

From GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement) to NERM (Neoliberal Educational Reform Madness)

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Volume 15, Number 2, 2024

Defending and Strengthening Public Education as a Common Good

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111304ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v15i2.186904>

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Publisher(s)

Institute for Critical Education Studies / UBC

ISSN

1920-4175 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Yoon, E.-S. (2024). From GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement) to NERM (Neoliberal Educational Reform Madness). *Critical Education*, 15(2), 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v15i2.186904>

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Critical Education

Volume 15 Number 2

May 1, 2024

ISSN 1920-4175

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Abstract

This article examines a popularized term, the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), and its underlying paradigm of neoliberalism. It elucidates neoliberalism's maddening effects on the education sector, especially public education. To analyze these effects, I draw from and adapt Michel Foucault's analytical approach to madness. My analysis focuses on the following maddening effects of neoliberalism on education: (1) it obstructs us from seeing inequalities; (2) it creates a desperate passion amid the rise of school choice; and (3) it eliminates reason and creates unreason in the school selection and admissions processes. My analysis is based on reflections on my decade-long research on school marketization and school choice in Canada. I conclude by suggesting that collective visions and concrete steps are needed to move toward equitable educational structures, discourses, and practices that resist or challenge the neoliberal education reform madness (NERM).



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The Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM, is a term that has been popularized by Pasi Sahlberg (2012) to describe how the past few decades of educational reforms of standardization, competition, choice, and accountability have spread like a virus around the world. Once infected by this germ, Sahlberg wrote, “Schools get ill; teachers don’t feel well, and kids learn less” (para 5). Sahlberg identified international development agencies and private enterprises as key actors in spreading GERM. Indeed, he noted that school choice infected 75% of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. Sahlberg further diagnosed three major symptoms of GERM. One is the increased competition between schools because reformers believe competition improves schooling by making teachers more effective, raising school quality, and improving student performance. Another symptom is school choice, whereby parents become consumers who choose schools for their children. The third symptom is the intensification of school accountability through standardized testing, based on the belief that testing can easily and quickly show what students and teachers are doing in schools. Through this formulation, Sahlberg’s articulation of GERM elucidates the global scope and nature of educational reforms. It also sheds light on the similarities of recent school reforms in multiple countries around the world. While Sahlberg’s framework is useful for revealing the globalization of educational reform, in this article, I move beyond the notion of GERM and conduct a critical analysis of other aspects of the reforms. In particular, I analyze some of the insidious effects by interrogating the neoliberalism that is at the core of these global education reforms, aiming to shed light on its madness and maddening effects.

My starting point for digging deeper into the ideological and paradigmatic underpinnings of GERM began with a reflection on the research I have conducted over the past decade on educational reforms (Yoon, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2023). My research indicates that it is important to understand *standardization* because all schools and students are subject to the same curriculum and standardized tests. There is evidence of large-scale tests, such as standardized tests, being used to rank schools, especially by a market-promoting think tank in Canada called the Fraser Institute. Yet, the standardization and ranking efforts have been limited. Indeed, a heightened focus on standardization and accountability may even be a distraction from the notable rise in *specialization* through school choice, which promotes niche schooling and an associated stratification between schools or programs within schools (e.g. arts, gifted, French Immersion, and other academically enriched programs) due to student selection and program scarcity.

For example, stratification and differentiation are evident in the ways parents and students perceive schools that offer specialized programs as being better than other schools (see Yoon, 2016; Yoon et al., 2020). Stratification and differentiation, which are often linked with particular programs of choice, seem to be driven especially by the passions of reformers, policymakers, parents, and students. Thus, not all educators, parents, and leaders will suffer or “get ill” under these reforms (Sahlberg, 2012, para 4). Some schools and students appear to gain a higher standing, recognition, and perhaps satisfaction, but others experience the opposite. This stratification coincides with *specialization*. It is apparent in the low enrolment patterns in the schools with no choice programs and in the high enrolment patterns (in some cases, over capacity) in the schools that do offer programs of choice (see Yoon et al., 2020, 2022). As such, students who *choose* and enrol in the highly popular, over-subscribed schools experience an elevated sense of school pride and belonging, while those who enrol in the relatively under-subscribed schools, often in low-income and racialized neighbourhoods, tend to experience relative marginalization and deprivation (Yoon, 2020). Indeed, these programs of choice are introduced within the artificial construction of scarcity instead of the common good in the public school system. They are deployed to trigger

competition, mostly among those who have the means to choose, within a degree of monopoly held by the suppliers of these limited programs or school types.

