

Investigating the Impact of K-12 International Recruitment
Policyscapes through Neoliberal and Anti-Colonial Frames
Enquête sur l'impact des « paysages de politiques » au sein du
recrutement international de la maternelle à la 12e année à
travers des cadres néolibéraux et anticoloniaux

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Article abstract

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**Investigating the Impact of K–12 International Recruitment Polycsapes through
Neoliberal and Anti-Colonial Frames**
**Enquête sur l'impact des « paysages de politiques » au sein du recrutement international de
la maternelle à la 12^e année à travers des cadres néolibéraux et anticoloniaux**

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Abstract

While Canadian public schools do not charge students tuition the same way postsecondary institutions do, we are increasingly seeing neoliberal pressures contribute to a lucrative market for tuition-based international students in K–12 education similar to higher education. This study focuses on how neoliberalization is shaping and contributing to the international recruitment polycsape in Ontario's K–12 education system. Theoretically informed by neoliberalism and anti-colonialism, this paper examines the case study of international student programming in Ontario's (and Canada's) largest school board, the Toronto District School Board. Using Carol Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be?" approach for our methodology, we conducted a critical policy analysis of various documents published by the board with respect to their international student program. Our analysis shows how overarching neoliberal pressures imposed by provincial governments contribute to the creation and maintenance of this particular polycsape, along with a discussion of how this impacts public education more widely.

Résumé

Bien que les écoles publiques canadiennes ne fassent pas payer de frais de scolarité aux élèves tels que le font les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire, nous constatons de plus en plus que les pressions néolibérales contribuent à la création d'un marché lucratif pour les étudiants étrangers payant des frais de scolarité dans le système d'éducation de la maternelle à la 12^e année, comme c'est le cas pour l'enseignement supérieur. Cette étude se concentre sur la façon dont la néolibéralisation façonne et contribue au paysage de politiques du recrutement international dans le système éducatif de l'Ontario de la maternelle à la 12^e année. Par le biais théorique du néolibéralisme et de l'anticolonialisme, cet article se penche sur l'étude de cas du programme pour étudiants étrangers du plus grand conseil scolaire de l'Ontario (et du Canada), le *Toronto District School Board*. En utilisant l'approche « Quel est le problème représenté ? » de Carol Bacchi pour notre méthodologie, nous avons effectué une analyse politique critique de divers documents publiés par le conseil scolaire en ce qui concerne son programme d'étudiants étrangers. Notre analyse démontre comment les pressions néolibérales dominantes imposées par les gouvernements provinciaux contribuent à la création et au maintien de ce paysage de politiques particulier, et offre aussi une discussion sur l'impact de cette situation sur l'éducation publique en général.

Keywords: neoliberalism, anti-colonialism, public education, international students
Mots clés : néolibéralisme, anticolonialisme, éducation publique, étudiants internationaux

¹ **Author's Note:** This paper is a collaborative work done by peers; the arrangement of authors is not in any particular order and there was equal contribution from all the authors.

Introduction

In recent years, K–12 education in Canada has been sought by a growing number of international students (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2019). Canada performs relatively well on global education quality rankings, as reflected in its 12th position among 33 high-income OECD countries (Aliakbari et al., 2020). It is also one of the most ethno-racially diverse countries in the Global North, and changes in immigration protocols after Brexit, Trump’s 2016 election, and COVID-19 made it a more desirable location for international students than other Western countries (Alini, 2017; Harris, 2020). In addition, international students whose parents are on a study permit or work permit, are able to receive free public education in Canada (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2001). All of these factors have positioned Canada as desirable for pursuing education and long-term settlement, and thus a top spot for international students.

However, the international recruitment policyscape of tuition-based students in K–12 is mired with neoliberal governmentalities. A policyscape can be understood as “a landscape densely laden with policies created in the past that have themselves become established institutions, bearing consequences for governing operations, the policy agenda, and political behavior” (Mettler, 2016, p. 369). Policyscapes describe contemporary public policy landscapes that are heavily impacted by policies made by lawmakers over the last several decades (Mettler, 2016). A policyscape is not simply a collection of policies impacting an institution: policyscapes describe the dynamic nature of how policies become established institutions overtime, which themselves require maintenance, and even dictate development of new policies and public policy landscapes because of how they come to impact social structures. Neoliberalism drives the international recruitment policyscape, which rests on the notion that it is the role of the state to create and maintain markets (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism leads to a society that resembles an enterprise, full of self-responsible individuals working towards economic growth (Burchell et al., 2008). Dean (1999) expanded the definition of government as authorities and the idea of ruling as employing various techniques to shape conduct. In this sense, neoliberalism as a “general art of government” (Burchell et al., 2008, p. 131) can be applied to various organizations and agencies who, with the aim of contributing to the economy as self-responsible entities, shape conduct by working with multiple actors and producing various consequences (Dean, 1999). In the past few decades, public schools in many Western countries are increasingly becoming financially independent entities that contribute to the economy through producing human capital. Budget cuts push schools to resort to nongovernmental funding, such as international student tuition. As the number of international students increases, which translates to a growing tuition income and formalization of international recruitment, schools become more subject to the dynamics of competition that embodies the market mechanism promoted by neoliberalism.

