000 teachers in a classroom with anywhere from 18 to 25 kids. And if you’re not physically there in the classroom. I will tell you it’s working in the universities and it’s starting to work in [K-12 schools]. I’ve censored or fired or terminated numerous

teachers for doing that. I'm getting sued right now in Duval County, which is Jacksonville, because it was an entire classroom, memorialized to Black Lives Matter. We made sure she was terminated and now we're being sued by every one of the liberal left groups for freedom of speech issues. (Hillsdale College, 2021, 37:08)

This section of the speech leans into polarized language, setting up the conservative approach as not just rational, but also ethical. Neoconservatism is presented in dichotomy with progressivism as a battle—the virtuous and good conservative, emblemized in Florida by the Republican government, is in a battle for ideological space in the schools against the “infestation of liberals” who have “crazy” ideas. Some of these “liberal” ideas that are rooted in improving social justice outcomes for marginalized groups, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, are highlighted as particularly egregious normative violations that are fireable offences.

Although the Hillsdale College speech is most compelling in its demonstration of ethos established through political entrenchment, similar, though more measured, language is evident in the GPO releases. In these press releases discussing curriculum revisions, the government in Florida continues the theme of battling against progressive values, positioning parents as the gatekeepers against classroom indoctrination. This is perhaps best demonstrated *in toto* in “Governor Ron DeSantis Highlights Administration’s Major Accomplishments of 2022” (GPO, 2023, January 09) press release, where DeSantis’ curricular reform highlights included: “[reinforcing] parents’ rights to make decisions regarding the upbringing of their children and [prohibiting] classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through 3rd grade”; “The rights of parents to be informed of and make decisions about what library and instructional materials their children are exposed to in school was enhanced and elevated”; “provisions to prevent discriminatory instruction in K-20 public schools, [ensuring] Florida’s students are not subject to Critical Race Theory indoctrination” (Protecting Parents’ Fundamental Rights section). The language used involves the “prohibition” of health education curriculum, reducing “exposure” to unvetted (by parents and governments) curricular resources, and safeguarding against being subjected to “indoctrination” in CRT. Also in the highlights, in a section titled, “Protecting Kids and Ensuring Parental Rights from Agendas Pushed by WOKE Ideologists,” the government cited their commitment to “reinforce parents’ fundamental rights to make decisions regarding the upbringing of their children”; in a section titled “Developing Active and Informed Citizens,” DeSantis foregrounds the addition of “the first statewide recognition of Victims of Communism Day in schools” as a legislated addition to curriculum. The suggestion is that parents are moral safeguards against the corruptible influences their children may be exposed to in schools. These perils are not neutral: they are represented by progressive education and by “WOKE Ideologists” who might dare to question capitalism, explore equal rights for gender and sexual diversity, or attempt to teach the historical fact of slavery and the contemporary issue of systemic racism.

Pathos. In Florida, appeals to emotion can be interpreted as relying heavily on a particular evocation of fear. That is, many of the texts are suggestive of an existential terror that a conservative way of life is under threat. This sense of fear is cultivated through the entrenched political positions: neo-conservative *contra* progressive ontologies. In Corcoran’s speech, for example, education is positioned as a field of battle with opposing sides encroaching on and endangering innocent children. He advises his audience at various points in the speech that “there’s going to be a battle” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 30:29), that “education is our sword” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 29:03), and that “our weapon is education” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 29:07). Not only does the speech draw on violent war imagery, but it also clearly cultivates the identity of the enemy. Corcoran notes that the Republicans in Florida are in a fight with “Antifa,” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 28:05) the “outer left,” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 28:01) the “far left,” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 29:22) the “radical left,” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 22:37) and the “liberal left.” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 38:48) In describing the right-wing government as a bulwark against the “left,” the Education Commissioner also suggested that there is a window for the reforms to be enacted because Republicans are in power, building fear that a change in regimes would mean a reversal of policy. For example, when talking about the “advancement of choice” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 24:33) or the creation of charter and private schools, he advises that the Republicans had to move quickly so that if liberal politicians come into power, “a Nancy Pelosi in Florida,” they “can’t take those 500,000 kids and bring them back into the public system” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 24:50) and that “you can’t put the

animals back in the barn” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 25:13). He also describes students who struggle with standardized tests as a “corpus of your dropouts” and “failures.” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 14:42). He suggests that “a lot of them become very, very dangerous and that’s a problem.” (Hillsdale College, 2021, 14:02). Further along in the speech, he returns to the theme of “low-income kids” and the difficulty of getting them to test at 90% reading proficiency by third grade on standardized tests (Hillsdale College, 2021, 41:47). He says:

I say it not publicly, but the bulk of those low-income kids are majority minority and these are our struggling readers. Our struggling readers are overwhelming majority poor. Of that poor population, overwhelming majority minority of that population, overwhelmingly majority African American. So, there is an injustice that’s going on. It’s not, you know, instead of having marches and riots and what have you, there’s something that could be done, but it’s not being done. (Hillsdale College, 2021, 42:47)

He conjures imagery of “marches and riots,” which may arouse fears of violence and disorder. He also suggests that the injustice of inequality is rooted in a lack of choice and that the remedy is parental involvement and the school voucher system.

