

December 2021

Inform-Ed.ca

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



“Modernized” Education and Equity: An Unsuccessful (P)Act

Rebeca Heringer¹

Bill 64—the Education Modernization Act—was proposed in the spring of 2021 as the government’s response to the perceived crises in provincial education: Manitoba’s low placement on national and international rankings, high financial spending, and unnecessary bureaucracy. Among major structural changes in governance, Bill 64 proposes a stronger focus on achievement and making all students “future ready.” The response might sound like a necessary move, especially since it is framed with terms such as “success”, “performance” and “efficiency”. However, based on my analysis, what the government’s proposed bill hides, is that the claims of “modernity” are neither new nor equitable. Rather, the Education Modernization Act reveals the logics of a system deeply biased in favor of the elite, reinforcing a structure that has been in place for over a century and which is currently strengthened by a global neoliberal mindset. In other words, Bill 64 is ultimately a unilateral Act that perpetuates inequity.

“Modernization” Through a Future- and Market-Driven Education

The government’s urge to modernize education through maximizing results at minimum cost is far from new. Since the beginning of the 20th century, curriculum theorists have sought to conceptualize education in terms of efficiency, employability and preparedness for the future based on certain perceived necessary skills.

What remains unquestioned in this kind of future-oriented approach to education, however, is *who* decides what those skills will be, what does a future of success look like—or more importantly, *what* constitutes success in the first place. The government’s claims of promoting the success of Indigenous students, for example, become paradoxical when success is reduced to an individualistic, competitive, market-focused production, where a successful future is contingent upon a compliance with neoliberal market logics. In such a system, those who cannot or do not comply with these narrow logics are seen as unsuccessful and disqualified.

“Modernization” Through Achieving Standards

Achievement is a pervasive term in the Education Modernization Act. However, despite the government’s claims that achievement can be as a measure of a future of success, achievement based on standardized tests has been influencing education for decades. A distinguishing feature

¹ Rebeca Heringer is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, sessional instructor, and research assistant. She can be reached at Rebeca.Heringer@umanitoba.ca. All contributors of papers retain the copyright of their work.

enhanced by neoliberalism, however, is the way in which educational rankings have become a tool of capitalism, creating the sense that success on standardized testing—and thus a quest of a standardized student—is imperative to a society's progress.

In this context, the seemingly equitable goal within Bill 64 to “close the achievement gap for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students” in fact means molding non-conforming students to pre-determined and standardized outcomes. The rationale for the tokenistic focus on Indigenous students, for example, is not to unsettle dominant colonizing perspectives but rather to improve the province's position on national and international rankings. Minority students are being encouraged to “succeed” as long as success involves performing to the standards as defined by policy makers.

“Modernization” Through Parental Involvement and Individual Responsibility

Bill 64 has a strong emphasis on increasing parental involvement which is also not new among Canadian education reforms. Similar claims accompanied the movement in the Education Reform in Ontario in the 1990s, for example. Analysis of the proposed creation of Provincial Advisory Council on Education and formal School Community Councils indicate that minority populations will have fewer opportunities (through representative, elected positions) to influence policies and decision-making.

The focus on parental involvement also becomes questionable in light of the neoliberal hyper-focus on individual success, which removes institutional responsibility for those who do not “participate” or “choose” to engage in the process. Such neoliberal logics then makes any pursuit of community within the school, between teachers and students, and across families at least paradoxical.

“Better Education” for Whom?

Although the reform's related document “Better Education Starts Today” (BEST) articulates the inclusion of Indigenous students and students with special learning needs, Bill 64 itself proposes no structural, policy or curriculum changes that would challenge colonial practices or systemic racism. In Bill 64, students with special needs, gender and racial diversity remain broad and general issues that need “to be accommodated”.

Rejecting “a one-size-fits-all approach” while defining “the key to success”, as BEST does, is an outright contradiction. Skills such as numeracy and literacy must not be seen as ends in themselves nor as synonyms of student success. Education must not be conceptualized as a requisite to student *future* well-being, but as instrumental in opening doors to each student *present* uniqueness and *unforeseeable* success to flourish.

Genuinely “better” education will only take place when educators, parents and politicians understand that “good” education is not something that can be rigidly defined a priori based on economic orders. “Modernization”, as truly innovative education that makes room for the success of all students, will only begin when success is conceptualized as a response to students' uniqueness—their strengths, interests and goals—rather than as what it takes for a province or institution to be better placed in pre-existing rankings.