



Are we there yet?

Neoliberal education and never-ending reform

Pamela Rogers

In the July 1994 edition of OS/OS, Maude Barlow wrote that public education had become the “scapegoat” for all types of societal ills, including an unskilled workforce, a failing economy, and the reason for Canada falling behind in international competition:

Educators are being loaded with society’s failures, and when they don’t find quick fixes, “reformers” are ready with radical solutions... Many current myths are gaining cheap currency. Our schools aren’t turning out scientists and mathematicians. That none of these myths is substantiated by fact is lost in the school reform zeal. (p. 77)

Barlow wrote this before the advent of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] test, and before strategic political messaging over social media, but during a time of drastic education funding cuts and back-to-basics reforms across Canada in the 1990s. Yet the concerns she raises, such as the push for science and mathematics, and “school reform zeal” are very much present-day matters in public education. Over 25 years later, public education in Canada continues to be subjected to constant cycles of one major reform plan after the next, which begs the question, *are we there yet?*

The simple answer to this question is no, because there is no “end” to neoliberal reform. Much like the goals of capitalism, the demand

for constant growth and improvement, and for the system to perform better with less funding, is ever-present. Without a defined end-goal, the need to compete at higher levels in international testing, and continually align schools with the future economy (which is uncertain and unknown), creates deep anxieties out of fear of being left behind.

To show how neoliberalism works in education policy and how it is replicated *regardless of the political party in power*, I use New Brunswick and Nova Scotia as exemplars, deconstructing their reform discourse to expose its underlying logic. I’ve focused on *testing* and *crisis* to show how systems quickly reform to achieve their goal — to use public schooling as a vehicle for global economic competitiveness.

PISA: “Hijacking” public education since 2001

International PISA assessments were created by the OECD in the late 1990s as a way to track student performance in reading, mathematics, and science, with the intent to bolster learning in disciplines that support global economic competitiveness for industrialized nations. The triennial standardized test is administered globally at an estimated cost of \$80 million USD (without calculating the teacher labour to administer the test), which are then compiled and analyzed, resulting in global education rankings (Sjøberg, 2019).

Since the 1990s, critical conversations, including essays by OS/OS authors Larry Kuehn and Michael Corbett, have questioned the purposes and effects of international testing in local contexts. Sjøberg (2019) has called PISA a “hijacking” of public education, part of a process where “reforms that are not at all empirically founded are introduced, often overnight” (p. 14). The “hijacking” of public education systems globally is but one of many dire consequences when politically subscribing to a single test which, although developed and analyzed abroad, steers local decisions in public education.

Another “failed” PISA test?

In New Brunswick’s 2019 reform plan, *Succeeding at Home: A Green Paper on Education*, education is named a key priority for the Progressive Conservative government. After a brief introduction, under the title “What do we mean when we talk about a world-class education system?” the 2015 PISA rankings are used to set the tone for the reform plan. Citing that New Brunswick was 10th in the world for science, 7th for reading, and 19th for mathematics, the document states:

New Brunswick’s education system appears to perform well on the international stage. However, in a rapidly changing world, this is not enough—we need to do better. We cannot afford to lag behind or even just keep pace. (p. 3)

Based on these figures, the *Green Paper* aims for New Brunswick to become a top-10 jurisdiction by 2030. At the back of the document, full standardized testing results in PISA, Pan-Canadian, and provincial assessments are provided in *Appendix B* (pp. 16–22). These results show that, on average, Canadian schools ranked 4th in science, 2nd in reading, and 7th in mathematics in the 2015 PISA round of testing—a far cry from falling behind the rest of the industrialized world.

But even with good-to-excellent results, the standings continue to be used politically to implement massive shifts, such as flexible ability-based groupings over age-based classrooms (p. 9), and to lessen teacher workload by implementing artificial intelligence tools for assessment (p. 10). While these suggestions sound innovative on paper, the changes are based on performance, with the claim that ability-based classes will foster high levels of student competition. Further, the use of artificial intelligence “to reduce teachers’ workloads” does not solve the issue of teacher workloads;

it essentially provides technology to remove professional autonomy from an essential aspect of teaching, standardizing assessment to easily track student performance.

Although discussions on classroom composition and student learning are also included, the reform plan begins and ends with catering to PISA.

