

December 2021

**Inform-Ed.ca**

Academic and research perspectives on issues relevant to and in support of public education in Canada



## Looking at Bill 64 Through a Decolonial Lens

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### Abstract

Through a decolonial lens, which has been inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission educational calls to action, this paper critically examines the ways in which teacher knowledge, autonomy, and purpose have been influenced by neoliberalism within Manitoba. I will begin by positioning myself within the literature by providing a brief introductory reflection about myself as an academic as well as an educator. This will be followed by the Treaty 1 territorial land acknowledgement. I will then discuss the historical influence of neoliberalism in education and how settler colonial ideologies continue to control the narrative of contemporary educational reform while diverse worldviews and decolonial perspectives are excluded. Focusing on the recent education reform proposed by the government of Manitoba, I explore how neoliberal agendas are embedded in Bill 64, the Education Modernization Act, and how these policies may influence teacher professionalism in terms of teacher knowledge, autonomy, and purpose.

### Introductory Statement

I would like to begin by positioning myself within the literature by providing a brief introductory statement about who I am as a graduate student as well as an educator. My name is Sarah Paradis (she/her) and I am a non-Indigenous, third-generation Canadian citizen with multicultural (French, Ukrainian, Polish, Scottish, and Welsh) roots. I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours degree, as well as a Bachelor of Education degree. I am currently completing my master's degree in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. My research interests include critical pedagogy, arts-based research, and educational technology. I am also a full-time educational technology teacher working in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. These experiences have influenced my current educational worldview (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 24).

### Treaty 1 Land Territorial Acknowledgement

I would now like to acknowledge that Winnipeg is,

*located on [Treaty 1], original land of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. We respect the Treaties that were made*

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*on these territories, we acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and we dedicate ourselves to move forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration. (University of Manitoba, 2021)*

### **Historical Influence of Neoliberalism in Education**

Davies and Bansel (2007) inform us that “neoliberalism as a form of governmentality first emerged in the 1970s in response to some of the more radical and progressive positions being taken in education and the media at that time” (p. 250). As a result of this new form of educational governance, neoliberal agendas such as “increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals in the contracts of management” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254) have been, and continue to be, infused into public education across North America. The authors indicate that “neoliberalism both competes with other discourses and also cannibalizes them in such a way that neoliberalism itself appears more desirable, or more innocent than it is” (p. 258). During the 1980s, “the introduction of institutional and workplace changes, which deprived students and [teachers] of previous freedoms, were accepted as the acts of responsible governments introducing measures necessary for individual, institutional, and national economic survival” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 250). Tuck (2013) would argue that these neoliberal agendas were more “concerned with the dispossession and erasure of the unworthy subject” (p. 341) rather than reconciliation.

Within a North American context, Tuck (2013) informs us that neoliberalism is an extension of settler colonialism (p. 341), which propagates imperial forms of knowledge and prescribes what is “valued, replicated, exported, and vilified in public education” (p. 328). The fortification of neoliberal educational agendas is concerning in the context of teacher professionalism, as these ideologies seem to discourage diversity, exalt homogeneity, and manifest the colonial density (Tuck, 2013, p. 327). Neoliberalism in education is unsustainable as it fosters inequality (Tuck, 2013, p. 331) and prevents diverse worldviews from prospering.

Tuck (2013) denotes that neoliberalism is not a new or emergent paradigm, but rather “the latest configuration of colonial imperialism” (p. 325). These imperial ideologies are embedded within the social fabric of settler colonial societies and the educational institutions fortified within them (Tuck, 2013, p. 326). This dogmatic level of educational control has been achieved by excluding knowledge and worldviews that deviate from the neoliberal narrative (Tuck, 2013, p. 338). This perspective seems to position teachers in a state of subjugation as they may be expected to submit to “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 1998, p. 20) and comply with the neoliberal agendas that continue to dominate the narrative of modern educational reform.

Tuck (2013) indicates that neoliberalism in North America is an extension of settler colonialism intent on controlling the dissemination of information by promoting Eurocentric ideologies and omitting traditional knowledge and decolonial perspectives (p. 338). Tuck (2013) denotes that neoliberal educational objectives value conformity and “that any alternatives put forward, are by definition irrational, and hence not worthy of serious contemplation” (p. 328). The ovation of neoliberal ideologies by government organizations and private stakeholders is concerning

within the context of teacher knowledge, as this perspective presupposes that teachers should propagate authoritarian information in the same prescriptive ways without questioning their intentions (Tuck, 2013, p. 330). This may position teachers as scapegoats of neoliberalism, “tethered to compliance” (Tuck, 2013, p. 328) in the form of teaching, learning, and high stakes assessments within the North American context of public education.