In this article, I critically analyze market-making neoliberal reforms of education through standardization and specialization. I do so by drawing on and adapting Michel Foucault's (1988) analysis of madness to examine neoliberalism's maddening effect on the education system. While Sahlberg's notion of GERM as illness has brought attention to the seriousness of the reforms, I suggest that Foucault's notion of madness can deepen our understanding of these reforms. In particular, my analysis focuses on the irrationality or unreason of neoliberalism, showing that it contradicts the premise of neoliberal philosophy built on rational choice or action theory in the discipline of economics. I argue that neoliberalism is inappropriate to (and misused in) education. I apply the analytical lens of madness to examine the "desperate passion" of individuals who embody and drive the current neoliberal educational reforms (Foucault, 1988, p. 30). In addition, I shed light on the effects of neoliberalism's heightened emphasis on individualism and choice in covering up the starkly unequal conditions to unsee them. In these analyses, I use concrete examples of the neoliberal reform phenomena that I have observed and studied in Canada. Indeed, Canada has unique historical, political, and geographical contexts in which neoliberal education reforms have unfolded widely in terms of their types and variations. As such, the goal of my analysis is not to encompass all reforms. Rather, I argue that rethinking the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) as Neoliberal Education Reform Madness (NERM) can help us see some of the insidious practices of market-based education reforms as madness. I hope that this rethinking process will open up a critical space for considering alternatives to neoliberalism in education.

A Brief Note on Michel Foucault and Madness

Michel Foucault (1926–84) was a French philosopher and historian who produced a vast amount of stimulating intellectual work. My intention is to focus mainly on his contributions to post-structural thinking in the humanities, especially education. I draw on Foucault's views on power, discourse, régime of truth, and governmentality (rationality of the government), all of which have influenced my thinking about education and schooling. For instance, Foucault (1980) offered a powerful lens through which to see educational governance, policy, and related reforms as the politics of truth. Education is governed mainly by dominant discourses, that is, texts, practices and policies that articulate and regulate what counts as truth and is seen as legitimate (Foucault, 1980).

I pay particular attention to Foucault's (1988) analysis of madness in his book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Foucault explored how madness was documented and constructed during the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. His examination of madness as a social construction provides a rich analysis of how madness was understood at that time and in that place. While some historians view his approach as somewhat unconventional (see Gutting, 2005), his analysis has also received much scholarly attention for analyzing madness as a socially constructed phenomenon beyond medically diagnosed conditions (Barchilon, 1988). I am especially drawn to how Foucault's analysis pays keen attention to the moments and spaces when and where madness is not too far from sanity or reason. Reading through his analysis of what is construed or recognized as madness prompted me to think about everyday encounters with madness. As Einstein once said: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Hence, in the spirit of Foucault's examination of madness and insanity sitting at

the crossroads of sanity and normality, I analyze neoliberal reforms in the public education sector as madness. I focus on the reforms' madness as an unseeing inequality, as a desperate passion, and as an absence of reason (Foucault, 1988). Before I discuss each of these and analyze how key aspects of neoliberal reforms embody some of these characteristics, I will briefly define what I mean by neoliberalism and neoliberal education reforms.

Neoliberalism and Education Reforms

In this article, neoliberalism is defined broadly as a political philosophy that theorizes the role of the state to create and maintain “free markets” to ensure the well-being of its people and their freedoms (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In education, “if markets do not exist,” the state must create markets to liberate “individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). This new mode of governance is proposed to promote “individual, institutional and national economic survival” in the era of globalization (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 250). According to education scholars Davies and Bansel (2007), neoliberalism in education translates to restructuring educational institutions, ranging from pre-K to post-secondary, as sites for producing “the highly individualized, responsabilized subjects” (p. 248). The role of state institutions, especially educational institutions, is to empower individuals through making successive and successful choices in the pursuit of their prosperity and self-expression (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Much of the GERM described by Sahlberg (2012) illustrates the reconfiguration of the education sector through competition, choice, and accountability to create markets.

Building on these critical studies of neoliberalism and education reforms, I emphasize neoliberalism as a paradigm used to marketize the public sector, thereby illuminating the far-reaching effects of neoliberalism on the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of those involved in education reforms. Through a market-based political philosophy, students, parents, educators, and others within the affected population begin to see, consider, and constitute themselves as rational beings and make choices for themselves. This neoliberal ontology or way of being has made a significant shift in how students, parents, educators, and people interact with each other and what they expect from each other. Epistemologically, a neoliberal shift has meant that learning and teaching are viewed more quantitatively, with schools as sites for disseminating measurable education and some (often privileged) students making choices and having greater access to specialized learning and individualized assessments that will give them promising futures as entrepreneurs (Yoon, 2013, 2016). Below, I illustrate some of these aspects of neoliberal education reforms. In other words, neoliberalism has created two distinctive ways of creating knowledge and truth about individuals and institutions. One is standardized tests. The other is a set of more tailored and individualized truth claims that institutions and individuals make about themselves for their own benefit. Schools and students are thus increasingly invested in generating knowledge and discourses about who they are and what they offer in comparison to (or in competition with) others. In these reorientations, the axiology or ethics of neoliberalism in the education system is to value individuals, and more precisely, individual gains, without regard for others and even at the expense of others. I will discuss some examples that illustrate these trade-offs.

