


## Is it a Choice?

# Examining Neoliberal Influences in Three Ontario Education Reforms

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# Critical Education

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## *Is it a Choice? Examining Neoliberal Influences in Three Ontario Education Reforms*

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### Abstract

*In this article, we draw on various critical perspectives to theorize neoliberal choice and examine how it has been deployed to market new educational reforms in Ontario. We begin by offering a contemporary framing of neoliberalism that looks at its core elements as well as its chameleon-like tendencies to draw on neoconservative elements as needed. We also furnish critiques of neoliberalism by engaging Adams et al.'s (2019) description of neoliberal "choice" as one component of a larger psychological exercise in support of capitalism. We then examine how the language of choice has been used to position three recent Ontario education reforms: (a) mandatory e-learning; (b) growth of international students; and (c) the revision of curricula according to economic ends. Finally, we argue that the implementation of these reforms ironically has produced less choice for stakeholders through austerity and standardization.*



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The current structure of education in Ontario emerged with the School Acts of 1846 and 1847, which included free schooling for children at the elementary level and the establishment of a province-wide Board of Education (Pinto, 2012). With the School Act of 1871, the Ontario government enshrined free schools (Li, 2015) and facilitated publicly funded secondary schooling (Pinto, 2012). From its inception, education in Ontario has had economic and ideological aims that have reflected the dominant concerns of the time. On one hand, education was seen as an avenue to increased democratization. On the other, it was thought a useful tool to cultivate both a workforce and civil order (Axelrod, 1997). This is perhaps best summarized in then-Superintendent of Education Egerton Ryerson's remarks that Ontario schools should prepare young people for "appropriate duties and employments of life, as Christians, as persons of business, and also as members of the civil communities in which they live" (as cited in Axelrod, 1997, p. 25). With a firmly established system of public schools in place, education reforms between 1960 and 1980 in Ontario began to reflect the liberal zeitgeist of the era (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003)—even if only superficially (Pinto, 2012). These reforms were ostensibly shaped by goals for progressive education and included: increasing access to junior and senior kindergarten, elementary curriculum embedded with student-centred pedagogies, mandatory special education provision and funding, and the elimination of exit exams at the secondary level (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003). The funding model for education in Ontario continued to provide autonomy at the local level with school boards able to obtain more funding by advocating their municipal councils to approve increases to education property taxes (Li, 2015).

The 1990s and early 2000s represented a period of substantial change to education policy in Ontario (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003; Pinto, 2012; Sattler, 2012). The Progressive Conservative (PC) government under Premier Mike Harris led education reforms premised on neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies that were gaining traction across jurisdictions including Canada, the United States, and Britain (Pinto, 2012). Through the "Common Sense Revolution," the Harris government was intent on reducing the size and spending of government, increasing accountability of government services, and cutting taxes (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003). In education, Pinto (2012) notes "there was a fundamental shift in framing educational issues, with the introduction of business metaphors in which education was a 'business' whose 'customers' were parents and students, reflecting the ideological position of the government in power" (p. 57). As delineated by Pinto (2012), major reforms of the era included: curriculum overhauls with more specific expectations per grade, standardized testing of literacy and numeracy through the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), reduction of high school course offerings from 1,400 to roughly 200, cuts to school board budgets including a \$1 billion reduction in education spending in 1999 from the previous school year, amalgamation of school boards to 72 from 124, formation of a self-regulatory body known as the Ontario College of Teachers, and the shutting down of the Anti-Racism Secretariat and its equivalent in the Ministry of Education. Also, through the passage of Bill 160 in 1997, the government fully centralized education funding (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003). Overall, the reforms developed along economic lines and formed part of a shift toward prioritizing market-based logics, such as privatization in policy production (Pinto, 2012).

Li (2015) notes that education governance under the Liberal government that replaced the PCs "continued in the same direction, albeit generally with a more collaborative approach" (p. 10). The Liberal government, while being more progressive, remained neoliberal (Parker, 2017). For instance, major education objectives were based on neoliberal performative accountability

metrics such as having 75% of students meet the provincial standard on EQAO tests and graduation rates at 85% (Sattler, 2012). To support these goals, the government established new accountability organizations and mechanisms. For example, the Liberals initiated the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership and created *Growing Success* to guide evaluation, all with the main goal of increasing student achievement according to neoliberal notions of accountability (Parker, 2017). Examples of reforms that were seemingly more progressive included the implementation of a system-wide Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, which required each school board to develop an equity and inclusive education policy (Campbell, 2021), and the implementation of a full-day kindergarten program (Lynch, 2014).

We contend that an ever-adapting neoliberalism continues to manifest in Ontario's education reform. We draw on neoliberal theory and a psychological perspective of the entrepreneurial self to theorize choice critically and to examine how it has been deployed to market new educational reforms in Ontario. In particular, we begin by offering a contemporary framing of neoliberalism to set the study's context in the broader social, political, and cultural realm. We describe Wendy Brown's (2020) critique of neoliberalism, which reveals how neoliberalism has metamorphized into not simply support for capitalism but also support for the neoconservative agenda; we also note how the concept of choice exists at the nexus of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Having established choice as fundamental to neoliberalism, we next aim to highlight the appeal of choice to the individual by engaging Adams et al.'s (2019) description of neoliberal choice as one component of a larger psychological exercise in support of capitalism. We then examine how the language of choice has been used to position three recent Ontario education reforms: (a) the introduction of mandatory e-learning; (b) the accelerated growth of international students in schools and higher education; and (c) the revision of curricula according to economic ends. Finally, we argue that the implementation of these reforms ironically has produced less choice for stakeholders and suggest that, though the language of choice is attractive, scholars and critics need to be vocal in highlighting the fiscal and educational constraints that may be produced by these policies.

