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**Introduction to the Special Issue:
Studying School Choice in Canada**

Christopher Lubienski

Indiana University

United States

&

Ee-Seul Yoon

University of Manitoba

Canada

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This article is part of the Special Issue on *School Diversification and Dilemmas Across Canada*, guest edited by Ee-Seul Yoon & Christopher Lubienski.

Abstract: In this article, we introduce the special issue that illuminates issues in school choice and education marketization in contemporary Canada. We begin with a discussion of the proliferation of market models across the globe and the kind of questions that have arisen as public policymakers, philanthropists, and other private interests have embraced and advanced market-oriented reforms. Then we turn to Canada, and briefly discuss the scholarly literature on education privatization and school choice in the past two decades. After that, we present the five articles, highlighting how each piece contributes to a deeper understanding of the changing landscape of choice and competition, as

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well as how these changes impact schools and communities in a diverse, multicultural country. We conclude by discussing the importance of continuing empirical research in order to inform important debates about how to best meet the needs of the students in a democratic society.

Keywords: school choice; education privatization; education marketization; Canada; democracy

Una introducción a la edición especial: El estudio de opciones escolares en Canadá

Resumen: En este artículo, presentamos una edición especial que ilumina los problemas con las opciones escolares y la mercantilización de la educación en Canadá hoy en día.

Comenzamos con una discusión de la proliferación de los modelos del mercado en todo el mundo y el tipo de preguntas que han surgido a medida que los formuladores de políticas públicas, filántropos y otros intereses privados han adoptado y avanzado reformas orientadas al mercado. Luego nos dirigimos a Canadá y discutimos brevemente la literatura académica sobre la privatización de la educación y las opciones escolares en las últimas dos décadas. A continuación, presentamos los cinco artículos, destacando cómo cada pieza contribuye a una comprensión más profunda del paisaje cambiante de las opciones escolares y la competencia, así tal como estos cambios impactan a las escuelas y las comunidades en un país diverso y multicultural. Concluimos discutiendo la importancia de continuar la investigación empírica para informar importantes discusiones sobre cómo satisfacer mejor las necesidades de los estudiantes en una sociedad democrática.

Palabras-clave: opciones escolares; privatización de la educación; mercantilización de la educación; Canadá; democracia

Uma introdução à dossier especial: O estudo da escolha da escola no Canadá

Resumo: Neste artigo, apresentamos uma edição especial que ilumina os problemas com opções escolares e mercantilização da educação no Canadá hoje. Começamos com uma discussão sobre a proliferação de modelos no mercado mundial e no tipo de questões que têm surgido como formuladores de políticas públicas, filantropos e outros interesses privados adotaram reformas avançadas e orientadas para o mercado. Então, nós fomos para o Canadá e discutir brevemente a literatura acadêmica sobre a privatização de opções de educação e escola nas últimas duas décadas. Aqui estão os cinco itens, destacando como cada pedaço contribui para uma compreensão mais profunda da paisagem em mudança de escolha da escola e concorrência, bem como as mudanças que impactam estas escolas e comunidades em um país diverso e multicultural. Concluimos discutindo a importância de continuar a pesquisa empírica para informar discussões importantes sobre como melhor atender as necessidades dos alunos em uma sociedade democrática.

Palavras-chave: escolha da escola; privatização da educação; mercantilização da educação; Canadá; democracia

Studying School Choice in Canada

Market models for education have increasingly become a global phenomenon in recent years. While countries like Belgium and the Netherlands have traditionally funded separate systems families could choose based on their religious faith, Chile and Sweden have pioneered national voucher programs over the last few decades, and are now joined by smaller-scale programs in Colombia, India and Argentina in providing funds for students to switch to private schools. Nations such as New Zealand and England have moved dramatically in the direction of choice and competition within the state-funded sector, and, along with the United States, have experimented

with efforts to ease entry for new providers by encouraging more autonomous, independently managed schools, either as conversions from the state-run management, or as new start-ups. Despite strong state-led sectors in education, many East and South Asian countries also feature vibrant consumer markets for private tutoring, with competition for the best teachers leading in some cases to outlandish offers to hire star instructors. Of course, digital delivery has also meant a proliferation of the spaces and opportunities in which education markets can operate, with a range of online delivery available to students, and whole institutions in primary, secondary and tertiary education competing only on the internet. Likewise, a whole global education industry is emerging not just with schooling, but also around teaching, evaluation, curriculum, consulting, and so forth, with some multi-national providers setting up chains of schools that use market-style tactics such as branding and product differentiation in nurturing education markets.