Neoliberal education reforms, rather than being uniform across contexts, take particular forms in each country or region (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Neoliberalism emerged in Canadian politics in the 1970s and has become a more entrenched part of the country's governing systems since the 1990s. Neoliberalism varies in practice and policy, however, across Canada's 10 provinces and three territories (Carroll & Little, 2001). In education, neoliberalism became more

pronounced in the 1990s and has since spread throughout the country to various degrees and in different forms (Basu, 2004; Poole et al., 2021; Taylor, 2001; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017; Yoon & Winton, 2020; Yoon et al., 2020). Rather than trying to create a single narrative of neoliberal education reforms in Canada, I discuss some major ways that neoliberal education reforms have affected the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of those involved in the public education sector in Canada and how these reforms have had maddening effects.

Madness as Unseeing

Foucault (1988) wrote, “Madness begins where the relation of [person] to truth is disturbed and darkened” (p. 104). Madness is about accepting “error as truth” (p. 26) and is evident among “those who are actually deprived of reason or who persist in some notable error” (p. 104). Madness is the “*constant error* of the soul manifest in its imagination, in its judgments, and in its desires” (p. 104, italics in original). Put differently, Foucault (1988) wrote that madness is “blindness” to reality and reason (p. 105). This notion of madness as *unseeing* reality struck a chord with me as I have thought about neoliberal education reforms’ concealing of unequal realities and their obliviousness to the inequalities of opportunity and choice. In this article, I use the term, unseeing, to refer to an inability to see what is in front of one’s eyes.

For example, school choice policy, which is emblematic of neoliberal reforms in education, aims to provide families with options in choosing a publicly funded school other than the one assigned to them by their school board. School choice policy suggests that a variety of options are available and that these options are free and open to all, ignoring the way these choices encourage rationing and competition, which result in exclusion. One option is for parents to choose any school they want within their public education system. Another option is for them to choose any school with a specialized program of choice, such as arts, gifted, French, or other academically oriented programs, such as International Baccalaureate; Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM); and so on. Other options include choosing charter schools, although within Canada this option is currently available only in the province of Alberta. All these school choices are rooted in neoliberalism in that individual families can choose, in principle, any school they want. However, my research has demonstrated that school choice policy conceals the complex inequalities faced by families, especially families who live with poverty, racism, and discrimination, all inequalities that have become further magnified through school choice (Yoon, 2018, 2020).

For instance, in Toronto, Canada’s largest city, not every family or student has the same means to choose or has equal access to schools of choice or choice programs. The city’s largest Anglophone (secular) school district, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), has a school choice policy that allows families to choose from various programs at numerous schools. Every year, when students apply for secondary schools, they can indicate whether they would like to attend a school of choice and/or enrol in a specific program of choice. Yet, my research with Marmureanu and Brown on school choice in the TDSB has shown that the district sits in a highly unequal urban area and families have vastly unequal means to choose (Yoon et al., 2020). The median family income in the lowest 20% group in Toronto ranged from approximately \$18,000 to \$46,000 according to the 2016 Canadian census. In contrast, the median family income of those in the top 20% ranged from \$81,000 to \$323,000. This indicates that those in the top 20% had considerably more resources to choose schools. Families with greater resources can support their children’s preparedness for specialty arts programs, search for different programs, gain timely and

relevant information through social connections, pay for extra fees (often required for choice programs), and support long commutes. Parents with high economic resources also tend to have high levels of education, so they tend to understand how education systems work and how school choice could benefit their children in the future. This support enables students in wealthier neighbourhoods to be more likely to access choice. Indeed, our research found that students from neighbourhoods in the top 20% (upper) to 40% (upper-middle) in terms of family income levels were more likely to choose schools, schools of choice, and schools with programs of choice. Families in wealthier neighbourhoods were more likely to access choice because these programs tend to provide enriched experiences with extracurricular activities, in addition to making their children more competitive when applying for post-secondary institutions or jobs (Yoon, 2016).

My research has also indicated that wealthier neighbourhoods tend to be where a majority of residents have European ethnic origins and work in professional and management occupations. Moreover, most of the programs of choice, including arts-focused, gifted, French-language, and other academically advanced and/or enriched courses in math, science, technology, and engineering, are concentrated in the wealthier areas, where a majority of residents have European origins. Yet, neoliberal reforms grossly overlook this reality of inequality. Reformers advertise choice for everyone, although choice is constrained by one's capital, access, and neighbourhood. Neoliberalism also ignores the lack of equality of opportunity for school choice. This unseeing of unequal choice and opportunity is an illustration of neoliberal education reform madness.