Tuck’s (2013) research findings reveal that government officials as well as private businesses may also control the creation and dissemination of neoliberal agendas, such as policies or programs, that are distributed throughout educational systems across North America. Tuck (2013) suggests that these authoritarian agendas were designed to ensure the surveillance of students via high stakes assessments (p. 329). Academic surveillance may also be an extension of neoliberalism as it limits possibilities for alternative teaching and learning to occur (Tuck, 2013, p. 329). Davies and Bansel (2007) would argue that neoliberalism undermines teacher professionalism by utilizing “curriculum and surveillance authorities” (p. 256) to maintain control. This perspective suggests that teachers and students are monitored to ensure that neoliberal agendas are being enforced throughout public schools, rendering “teaching and learning as technological tasks” (Tuck, 2013, p. 329), favoring automation over autonomy.

#### **Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act**

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba recently released Bill 64, The Education Modernization Act, which proposes “the elimination of democratically elected school boards, the creation of a provincial education authority, school division amalgamations ... and [the removal of] principals and vice-principals from being in the same bargaining unit as teachers” (Manitoba Teachers’ Society, 2021). In addition to these managerial changes, I will examine how teacher knowledge, autonomy, and purpose may be impacted by Bill 64 (in sections 3, 4, and 6). Bill 64 proposes that provincial education be governed by the Minister, Provincial Education Authority (PEA), Provincial Advisory Council on Education (PACE), and School Community Council (SCC). These councils will include government officials appointed by the Lieutenant Governor General (Government of Manitoba, 2021). Tuck (2013) would argue that these appointed officials may only represent their interests (p. 339), which seem intent on controlling the policies within Bill 64, and educational reform in Manitoba.

Bill 64 has been designed to afford the Minister of Education, Cliff Cullen, the power to approve or reject specific policies pertinent to the Manitoba K-12 education system (Government of Manitoba, 2021). Cullen, a progressive conservative MLA from the Spruce Woods riding (PC Manitoba, 2021), will assume authoritarian control over the policies proposed by Bill 64 (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 29). Cullen has an academic background in agriculture (PC Manitoba, 2021), which is concerning as he appears to lack the necessary academic credentials to exercise professional judgement on behalf of the entire Manitoba K-12 education system. This position should be maintained by someone with experience in education, such as a teacher or administrator, as they would better relate to the people that they represent and serve.

If Bill 64 is enacted, the Provincial Education Authority (PEA), composed of government officials (appointed by the Lieutenant Governor General) and at least two parents, will be incorporated into the Manitoba education system as a government agency (Government of Manitoba, 2021, pp. 50-51). The PEA will be able to make recommendations about the number of schools in each catchment area, the programs or courses offered at these school, as well as the methods of assessment to be used for evaluating the effectiveness of these programs with regards to teaching and learning (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 55). Phelan and Vintimilla (2020) would argue that this authoritarian level of control is concerning for teacher professionalism as this perspective presumes that “an educators ethical obligation becomes little more than a technology as standards of conduct and competence invite escape from ... judgment” (p. 29). As a contemporary educator, I know how important it is to integrate curricula that is relevant and engaging for students in order to support their learning. However, Bill 64 seems intent on determining the content and programming offered within the Manitoba education system, which may be part of the neoliberal agenda to control the narrative of educational reform in Manitoba.

The Provincial Advisory Council on Education (PACE) will include one representative from each catchment area and will be able to make recommendations about teacher evaluations, as well as the hiring of teachers, principals, and other staff within their catchment areas (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 66). The PACE will have the power to influence hiring protocols, educational policies, and the programs offered at schools in their catchment areas (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 69). This exclusive council may covertly reinforce “professional microaggressions” (Marom, 2019, p. 333), such as othering, by including specific neoliberal ideologies and excluding decolonial worldviews from influencing the Manitoba K-12 education system. Biesta (2009) would infer that the intention of these othering strategies is to reproduce social inequalities in public education (p. 37).

The school community council (SCC) will be composed of parents from the school catchment area to advise principals about school related matters (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 70). These matters may include assessing the effectiveness of school programs, recommending the need for performance evaluations of the provincial education authority members, the hiring of teachers and staff at their school, recommending priority capital construction projects for their school, as well as proposing educational priorities and policies (Government of Manitoba, 2021, pp. 70-71). These neoliberal agendas seem to be in the best interest of the council members authorizing and implementing these authoritarian policies. Although the purpose of the SCC is to include and empower parents in the process of public educational reform, this council may become corrupt by covert neoliberal agendas as these SCC members will only represent a small sample of the student population in Manitoba. The SCC may also impact teacher professionalism by undermining teacher knowledge based on speculative claims made by opinionated parents that speak English as a primary language, while other perspectives may be excluded by minority parents who might not speak enough English to participate in SCC. While Biesta (2009) argues that “at least in democratic societies, there ought to be an ongoing discussion about the aims and ends of (public) education” (p. 37), in Bill 64 education seems to be presented as a system that needs to be controlled rather than reimaged.