Yet, even as we have seen the proliferation of market models across the globe, questions have also grown as public policymakers, philanthropists, and other private interests embrace and advance market-oriented reforms (Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). There are the philosophical and ethical questions about whether the public should be served by private interests, and whether communities should trust markets to pursue the best interests of children. Similarly, there are issues for policymakers, such as whether private actors can deliver a superior service, increase efficient use of public funds, or whether they can do so in ways that do not damage societal goals such as social cohesion and tolerance. And numerous other research questions persist: Can market-based actors, market-style autonomy, and market-driven competition produce better outcomes? Does consumer-style choice of schools and competition between those schools for those choices lead to more or less equitable access to quality schools? Does competition and autonomy increase the rate of innovation?

While researcher, philosophers, and policymakers may debate many of these issues, one increasingly obvious response is that the answers to these questions can vary considerably across contexts, depending on policy specifics, market structures, institutional landscapes, demographic variations, and so forth. Thus, while market-mechanisms such as consumer choice might appear to function efficiently in some respects (but not others) in cram schools in East Asia, there may be noticeable areas of market failure as the private, for-profit sector purports to meet the needs of under-served students in the tertiary sector in the US. Markets can create opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable in the low-fee sector in India or Africa, but the same forces can shape the exclusion of students in New Zealand, Australia, or Chile (Gonzales Diaz, 2017; Hsieh & Urquiola, 2002; Lauder et al., 1999; Lubienski, Gordon, & Lee, 2013; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Srivastava, 2016; Tooley, 1999; Windle, 2015). Some contexts present more developed markets, or more regulated markets, while others reflect more unsettled conditions, or a more *laissez-faire* approach to market management. Some nations have centralized management of markets for education, while others leave such functions to meso-level or local levels of government, or to private or quasi-private institutions. Some markets operate in contexts characterized by high levels of long-standing social inequality, while other societies that have long valued social equality may use markets to enhance innovation in education, or to try to meet the particular needs of new citizens.

While contextual factors can be crucial, some contexts, and thus, some factors, have received considerably more attention than others. We know much about school outcomes in education markets in the US, for instance, than we do about such considerations in the low-fee sector in India (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2008; Shakeel, Anderson, & Wolf, 2016; Usher & Kober, 2011). Similarly, there has been good work on the impacts of markets on social segregation in wealthier, developed systems such as the US, Sweden and New Zealand, but we know less about that issue in Colombia or Kenya (Bohlmark & Lindahl, 2007; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2009; Perry & McConney, 2010; Verger,

Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016). Thus, we often have some insights on a narrow range of outcomes in a relatively narrow range of market types, but we need to know much more about how different types of markets in different contexts can lead to different outcomes.

So, Canada?

Canada has received relatively little attention from researchers interested in the impact of market mechanisms in education. Partly this may be due to the fact that Canada lacks any centralized ministry or department of education. Thus, it presents a case where education policy is more decentralized than in many countries. Since such policy is the purview of the provinces, Canada offers us an opportunity to observe a diversity of approaches to education markets within the same country. Indeed, this is particularly interesting in a country increasingly defined by its multicultural social experiment, with large immigrant communities recently arrived, but not distributed evenly across the country. This presents interesting dynamics and challenges for a nation that has traditionally prided itself on its equitable social structures. But, as a nation that also performs quite well on international measures of academic achievement (OECD, 2011; Perry, 2009), the rising social challenges associated with immigration, (neo)liberalization, and globalization highlight an interesting question as to whether or not the embrace of market mechanisms are useful in education as a way to accommodate diverse learners and communities, or a neoliberal challenge to a relatively successful and equitable state-run system.