French Immersion programs, which are available as a choice option in public school systems across Canada, reflect the spectacle of choice. French Immersion became widely available after the Official Languages Act was passed in 1969. In Canada, English and French have equal status as official languages. Hence, the federal government provides resources to support teaching French in the provinces where English is the majority language, and vice versa. Most public schools across Canada began offering French Immersion programs in the 1970s. While market-based reforms of education might not have been the political motivation behind these programs, French Immersion has become an important part of the school choice landscape in Canada, overlapping with the consolidating years of neoliberal reforms of "consumer sovereignty," whereby consumers supposedly dictate the market order of supply and demand (Brimley et al., 2016, p. 12). The research on French Immersion as a school choice option has shown that most of the students enrolled in these programs come from middle- and upper-middle-class families (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2024; Yoon & Gulson, 2010).

My research on the TDSB has indicated that French Immersion programs are more likely to be located in the wealthier and wealthiest areas. The map below indicates the location of secondary schools with French Immersion programs (marked with black circles) (Figure 1). The layer of the city of Toronto map shows the quintiles of housing prices in Canadian dollars. Most French Immersion programs are located in (or adjacent to) the neighbourhoods with high (from 750,000 dollars to one million dollars) or the highest (from one million dollars to over three million dollars) home prices, according to 2016 Canadian census data. This spatial pattern indicates that these programs are more readily available for students who live in areas with above-average home prices. This pattern further implies that French Immersion programs are located in areas with families with intergenerational wealth and status who are able to reside in the neighbourhoods with "desirable" characteristics.

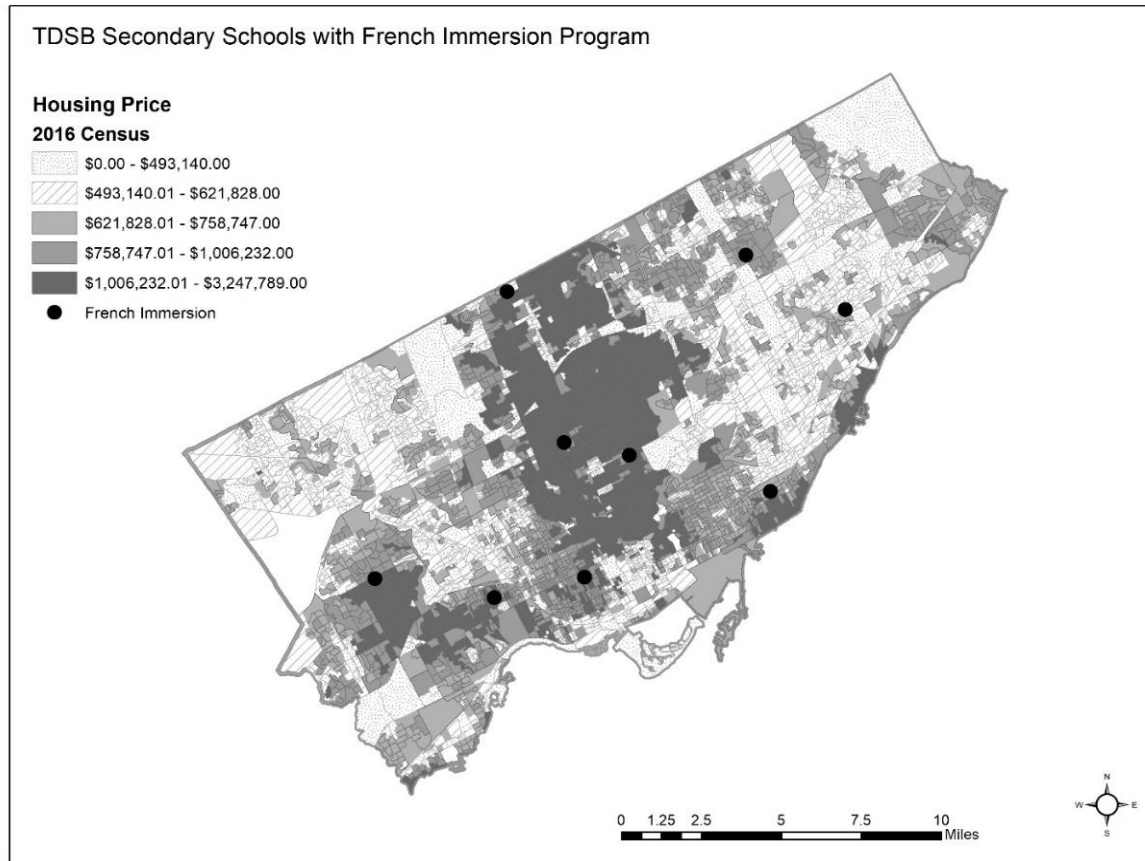


Figure 1. *Toronto District School Board Secondary Schools with French Immersion Programs*

Furthermore, in Canada, where settler-colonialism has shaped the geographies of urban school districts, neoliberal notions of school choice neglect this spatial inequity and segregation. Indeed, my research with Grima, Barrett DeWiele, and Skelton (Yoon et al., 2022) indicated that an urban public school district's school choice policy tends to overlook the city's historically shaped geography that separates those with European origins from those with Indigenous and racialized backgrounds. The spatial patterns of school choice indicate that the popular schools that attract more students are in predominantly white neighbourhoods (or those with a majority of residents with European ethnic origins). The patterns often result in the over-utilization of the schools in these areas. Furthermore, the schools in these affluent areas with economic and (dominant) cultural capital have more enriched programs of choice in academics (e.g., International Baccalaureate) and French Immersion, among others. In contrast, schools with predominantly Indigenous and/or racialized residents tend to have low enrolments and have fewer programs of choice that focus on academically advanced or enriched curriculum.

