

Foggy Futures in Education: The Looming Storms of School Choice and Voucher Programs

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Abstract

Reinventing education through neoliberal education reform policies has dangerously (re)configured the idea of market approaches in education. Around the globe, as variations of school choice and vouchers programs have gained popularity, the need for critical investigations, analyses and discussions to unravel the myth of ‘freedom to choose’ in shifting to a (semi)market approach in education has become more urgent in this challenging era. As such, this special issue offers a collection of articles with multiple examples to examine neoliberalism, school choice and voucher programs that elucidate the false promises of such education reforms globally as the ultimate solution to ‘fix’ education problems for all.

Keywords: School Choice, Voucher Programs, Neoliberalism, Critical Theory

Introduction

Since Milton Friedman’s 1955 publication on the Role of Government in Education (Friedman, 1955), the concepts of deregulation and decentralization have emerged to interject different type of imaginaries for restructuring and governing education. Mobilized by global and local circulations of neoliberal political economic systems of reasoning, freedom and choice have been linked together as a new compound of ideological concept to reconfigure issues concerning affordability, accountability and accessibility in education systems. In that, reinventing education through neoliberal education reform policies has dangerously (re)configured the idea of market approaches in education (Bracey, 2003).

Through a neoliberal construction of ‘freedom to choose,’ education reform policies such as school choice and vouchers have gained popularity and desirability as a political-economic strategic reform to great(er) and bright(er) futures for the field of education. However, what’s at issue here is a fundamental change relating to the ways in which we come to think about freedom, liberty, equity, diversity, inclusion, and democracy in contemporary education systems. Around the globe, as variations of school choice and vouchers programs are gaining popularity, the need for critical investigations, analyses and discussions to unravel the myth of ‘freedom to choose’ in shifting to a (semi)market approach in education has become more urgent in this challenging era. Take the ongoing global political changes and the major shifts in planning and reforming education as examples. Education policies that support the rise of charter school systems or school choice programs with vouchers schemes that streamline public funding into private enterprise have taken on new dimensions of political, cultural, educational, and economic meanings (for example, see Levin, 2001/2018; Ndimande & Lubienski, 2017). Therefore, this special issue offers a collection of five articles with multiple examples to examine neoliberalism, school choice and voucher programs to elucidate the false promises of such education reforms as the ultimate solution to ‘fix’ education problems for all. The articles in this special issue drew from multiple cases around the world including different states in the United States and a case in South Africa.

In the first article, Bekisizwe Ndimande examines how school choice policies in post-apartheid South Africa have fallen short to achieve promised greater educational equity. In his discussion, Ndimande highlights racial incidents and tensions in schools to highlight the limits of neoliberalism and how school choice policies cannot be the solution of equality and fairness, but produce more spaces to perpetuate inequities for children between White Afrikanns and Black students in the Post-Apartheid eras. As discussed, school choice policies cannot ‘fix’ or resolve existing education problems, especially racialization of the school zones in the South African context. Rather, Ndimande points out that neoliberalism has dangerously worked to disguise the history of colonialism and apartheid while creating illusions of equity through school choice policies in South Africa.

The second article turns to a different discussion on school choice and charter schools in New York City (NYC) as an example in the United States. Andrew Aprile notes that most NYC charter schools serving K-3 students have strong emphases on core curriculum and character education. In that, he investigates how music education and programs are often pushed aside or ignored in most charter schools in NYC. In Aprile’s discussion, he unpacks how models of charter schools have gained much attention as effective alternative education to challenge traditional public schools within the debates of education outcomes but still fall short to recognize the importance of music education in most K-3 schools.

The third article by Nancy Rice and Maggie Bartlett focuses on interrogating assumptions of school choice and inclusion from the perspective of a mother of a child with significant multiple dis/abilities and complex medical needs. Through a narrative study, the article shares how this mother has traversed an educational landscape in search of the best school environment for her daughter. Decisions were led by notions of safety for her daughter and fear of what may have happened in its absence. Mediating factors that drove the mother’s decisions were the health of her daughter, peers in school, and the quality of professionals/caregivers. Throughout the narrative, it becomes evident that the mother’s options of schools were limited and that the level of inclusion of children with disabilities was low. Ultimately, this study grapples with assumptions about what school choice programs offer.

In the fourth article, Tatiana Joseph investigates the experiences of English Language Learners in a Midwestern US, Choice Program Catholic school to see how the school creates/supports their language experiences. The Choice Program (CP) was created by defunding the city’s public school system to provide low income families an opportunity to “get away” from perceived struggling public schools. Although it is debatable whether or not religious schools provide better academic opportunities for low income families, the program is very popular among recently arrived families (whose children are English language Learners). The experiences presented by Joseph demonstrate that this Choice Program school was not providing better opportunities for English Language Learners. Instead, the school was setting up students for failure by not providing them opportunities to learn English or content in their own language.

For the fifth article, Berta Carela explores neoliberal early childhood reforms as the current iteration of imperialist agendas aimed at creating subjects and consumers. With a focus on the marginalization of people of color, Carela’s article discusses how neoliberalism is presented and embedded under the guise of saving children labelled at risk and getting them ready to learn. Neoliberal policies and praxes that disempower educators, de-fund public education, and disregard the diversity of children’s and families’ voices are examined and given herstorical perspectives through a Womanist and Women of Color feminist lens.

The articles in this special issue have illustrated how competing educational perspectives and opposing political views in the debate over school choice and voucher systems within neoliberal education reform policies often lead to radically different conclusions to produce both fears and hopes in what school choice and voucher programs may imply. The dichotomy division of public vs. private in the current wave of neoliberal education reforms has been problematic and challenging. School choice and voucher programs are controversial education policies that

interact dangerously with a neoliberal logic that is laced through dominant education reform policies (for examples, see Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998). In the names of equity and equality through debates of affordability, accountability and accessibility, the core meaning of education for all has been shifted and (re)configured by school choice and voucher discourses. As the articles in this special issue have discussed, critical examinations on how neoliberalism, school choice and voucher policies can damage or dismantle public education for all children cannot be overlooked.

Reference

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Biography

Dr. I-Fang Lee is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Newcastle. I-Fang's current research foci are on contemporary issues relating to changes and reforms in early childhood education and care, constructions of Asian childhoods, children's mental health and well-being, and global knowledge on appropriate pedagogical practices in the early years. Fundamental to these research foci are her critical perspectives and theoretical lenses on issues relating to equity and justice across different early childhood care and education systems in multiple cultural contexts.

Michelle Salazar Pérez holds the J. Paul Taylor Endowed Professorship and is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at New Mexico State University. She uses women of color feminisms to examine dominant constructions of childhoods, particularly how they influence public policy and subjugate the lived experiences of marginalized people/s. She is co-editor of a special issue in the *Global Studies of Childhood* journal that centers global south onto-epistemologies in childhood studies. Her work has been published in *Teachers College Record*, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, and *Review of Research in Education*.