### **Neoliberalism as a Chameleon**

For this analysis, it is important to recognize neoliberalism as an adaptable hegemony that draws upon neoconservative values. At its roots, neoliberalism can be understood as the application of free market logics to promote unrestricted flow of capital. Typically, this is accomplished through low tariffs and taxes, industry deregulation, and the privatization of public goods and services (Brown, 2018). Neoliberalism is intent on implementing marketization even when a market does not exist. It is able to achieve this feat because it replaces the capitalist idea of "exchange" with "competition" (Brown, 2015). In doing so, it situates citizens as a particular iteration of *homo oeconomicus*—that is, individuals who see themselves as manifestations of human capital that require constant self-investment to increase value and competitiveness (Brown, 2015). Further, neoliberal rationality requires that governments play an active role in supporting market-based logics through legal frameworks.

What is notable is that these economic arguments do not stand alone. Instead, neoliberalism upholds market-based logics through neoconservative morality and values, which are rooted in white, Christian patriarchy (Brown, 2020). Neoconservatism is preoccupied with upholding this particular social order in response to a perceived decline of the West (Stanley, 2007). Neoconservatives attribute this decline to the rise of cultural relativism and faltering

moral standards, multiculturalism, and permissive immigration (Stanley, 2007). As such, neoconservatives want a return to a strong state that will restore “real knowledge,” morality, common culture, and high standards, based on a particular iteration of “Western tradition” (Apple, 2000). Brown (2020) uses the term “markets-and-morals” to denote how a neoliberal paradigm is supplemented by neoconservative values. This markets-and-morals model normalizes competition and individualizes responsibility. It positions neoconservative traditional values as synonymous with patriotism, so that critiques of neoliberal governments are seen as unpatriotic (Brown, 2020). In doing so, as Brown (2015) determines, neoliberalism trades in freedom for deregulation, inclusion for competition, and equality for inequality, in a manner that seeks to minimize costs. It permits governments to rationalize cost-cutting and austerity budgets, the privatization of public services, and accountability based on standardized metrics all in the name of economic, human capital imperatives.

The marriage of neoliberalism and neoconservatism creates potent adaptability and hegemony, traversing well beyond the economic domain (Brown, 2020; Callison & Manfredi, 2020). In education, for example, Apple (2007) describes neoliberalism’s pairing with neoconservatism through the concept of conservative modernization. The alliance, which is spearheaded by neoliberals, includes neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and a segment of the new managerial class. While on the surface these factions may have contradictory aims, neoliberalism is able to create synergy across the groups through appeals to high standards, traditionalism, accountability, competition, and choice (Apple, 2007). These appeals are able to simultaneously appease market fundamentalism and social order. More importantly, however, by forging this kind of unity, these concepts permit neoliberalism to proceed more effectively with its main agenda of applying market-based logics to all decision-making.

The concept of choice sits at the nexus of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, where, on the one hand, neoliberalism furnishes a market for entrepreneurial selves and where, on the other, neoconservatism guides individual choice through particular values. The language of choice appeared through appeals to the free market in the 1980s (Brandes, 2020). Economists like Milton Friedman aimed to develop populist, widespread support for the adoption of concepts such as individual freedom and choice in reaction against the then-prevalent zeitgeist of social democracy and the welfare state (Brandes, 2020). Friedman argued that the government interferes in individual freedom and choice, and that the free market, through competition, would allow each individual to be more prosperous if they were able to make their own choices. In these early arguments, we see that choice was closely linked to liberal notions of the individual. Over time, however, the argument for personal choice has resulted in an outsized sense of personal responsibility through framing of the entrepreneurial self (Peters & Green, 2021). Peters and Green (2021) note that choice takes on a greater role for the neoliberal entrepreneurial self, since choice-making transfers responsibility from the state to the individual and creates “consumer-citizens” (p. 160) who are focused on making decisions—economic, social, and political—through a personal investment lens. Overall, the expansion of individualism and the entrepreneurial self erodes support for collectivism and social programs; it cultivates more opportunity to develop markets and dismantle the public good.

### **What Does It Mean to Have “Choice”? A Psychological Perspective**

If the twinning of neoliberalism and neoconservatism lends insight into how policies escape the economic domain and sprawl into all areas of life, there remains the question of why

these policies hold appeal for the voting public. Put another way, the question becomes: how does the government convince people that these policies and reforms are desirable? In other work, Parker (2020a; 2021a; 2023) has explored phenomenological aspects of the forces cultivating neoliberal ways of being, illustrating the range of means by which education is shaped according to the governing hegemony. When grappling with the specific appeal of choice, however, we seek a theory that helps illuminate the particular psychological draw of choice to the individual as a citizen or voter.

As such, for this analysis, we draw on Adams et al.'s (2019) study of psychological science and neoliberalism, which highlights the emergence of the "entrepreneurial self." Their analysis foregrounds how neoliberalism constructs the psychology of the self in response to economic demands for growth, competition, and individualism. Adams et al. (2019) identify the "entrepreneurial self" as rooted in two enjoined traditions: the first is based on Enlightenment theories such as the Protestant Work Ethic that "emphasizes economic freedom to acquire private property, to exchange goods and services, and to succeed or fail according to a person's merits" (p. 194); the second is the romantic or post-modernist movement toward self-actualization or self-determination. In a discussion that resonates with Peters and Green's (2021) analysis, Adams et al. (2019) describe how, for the entrepreneurial self, there is a necessary connection between individualism, choice, and, subsequently, what the authors' term "responsibilization." First, the authors describe how individualization that is aimed at economic growth and imperatives for people to be responsible for the "refinement of their own capital" (p. 195) leads to a desire for choice. The entrepreneurial self, they argue, psychologically requires a range of choices in order to develop and express the range of preferences and tastes that will allow for their competitive achievement as a self, and for the expression of their judgments that can produce capitalist growth. As such, one principle of neoliberalism, in complement to the construction of the individual who is *free from* constraints, is also the fostering of the individual who is *free to* choose. In this way, choice is not simply appealing to the neoliberal self, it is critical to its psychological expression of self.