The research discussed thus far indicates that existing spatial inequalities and inequities make it difficult for parents and students who have limited resources to choose schools. Those who are socio-economically, ethnically, and spatially advantaged, in contrast, are more likely to be able to choose schools and programs. Indeed, wealthier parents are offered more choices where they reside, and they have more resources to take advantage of those choices. Yet, neoliberal reformers

and policy makers seem to unsee these multi-generational layers of socioeconomic inequality, racial and ethnic segregation, and hierarchy.

Furthermore, as more advantaged families have selected their schools of choice, the reforms have led to greater polarization and segregation with school and program *differentiation* and *stratification*. Stratification is a result of more families in Canada choosing schools and/or programs of choice that they perceive as better (Yoon & Daniels, 2021; Yoon & Gulson, 2010). In other words, the neoliberal education policy of school choice produces unseeing effects. Neoliberal discourse on individual choice reproduces public attitudes or perspectives that continue to overlook or disregard historically formed settler-colonialism. When the discourse of individual choice circulates uncontested in the public school system, it can hide how the current geography of schools sits on the residential areas historically formed and segregated by social class, race, ethnicity, and gender, among other factors.

Indeed, the rise of neoliberalism since the 1970s and its emphasis on individuals, individual responsibility, and choice is noteworthy in light of the changes in Canada's immigration policy. The withdrawal of social welfare in the name of neoliberalism coincided with an influx of racialized immigrants after Canada's immigration policy changed in 1968 from a racially discriminatory policy to a points-based system, which facilitated an increase in the number of immigrants with African or Asian ethnic backgrounds (Dirks, 2020). In education, the scaling back of public spending has been notable. Total spending on elementary and secondary education as a proportion of the total economy (as measured by gross domestic product) in Canada has declined considerably since 1971. Spending decreased from 5.5% in 1971 to 3.6% in 2010 and further to 2.2 % in 2018 (Wallin et al., 2021). Tax cuts and cuts to social programs in the 1990s were signs of the consolidation of neoliberalism across Canadian governments (Carroll & Little, 2001).

It is in this broad context of neoliberal reforms that I see the neoliberal education reforms of school choice and marketization as madness. The educational reforms have glossed over the cuts and scaling back of public spending in education. Instead, the reforms, in the name of individual choice, have led the public to neglect the contemporary inequalities caused by welfare rollbacks and racial capitalism (i.e., the rise of racialized migrant families and workers filling positions in the low-paid service sector). Hence, the ideology of neoliberalism further glosses over society's growing inequalities while it promotes individualism over social welfare. In education, neoliberalism promotes school choice over providing equitable resources for quality public education to every neighbourhood. Few choice programs are available in the racialized neighbourhoods, undermining the quality of public education and thereby underserving the families in these marginalized neighbourhoods (Yoon et al., 2018, 2020, 2022). Therefore, this unseeing of inequalities caused by neoliberalism is a grossly overlooked symptom of madness.

Madness as Passion

Foucault (1988) also considered madness in relation to passion. He wrote, "The possibility of madness is therefore implicit in the very phenomenon of passion" (p. 88). Foucault did not mean that all those with passion are insane or mad. What he pinpointed, however, is that there is a continuum between what is considered passionate and what is mad. He continued, stating that what drives individuals to the point of madness is in fact "desperate passion" (p. 30). Put differently, how far and to what degree one pursues their passion can lead to madness. This link between passion and madness made me think about the current reforms of school choice and how passion

for choosing schools, especially specialized programs of choice, might be done to excess, taking people to the edge of madness. Indeed, the extent to which individuals pursue their passion in public schools to the exclusion of “others” would be a case of a passion that has gone too far.

When I first read about GERM, Sahlberg’s (2012) metaphor for the global spread of education reform movements, I was reminded of my research participants, including the parents and students I met during my fieldwork (Yoon, 2013, 2016, 2018; Yoon & Daniels, 2021; Yoon & Gulson, 2010; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). Some were enthusiastic about school choice and hoped that others would choose schools, boutique programs, and specialized options. From these people’s perspectives, the reforms have not been, as the GERM metaphor suggests, all about infections that make people ill and that people would want to avoid. Rather, choice enthusiasts have created an identity around these neoliberal reforms. Neoliberalism has become part of who they are; neoliberalism is their newly adopted ontological position. They are wholeheartedly passionate about making their own school and/or program choices, as I illustrate below.