As is the case with both logos and ethos, the analysis of press releases from the Florida Governor Press Office can be interpreted as drawing on the same fear-based existential threats to a neoliberal capitalist and neoconservative way of life that are evoked in the Corcoran speech. For example, in the press release “Governor Ron DeSantis Signs Legislation to Set the Pace for Civics Education in America” (GPO, 2021, June 22), revisions to the Civics Education curriculum are positioned in response to the need to combat “dangerous ideologies that produce corrupt regimes in other countries” (Senate President Wilton Simpson as quoted in GPO, 2021, para. 4) and because “only 63% of Gen Z and Millennials believe the Declaration of Independence better “guarantees freedom and equality” over the Communist Manifesto and 40% of Americans today have a favorable view of socialism” (Andrew Bremberg, President and CEO of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, as quoted in GPO, 2021, para. 5). In press releases about curriculum reform requiring increased “curriculum transparency” (GPO, 2022, March 25), parents are quoted in ways that could stoke fear that without this bill, teachers would expose students to pornography and school boards would wield power without proper parental and government oversight. On the fear of pornography, one parent says: “Recently I discovered one of the most disturbing, pornographic books in my child’s high school in Orange County ... After some research, I learned that an alarming percentage of high school and middle school library books contain similar material” (GPO, 2022, March 25). In these press releases, fears of the other and an us-versus-them mentality are also cultivated with the term “woke,” which seems to be used as a descriptor for progressive, equity-seeking values. A search on the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) website for the term “woke” generates 81 hits, with press releases on curricular reform citing fears of “indoctrination” through texts that included “references to Critical Race Theory (CRT), inclusions of Common Core, and the unsolicited addition of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in mathematics” (Florida Department of Education [FDOE], 2022, April 15).

Concluding Comments

The trend of neoliberalism increasingly enfolded neoconservatism into its mandate is evident as a growing tendency toward right-wing political positions that are no longer merely inflected with marketization, but also a rigid set of traditional values (Brown, 2018). As is evident in the analysis of the three sites, despite a shared right-leaning political agenda, there are differences in the rhetoric employed by the three governments seeking to gain support for curriculum reforms. More centrist conservative governments, like the one in Ontario, still rely heavily on the economic arguments fundamental to historical neoliberalism. As the pendulum shifts further away from the political centre, however, as seen in the more conservative Alberta government, there is more language bridging neoliberal discourse with neoconservative traditional values. This twinning of neoliberal and neoconservative rhetoric is perhaps best expressed through the analysis of the Florida case study in comparison with the two Canadian cases: in Florida, the economic argument is relegated to the background in favour of ideological arguments, and a governing

us-versus-them framing of educational issues. This trend suggests, moving forward, that there will be not only increasing polarization in political positions, but that this extremist framing will focus on education as an integral space for discursive, pedagogical, and curricular battles. Unlike in previous iterations, where neoliberal influences sought to increase privatization, marketization, and economic support from education, the shift into neoliberal neoconservatism suggests that there may be a push to prevent progressive values from taking hold in the classroom through exposure to social justice education.

To that end, scholars have traced varying expressions of neoliberal and neoconservative incursions into curricular spaces over the last decade, with particular interest in how discourses of equity and social justice have been repurposed to give moral heft to arguments for change. Neumann et al. (2020) note:

Conservative politicians have in recent years worked towards disaggregating social justice from its leftish connotations ... In doing so, 'social justice' and 'equity' have been rearticulated and redefined in terms of individual aspiration, social mobility, personal worth and ethical character. (pp. 704-705)

Determining whether the reframing of education discourse is entirely cynical or reflective of a genuine set of political ideals is challenging. If the reframing is the former, then perhaps politicians are responding to an appetite in the voting public for conservative values and are joining these values discursively with neoliberal ideas to pursue economic ends more incisively. If it is the latter, we may observe curricular reform mandates in coming years that aim to curb progressive ideals, conflate social justice efforts with individualistic household competition, and reassert normative boundaries for dominant culture. In either case, there will be growing evidence of the twinning of the two discourses or evidence of neoliberal discourse drawing on neoconservative language to further compel a free-market mentality. In addition, as Apple (2006) noted nearly two decades ago, the emergence of a twinned neoliberal and neoconservative rhetoric undermines collectivism; that is, people are increasingly alienated from one another as they identify with the individualism of the market. Over time, one outcome will be a material loss of support for publicly funded educational goods that serve the collective, including eroding tax bases and the increased role of private for-profit companies in education.

Taking former Commissioner of Education Corcoran at his word, the curriculum must be thought of as an ideological text and curricular reform as one battle in an ongoing war of position. This perspective suggests that curricular reform and the knowledge traditions it upholds can no longer pretend to be a kind of objective knowledge or neutrality. If curricular spaces are not merely mirrors of the governing hegemony, but also instrumental fields of hegemonic exercise, then it is important to hear Apple's (2018) call to scholarly activism all the more clearly: as he notes, there must be more than critical, rhetorical engagement with the issues; there must also be full participation "grounded in the concrete understanding of and action in and with communities, cultural activists, practicing educators at all levels of the educational system, and social movements" (p. 687). The shifting grounds revealed by the rhetorical analysis in these three case studies demonstrate just how quickly curricular reforms can move, how conveniently economic ends can be married to traditional values, and how powerfully political language can be engaged to stir public support. Educators and scholars working to establish socially just and inclusive curriculum would do well to take note of the changing language and calibrate arguments accordingly.

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