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A Window into Public Education
Documenting Neoliberal Capitalism's Harms, Advocating for Alternatives

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Article abstract

Decades of neoliberal capitalism have had a corrosive effect on public education, with implications for both the fiscal realities of education systems and the ideological values guiding curriculum and pedagogy. While the culture of neoliberalism has often been studied, it is equally important to expand analyses of the shifting material conditions of how capital moves through education systems, reshapes power, and exacerbates inequality. It is also, I argue, vitally important to document—to be mindful—of how the affordances of the present, once eroded, diminish the imaginings of what is possible in the future. To that end, in this special issue, we highlight the twin realities of neoliberalism. We also make the argument for public education, imperfect though its current iterations may be, as a valuable inheritance of public good.

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Abstract

Decades of neoliberal capitalism have had a corrosive effect on public education, with implications for both the fiscal realities of education systems and the ideological values guiding curriculum and pedagogy. While the culture of neoliberalism has often been studied, it is equally important to expand analyses of the shifting material conditions of how capital moves through education systems, reshapes power, and exacerbates inequality. It is also, I argue, vitally important to document—to be mindful—of how the affordances of the present, once eroded, diminish the imaginings of what is possible in the future. To that end, in this special issue, we highlight the twin realities of neoliberalism. We also make the argument for public education, imperfect though its current iterations may be, as a valuable inheritance of public good.

> … occasionally, a small miracle happens. Like in the opening of Maurice Ravel's *La Valse*, where the dissociated, fragmented sounds gradually interlace and fuse into a single musical march-dance, our mind, in a flash of negation, unites the seemingly distinct social regions into a single holo- gram. Although often no more than a fuzzy silhouette, this hologram shows us the whole picture. The fractured human beings, the infinite threads that tie them to one another, the different 'spheres' between which they move – all those converge into one totalizing logic: the logic of capital. (Nitzan & Bichler, 2009, p. 9)

Neoliberal Ideologies and Material Realities in Education

Decades of neoliberal capitalism have had a corrosive effect on public education systems around the world. Peters (2021) notes that one of the guiding objectives of neoliberalism is to displace the idea of public goods with the notion of individual choice. This permits entry of market ideals and profit motives into every facet of educational systems and policies. It covers over fiscal austerity and the drift into an unsustainably funded system with stopgaps or privatization. For example, the neoliberal belief that public education funding is inefficient allows systematic and prolonged underfunding and diversions of tax-payer dollars to private schools, like charter schools in Alberta and the US (Feuerstein, 2017; Ganshorn, 2024) and the three-speed system in Quebec, which heavily subsidizes private schools with public monies (Plourde, 2022; Schuetze et al., 2011). Underfunded public schools are forced to seek other funding sources through growing international student revenue (Parker & Deckard, 2022) and fundraising (Yoon et al., 2020), completing the circle of unsustainability by drawing on short-term and unequal resources. In addition to the fiscal influences of neoliberal capitalism, neoliberal values of choice and the focus on the individual versus the collective undermine arguments for public education for all (Di Giovanni & Parker, 2024). As the researchers in this special issue of *Critical Education* note, neoliberal beliefs express themselves in myriad tangible ways across education, particularly through regimes of accountability and efficiency. After over fifty years of proliferation across social, political, and economic spheres, the very premise of education — the answer to the fundamental question of what is education for? — has been reshaped by neoliberal values of economic competition and unmitigated capitalist growth (Parker, 2023b). In all, scholars have documented that neoliberalism in education influences education policy, curriculum, and pedagogy. This means the neoliberal values translate into material conditions in schools in complex ways, and that its core value—to financialize all aspects of human life—refashions the underlying economic fiscal supports that uphold the public system.

This last point—that the underlying mechanism and impacts of neoliberal capitalism are economic—is often obscured by disputes of ideology. Despite arguments for and against competition, individualism, meritocracy, efficiency, and accountability, the main objective of the neoliberal capitalist project has been about converting previously public goods into terrain for marketization and competition, with an emphasis on generating profits that are concentrated into the hands of a few. Nitzan and Bichler (2009) find that arguments against capitalism fail because they try to cleave capitalism from the state or from understandings of power. They make two key assertions: first, that capitalism, in its modern expression, is about finance or capitalization (rather than issues of production or labour); second, they determine that capital cannot be cleaved from power and the state. They write, "the power to generate earnings and limit risk goes far beyond the narrow spheres of 'production' and 'markets' to include the entire state structure of corporations

and governments" (Nitzan & Bichler, 2009, p. 8). By focussing on capitalization as power, Nitzan and Bichler redirect the critics gaze from ideology to the pragmatism of watching how and where capital flows. Their first claim is vital to arguments for public education, which are often mired in ideological tunnels, but lack persistent engagement with the "dismal science" of economics and consequently ignore issues of financialization. Their second claim, treating capital as power, is also instructive for public education, which is located firmly within the state apparatus, and which must be studied as a site of how capital expresses its power over the lives of students, workers, parents, and communities.