Across Canadian schools, parents who advocate for specialized choice programs seem to focus on their children’s passions (or what they perceive to be their children’s passions) for particular subjects or activities. These could be academic core subjects, such as mathematics and English, or non-core subjects, such as arts and sports. What is common to the programs and schools of choice is their emphasis on passion. Brochures for choice programs often include descriptions of the specialized programs that use the discourse of passion. For example, a description of a program of choice in the Vancouver School Board (VSB) states that the program “is designed for students who wish to direct their energy and *passion* towards the fine arts, work within a community of students who share their interests, and maintain strong academic achievement” (reference anonymized, italics added). Another program of choice articulates that it:

is a vibrant, continually evolving, enriched liberal arts program, structured on the basis of student self-directed learning. Critical thinkers, who thrive in active, autonomous, cooperative groups, have a *passion* for philosophical and historical thinking, and who are comfortable in a relatively unstructured learning environment, will excel. (Reference anonymized, italics added)

Additionally, a specialized program of choice is described as:

...offer[ing] both acceleration and enrichment for highly motivated and capable students who have a desire to shape the direction of their own studies and a wish to pursue areas of *passion*. (Reference anonymized, italics added)

Indeed, these program descriptions in the school choice brochures of the VSB all indicate that the programs are designed for students with passion. The applicants must possess a passion to apply and to be accepted into these enriched and advanced programs.

The discourse of passion in these brochures indicates that passion is integral to the existence of these specialized programs in the public school system. Yet, a problem—or what could be considered insane about this discourse of passion—is that certain programs are made available for those specific areas of passion, while programs for other areas of passion are unavailable or excluded. What is also maddening about the discourse of passion in these specialized programs of choice is the presumption that other children do not have any passion, that parents are assuming that children only have one passion, or that children’s interests should even be described as passions.

It is evident in the program brochures for the VSB that not only have parents gotten behind the neoliberal education reform movement, but also why: They have joined this movement voluntarily as a way of showing their support for their children's passions to pursue their particular interests, which they can do through the public school system. In doing so, they prioritize their own children's passions over those of other children. In other words, the privatization and marketization of education are not something the government can simply impose upon individual parents and families. It is done, rather, in ways that are pleasing and encouraging (Foucault, 1980). Further, it is done through the meanings that parents and families ascribe to their school choice through passions that have a privatizing effect on education.

The discourse of passion is used to elevate the passions of some children over the passions of others in the marketization of the public school system. The madness of the neoliberal reforms is driven by those who pursue their own passions through the public school system to the exclusion of others. Foucault noted that "the first sign of madness" (p. 26) is self-attachment or self-love. Neoliberal education reforms are rooted squarely in individualism and self-interest, to the disregard of others: Madness in ego, in ignorance of others, and in dismissal of the common good (and our interconnectedness). Parents and children see education differently as a result of these reforms. The reforms advance and normalize the idea that education is about individual gains (and society has accepted these reforms, and in many cases, has been a cheerleader for them). Neoliberalism encourages self-interest and, thus, self-love. In the case of programs of choice, it is about (the individualistic desire of) pursuing what one loves—that is, one's passion. My school choice research in Vancouver confirmed that students and their families pursue programs of choice because they feel passionate about what they want to do and thus feel that they, more than other children, deserve the enriched programs because they have what it takes (Yoon, 2013, 2016). Pursuing passion, self-interest, and self-love is a form of madness constituted through neoliberal discourses, which are rooted in individualism. This passion is linked to neoliberal education reform madness.

Madness as Unreason

In the book *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault (1988) argued that madness is "the very absence of reason," or *unreason* (p. 101). Madness emerges when humans stop using any reason or reasonableness. Madness is the lack of a reason for actions or thoughts. It is the opposite of rationalism. False rationality is a form of madness. Foucault further wrote that, in the age of reason, madness marks those of unreason. It manifests in an irrational logic. It is entrenched in irrational methods in the decision-making process. In other words, what separates the insane from the sane is how they derive knowledge or truth. Rational steps and methods are integral to the saneness of reason that is separate from the madness of unreason.

Sahlberg (2012) has critiqued GERM for its nonsensical approach to education. The renewed emphasis on standardized tests in neoliberal reforms of education applies educationally arbitrary or undesirable methods to measure learning outcomes through standardized tests. Imposing standardized tests on learners and using the results to compare or rank them are arbitrary and irrational in that such evaluations grossly underappreciate what learners do with their teachers in their unique classrooms. Much of the learning that happens in classrooms is hard to measure quantitatively when and if teachers and learners follow their developing interests and issues that are relevant locally and globally. Indeed, neoliberal educational reforms and their practices are

predicated on the notion of choice. Nevertheless, what is measured to guide their choices is often skewed toward standardized tests.