Bill 64 indicates that teachers must provide “competent” instruction while fostering a positive learning environment that supports students’ academic success (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 80). Phelan and Vintimilla (2020) would argue that this policy offers “teachers’ professional autonomy in exchange for compliance with standards of competence and professional conduct” (p. 28). This statement seems to imply that teachers who do not provide competent instruction are not meeting the policies outlined in Bill 64, which may lead to negative repercussions such as being randomly evaluated or written up for non-compliance.

The strong focus on neoliberal agendas, surveillance, and control observed in Bill 64 seem to suggest that the government of Manitoba will be appointing their own members of parliament into the Manitoba K-12 education system to prescribe, servile, control and dissolve any ideologies or perspectives that oppose the neoliberal narrative. Pinto (2013) reminds us that “a politicized process ... relying on contracted and invited elites to create value neutral policy texts, effectively shuts down any possibility for social justice to emerge when it is not part of the government’s priorities” (p. 21). This perspective implies that teacher professionalism is not a priority as it seems to have been conveniently excluded from Bill 64. This is concerning for teacher professionalism in Manitoba as it implies that our K-12 educational system is at risk of becoming a homogenous *learnification* (Biesta, 2015) system, which is unsustainable (Tuck, 2013, p. 340).

### **Looking at Bill 64 Through a Decolonial Lens**

Bill 64 is concerning for teacher professionalism in Manitoba. Looking at Bill 64 through a decolonial lens presumes that there are alternative ways to reform public education in Manitoba. Alternative perspectives, such as decolonization, “offers a different perspective to human and civil rights-based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 36). A decolonial lens seeks to disrupt settler colonial educational ideologies in order to reimagine and reform the intent of public education in Manitoba.

When looking at Bill 64 through a decolonial lens, it is evident that Indigenous perspectives have been excluded and that reconciliation is not being engaged with seriously. The ongoing oppression and exclusion of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges in public education has become justification for the establishment of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). The purpose of the NCTR is “to share these truths in a respectful way and work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, researchers, communities, decision-makers and the general public to support the ongoing work of truth, reconciliation and healing across Canada” (NCTR, 2021, para 4). The NCTR was “gifted the spirit name *bezhigh miigwan* which, in Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabe people, means ‘one feather.’ The name teaches us that we are vital to the work of reconciliation” (NCTR, 2021, para 1). The NCTR reminds us that, as educators, we must work together with Indigenous peoples to work towards reconciliation by developing deeper understandings about Indigenous knowledges and perspectives throughout the healing process.

In response to the oppression and exclusion of Indigenous peoples throughout Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) created 94 calls to action (Truth and

Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 1). The TRC educational calls to action provide valuable decolonial perspectives that I will use to critically analyze specific aspects of Bill 64, such as Part 3 (Minister and department), Part 4 (Provincial Education Authority), and Part 6 (Principals and Teachers). From a decolonial perspective, Tuck (2013) suggests that “it may take some imagination and flexibility to determine other useable frameworks, but there are many, many other logics or perspectives that can provide far more fruitful models for change in teacher education and schools than neoliberalism” (p. 342). As a non-Indigenous educator, I would like to position myself alongside Tuck and the TRC calls to action in their opposition against neoliberal educational reform.

### **Failing to Adhere to the Calls to Action**

Based on the fact that Indigenous peoples in Canada have historically been excluded from the development of educational legislation, the TRC calls on the “government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples” (NCTR, 2015, p. 2). Contrastingly, according to Bill 64, the Minister of Education will have the power to:

- (a) establish official school programs to be offered by the education system in Manitoba; (b) establish or approve courses and set the learning outcomes and amount of instructional time for courses; (c) authorize learning and teaching resources for use in schools; (d) approve courses or learning and teaching resources submitted to the minister by the provincial education authority. (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 33)

In this way, Bill 64 evidences the government of Manitoba’s attempt at reforming the current education system but without Indigenous leadership—an outright failure to adhere the TRC’s call to action. The reform proposed by Bill 64 assumes that the neoliberal agendas will continue to dominate the narrative of public educational reform in Manitoba, despite this call to action. This perspective assumes that “professional practice will be governed by ... ethics and principles” (Phelan & Vintimilla, 2020, p. 30), which may diminish teacher autonomy. Davies and Bansel (2007) might infer that neoliberal agendas are apparent throughout Bill 64 as it shifts “authority away from both students and teachers to state curriculum and surveillance authorities” (p. 256), which seems to ensure that the Manitoba education system will be controlled by an exclusive group of people who may not represent the diversity within our school communities.