Public Education as Inheritance

Seen as a common or public good, public education offers the foundation for a more equal, just, and democratic society. As Biesta and Säfström (2023) suggest, "public education can be seen as the *expression* of the democratic values of liberty, equality, and solidarity. … [It has also] played a key role in *promoting and sustaining* these values" (Public education and the rise of neoliberalism section, emphasis in original). In this vein, well-funded public schools offer opportunities for community, fellowship, ethical relationality, and the development of critical, creative capacities (Parker, 2021, 2023a, 2023b). It is a system that holds the potential for people to come together from socioeconomically and culturally diverse backgrounds to learn how to be together, making meaning and encountering a range of possible interests. Despite this underlying potential, however, any defense of education as a public good must resist nostalgia, ahistoricism, or conservativism. That is, though public education holds promise, it has also often been rooted in material, cultural, and ideological conditions of exclusion (Nelson et al., 2022). As such, public education as a common good, and the related argument against privatization, must include two parallel, though not mutually exclusive, understandings: First, that the legacy of public education in many countries has often been unjust in its implementation. Second, that although as a system it has been imperfect in its practice of equality and justice, it still represents the most powerful foundation from which to seek and improve these aims**.**

But before these goals can be realized, and before ideological questions of what constitutes effective pedagogy or sound curriculum are debated, the material conditions of a safe and inclusive classroom must be in place. A healthy public system, one that is the expression of a democratic society's commitments as described by Biesta and Säfström (2023), is marked by proper fiscal investments. This type of sustainably funded system has several characteristics. The first is small class sizes, which allow for low teacher-student ratios and permit student-centred approaches (Blatchford et al., 2002; Schwartz et al., 2012). Another is good teacher wages and the high levels of teacher education attendant to those wages (Britton & Propper, 2016); this ensures a respect for the profession and encourages teacher recruitment and retention. A third characteristic is the affordance of rich and diverse programming for all students, with full availability of arts and sports programming, as well as opportunities for experiential education and access to necessary technologies (Shaw, 2018). A fourth characteristic is the commitment to keep school resources and infrastructure in good repair (Shaw, 2018[1]). Finally, and most significantly, a sustainable public

[1] Shaw's (2018) study reveals the cluster of impacts of underfunding, including how the expansion of school choice in Michigan led to outflows of students and funds from the public system. Shaw (2018) documents not only the loss of arts programs, but also the decline of quality infrastructure through maintenance and repair.

system maintains its independence from market interests and from reliance on private sources of revenue (Archer, 2021).

Neoliberal Fiscal Realities in Education

The signs of an unsustainable public system—one which has been subjected to budget cutting and economic underinvestment—are the inverse. Let's take the public system in Ontario, Canada as a case study. Funding for Ontario's 72 school boards fell by an average of $800 per student from 2017-18 to 2021-22, a cut of nearly six percent (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [CCPA], 2022). This cut was compounded by subsequent rising inflation, which suggests that actual fiscal costs will translate to further losses in access to educational requirements. To make these budgets stretch, one of the fiscal mechanisms that governments use to manage a reduction in funding is to increase the teacher-student ratio in classrooms. In 2022, the Government of Ontario proposed to increase class sizes for junior grades (grade 4 to 8) from an average of 23.84 to 24.5 and for high school from 22 to 28 students (Di Giovanni & Parker, 2024). They also proposed to make four online courses mandatory for high school students, which translates to yet another increase in class size since the class size proposed for online courses was 35 (Di Giovanni & Parker, 2024). The government simultaneously issued a law holding public sector salaries, including wages for teachers and school administrators, to 1% (Jones, 2024). With inflation in the same period rising at its fastest pace since 1991 (Statistics Canada, 2022), the wage freeze amounted to a pay cut. Though the law was later found unconstitutional and repealed, the decision to limit wage increases added further stress and perceived disrespect to a group of educators already disproportionately burdened by the pandemic. This is shortsighted since the province is already struggling with staffing and teacher retention (Zhu, 2024). With respect to the third characteristic, rich programming, the government made the move to introduce larger class sizes and mandatory e-learning while cutting a Programming Grant that was in place to support arts learning in the schools (Di Giovanni & Parker, 2024). While documenting the budget cuts, the CCPA also noted a $16.8 billion infrastructure backlog (Tranjan et al., 2022), describing a years-long backlog of overdue building maintenance. Lastly, and in keeping with the general move to reduce public sector support of education by encouraging school boards to seek alternative revenue streams, the government suggested that e-learning could provide an avenue for alternate revenue streams. This paves the ways for further tax-base reductions in the future and renders public education funding more fragile.