As mentioned in the earlier section, in Canada, the Fraser Institute, with its historic ties with Milton Friedman and a continuing relationship with its founding and free-market supporters, uses standardized test results to rank schools in some of the major provinces. These rankings are devoid of any contextual information that explains the different results. None of the contextual information (such as the inequality and segregation mentioned in the earlier section) is taken into consideration when ranking schools. The Institute's methods are thus what Foucault would call "an irrational method" because the comparison of schools' test results is not made based on sufficient use of explanatory factors or reasons (1988, p. 104).

Standardized tests are measures that have been used to compare schools since Milton Friedman, who is often dubbed the father of neoliberal education reforms, pushed for school vouchers in the 1970s and 1980s. Friedman advocated for creating a market where parents could make rational choices in the education system. Much like contemporary economists who study market behaviours, Friedman (1982) based his politics on the science of human rationality, cost-benefit analysis, and freedom of choice. Indeed, since the early 20th century, the field of economics has shifted away from its roots in the humanities and philosophy. Many contemporary economists theorize market behaviours with the assumption of rational choice; that is, markets can solve the problems and challenges related to the production and allocation of any services or products because individuals can make rational choices based on their preferences (which are assumed to be ranked rationally or with reason; Blakely, 2020). As such, the education market is presumably built on this knowledge of economics or what Foucault (1980) called a "régime of truth" (p. 114). Rationality or reason is supposedly at the ontological, epistemological, and ethical foundation of neoliberal education reforms. However, the reforms are being carried out while schools are being ranked and compared based on standardized tests that are devoid of contextual information. This absence of important contextual factors and reasons that could explain differences in school academic achievement outcomes is unreasonable, which Foucault noted is another form of madness.

The use of academic outcomes in guiding one's decision to apply for specialized programs of choice, programs where some children can develop their passions, as discussed above, is irrational. Yet, in Canada, such outcomes have been and are continuously used in many school districts for deciding who qualifies for programs of choice. Arts-based choice programs and other choice programs require students to have a certain academic standing in their elementary schools (Yoon, 2013, 2016). Applicants for specialized programs must demonstrate that they are academically high-achieving students. In addition, they must demonstrate their aptitude and, in some cases, they must present a portfolio of their work demonstrating their passion (whose strengths are difficult to measure, thus making it also difficult to compare applicants). Hence, there are obvious inconsistencies between the intent of choice programs to meet students' passion/interests and the requirements of academic standing. In other words, while academic grades may not be the sole deciding factor for admitting students into programs of choice, using academic grades in these processes is an unreasonable method for determining who gets to follow their passion in high school.

Furthermore, there is a certain level of unreason or irrationality in using a lottery system in the admission process for specialized choice programs in school markets. In the Toronto School District School Board, a lottery system has been introduced to select students for the schools or

programs of choice. When TDSB students apply for a high school, they can apply for any regular public school in the district. Alternatively, they can apply to any public school that has a specialized program of choice. The district introduced a system for admission so that who gets admitted into their choice programs is determined by lottery. This policy was adopted because a merit-based system with a school-based selection process had been perceived as being biased against those who have experienced historical social, cultural, and economic challenges. Nevertheless, a lottery is a method of random selection and is devoid of reason (that is, there is no clear reason why some who apply for choice programs get admitted, while others do not). All the reasons for creating the school choice system or school markets are no longer the basis for decision-making. Any reasoning behind specialized programs of choice appears to have evaporated. The lottery-based admission system thus indicates that neoliberalism may have reached the end of its rationality by introducing complete randomness.

It is noteworthy that the TDSB's lottery system has reserved 25% of all available lottery spots for students who identify as members of Indigenous, racialized, or LGBTQ communities, or who are living with a disability. This system ostensibly makes selection fairer than a merit-based system because the lottery system does not depend on the accumulated skill level or achievements of individual students who are likely to have benefited from familial support and resources. Nevertheless, this approach to market-based school choice is oblivious to existing inequalities, as discussed in the previous section. Also, it sustains the notion of scarcity of enriched programs. Only those who are admitted into these programs get to benefit from them, while other students are denied these benefits. Indeed, this exclusion contradicts the philosophical foundations of the public school system. The enriched experiences are not available for everyone in this market-based education model.

At its foundations, there is an absence of or insufficient reason guiding neoliberal education reforms. Instead of rationality, it is unreason that underpins choice and competition. Although school choice policy is supposedly based on the knowledge and principle of the free market, which in turn is based on neoliberal economic theory, the theory's assumptions about the rationality of agents, choice, and processes seem to be irrelevant, as school choice relies on insufficient or skewed information and randomness. School choice is premised on parents and students choosing a school of their preference and in the pursuit of their passion. Yet, in reality, it is not uncommon to see their choice unrealized, not because individual families or students have neither preferences nor reasons, but rather because the system is set up to have limited spaces. Schools can admit only a limited number of students and exclude those who are unable to find spots. This market system thus negates the rationale for public education, which is that education should be accessible to all. There is little justification for market-based choice in the public school system. Hence, while madness is not a concept usually associated with neoliberalism, I propose Foucault's notion of madness as something that is absent of reason or for which reason is obscured, and that underpins neoliberal education reforms.

