Document generated on 04/06/2025 3:35 p.m.

Critical Education

Critical Education

Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada

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Volume 15, Number 2, 2024

Defending and Strengthening Public Education as a Common Good

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111312ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v15i2.186944

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Publisher(s)

Institute for Critical Education Studies / UBC

ISSN

1920-4175 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Lopuck, K. (2024). Review of [Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada]. *Critical Education*, *15*(2), 143–146. https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v15i2.186944

Article abstract

This review is a critique of Sue Winton's Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada. Sounding an alarm about the encroachment of privatization in the Canadian school system, Winton provides a critical review of the many ways in which neoliberal marketization of education is becoming common place in Canadian schools. Many of the examples provided by Winton demonstrate how individual choices have detrimental effects on the ideals of public education. Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada encourages parents, educators, and policymakers to engage in the fight to save public education from this growing privatization.

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Critical Education

Volume 15 Number 2 May 1, 2024 ISSN 1920-4175

Book Review

Winton, S. (2022). *Unequal benefits: Privatization and public education in Canada*. University of Toronto Press. $27.95 ISBN 978-4875-2596-5, 185 pages.

Lopuck, K. (2024). [Review of the book *Unequal benefits: Privatization and public education in Canada,* by S. Winton]. *Critical Education, 15*(2), 143-146.
https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v15i2.186944

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"Public schooling is based on the idea that every child is of equal worth and deserves the same opportunity to realize all the benefits of education. Education privatization undermines these beliefs" (Winton, 2022, p. 130). Sue Winton's warning about the risks of privatizing public education summarizes the rallying cry that is her book, *Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada.* Throughout her critical review of education privatization in Canada, Winton thoroughly analyzes multiple examples of privatization and its growing encroachment on public education systems across the country, demonstrating how privatization prioritizes individual benefits over collective ones. Written for a diverse audience that includes parents of school-aged children, educational policy makers, educational policy researchers, and the general public at large, *Unequal Benefits* is comprised of five chapters and an appendix.

Winton's first chapter offers a general introduction to educational privatization and public education in Canada. Drawing on research from Canada, England, and Australia, Winton identifies five important characteristics of a public education system. These characteristics include that the public system is universally free and accessible, that public schooling is fully funded by the government so that costs do not impact equal access, that there is equal opportunity for all students to reap the benefits of the system, that the system prioritizes public benefits over private ones, that the system must be accountable to the public, and that decisions are made through public political processes. Unfortunately, across the country strong neoliberal and neoconservative political forces, as well as corporate involvement, are threatening public education systems.

In Chapter 2, Winton provides a brief overview of two general approaches to educational policy analysis. In a traditional sense, policy analysis usually follows some sort of cycle that identifies a problem, conducts formal consultation, implements a solution, and evaluates its

success. More critical approaches, which Winton employs throughout the book, focus on social inequalities that occur as a result of power dynamics and various historical, political, geographical, cultural, or economic contexts. In an appendix, Winton provides education policy researchers with a detailed outline of how to go about conducting critical policy research.

In the third chapter, Winton explores three endogenous privatization policies (Ball & Youdell, 2008) common in schools across the country. Winton, drawing on Ball and Youdell (2008), describes endogenous privatization as the introduction of values, techniques, and practices from the private sector into the public sector. The first, fundraising, is not new in public schools. However, Winton outlines how the frequency and ferocity of fundraising campaigns in public schools in Canada continue to increase and, at their base, fundamentally undermine the public-school ideal. Not only does fundraising absolve governments of their responsibility to provide sufficient funding to schools, it also continually exacerbates socio-economic divisions in the public school systems. For example, schools in higher-income neighbourhoods generally raise more money through their fundraising efforts than schools in lower-income neighbourhoods, and students who do not have the financial resources to contribute to fundraising often feel left out while businesses reap the benefits.

The second way in which Winton identifies private money and practices entering the public system is through school fees. These additional charges to families can take the form of general fees that go toward student activities or athletics, fees that go toward resources or extra experiences, or fees that are needed to cover specialty programs such as paying for transportation costs or for the costs associated with years of participation in a sport or activity to compete at an elite level prior to accessing specialty school programs. All of these fees then, according to Winton, "undermine the public school ideal" (p. 66) by limiting access to enrichment or enhancements to regular school programming to those families that can afford to pay for it.

The final way privatization enters the public school system is through international student recruitment that can include tuition fees upwards of $15,000 a year. Though there may be some societal benefits to increased international student interactions with Canadian students (for example, breaking down cultural barriers.), increased competition and recruitment of international students again generally benefit the schools that are already located in higher-income neighbourhoods and work against schools located in more rural or remote locations. Given that international students can bring in significant money to a school, it is easy to see why school boards spend a lot of resources on recruitment. However, schools should not be reliant on this extra source of funding to make up for a lack of funding provided by governments. Regrettably, even though international students pay a significant amount of money to attend Canadian public schools, that funding is not usually directed to the supports required by international students.