Ontario's unsustainable funding model for K-12 is mirrored by cuts to higher education. A report by Usher and Balfour (2023) on the financial health of Canadian universities and colleges reveals Ontario's government to be the worst culprit in the ongoing underfunding of public higher education. They find that Ontario's low public funding of post-secondary education has driven colleges and universities to rely on international student tuition, to the extent that these tuition dollars supply 100% of new operating income in Canadian higher education since 2008 (Parker & Stuart-Hitchcox, 2024). Usher and Balfour (2023) find that the number of international students in Ontario colleges has tripled between 2017-2017 and 2022-2023. Here, there is clear evidence of how ideological talk about the value of pedagogies of internationalization (i.e., for cultural enrichment and reciprocity) elides the fiscal motives undergirding the decisions that institutions are compelled to make. Rather than publicizing and protesting the budget shortfalls, universities and colleges across Canada embraced a ballooning population of international students, often without first developing proper infrastructure for student housing or student support. This short-

sighted approach has brought the unsustainability of budgets to a head: because of an outcry over migration (and the spurious claim that international students were to blame for spiralling house costs), the federal government stepped in this year to limit the number of student visas available to colleges and universities. The result? Rather predictable: international students, who bore the costs of local underfunding through their foreign tuition dollars, are now being turned away. Perhaps this will force universities and colleges to do the difficult work of rejecting temporary revenue streams and advocating for sustainable public support. Or perhaps it will lead to further appeals to alternative sources of funding, including one-time private sector donations which will no doubt come with strings attached to the learning and research mandates of the institutions (Rizvi, 2016). Defenders of public education might hope for the former, while pragmatically preparing for the latter.

The Mandate to Conserve – and the Risks of Loss

One of the challenges of safeguarding public education is that erosion occurs slowly, but continuously, like water over stones. In time, what one is left with bears no resemblance to what stood before. The risks of loss are twofold. First, there is the danger that the public will come to accept the premise that governments should not, or cannot, be responsible for education funding. In this regard, Rizvi's (2016) statement that "The idea that education should be funded and managed entirely by the state is no longer feasible" (p. 9) must be challenged. Public education advocates in the current moment can join together in petitioning their governments to robustly fund education precisely because they have lived through a time of more balanced funding and know it to be economically feasible. Drawing on and adapting Archer's (2021) calls to action for public funding of education, sustainable funding could seek:

1. Increasing or maintaining state education funding at a benchmark of 20% of the total budget at a minimum. While not all countries have adequate funding for this allocation, the commitment must be upheld by wealthy nations.[2] It is also important that the education envelope be defended from calls for austerity under the guise of fiscal efficiency.[3]
2. Growing the total size of the government purse through increased taxation, particularly of big corporations. Archer (2021) notes that some global reforms of how three Big Tech companies (Microsoft, Google, and Facebook [now Meta]) are taxed could produce billions in revenue. This might be a particularly fitting avenue for taxation, since students and young people are the core user demographic and target advertising audience of these companies.

[2] Archer (2021) discusses the differences in state provisions of funding and the problems associated with carrying debt from the IMF. It is worth recognizing that although public education should be a global human right, persistent exploitation and colonial capitalism have harmed the prospects for all nations to be able fund education without relying on expensive loans or international aid.

[3] For example, the Premier of Ontario defended stripping public sector wages by claiming his government had "walked into a bankrupt province and … had to keep things in control" (James, 2024, para. 6). This did not prevent the Premier from then campaigning to spend billions on new highways (CBC News, 2024). Rather than improving day-to-day tangibles through investment in education and healthcare, the funds diverted to highway-building will lead to "long-term decreases in the quality of life for Ontario residents" (Moos, 2024).

3. Increasing fiscal responsiveness to education priorities, as determined by the communities and education professionals. This would allow school boards and districts to have more say in distributing funds to underserved communities, while attending to shifting local needs.
4. Increasing transparency of how the education budget is allocated. Some districts use complex and changing accounting or complicated funding metrics and shifting but obscure grants. It becomes difficult to perceive how the funds are being deployed—including, if they are being funneled into private concerns or are exacerbating systemic inequities.