“The future of Nova Scotia depends on it”

Like New Brunswick, Nova Scotia uses PISA results as the basis for reform. Beginning with the consultation document *Disrupting the Status Quo: Nova Scotians Demand a Better Future for Every Student* (2014), assessment results cited in the Executive Summary set the tone:

The panel’s recommendations constitute a significant change for the management of our school system. There is no other choice... Given that our youth need to succeed in a competitive world, this is deeply disturbing. (p. 3)

Disrupting the Status Quo is alarmist. Standardized assessment scores are claimed to be beyond repair, and, therefore, the system must be overhauled completely, and immediately: “the future of Nova Scotia depends on it” (p. 4). In reality, the chart for Nova Scotia PISA mathematics results shows that test scores have fluctuated only slightly since 2003 (p. 10), and interestingly, the report does not include PISA reading and science results, in which Nova Scotia consistently performs at, or above, the Canadian average.

So, why the fuss? One reason to evoke crisis is to push through neoliberal reform at a rate Sjøberg described as “overnight.” In accordance with this sentiment, the executive summary suggests “There is a pressing need for the government to move forward with the full range of recommendations” (p.4). And in the follow-up reform document released four months later, *Nova Scotia’s Action Plan for Education, The 3R’s: Renew, Refocus, Rebuild* (2015), the same level of crisis is used to frame the proposed changes.

Like New Brunswick, the suggested changes are based on the narrative that Nova Scotia is failing in international assessments, and the answer to this crisis is to address the issue of test scores. In the Minister’s Message, Karen Casey adds, “In the simplest terms, we want to ensure that our students do better, especially in math and literacy, and that they are better prepared to lead productive lives in our changing world” (p. 5). In other words, student test scores in

math and literacy are directly correlated to their ability to be “productive” in a future economy.

In this way, public education, and more specifically, test scores, are presented as the best measure for the functioning of the system, but also as a measure for how the system is functioning, and for students’ possible futures. This is an enormous amount of pressure for the education system to be judged on a random sample of students taking a two-hour test highly criticized for its methodology and analysis.

Teacher performance and education crises

The discourses in the *Green Paper* and *Action Plan* oscillate between crisis – mainly around failing tests scores and an aging education system – and hope. Both reform plans use similar tactics: deficit discourses negatively framing the system, students, and teachers, with strategically placed positivity throughout, which makes for a confusing, emotionally fraught read. Perhaps more interesting are the similarities in these two plans, from two different provinces and two governments from different political parties. The actual educational priorities are in the details of the plans, teacher performance management and student tracking through digital tools and/or artificial intelligence.

Teachers are “the best” pieces in the machinery of education

On the last page of the *Green Paper*, Minister Cardy states “Teachers are the most important people in New Brunswick. We need you. We need you to feel supported in your work” (p. 23). However, the exact details that describe how teachers will receive this “support” in the reform plan seem contradictory: in one breath teachers are applauded, and in another, they are subject to an oversimplified equation of their place in the “machinery of the education system” (p. 5). The section titled “Students and teachers are the most important part of the education system” positions teachers as professionals who should be “working solely to advance their students,” within an education system that needs to be assessed on its support of teachers. But at the same time “teachers should be evaluated on how their students advance” (p. 5).

While seemingly innocuous, these statements point to future teacher performance evaluations as a function of the educational machinery. In spite of strategic use of words like “advancement” and “support,” the underlying message is that teachers are *not* autonomous professionals in the education system, but instead are

cogs carrying out the state formula for public education and are to be evaluated on their contribution to improved student performance (the goal of the *Green Paper*).

Later in the document, the *Green Paper* suggests that teacher workloads will be supported through artificial intelligence, primarily in areas of student assessment (ironically, the use of digital technologies which track student and teacher performance are discussed directly before the section titled “Teacher development, teacher freedom” [pp. 9–10]). Instead of dealing with underlying issues of teacher workloads, and supporting teachers by lowering class sizes, addressing classroom composition, or increasing preparation time, the plan suggests that technology could help take over some of the work for teachers “struggling with often excessive demands on their time” (p. 10).

This bait and switch strategy accomplishes two things: it *outwardly* addresses teacher workload, while *increasing standardized assessment* through technology. Such actions are not benign: the discussion of teacher workload is side-stepped, ignoring systemic and institutional factors that contribute to increased demands. Likewise, the use of artificial intelligence to assess student work diminishes teacher autonomy, and tracks data on teacher and student performance. In effect, teachers and students become data to measure the “machinery.”