In the fourth chapter, Winton continues to explore how privatization is creeping into public education systems through the creation of education markets. One of the ways in which this is done is through the idea of open enrolment. When school geographic boundaries are dropped, competition between schools to recruit students takes their place. This leads schools to implement alternative and specialized programs in order to attract more students. One of the most prominent examples in Canada is the demand for French immersion but other programs, such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and sports academies are also commonly used to recruit more students. This practice turns public schools into educational marketplaces. Outside of a global pandemic, e-learning, whether offered through provincial ministries or local schools, is becoming a popular choice for parents who want to provide their child with extra opportunity for

advancement or who prefer to get their child out of a classroom that they see as problematic. Once again, however, e-learning has been shown to only benefit those families who have the financial capital to provide technology, time, and space to their child. Though charter schools have not taken hold in Canada as much as they have in the United States, their development in Alberta has demonstrated increased competition between schools. Winton also critiques the role played by private schools in the Canadian educational landscape, as many provinces provide private schools with varying levels of public funding. Once again, this benefits those who already occupy a position of economic privilege in society. Lastly, Winton notes that homeschooling is also an option in an educational marketplace, even if its adherents occupy a very small percentage of that marketplace. As a result, the concern about homeschooling is not necessarily in its marketization, but in the fact that most proponents of homeschooling do so as a negative reaction to the public school ideal. In all cases, these examples of encroachment of privatization into education continue the trend found in Chapter 3, that the marketization of public education benefits higher-income families and those students who do not face the challenges presented by historical and systemic barriers. The chapter ends with a brief exploration of other ways economic advantages are used by parents including the hiring of private tutors or enrolment in learning centres, paying for private psychological testing in order to skip the line, and paying for single-course instruction.

In her final chapter, Winton unpacks five concrete steps to taking action to save public education. These steps include staying informed, asking critical questions, joining the public dialogue, knowing what you are up against, and recognizing the fight for public education is worth it. Winton states, "If (public schools) are accessible to all, kids will have a better chance of developing a respect for diverse beliefs, perspectives and ways of living than they will if they attend schools segregated by race, class, language, religion, or other social categories" (p. 130).

As a public-school educator for over 20 years and as a parent of a child within the public system, I have seen the effect of the neoliberal policies Winton criticizes. Although I am a public education advocate who is committed to the ideals that Winton outlines, it is easy to get caught up in the individualistic race to offer our child a better education. Parents, including me, feel compelled to seek advantages for our children through rationed spaces and specialized programs even though we philosophically understand the ways this creates inequities for other people's children and negatively affects the broader community. As an educator and a parent, I see the consequences of a public education system that lacks robust public funding, including, for example, the necessity of ever-more fundraising campaigns for basic school resources. School fees are now so common that they are usually just accepted as the way things are, but as Winton so crucially points out, the more teachers and parents rely on fundraising and fees to support schools, the more reason there is for governments to abandon their responsibilities to fund public education. Specialty programs or sports academies are also becoming more popular in my province of Manitoba, and their costs create barriers for many students. These examples perpetuate the socio-economic gaps that the public system is designed to address.

Although Winton asks the reader to "see how policies that invite us to make choices that benefit our own children may simultaneously disadvantage other kids and our democracy" (p. 5), I feel this warrants further exploration. As a parent, it is very natural to want the best for our child, and if this means special programming or a commitment to fundraising, that is a decision many of us will make without hesitation. The encroachment of privatization in our schools will not end overnight. As such, as a parent and public-school educator I will continue to wrestle with the tension created by competing discourses of a truly public education system and a public education

system that allows for the increasing encroachment of privatization. Ultimately, however, I know that I want my child to grow up and live in a society that reflects the values of a truly public education system, and so I will continue to ask critical questions of educational stakeholders, continue to participate in the public dialogue about the importance of public education, and stay informed so that I know just what the public system is up against in this fight against privatization. Reading *Unequal Benefits* has been an important component of that desire.

Sue Winton is right to sound the alarm about the encroachment of privatization in the Canadian school system, and *Unequal Benefits* allows for a wide spectrum of readership to engage in the issue. There is ample scholarship about increased privatization of public schools in the United States, which can make Canadians regard privatization as an American problem. Winton importantly puts the privatization of public schools on display for Canadian readers. Hopefully, her readership and a growing network of public education advocates can continue to put pressure on governments to properly fund a sustainable and truly public education system.

References

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Author

Kevin Lopuck is currently a PhD student at the University of Manitoba in the Faculty of Education. He has been a public high school teacher for over 20 years, is the past president of the Manitoba Social Sciences Teachers' Association and is a current board member of the Social Studies Educators Network of Canada.