Thus, Canada offers an interesting case — or, more precisely, set of related cases — from which to offer some new insights into what are often stagnant and unproductive debates about education privatization and school choice. Because of its more decentralized system, Canada can serve as a laboratory from which to study a number of important issues related to these policy trends. Can choice enhance social equity? What happens in Vancouver may look different than in rural Manitoba, which differs from Toronto. Especially in an age of substantial immigration in some cities (but not others), how do different regional governments, the provinces, assume different approaches to balancing the push for family choice with the national ethos supporting equity? Do they take different paths toward making new education markets? Does such decentralization allow “a thousand flowers to bloom”? And that raises two other related questions: (1) Does policy variation between the provinces lead to interesting differences on programs and outcomes? And (2) do the forces animated by such policies lead to differentiation between schools in different contexts?

Contemporary Canadian research on market-based education reforms indicates that school and program choices are becoming increasingly available in both private and public sectors across the country (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Davies & Aurini, 2008; Yoon, 2016). In the private sector, there has been an increase in the number of schools registered as for-profit private and non-profit private schools — that is, independent schools (Davies & Aurini, 2011). The range of programs has also diversified in the areas of religion, college preparatory, and alternative programs that utilize different learning and teaching styles and philosophies (Davies & Aurini, 2008). Likewise, in the public sector, a wide range of enriched programs have been adopted across provinces, ranging from literature to science to language to sports and the arts (Gaskell, 2002; Gaztambide-Fernandez, VanderDussen, & Cairns, 2014; Yoon, 2015). While some programs admit students based on a lottery or a first-come, first-served basis, an increasing number of specialized choice programs are selective and available only for those who are high-achieving students (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Saifer, & Desai, 2013; Taylor, 2006; Yoon, 2011, 2016). Also, digital delivery is offered in Vancouver, with virtual learning options for

students to take courses online, while Alberta is notable for its thirteen charter schools offered as school choice options (Bosetti, 2004; Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016).

Yet, the extent to which new types of schooling have introduced more innovation, improved quality, or higher outcomes is scarcely reported in peer-reviewed research articles. Some schools and programs show a return to a more traditional academic focus or simply an acceleration of existing programs (for example, allowing students to graduate sooner or move more quickly to college-level courses), while specialized schools may be using what has already been developed by other educators, including International Baccalaureate or Montessori approaches (Davies & Aurini, 2008; Yoon, 2011). Recently, the charter schools in Alberta have been redirected to become innovation centers, and while there has been some evidence of innovation, there is no systematic study that indicates that school choice has introduced radically innovative learning or teaching methods in education (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Similarly, there is a lack of studies that evaluate improvements in the quality of education, although some may argue that increasing enrollment in private schools or growth in the number of parents who prefer to choose private schools may be an indicator that parents perceive private school education as of higher quality (Davies & Aurini, 2011). In addition, the extent to which school choice causes higher academic outcomes remains a puzzle, although, as noted earlier, some may interpret Canada's strong performance on international tests to be an indirect reflection of its education reform efforts.

Furthermore, little is known about the cost-effectiveness of education privatization. A recent study indicates that public school districts in British Columbia have been restructured to become more self-reliant by generating revenue from private sources, and that these new sources of revenue are meant to compensate for cuts that have been made to government operational grants; however, most districts are experiencing structural funding shortfalls (Fallon & Poole, 2014). In Ontario, after the radical funding cut under the Harris government in the mid-1990s, questions have been raised regarding whether or not government funding for the public education systems is increasing with inflation, keeping up with the rising cost of technology needed in the school system, or sufficient to fund special-needs programs (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2016). What we do know is that more and more parents are spending their own time and resources on fundraising (Winton, 2016). Individual parents are paying extra fees and fieldtrip costs for the students who are enrolled in enriched programs (Yoon, 2013, 2016). Hence, it is difficult to assess whether the reductions in government spending on education in fact translates into cost-effectiveness overall, or whether these reductions have been simply replaced by individual parents who bear these costs. In addition, while no educational authority in Canada issues vouchers, in British Columbia, the provincial government has increased its funding for private schools, which functions as a form of subsidy for families who choose private schools, while this government funding in turn has put more regulation on what private schools can do and reduces biases in student admissions (Barman, 1991).