Adams et al. (2019) also note that this affordance of choice as a central tenet of the entrepreneurial self comes with significant psychological and social consequences. One psychological consequence is that choice as a function of individualism leads to responsibilization. That is, the individual begins to construct narratives for making sense of their life circumstances by applying the framework of neoliberal choice to their outcomes. A person who is economically successful, for example, might see their positive financial outcomes as a function of their ability to make excellent choices. A person whose life is less economically productive would be more likely to see their hardships as personal failures. This leads to the "responsibilization" of the self and produces negative by-products of choice, such as higher levels of dissatisfaction and a growing sense of anxiety rooted in the risks associated with choice-making (Adams et al., 2019).

Taken on a societal level, responsibilization results in the inability to recognize systemic oppressions and injustices, since all stories of inequality become a measure of a person's individual merits as a choice-maker. It also elides the fact that some people, mostly affluent people, have a palette of good choices available to them, whereas other groups may have historically had choices, but of an overall worse set of options. Adams et al. (2019) also note that the rise of the entrepreneurial self, responsibilization, and the discourse of choice cultivates perspectives of individualism over collective solidarity. They cite studies spanning 40 years that

documented the growth of terms such as “choose,” “right,” and “entitlement,” rather than terms such as “obliged,” “communal,” and “act” (Adams et al., 2019). Savani et al. (2011) further analyze the relationship between the neoliberal language of choice and social outcomes and determine that choice discourse undermines the public good by reducing support for policies aimed at reducing inequality and fostering collective benefits. The reduction in support for the public good, paired with the appeals to the entrepreneurial self, then cultivates the appetite for privatization and the proliferation of markets in traditionally non-market spaces, like education.

## Methodology

We draw from elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the way language has been used to position education reforms in Ontario. CDA can be thought of as a qualitative methodological approach that foregrounds language as a site for the negotiation of meaning in a social context, with consideration of the nature of asymmetric power amongst a discourse’s participants. As Luke (1995) contends, “discourse in institutional life can be viewed as a means for the naturalization and disguise of power relations that are tied to inequalities in the social production and distribution of symbolic and material resources” (p. 12). It is, then, a study of the way language is used subversively to uphold structures of dominance and inequity in ways that require redress and critique.

This analysis is a sociopolitical critique that understands educational reform as immanent in the political and social aims of both governments and the citizenry whose support they seek. As noted above, our application of CDA can be thought of as an intervention at the site of the onset of reforms; we aim to highlight how particular invocations of the language of choice—in this case employed by governments—often invisibilize or ignore arguments against the reform as offered by scholars, practitioners, parents, students, and other educational stakeholders. This work continues in the vein of Parker’s (2017; 2019) earlier analyses that explored the way language is commonly used to sell or market education reform; it also extends the tradition of CDA described in Rogers et al.’s (2016) review of the literature, in that it aims to examine how neoliberalism has, and continues to, influence education reforms. Our approach began by selecting Ontario as the site of study for two reasons: first, in response to our research and professional expertise with the context; second, in recognition of the varied nature of educational reforms that the latest government has undertaken. We draw on government-authored texts to create a panorama of discursive positioning for each reform, and we hold these in tension with concerns about the reforms that the government has failed to fully address in its communication.

CDA is, by necessity, varied in method; it is also a process that changes and adapts over time in response to the flux in discursive tools and dominant media. Luke (2004) notes the following:

The very *raison d’être* of critical discourse studies is to engage in ways of criticizing and second-guessing prevailing and dominant ways of naming the cultural and natural worlds as a means for questioning social, economic and political power. It therefore involves naming, describing and explicating through varied analytic metalanguages and specialized approaches, none of which are fully transparent. (p. 150)

With Luke, we acknowledge that CDA is complex and can be engaged from a variety of positions, using a myriad of deconstructive processes, and toward a host of aims. In this analysis,

we seek to make interpretive moves that read for themes of choice in government literature and that offer an intervention at the nexus of official, political positioning of educational reform and the oft-times elided questions of the attendant harms. We make a choice here not to focus on word counts and keywords in order to freely engage with how themes have arisen holistically in government communications. We also note that, after 50 years of neoliberal influence, the government does not often need to produce a great quantity of persuasive texts or rely on the drumbeat of repetition—whether in press releases or speeches—to compel public support. Rather, the firm entrenchment of a neoliberal hegemony means that the discursive cues are often echoes and appeals that draw upon well-established norms of economic priority and individualism. By studying the available texts for the language of choice and contraposing them against concerns from the field and community, this analysis seeks to: continue in the tradition of critical analysis of neoliberal incursions into non-market spaces of education (Rogers et al., 2016); also, hold open a productive space for the recognition of neoliberal themes at work in education and for the articulation of opposing voices that raise concerns, often in favour of the public good or more equitable outcomes.

### **A Study of “Choice” in Three Ontario Policies**

In this section, we analyze three recent reforms in Ontario, Canada to illustrate how the language of choice has been deployed by the government in order to draw public support. These reforms were selected not only because they are timely examples but because their implementation has a significant impact on the public system and, as we highlight below, potential for harm. As we show through the analysis, these policies demonstrate elements of neoconservative appeal through standardization—that is, by conceptualizing learning as transactional and rote—while implementing neoliberal goals of privatization, austerity, and marketization. We first describe the reforms briefly before discussing how the language of choice was part of the public messaging about them. We also discuss how the appeal for choice has ignored particular drawbacks of the reform in each case, foreclosing fulsome public deliberation and setting the stage for future issues for students and families. The three reforms include: (a) mandatory e-learning in Ontario high schools; (b) the expansion of international student cohorts in secondary and post-secondary education in Ontario and across Canada; (c) finally, the revision of curricular documents in line with narrow, economic interests.