These kinds of overt calls to action have too long been perceived as the purview of teachers' unions. Parents must be invited into the conversations about funding and privatization so that they come to understand fundraising as a Band-Aid that belies systemic issues. It may feel like a Catch-22: some public education advocates are nervous to expose the hardship in public schools for fears that it would only encourage a mass exodus into private education (perhaps, in the same vein as what happened in Shaw's [2018] Michigan study). But the longer we pretend everything is fine, the longer we delay mobilizing the most powerful group of advocates education has: its families. In the US, and increasingly in Canada, conservative lobbyists have already recognized the power of the parental movement, building "parents' rights" groups that have been somewhat effective in monopolizing school council and school board meetings, as well as in getting their representative elected as school trustees (Ganshorn, 2024). It is time for those who wish to redress educational fiscal losses and to defend and advance progressive educational goals to become more organized using the same channels.

For public education advocates, the passing of time also invokes risk of a second loss. This is the loss of the lived experiences of teaching and learning in a healthy system, the distancing of history into relic and reminiscence. The next generation of teachers, students, and families learn to live with less. And the reality of today passes into the histories of yesterday, hope for the future becomes increasingly sustained by imaginings and re-imaginings. That is one reason why groups such as the Public Education Exchange (2024)—of which I am a founding member—aim to document, critique, and address the problem of unsustainable education funding and to highlight the creeping incursions of private funds that weaken the next generation's inheritance. In thinking through the efficacy of movements against capitalism, Wendy Brown (2001) offers an argument that is different, though similar to Nitzan and Bichler's (2009) analysis of capital as power. It is equally important to question of how to conserve public education. Drawing on Derrida and Benjamin, Brown (2001) foregrounds the essential relation of the past to the constructions and imaginings of the future. She writes of Derrida's ghosts and Benjamin's memoration as ways of engaging history for the present and with an eye to the future. In this framing, to haunt is to tell, to be mindful is to "render history … 'an outrage to the present'" (Bolz & van Reijen as cited in Brown, 2001, p. 171). To haunt is to offer windows into the experience of the world as it is lived by those currently engaged by it: to tell of the material conditions and experiences of life under the dominant regime, draw links between what once was and what is being lost, and seek material change through the telling. Brown suggests that the interventions of mindfulness and haunting offer possibilities for the future and for hope. She writes:

> Grasping the constellation that our own era forms with an earlier one entails grasping the extent to which (selected elements of the) past and present ignite each other, resemble each other, articulate with one another, figure meaning in one

> another. This grasp allows the past to illuminate the possibilities of the present, and especially to open hope in the present. Such an opening in turn allows the present itself to emerge as a time in which redemption-that is, the connection of a particular political aim in the present with a particular formation of oppression in the past-might be possible. (Brown, 2001, p. 165)

This connective tissue, the links to the history of what once was, the recognition of what is, and the significance of what might need to be (re)built are the gifts of telling and mindfulness that are invaluable to a system that is, at once, open to the public and also enclosed from view. Everyone thinks they know the classroom, because most people have spent their formative years in one. That is one of the problems with the current imagination: parents who envision their child's education may be remembering classrooms that existed before the neoliberal era, or may be assuming that their child's experience will be better simply because it is more technologically advanced. But only those who work inside the classroom today, who have taught for years and across political mandates, can fully raise the spectre of history to invite deliberation of different futures.

In this special issue, four articles draw us to mindfulness through telling. They offer varied contemporary snapshots of the effects of neoliberalism in education in an effort to critique the material conditions of inequality, impoverishment, and austerity that these shifts have produced; the special issue itself is also aimed at advocacy for well-funded public education as a common good worth protecting. In the first piece, Debbie Sonu, Karen Zaino, and Robert Helfenbein offer insights into how teachers address economic inequality in the classroom. They draw on the theoretical frames of racial capitalism and critical geography to analyse what might be offered in the way of an anti-capitalist education. The second article, by Adam Kaszuba, explores the way neoliberal values have permeated teacher perceptions of professionalism, with a focus on how teacher candidates express their values of professionalism in learning communities. The third article is by Harrison Dressler, Noah Pleshet, and Daniel Tubb, who bring historical connectivity to the foreground by examining how the bureaucratization of universities has unfolded. They discuss the "Strax Affair" in New Brunswick, Canada, to expose how neoliberal subjectivities are produced and codified in the university. They also seek resistance and recourse through Huizinga's theory of the "play-function." Lastly, Justin Gutzwa and Robert Marx provide a window into neoliberal capitalism as power. They illustrate the ways that trans students are forced to grapple with power dynamics among their peers and professors, exposing how ideologies produce lived and material conditions in the classroom. While each of these pieces is quite different in methodology and focus, together they reveal just how complex and entrenched the neoliberal iteration of capitalism is in different settings. Hopefully, the articles in this special issue foster moments of mindfulness and welcome further acts of telling.

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Author

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