Research shows that parents who can choose are happier to have more school choices. The trend of increasing enrollment in private schools and public schools of choice is an indication that parents enjoy having choices (Davies & Aurini, 2011). Also, there is some evidence in Alberta that if tuition is free, parents may be more willing to choose private schools over public schools (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). A cross-country survey of parents in 2005 further shows that most parents, whether they have the means to choose or not, appreciate having affordable options of school choice, and that they are happy when they are able to choose a 'good' and 'high-ranking' school for their children (Davies & Aurini, 2011). These studies thus

indicate that parents are satisfied as long as the schools their children attend have a good reputation and they can actually choose those schools.

However, a majority of school choice studies in Canada also shows that school choice has become a middle-class privilege, or is practiced largely by parents who place a high value on education as a means to further advantage their children (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Davies & Aurini, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2013; Taylor & Woollard, 2003; Yoon & Gulson, 2010). For instance, a highly popular French Immersion program tends to appeal to Anglophone middle-class parents, which ends up excluding immigrant families whose mother tongue is not English, thus further segregating different socio-linguistic and racial groups in a city with increasing immigration (Yoon & Gulson, 2010). Families who cannot choose, or who send their children to schools located in neighborhoods with low cultural, economic, and social capital, tend to be further excluded and demoted in market approaches to education (Taylor & MacKay, 2008; Yoon, 2017). Concerns have thus been raised about the extent to which school choice erodes societal goals such as social cohesion and equity in the education systems that promote individual choice and competition (Gaskell, 2001; Levine-Rasky, 2008; Yoon & Gulson, 2010).

Finally, an ethnographic study of school choice that focuses on the students' perspective indicates that while the students who are enrolled in enriched programs in public schools of choice experience academic advantage, they also feel stressed, socially challenged, and spatially displaced when crossing boundaries between schools in a city with a high level of inequality and spatial division (Yoon, 2013, 2015, 2016). Also, since most popular schools tend to be located in affluent neighborhoods, it is often students from marginalized neighborhoods who have to travel far to attend them, thus making it more challenging for those children who attend schools outside their neighborhoods (Yoon, 2015). Furthermore, increasing stratification of schools based on the circulation of school league tables adversely shapes learners' identities, which is especially detrimental to disadvantaged students who get labelled as "underachieving" or "underperforming" (Yoon, 2011, 2016, 2017). As such, given the research of market-based education reforms in Canada, it is not clear that the impact of the marketization of educational experience, quality, innovation, cost-effectiveness or outcomes have been positive. Clearly, more research is needed.

Contributions in this Special Issue

We invited some leading scholars to contribute to this special issue of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* to add more insights and understanding into the devolution of the education systems across Canada. As you will see, the authors represent a range of disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives, and thus approaches to the question of what marketization looks like, and what its impacts are, in Canada. Together, these papers explore the multiple manifestations of the global trend toward marketization, privatization, and school choice in a single, but demographically and administratively diverse country. The papers focus on crucial issues such as how policymakers consider education markets, and their equity implications as schools may then exacerbate social segregation; how charter schools — removed from the US emphasis on competition — may be serving as laboratories of innovation; how market incentives may be shaping competitive markets in both the public and private school sectors; and whether or not choice programs really are (hidden) privatization.