#### ***Mandatory E-Learning***

The policy to introduce mandatory e-learning in Ontario high schools was first proposed by Premier Doug Ford’s Progressive Conservative provincial government in a document entitled *Education That Works for You: Modernizing Classrooms* (Government of Ontario, 2019a). Amid a suite of reforms, the government proposed shifting four of the regularly required 30 in-person courses to fully online for each high school student in the province. In the same document, the government also noted that it would be making increases to class sizes for students in junior grades (grade 4 to 8) from an average of 23.84 to 24.5 and for high school students from 22 to 28. For high school students, the shift in class sizes for in-person learning represented over a 27% increase in size. For the four proposed mandatory online classes, the class size would be even larger, at 35 students (Barbour & LaBonte, 2019) or a 60% increase in class size.



The policy was met with much unease. Some scholars noted that it would be very costly and difficult to scale the program, given the lack of internet infrastructure and technology supports in all parts of the province (Barbour & LaBonte, 2019). Others voiced concern about the lack of consultation and research demonstrating the need for such a shift, and that such a policy was largely aimed at cost-cutting (Parker, 2020b; Parker, 2021b). The concerns about cost-cutting were lent further weight by two concomitant shifts outlined in *Education That Works for You*. First, the document proposed class size increases for intermediate and secondary grades. Second, and in conjunction with the introduction of the four mandatory e-learning courses, the government announced that the online shift would mean that “the secondary program enhancement grant will no longer be required” (Government of Ontario, 2019a). The secondary program enhancement grant, introduced under the previous Liberal provincial government in 2008, was designed to foster “a well-balanced education, [providing] support for music, arts, physical and outdoor education programs” (Government of Ontario, 2008).

Aiming to establish a rationale and to draw support for the mandatory e-learning policy, the government deployed the language of choice in conjunction with language about economic competition. In a November 2019 press release, for example, the government rationalized the need for mandatory e-learning in the following way:

By expanding and modernizing online learning, students will have greater flexibility, more choice, and will graduate with the skills needed to enter the workforce. Employers are looking for people who understand the importance of technology and can use it in ways that will help their businesses thrive in a competitive, globally connected economy. (Government of Ontario, 2019b, para. 6)

On the one hand, here we see the pairing of “flexibility” with “choice” and the invocation of the needs of the workforce alongside the pressures of global competition. On the other hand, it is not clear how e-learning provides students with a greater understanding of “the importance of technology” or different “skills needed to enter the workforce.” It is also unclear whether the injunction to take an e-learning course actually produces more choice for students or simply forces more technology-based learning at the expense of in-class models. Nonetheless, the discursive positioning marketed e-learning as a “modernization” that would assist the individual with their desire for social mobility. This two-fold appeal accords well with Adams et al.’s (2019) conception of the entrepreneurial self, which necessitates seeing ourselves as economic contributors who have the ability to compete through an ongoing process of well-judged decisions. That is, by applying this language, the government was drawing on the psychological appeal of the neoliberal entrepreneurial self who has to compete through choice-making in order to secure economic gains.

Another notable example of the positioning of choice emerged in a leaked government document about the then-proposed mandatory e-learning policy. As described in a *Globe and Mail* article regarding the leaked policy:

high-school students would have the *option* [emphasis added] to enroll in a teacher-supported online course or an independent-learning course offered through a centre operated by TVO for English-language students and TFO for French-language students. The document also said that those organizations could market the courses elsewhere. (Alphonso, 2022, para. 11)

Here, students would have an option to enrol in classes with a teacher or without, and the government would have the option to sell the curriculum in other jurisdictions. Press Progress (2021), which offered screen shots of the retracted document, revealed that the Ministry of Education “mandates TVO develop a ‘global strategy’ to ‘market’ Ontario online courses for sale” (para. 9) and that “this change will help TVO ‘generate revenue’” (para. 10). This rendering of choice would produce a standardized and undifferentiated course-as-product that, while saleable, would increase standardization for students. It would, in effect, rely on more traditional neoconservative models of rote learning that see students as repositories for knowledge delivery and effaces the complex relationality at the heart of teaching and learning. Further, this iteration of choice highlights the economic undergirding of the policy rationale, such that the Ministry of Education could reduce costs by offering courses without paying for a teacher (i.e., the “independent-learning course”) and simultaneously raise funds, or make a profit, by selling the courses abroad. Although this aspect of the reform is evidence of market “choice,” in this circumstance, it is an example of choice the government did not wish to promote, as the leaked document was subsequently made unavailable (Alphonso, 2022).

The positioning of the policy as one that offers economic competitiveness through more choice obscured the drawbacks associated with the policy and, because the government did not fully address these arguments, diluted the ability for stakeholders to have discussions about their concerns. One concern was that, by centralizing course offerings, students and families would *de facto* have less choice since centralization and standardization would remove the ability of local school boards to make decisions about which courses would best be suited for e-learning at a local level. A related concern was that a reduction in funding would result in fewer course offerings for students, thereby limiting the diversity of regional learning options for communities. Another substantive problem was that the larger class sizes in e-learning contexts would result in less personal attention for students and fewer opportunities to meet their individual needs through differentiation. In their analysis of the policy, Robertson et al. (2021) summarize these issues, noting:

the requirement for four mandatory online courses would reduce full-time equivalent secondary school teaching positions by 25% by the 2022–2023 school year. The proposed change would cause significant increases to class sizes, decreases in course options available to students, the cancellation of programs, and potential closures of rural schools that would be unable to provide the minimum core programs. (pp. 5–6)

The same problems were documented and expanded upon in Bocking’s (2022) autoethnographic study of the Ontario government’s policies since 2018. Bocking (2022) notes that existing scholarship delineates how e-learning promotes inequities among students, and documents the widespread opposition to its becoming a requirement among students and parents. In addition to these pedagogical issues, still other educational stakeholders have raised questions of a more pragmatic nature, asking how the government could enact such a requirement when many students lack adequate internet infrastructure at home. Robertson et al. (2021) cite a Canadian Radio and Broadcasting Corporation report from 2020 to note that, while 87.4% of homes in Canada have high-speed internet access, this average drops to 45.6% in rural and remote areas.