Where do educators figure into education reform? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the push for higher test scores in education also means more accountability, performance reviews, and lessened teacher autonomy in a variety of ways, including in curriculum, planning, and assessment.

“Supporting teachers” through performance management

The Nova Scotia *Action Plan* was released months after a province-wide consultation, and closely based its recommendations on the reported results. The document, *Disrupting the Status Quo* positioned high-quality teaching as fundamental for systemic change. But even though, statistically, 70% of respondents reported that students were already receiving highly effective teaching in their classes, *Disrupting the Status Quo* argued that teaching quality needed to be fixed, recommending tighter personnel management and higher standards for certification.

Under the fourth pillar, “Excellence in Teaching and Leadership,” the *Action Plan* recommends an overhaul of teacher certification,

the possible creation of a college of teachers, and the need for a “more robust performance management system” (p. 33). Unlike the *Green Paper*, which at least discusses teacher workload and classroom composition, the *Action Plan* positions teaching and leadership within neoliberal education discourses of performance, efficiency, and effectiveness, with rewards for excellence, and the creation of a new performance management system for teacher appraisal. While it is mentioned that teachers have “enormous responsibilities and increasing demands,” and “need support, time, and structure” the focus on *support* is solely in the context of enhancing student achievement (p. 33) — not to change underlying issues related to the enormous demands and responsibilities educators face. While both provinces insist that teachers’ professional work matters, their plans show that student performance is the bottom line, and the way to control it is through increased control of educators. Instead of addressing systemic issues, the *Action Plan* places more pressure on teacher performance, positioning disciplinary actions as being “supportive” of teachers’ workloads.

In January 2018, a second consultation, *Raise the Bar*, was released, authored by Dr. Avis Glaze. Three years after the *Action Plan*, and one year after the provincial Liberal government legislated Bill 75, imposing a contract on teachers after failed negotiations, *Raise the Bar* called for the dismantling of elected school boards, removal of administrators from the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union (NSTU), and the creation of a college of teachers. Due to action from the NSTU and its membership, the college was not created, but elected school boards were dismantled, and within months, administrators removed from the NSTU; at a pace one might call “overnight.”

The Equation: Consult, Reform, Repeat

Education reform plans often invoke crisis rhetoric out of fear of falling behind, and urge an immediate need to reform. Such tactics are not new or original, and in many jurisdictions have been very effective at shocking the general public into accepting swift, and major changes to education systems, often without proper research or consultation with teachers.

In the case of Nova Scotia, the government used PISA test scores to create a crisis of confidence in public education, which set the stage for a major consultation, a consultation paper, and an identical reform plan, which set into motion the next consultation. In effect,

Nova Scotia demonstrates the neoliberal education reform pattern perfectly: consult, reform, dismantle, and repeat.

New Brunswick’s reform plan, on the surface, was not as aggressively neoliberal as Nova Scotia’s *Action Plan*, but, the underlying message is that both provinces are facing major crises in education. This is justified by citing PISA test scores, which are used to support the introduction of artificial intelligence for student assessment in New Brunswick, and tightened performance management in both provinces.

Overall, perhaps the most confusing tactic is the use of conflicting language; on the one hand, claiming that the education system is excellent, and on the other, stating that the education system is in crisis and is failing. These confusions are not neutral, but part of the logic of neoliberal education reform: say everything and nothing at once, and play on the public’s fears and emotional responses to drive through reform measures quickly, with little resistance to what is configured as “common sense.”

Neoliberal education reforms continue to cross jurisdictional boundaries (Ontario or Alberta readers might be experiencing *déjà-vu*), re-selling the same defunct package — well past its “best before” date — to the next in line. It is critical that advocates understand the language of reform policies to see the patterns more clearly, and to resist those changes that work to dismantle public education systems. ●

Dr. Pamela Rogers is a Researcher and Policy Analyst at the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, and Adjunct Professor at the University of Ottawa, Faculty of Education. Her research focuses on policy discourse formation and teachers’ lived experiences in systems of neoliberal accountability and digital surveillance. As a former high school teacher from Nova Scotia, Pamela is interested in improving workplace conditions and building community alliances to support public school educators.

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