Concluding Discussion

This article has illustrated how I have adapted Foucault's analytical approach to understanding madness in articulating the Neoliberal Education Reform Madness (NERM). My starting point was Sahlberg's conceptualization of the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM, as infecting public school systems around the globe. Yet, moving beyond the notion of the reforms as germs, I analyzed the neoliberal underpinnings of global educational reforms,

especially in the context of Canada. I have pinpointed how neoliberalism overlooks the unequal conditions of school choice, while individualism and choice discourses contribute to reproducing inequalities. The neoliberal reform's obstructions to the inclusive vision for education lead to (re)producing inequalities and the stratification of schools, students, and educators. Neoliberal individual choice undermines the education system's capacity and reflexivity to address systemic and structural inequities. The neoliberal reforms will continue to create a stratified and segregated education system.

Passion, desperate passion, or privatizing passion, as illustrated in this article, is part of the neoliberal reform movement that drives parents to choose schools and for some to desire their children's education to be tailored through specialized programs. Pursuing their and their children's passions ostensibly keeps these parents from seeing other children's passions while schools become separated, segregated, and stratified. Allowing this separation and stratification according to one's passion is madness. Learning opportunities are lost to those who have yet to have the opportunities to develop their *passions*, and they may never find or have the chance to explore them. The discourse of passion, which anchors the global education reform movement, especially by those who implement and/or support marketization and privatization, needs to be confronted.

The madness undergirding school market reforms is evident in the rise of unreason in how schools and students are considered competitive and worthy of specialized programs, especially in introducing and using a lottery-based admission system. Indeed, lottery-based admission is happening not just in Canada. It is also practised in charter schools in the United States, as featured in a relatively well-known documentary, *Waiting for Superman*. In the documentary, the SEED public charter school in Washington, D.C., uses a lottery method to choose its students. A staff member spins a cage full of bingo balls, each with a number on it, and randomly selects a ball. Whoever is called out gets admitted to the school. In other words, whether or not a student enters the school is decided entirely by luck. This lottery admission process thus removes the rational choice element from the school market system—a system in which rational actors supposedly participate. Randomness determines students' admission to the charter school, that is, their school of choice. The neoliberal theory of the market mechanism is built on the assumption of rational actors reaching an equilibrium in which demand and supply balance each other out; however, in many markets, including school markets, rational choice is not something that individuals or institutions practice (Stiglitz & Rosengard, 2015). The random selection of students is neither educationally sound nor equitable. Such selection does not address unequal conditions because of the unequal geography of educational opportunities and choices, as discussed in this article. Moreover, the lottery system does not address the resource disparities that students experience while they attend their schools of choice or programs of choice, which often require them to pay additional fees. Indeed, any other admission procedure would negate the universal access principle of public education.

As discussed thus far, Foucault's analytical approach (which is used to examine madness) provides a generative lens to deconstruct the overlooked yet significant maddening effects of neoliberal educational reforms on our public school systems. While existing research has taken a Foucauldian approach to analyzing neoliberal reforms (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Niesche, 2013), few have done so through the lens of madness. I hope the lens of madness, as used in this article, allows readers to *see* that insanity is not that far from sanity; inequity continues to be produced in a system that is supposed to strive for equity. The market principles of choice, competition,

differentiation, and niche-making are forms of madness that do not (and should not) belong in public schools. The market principles are not intended to serve all learners' interests or passions, especially not those with few private resources. Neoliberal reforms are thus maddening because it is impossible to meet the goals of public education under market principles. Instead, by strengthening the dual "régime of truth"—namely, standardized tests of the student population and portfolio-building among those select few via choice programs—neoliberal reforms are creating new power relations and inequalities (Foucault, 1980).

My hope is that my analysis provides a critical space in which to reconsider the current policy direction of the global education reforms of privatization and marketization. A critical stance on neoliberalism's far-reaching maddening effects can help us awaken to and activate counter-conduct (Foucault, 2007; Nietzsche, 2015). Public schools should be sites of resistance and should rectify the unequal realities of schooling. We need to stop advantaging some students over others. We can take a greater collective responsibility for public education that can serve all students equitably. Ultimately, public schools are based on the ideals of inclusive education for all. High-quality public education that can support students' developing passions should be within easy reach for every child.

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By pioneering innovative geospatial approaches in education research, Dr. Ee-Seul Yoon is recognized for breaking new ground in interdisciplinary research connecting educational policy, sociology, and geography. Her work has helped forge new lines of research on the uneven impact of education marketization and privatization on schooling opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.

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