In sum, the analysis of how the government positioned this mandatory e-learning as a positive choice reveals: a reliance on traditional values of learning, despite language of

modernization; a focus on cultivating markets at the expense of relationality and differentiation; and a lack of engagement with education stakeholders' concerns.

### *Increases in International Student Population*

In recent years, another notable policy shift has affected both K–12 and higher education: the move to increase the number of international students attending Canadian schools, including schools across Ontario. In a 2019–2024 strategy document entitled *Building on Success*, the federal government explicitly called for growth in the international student population and indicated it had “asked provincial and territorial partners and stakeholders across Canada what is needed to grow and sustain Canada’s international education sector” (Government of Canada, 2020, “Message from the Minister” section). An Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) strategy document, authored in 2015 but still listed as current on the Ministry website, details an objective to grow the “market share” of international students by becoming more competitive globally and interprovincially (OME, 2015). The government noted that it was aiming to increase this population of students across K–12 and post-secondary systems, writing, “Ontario is committed to increasing the number of full-time, fee-paying visa students in Ontario schools and the number proceeding to Ontario colleges and universities” (OME, 2015, p. 23). Perhaps anticipating the concerns with such a strategy over the long-term—including sustainability of public education funding and erosion of the ability to support domestic and international students in the existing system, which was designed for local education—the government also went on to note the following:

this growth must not be attained at the expense of quality in the educational experience provided or of the care and support of international students; financial considerations are secondary to achieving the goals of the strategy and supporting Ontario’s vision for publicly funded education. (OME, 2015, p. 23)

As detailed below, however, this internationalization strategy has produced a range of concerns, including the unsustainable dilution of public funding (Usher & Balfour, 2023) and a host of issues facing arriving students (Calder et al., 2016).

Before moving on to the analysis of the documented problems of this internationalization strategy, however, it is important to analyze what kind of appeals the government made in the language of the strategy documents to the entrepreneurial self and to choice. Language establishing the neoliberal premise for the strategy has been evident at both federal and provincial levels. In *Building on Success*, for example, the Canadian government delineated benefits of the internationalization policy in a way that twinned neoliberalism and neoconservatism. That is, the federal government promoted both neoliberal economic goals and neoconservative nationalist values. The twinning is evident in the following introductory matter of the strategy, where the Minister of International Trade Diversification noted,

International education is an essential pillar of Canada’s long-term competitiveness. Canadians who study abroad gain exposure to new cultures and ideas, stimulating innovation and developing important cross-cultural competencies. Students from abroad who study in Canada bring those same benefits to our shores. If they choose to immigrate to Canada, they contribute to Canada’s economic success. Those who choose to return to their countries

become life-long ambassadors for Canada and for Canadian values. (Government of Canada, 2020, Message from the Minister section)

Here, the language posits neoliberal tenets of economic competitiveness and of humans as economic assets for a country to exploit as direct advantages. The language also draws on the neoconservative assumption that traditional “Canadian values” are both normatively good and can be exported globally to enrich other countries. This is similar to the unspoken neoconservative assumptions for transmission-based learning noted in the analysis of mandatory e-learning, and it is a theme we discuss in more detail below.

In Ontario’s strategy document on international education, there are direct appeals both to the economic rationale and to the entrepreneurial self. Choice, in particular, is presented in two ways: first, as seen in the example of mandatory e-learning, the government positions internationalization as producing more program and learning choice for the local population; second, in an echo of the twinned neoliberal and neoconservative language at the federal level, the strategy positions Ontario as the first choice of international learning sites within a competitive, global market. The first dimension of choice is highlighted in the document as “*creating and enhancing pathways for all students [through] new and expanded [program] choices*” (OME, 2015, p. 17). The second dimension of choice foregrounds Ontario as a desirable choice for international consumers. The following excerpt of the strategy document, for example, talks about Ontario as a “destination of choice” but also notes that international student tuition dollars can be thought of as an economic benefit that can be directly used to supplement public tax base erosion and shortfalls:

Ontario is a destination of choice for students from around the world, whether to enrol as full-time students in a K–12 or post-secondary education institution, or to come for a shorter term for language or other vocational training. These students choose Ontario as a place to learn and to share intercultural experiences and are also recruited by Ontario boards and schools for the value they bring to the learning environment here. They may also be recruited by boards in response to issues of declining enrolment in some areas, or as an additional source of revenue. (OME, 2015, pp. 9–10)

In the policy document, the government makes the marketization of a public good, education, a stated objective; it also fashions choice as a solution to issues of public funding austerity. The government frames internationalization as an economic mechanism for school boards here, without recognizing that the government has played a role in cultivating the need for additional revenue through underfunding. As players in the marketplace, the boards are meant to function in the same vein as private sector businesses, making choices about how to increase revenues through competitive recruitment and marketing. Further, Ontario’s educational product is seen as a desirable choice among international consumers, in no small part because of its location in the Global North (Parker & Deckard, 2022). In this way, the language of choice here functions not simply as a psychological mechanism for exercising an individual responsibility for growth and for contribution to the economy but also as a reinforcement of the colonial, imperialist positioning of Ontario as a superior site of teaching and learning, with school credentials that are worth more in the global marketplace.

