



## The Pandemic is a Portal ... to Privatization

Lana Parker

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## *Editorial Comments*

# **The Pandemic is a Portal ... to Privatization**

Lana Parker

*University of Windsor*

The pandemic, Arundhati Roy (2020) said, is a portal. It can lead us to new worlds with closer ties, localized community commitments to democracy, and strengthened social structures. On the other hand, the pandemic is a portal. It can lead to swift changes in the fabric of the worlds we inhabit and inherit. It can ossify practices of injustice and create new avenues for marginalization. At any moment of such flux, there stand to be both threats and opportunities, especially to the social contracts that underpin our societies.

One threat to education as a public good emerges in the form of disaster capitalism and predatory privatization, which, as I highlighted in a previous issue's Editorial Comments (Parker, 2021), seek to offer neoliberal capitalist solutions in response to crises. In keeping with the ethos of neoliberal capitalism, rather than recognizing broken healthcare and education systems as a consequence of decades of austerity funding, governments suggest the root cause can be ascribed to a lack of "choice" for citizens who can pay out-of-pocket. In a crisis, a public desperate for answers is perhaps more willing to accept these neoliberal shifts, even though privatization will not be affordable or reproduce the high quality we have come to rely on for all citizens. As Winton (2022) writes, "policies in our public schools that facilitate education privatization perpetuate and exacerbate inequalities that have long existed inside and outside the country's public schools" (Critical Democracy and the Public School Ideal section).

In Canada, Bocking's (2022) report on the health of Ontario's public education systems tracks the break-it-to-fix-it neoliberal approach. He details the worsening austerity conditions before the pandemic and tracks the positioning of privatization as a solution to the problems created by a starved public system:

When the coronavirus arrived in Ontario in the winter of 2020, the province's K–12 education system was already in a state of profound turmoil. Soon after its election in June 2018, the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party led by Premier Doug Ford, made known its intention to impose sweeping forms of fiscal austerity across the public sector and pursue opportunities for privatization. These priorities were applied to K–12 education in the subsequent provincial budget, with measures released in March 2019 including class size increases for Grades 4 through 12, the elimination of a \$235 million Special Education fund and mandatory e-learning for secondary students. The government subsequently signalled that Full Day Kindergarten might be rolled back.

The class size increases alone, scheduled to be phased in over three years, were projected to eliminate ten thousand teaching positions, while greatly reducing the course offerings of schools. Despite the PC Government's insistence that class sizes didn't really matter, private schools launched advertising campaigns emphasizing their low student to teacher ratios. (Bocking, 2022, p. 1)

That the government was already positioning a privatization agenda prior to the COVID-19 crisis signals the character of the solutions it would continue to posit moving forward as conditions worsened in classrooms through the pandemic. For example, the reduced funding to Special Education would translate to fewer supports for students, and yet through the pandemic, we repeatedly heard calls for improved mental health supports for students. Decreased funding, as Bocking (2022) notes, was already on track to increase class sizes, and yet through the pandemic, we learned the importance of small classroom numbers for both health and learning. The difficulties that we currently struggle with in public education systems in Canada (and in several Western democracies) emerge from decades of underfunding. The solutions that neoliberal governments offer are tailor-made to address the problems of their own creation—through private funds.

Gramsci (1971) wrote that dominant hegemonies—such as that of neoliberal capitalism—often seek to establish their ideological positions in the commonplace, “connected to and implicit in practical life” (p. 330). To preserve their position, Gramsci (1971) contended, dominant elite interests employ a discourse of common sense, “half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists” (p. 326). Further, as Cammaerts (2015) finds, “In the face of fundamental counter-hegemonic challenges, such as financial crises (cf. 1930s), the bourgeoisie and capitalism will mutate and reconfigure with a view of safeguarding and subsequently reasserting capitalist interests” (p. 526). This brings us to the present moment and to Roy's (2020) assertion: The pandemic is a portal. Possibilities for disruption will be harnessed by those with power and social capital. On the one hand, these possibilities will be shaped by neoliberal governments in thrall to capital, to large corporations, and to the billionaires that run them. On the other hand, there is the potential for grass roots advocacy and activism that interrupts every narrative, in the media or at the holiday dinner table, with alternative accounts, other ontological possibilities, and solutions that foreground justice for those most vulnerable among us.

Education in Canada is a public good; it is a foundational structure of a more equal society and a functioning democracy. This is the time to be vocal about our inheritance, to engage, as Gramsci (1971) would suggest, in a war of position that seeks to disrupt advancements in privatization. The breakage of the pandemic, in healthcare and in education, is not an indication of the inefficiency of our social contract; rather, it is an indictment of the austerity budgets and the desire to derive profits from the systems that are fundamental to living a life with dignity.

In keeping with Gramsci's (1971) assertion that a war of position can challenge accepted norms, this issue of the *Journal of Teaching and Learning* offers a glimpse into perspective-making over a range of pedagogical issues. In “Enduring Effects: Name Mispronunciation and/or Change in Early School Experiences,” Bonika Sok and Tina Bonnett draw attention to the confluence of identity and learning, analyzing the implications of persistent name mispronunciation in schools. Their intrinsic case study locates name mispronunciation in the context of racial and cultural identity and documents how these incidents accrue into a kind of persistent othering in the learning environment. Calkin Suero Montero and Lais Oliveira Leite's article, “Towards Local Community Involvement in Students' Science Learning: Perspectives of

Students and Teachers,” studies the open science schooling approach for science education. The authors delineate how the open schooling approach encourages schools to adopt a key role in overall community wellbeing. In “From Assessment for Learning to Assessment for Expansion: Proposing a New Paradigm of Assessment as a Sociocultural Practice,” Kohei Nishizuka contextualizes assessment as a sociocultural practice. Here, the author describes how formative assessment, in particular, can be transformed by a dialogic approach that makes use of a collective zone of proximal development between the teacher and the student. Lastly, in “Collaborative Learning to Foster Critical Reflection by Pre-service Student Teachers within a Canadian–South African Partnership,” Corné Gerda Kruger and Jan Buley document their action research project bringing pre-service teachers from different countries together to participate in disruptive and transformative learning. They demonstrate how the experience of different perspectives can serve to enhance critical reflexivity. In addition, this issue features a response to the April issue’s Dialogue & Commentary piece by Jim Cummins (2022). In “Response to Cummins: The OHRC *Right to Read* Report Will Move Ontario into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Perry Klein engages with Cummins’s argument and offers his perspective on the possibilities of the *Right to Read* report for language education in Ontario. This issue also features a book review of Gert Biesta’s latest work, *World-Centred Education: A View for the Present*. Chris Maas Geesteranus highlights key ideas and notes the book’s disruptive potential.

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