In particular, this special issue highlights the contemporary market-based reforms of school choice, which focus on enrichment or acceleration and contribute to the augmentation of cultural capital in a country with a history of different schooling options that have resulted in

and reproduced social and racial structures and inequalities (Yoon, 2016). The special issue starts with an overview of changing landscape of school choice in Canada by Bosetti, Van Pelt, and Allison, who delineate the changes in funding and student enrolment in home schooling and public and independent schools across Canada. They offer a valuable contribution of providing a detailed view of developments in various local and provincial contexts. They further discuss the importance of a shift in school choice, from a pluralistic approach of offering different schooling options to various religious or linguistic groups and First Nations children, to a more consumer-oriented approach that stresses parental preferences. Following that, Milian and Davies' study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how the social embeddedness of private schools mediates the impact of market forces on private school behaviors. They ask: "How are market forces reconfiguring educational organizations?... Do market segments, and their corresponding communities and norms, mediate the supposed effects of market pressures on educational organizations?" Taking theories from the fields of organizational and economic sociology, the authors argue that particular school communities, within their broader social structures, and the norms of individual schools shape the ways that private schools respond to competition and the demands of consumers in Toronto.

The remaining three papers focus on the corrosive effect of the marketization of education on the public sectors. First, Winton and Milani's research examines parental fundraising as a new force of privatization. The authors argue that fundraising allows wealthier parents to pay directly for the curricular and extracurricular materials and activities in their children's schools in Ontario's public education system. The authors thus argue that parental fundraising further aggravates inequities between schools. In contrast to research from the US that focuses on advocacy for school choice (Lubienski, Brewer, & LaLonde, 2015; Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2011), their research sheds light on a grassroots advocacy group for public education that has promoted resistance to this new trend of education privatization because they believe it undermines the long-held commitment within public education to equity between schools. After that, Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh examine specialty arts programs of choice in Toronto's public secondary schools. They show evidence that the students enrolled in the arts programs have family backgrounds with higher levels of social, cultural, and economic capital than the rest of Toronto's secondary school population. They further show that such outcomes are due to streaming processes that occur from elementary to secondary schools. Their studies thus indicate that school choice continues to be a middle-class privilege.

The last paper in this special issue, written by Yoon and Lubienski, investigates the extent to which the policy of school choice has been effective in achieving the goal of providing more choices for marginalized families in the socio-economically polarizing city of Vancouver. This study indicates that most low-income, racially marginalized families tend to choose schools in their neighborhoods. Their decisions are based on their residential locations, which are constrained by economic capital and housing options, but at the same time, enabled by the availability of community resources in the forms of institutional and social support (family and friends). We thus argue for supporting low-income families and their children's education in areas where they feel safe and belong.

As with Canada itself, together and separately, the papers in this special issue will be of interest not only to scholars studying school choice in Canada, but to international scholars, comparatists, political economists, and others from many disciplinary backgrounds and geographic contexts who are interested in the multiple ways such policies may promote or impeded desirable policy objectives. The authors help us understand the motivations for, and implementations of, policies associated with the global trend toward choice and competition, as

well as the impacts on schools and communities in a diverse, multicultural society. We hope that this special issue contributes to ongoing understanding and debate about how we can best meet the needs of the children to whom we promised that we would prepare them for a socially responsible life (Public Education Network, 2017).

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About the Authors/Guest Editors

Ee-Seul Yoon

University of Manitoba

Ee-Seul.Yoon@umanitoba.ca

Ee-Seul Yoon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations, and Psychology at the University of Manitoba. Dr. Yoon's primary research area includes school choice dilemmas and educational inequity in an era of education marketization and neoliberalization. Her recent work can be found in journals including *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Children's Geographies* and *Youth and Society*.

Christopher Lubienski

Indiana University and East China Normal University

clubiens@iu.edu

Christopher Lubienski is a Professor of education policy at Indiana University, and also a fellow with the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado and Visiting Professor at East China Normal University in Shanghai. His research focuses on education policy, reform, and the political economy of education, with a particular concern for issues of equity and access. His recent book, *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools* (with co-author Sarah Theule Lubienski, University of Chicago Press), won the 2015 PROSE Award for Education Theory from the American Publishers Awards for Professional and Scholarly Excellence, and his next book, *The Impact of Market Mechanisms on Educational Opportunity around the Globe* (co-edited with Bekisizwe Ndimande), will be published by Routledge in 2017.