Unlike the shift to mandatory e-learning, the policies supporting the increase in international student enrolment are several years old. As a result, there has been a growing body

of data and scholarship to highlight the problems associated with the way this policy has been enacted in Ontario. Parker and Deckard (2022) describe how the erosion of public funding for K–12 education was producing an increased reliance on international tuition. The dilution of tax funding has now produced a circumstance in which the international cohort from a single country (India) is out-funding the Ontario government in colleges (Usher & Balfour, 2023). This was confirmed in a recent report, *The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada* (Usher & Balfour, 2023), which found that the total number of students attending Ontario post-secondary institutions has approximately doubled in the last 20 years but that this growth has been underpinned by problematic trends in Ontario’s higher education sector. This includes the finding that Ontario has had the weakest funding of post-secondary education in Canada for 38 of the last 40 years and subsequently has the highest rate of income from non-government sources. The report also noted that the province has cut and frozen tuition fees since 2019, resulting in a loss of government-controlled income of 31% that institutions have seemingly been covering on the backs of international students. The report found the following:

Numbers like these tend to induce shock. How can it possibly be that Indian students are paying more into the system than *[sic]* Queen’s Park? The answer is simply this: Ontario institutions, faced with deep cuts in income, have acted precisely the way the government asked them to—that is, by acting entrepreneurially and securing new forms of revenue. This isn’t a mistake: this is exactly what the Ontario government requires. Now Ontario is an outlier. No province has underfunded post-secondary education more, and no province’s institutions have found so many ways to raise money from private sources. (Usher & Balfour, 2023, p. 3)

That these economic harms have come at the expense of a sustainable public good is in line with the neoliberal goal of reducing support for social services. It is therefore unsurprising that the policies, despite language about rich intercultural exchange, global competitiveness, and choice for learners through expanded programs, have resulted in a weaker and largely unsustainable fiscal circumstance. In addition to these economic concerns, it is also important to note that international students are suffering harms upon their arrival in the country. These range from lack of support for intercultural integration and community-building (McGregor et al., 2022; Tavares, 2021) to the most basic requirements for safe and affordable housing (Calder et al., 2016). In fact, government disinvestment in education has now dovetailed with its disinvestment in public housing policies to effect an outcome wherein international students are being blamed for the lack of housing supply (Zimonjic, 2023).

As shown, the language of choice in the context of Ontario’s policy for international students relies heavily on neoliberal conceptions of economic competitiveness globally, as well as individual appeals to the entrepreneurial self. It makes the argument for choice in adding revenue streams to school board funding while eliding the government’s role in underfunding public education. It also draws on neoconservative appeals to tradition and nationalism by using a shorthand for “Canadian values,” which are rendered as superior to alternatives. Finally, the use of the language of choice prevents the spotlight from landing squarely on significant concerns about funding sustainability and the exploitation of young people.

### *Curricular Revisions Aligned with Economic Projections*

Ontario has been updating several of its curriculum documents to bring them closer into alignment with projected economic goals and employment needs. Recent updates have included revisions to the Mathematics and Science and Technology curricula. For example, the government has highlighted new expectations within the mathematics curriculum, launched in September 2020, such as the addition of a financial literacy strand as well as an emphasis on coding with specific expectations established starting in Grade 1 (OME, 2021a). The new science curriculum also emphasizes coding and STEM-specific expectations, including learning about emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (OME, 2022). Within the secondary curriculum, starting in September 2024, secondary students will be required to complete a Technological Education credit in order to earn a high school diploma in Ontario (OME, 2023). The government's rationale is to provide students with exposure to skilled trades (OME, 2023).

The recent curricular revisions articulate choice in a very particular way. The government frames choice through an economic lens that appeals to the entrepreneurial self while also aiming to provide more choice of human capital for employers. When introducing the updated math curriculum, for example, the government stated that the updates were part of their four-year plan to improve math performance, help students solve everyday math problems, and increase future student employability (OME, 2021a). The rationale for the curricular reform, specifically the addition of financial literacy and coding, were strongly linked to future employability and economic success. For example, a news release for the elementary math curriculum highlighted the revisions as better preparing students for future jobs and a future workforce (OME, 2020). When the government discussed the revisions to the Grade 9 math course, they rationalized the changes by stating, "The course represents a major update that reflects emerging job-market needs, emphasizes real-world applications and responds to key recommendations provided by employers and education experts" (OME, 2021b, para. 3). The government supplemented this language by inserting quotes from non-public agencies that often have vested, profit motives in cultivating a particular workforce. For instance, the government used a quote from *FIRST Robotics Canada* President David Ellis. *FIRST Robotics Canada* is an organization dedicated to inspiring "young people to pursue further studies and careers in the field of science, technology and engineering" (First Robotics Canada, n.d.-a) and is sponsored by large multinational, private corporations including Magna, Boeing, and 3M (First Robotics Canada, n.d.-b). Ellis stated:

The jobs of tomorrow demand a solid understanding of mathematics. As we see more jobs being created in coding, data management and engineering, proficiency in math will become even more important. By giving Ontario's math curriculum a much-needed update, the government is taking decisive action to help students succeed in the job market and allowing them to unlock their full potential. We are excited about this change! (OME, 2021b, para. 9)

Here, there is some appeal to the student's entrepreneurial self through, perhaps, more choice of future employability. Nonetheless, by stating that the changes reflect recommendations made by employers, the main takeaway is that these curricular revisions are predominantly being made with market and employer choice in mind. Put another way, the curricular changes are going to provide students more employment choice given the expanding and emerging job market of the future only in ways that align with neoliberal imperatives. That is, increasing student employability also leads to increased choice for employers. It is also notable that, despite the

appeals to choice, the framing is overtly economic, thereby delimiting “real-world applications” as ones that have solely market-based logics, rather than broader applications targeting democratic, environmental, social, or wellbeing objectives.