### **Cultural Negligence**

An additional TRC call to action that is absent from Bill 64 is the proposal to develop “culturally appropriate [Indigenous] curricula” (TRC, 2015, p. 2). Remaining inattentive to this call to action positions the Manitoba government in a state of cultural negligence. This oversight is concerning within the context of teacher professionalism, in terms of autonomy, as it implies that decolonial curricula will require the minister’s approval before being integrated into our educational system. This is problematic for educational reform in Manitoba because it affords the Minister, PEA, PACE, and SCC authoritarian control over the programs and courses that are offered in public schools, despite the TRC’s call to action to be involved in the process. The absence of Indigenous and decolonial perspectives in public education seems to enable the fortification of settler colonial

ideologies through “subtle and elusive forms of ‘othering’ leading to discrimination and marginalization” (Marom, 2019, p. 333) of minority teachers in Manitoba.

This authoritarian perspective assumes that the government of Manitoba will have the power to prescribe the educational programs and courses being offered throughout the Manitoba educational system. These programs and courses may intentionally favor settler colonial ideologies while Indigenous worldviews and decolonial perspectives may be excluded as part of the neoliberal agenda. This statement implies that teacher knowledge is “grounded in certain worldviews” (Marom, 2019, p. 325), which may be tied to certain epistemologies. Within this colonial educational context, Biesta (2015) would argue that teachers “are merely willing objects of intervention, rather than thinking and acting subjects who carry responsibility for their part of the educational process” (p. 231). Phelan and Vintimilla (2020) would infer that “teacher autonomy in this instance surfaces as a commodity that can be granted or withdrawn” (p. 28).

### **Professional Paradox**

Bill 64 states that “the role of the teacher is to provide competent instruction and to encourage and foster a positive learning environment aimed at helping students achieve learning outcomes” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 80). This perspective seems to position teachers as disseminators of information, which may be influenced by neoliberal agendas. Section 104(1) implies that teachers are expected to “teach diligently and faithfully according to the terms of the teacher’s agreement with the provincial education authority and according to this Act” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 80). Section 106(1) explains that if teachers do not comply with these policies, complaints can be “made to the provincial education authority respecting the competency or character of a teacher (or principal)” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 80). Teachers who disregard these authoritarian agendas and push back against these prescribed policies may do so by “teaching with the door closed, or even leaving the profession” (Tuck, 2013, p. 331). Bill 64 has created a professional paradox as it undermines the importance of our teacher knowledge, autonomy, and purpose by forcing educators to conform and comply.

### **Sowing Seeds of Decolonization**

The literature reveals how the policies proposed throughout Bill 64 contain neoliberal agendas, which may impact teacher professionalism in terms of knowledge, autonomy, and purpose. Tuck (2013) reminds us that neoliberalism in public education is unsustainable (p. 340), and that educators must take collective action to uproot these authoritarian ideologies from our educational system before this bill becomes enacted. By taking action and speaking up against the neoliberal implications hidden throughout Bill 64, teachers, such as myself, can interrupt these totalitarian ideologies from dominating the narrative of K-12 educational reform in Manitoba. Some of the challenges educators might face when standing up against Bill 64 may include the time required to take action, the confidence to confront these oppressive ideologies, the support from colleagues or administration, as well as the fear of repercussions that might occur from getting involved with contemporary education on a grass-roots political level.

Bill 64 presents as a factory model of schooling, intent on preparing students to contribute to settler colonial societies that support neoliberal agendas and capital interests (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 250). Tuck (2013) would agree that Bill 64 seems to be “concerned with the dispossession and erasure of the unworthy subject” (p. 341) through the enactment of othering and pushout policies. This industrial school model does not include Indigenous worldviews or decolonial ideologies, which are necessary for reconciliation. Tuck (2013) reminds us that the “garden is a far more productive and appropriate metaphor for public schooling than the factory” (p. 341) as the garden cultivates opportunities for teachers to learn and grow together as an evolving educational community. This means that Indigenous leaders throughout Manitoba should be directly involved in the educational reform process as they are valuable knowledge keepers within our educational communities. As a non-Indigenous educator, I think that it is crucial to learn from Indigenous people within our communities so we can create inclusive educational environments where Indigenous worldviews are free to flourish. Only then will reconciliation begin to take root within K-12 public education systems in Manitoba.

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