This language, coupled with non-public sector quotes, is consistent throughout the introduction of other curriculum reforms in Ontario. When describing the curricular revisions for Science and Technology, for example, the government repeatedly has discussed job skills and a future-oriented job market (OME, 2022; OME, 2023). When describing the new mandatory secondary course requirement for Technological Education, for example, the government has emphasized that the change will enhance student employability and therefore choice for employers. For instance, a news release stated:

This new learning graduation requirement will expose Ontario’s students to at least one Technological Education course that could guide them to a future career in the highly skilled workforce, including the skilled trades. With more than 100,000 unfilled skilled trades jobs right now, it is critical Ontario attracts more young people to pursue a fulfilling, good-paying career in the trades. (OME, 2023, para. 2)

The focus on workforce, unfilled jobs, and a good-paying career draws on economic appeals: The addition of the technology course is framed as providing more choice to enhance the entrepreneurial self, as well as providing more choice for employers through enhanced human capital. News releases for the Science curriculum, as with the math curriculum, have been supplemented with quotes from not-for-profit organizations that promote business interests. For example, the government has cited *Skills Ontario*, whose mission is to “champion and stimulate the development of world-class technology and employability skills in Ontario youth” (Skills Ontario, n.d.). Many of *Skills Ontario*’s main sponsors are again multinational, private corporations with some of the same high-level sponsors as *FIRST Robotics Canada*, including Magna and 3M (Skills Ontario, n.d.). Ian Howcroft, CEO of *Skills Ontario*, stated:

*Skills Ontario* is pleased and fully supportive of today’s announcement requiring students to take Tech Education classes as part of the curriculum. We have long advocated that students need more exposure to and experiential opportunities with skilled trades and technology. This change will result in more students being introduced to skilled trades and technology, which will help to address our skills shortages and move more people to fulfilling and rewarding careers. This is another example of Ontario’s leadership in developing and delivering skills solutions that will benefit the province, our economy and our standard of living (OME, 2023, para. 12)

In this quote, references to careers, the economy, and “our” standard of living are economic appeals targeting the enhancement of the entrepreneurial self. However, the main appeal is that the course is welcome because it will provide employers with more choice of labourers.

Critics of this kind of curricular reform for economic ends have raised several concerns. Foremost among these concerns is that curricular reform that is aligned with overtly economic aims severely limits the pursuit of other educational goals (Brown, 2015; Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Savage, 2017). Brown (2015), describing higher education, highlights how the main objective of education has been reframed exclusively for enhancing human capital, to the detriment of social, democratic, and collective ideals. Priestley and Biesta (2013) argue that “this

model is driven by a narrow instrumentalism based upon economic imperatives—in other words, soft skills required for the workplace rather than the sorts of ‘powerful knowledge’ required to critically engage with the world” (p. 5). Still others note that, even if education objectives focused on equity and diversity are included in curriculum documents, they are framed to align with neoliberal ideology (Yates & Collins, 2010). In addition to these fundamental epistemic concerns, there have been critiques that draw attention to the imbalance in the breadth of educational opportunities that occurs when a curriculum prioritizes the economy and its future needs. This occurs when subjects that are not explicitly tied to the outlined government economic imperatives, like the arts, physical education, and social sciences, receive less attention (Carpenter et al., 2012). It also occurs through funding cuts, such as the removal of specialty grants like the Secondary Program Enhancement Grant, which was tied to the rollout of mandatory e-learning.

### **The Irony of “Choice”**

The preceding analysis has highlighted how choice has been employed to discursively position education reform shifts as beneficial for students and families, as well as for society as a whole through the mechanism of the economy. By drawing on the narrative of the entrepreneurial self and the responsabilization of the individual, the government in Ontario has introduced education reforms that often have lacked a substantive research basis and often have failed to engage fully with the concerns raised by educational stakeholders. In this section, we discuss how the use of *more choice* as a discursive move is ironic in that it often elides how, for most people, the policies will result in *less choice*.

#### *Less Choice Through Austerity*

The foremost irony in the use of the language of choice is that it distracts from the underlying issues of underfunding and austerity budgets that can *de facto* produce fewer good choices and supports for most people. In the analysis above, we described how policies like mandatory e-learning and growth of the international student population was coincident with cuts to the education budget. In the discussion below, we draw connections between these ongoing cuts and Ontario’s education funding reforms in the 1990s and we note that, though austerity produces less choice for the majority of families, there have been some countermeasures that preserve choice for wealthy families.

In Ontario, fiscal restraints have been a rationale for education reform for decades, as seen with the 1990’s shift to a centralized funding model at the provincial level (Li, 2015). This funding reform not only produced fewer choices for students by leading to diminished per-pupil funding, it also effected fewer choices for school boards to be responsive to their communities. The centralized funding model means that, under the guise of accountability, school boards no longer have the authority to decide local education tax rates and are no longer permitted to run deficits (Li, 2015). These two changes limit a school board’s ability to address local needs and make it difficult to fund initiatives that the communities they serve require. In and of itself, this funding model highlights the way in which underfunding a public good produces less choice at the local level.

As noted, compulsory e-learning and the mandate to grow the international student population emerged in tandem with funding cuts. One of the questions to consider, then, is why



did Ontario families—especially those with high levels of social capital—not respond with more alarm or urgency? Part of the answer may be that some of this austerity can be hidden from public view by drawing on private funds or, as neoliberals might say, alternate sources of revenue. Winton and Milani (2017) note that fundraising in Ontario, for example, is a widespread tactic used to bolster school budgets. Using a recent large-scale school fundraising initiative as a case, Yoon et al. (2020) examine how such fundraising leads to disparate outcomes with schools in wealthier catchments able to raise much more money than counterparts in lower socioeconomic catchments. Data from People for Education (2018) further demonstrate the outsized benefits of school fundraising accruing to wealthier schools. For instance, in 2018, when the top and bottom 10% of elementary schools that were fundraising were compared, the top schools raised 37 times more in funds. The situation at the secondary level is similar, with fundraising totals from the top 5% of high schools equalling fundraising efforts by the bottom 81% combined (People for Education, 2018). The unequal nature of fundraising means that schools in higher socioeconomic neighbourhoods will be able to provide students with enrichment opportunities through the purchase of more tools and a greater range of extra-curricular programming, including technology, art and science programming, and playground equipment (Yoon et al., 2020). The result is a range of good “choices” or opportunities for that community. On the other hand, this kind of unequal funding conceals the fact that other schools and communities will be left with fewer tools and programs, thereby producing fewer choices for those children. In addition, the term “fundraising” hides the fact that families who donate money to their local school are paying out of their after-tax income; this suggests that not only are they paying another layer of tariff for their child’s education, but also that, due to the reduction in disposable income, they have fewer choices as a family to spend that money on other types of opportunities for their child and household.

A lack of choice through fiscal austerity is also hidden from view through the proliferation of specialty programs. Whereas fundraising targets the school community living near the school, specialty programs permit parents to avoid local, underfunded public schools in favour of more prestigious specialized programming focused on French Immersion, arts, and sports. Yoon et al.’s (2018) study revealed that school choice in Vancouver, Canada has disproportionately benefited students with higher levels of wealth and has led to increased segregation. This supports similar findings by Parekh and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2017), who studied school programs in the Toronto District School Board and found that white students with higher levels of economic and social resources were disproportionately represented in specialized arts, gifted, and French Immersion programming. Further, they found that racialized students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were overrepresented in trades/skills programming. They note underrepresentation of racialized students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in specialty programming, other than skilled trades, has a two-pronged effect: first, it limits their current learning opportunities; and, second, it limits future post-secondary opportunities. Also, the funding of specialty programming at specific sites provides an excuse to not offer proper funding to all schools so that more students can access diverse programming. This limits choice for many students and families, particularly those that are racialized and marginalized.

### *Less Choice Through Standardization*

Because of the nature of the neoliberal reforms outlined above, there is less choice through reduced funding as well as through the drive to produce a standardized educational product. In the analysis of policies on mandatory e-learning and curriculum reforms, for example, we noted an increase in standardization through centralized course offerings for the former and a reduction in support for diverse curricular programming in the latter. Historically, curriculum designed for the economy has cultivated standardization and a parallel focus on accountability that produces less choice for most students. The focus on accountability that includes raising standardized tests scores, for example, narrows the scope of teaching by prioritizing testing areas (Carpenter et al., 2012) and leads to what has been widely documented as “teaching to the test” (Brill et al., 2018; Hargreaves, 2020; McNeil, 2000; Volante, 2007). This usually means more rote learning, as is valued in a neoconservative approach, and less focus on creative literacy and numeracy tasks. As noted above, it also means that time for other subject areas, typically the arts, music, and physical education, is omitted or curtailed (Carpenter et al., 2012; McNeil, 2000). Brill et al. (2018) note that “teaching to the test” has led to an increase in the achievement gap and impoverished learning opportunities. These side effects of pursuing improved test scores have also negatively and disproportionately impacted marginalized students (Larson, 2010).

In the leaked and retracted e-learning document described by *The Globe and Mail*, the government was seeking to develop a standardized education product that could then be marketed for export (Alphonso, 2022). By prioritizing a standardized product that can be sold internationally, the curriculum becomes less responsive to Ontario communities, reducing the choices for personalization and local context. This same lack of personalization is produced through larger class sizes that are a function of e-learning and in-person budget cuts. These larger class sizes diminish choice by increasing the teacher–student ratio and by reducing opportunities for differentiation. This creates teaching and learning conditions that are complementary to neoconservative aims of centralizing the curriculum and aligning it with state-sponsored traditional values (Apple, 2006). It also sets the stage for traditional top-down or transmission teaching models that rely on back-to-basics approaches, such as memorization and test-taking.

Mandatory e-learning also opens the door for further efforts to marketize education through the rise of “edu-business” and increased involvement by the private sector in policy production and delivery of curriculum (Lingard et al., 2013). For example, under the guise of using technology to provide opportunities for personalized learning, school boards become reliant on private corporations, like Microsoft, Cisco, Pearson, and Nelson, for programming and digital tools (Sen, 2016). The result is less autonomy for these boards to make local decisions because, as more public funds are diverted to private, for-profit companies, public systems are increasingly beholden to them. The inclusion of private technology companies in education also means school boards, families, and students have less choice about how their data is shared (Lingard, 2019). Lingard (2019) details how the data infrastructures implemented by private businesses in public education systems are part of a global neoliberal governance agenda where the datafication of schooling systems serves to further the restructuring of public education along neoliberal ideals of marketization, competition and choice, accountability, and standardization.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Governments employ the language of choice to cultivate support for their agenda through psychological appeals to the entrepreneurial self, which has been firmly established through decades of evolving neoliberalism. By drawing on individual choice as a mechanism for normatively good life outcomes, the neoliberal framing of policies and reforms—particularly reforms associated with the public good in education—often obscures the fiscal objectives at the root of the issue and sidesteps the concerns of stakeholders who raise questions about potential harms associated with the changes. Since this force of neoliberalism is twinned with neoconservatism in a kind of coalition, advocates for education as a public good have a clear responsibility to also work as a united front. As we see it, these responsibilities each address the appeals to choice, which rely on a taken-for-granted assumption that the entrepreneurial self is the best iteration of a person’s existential capacity. The responsibilities also aim to hold the discursive platform open in a more robust manner, challenging government to engage with scholarly and stakeholder concerns in direct conversation rather than through obfuscation. These responsibilities are fivefold. First, stakeholders invested in public education must make the connections between neoliberal reforms and budget cuts transparent. Second, we must continue to shine a spotlight on the “alternative revenue streams” that public institutions are forced to seek in the face of rising costs and be vocal about the harms that accompany such changes in the medium- to long-term. Third, we have to advocate for funding models that restore balance between neighbourhoods and families. Fourth, we have to continue to provide rationales for alternatives to the narrow economic project by articulating how other educational goals, such as those of criticality and social justice, can help young people lead happy (and economically sound) lives. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we must argue for values of collectivism, not merely in our messaging but by demonstrating a unified voice in our advocacy for the public good.

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