The recruitment of tuition-based international students is gradually reshaping public schools into education enterprises, yet the market freedoms promoted by this neoliberal discourse go against the democratic freedoms public education seeks to promote (Baltodano, 2012; Blakely, 2017). In Ontario, there are a total of 72 school boards organized either as English Public, English Catholic, French Public, or French Catholic (People for Education, n.d.). A 2015 study that examined international recruitment among Ontario English school boards revealed 33 publicly funded English school boards accepted international students (Lindenberg, 2015). Despite the success of school boards in recruiting tuition-based international students, few have interrogated the dominant neoliberal discourses in relevant policies.

This article aims to explore how neoliberalization might be shaping and contributing to the international student polycscape of Ontario's K–12 education system. Theoretically informed by neoliberalism and anti-colonialism, this paper will examine the case study of international student programming in Ontario's (and Canada's) largest school board, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Using the methodological approach of "What's the problem represented to be? (WPR)" (Bacchi, 2012a), the paper will conduct a policy analysis of various documents published by the TDSB with respect to their international student program.

Neoliberal Imperatives for Internationalization in Canadian K–12 Education

Neoliberalization of education introduced highly interrelated and complex mechanisms that seek to redirect public education through a human capital paradigm (Ball, 2016). This in turn is influencing large-scale education reforms in many countries and reimagining education solely through economic terms. In 2001 for instance, the entire educational system in Germany was restructured after the release of Programme for International Assessment (PISA). Similarly, in 2009, the Welsh government restructured their secondary education after they ranked lower than the average scores in PISA tests (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2009). The PISA "shock" in these two countries is a classic example of how neoliberalization in global education pushed emerging economies to restructure their education system. Through neoliberalization, education becomes a service commodity, a brand, a commodity or capital asset and is organized using business strategies, the same generic management techniques, and the same systems of value (Ball, 2012). In a similarly neoliberal fashion, COVID-19 created conditions for private companies to enter public education, and corporations were found persuading public education policy into online or hybrid formats during the pandemic, despite education research that advised the contrary (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Moore et al., 2021).

Neoliberal governmentalities have played a large role in shaping Ontario's public education system over the last few decades and contributed to a variety of new polycsapes. For instance, Mike Harris's *Commonsense Revolution* government in 1995 brought forth significant cuts to education, centralized education funding, established various quasi autonomous nongovernmental organizations (e.g., Ontario College of Teachers & Education Quality and Accountability Office), etc. (Basu, 2004). Similar to the Harris years, the current Doug Ford government's education changes brought in aggressive neoliberal policies including over millions of dollars in cuts, introduction of two mandatory e-Learning courses, reduction of teachers, lack of pandemic time school reopening support, and more (Chen, 2019; People for Education, 2020a, 2020b). While the Harris and Ford years implemented neoliberal policy aggressively, Liberal education policy from 2003–2018 also perpetuated neoliberal agendas on a structural level. For instance, research from People for Education (2020b) illustrates that while teacher-librarians in elementary schools have been on the decline over the last 20 years, library technicians are on the rise, which could be attributed to the financial savings from lower salary offerings for library technicians. Even though education spending almost doubled between 1997 and 2020 from \$12.9 billion to \$25.5 billion (Ontario Treasury Board Secretariat, 2020), scholars and school boards consistently cite operating deficits and insufficient funds to run schools successfully. In the Report of the Education Equality Task Force, Dr. Rozanski (2002) recommended \$1.78 billion additional funding to the Ontario public education system to fulfill some of the equity goals. In 2017, the capital repairs backlog to maintain school facilities in Ontario stood at \$15.9 billion (Mackenzie, 2017), and a 2015 report from Ontario's Auditor-General illustrates "chronic underfunding by [the] provincial government ... led to the rapid and continuous increase of disrepair in Ontario's

schools” (Mackenzie, 2017, p. 1). Even during the 2021–22 school year, the Ontario government announced a further \$500 million cut to funding (Tranjan et al., 2022).

One of the many ways school boards have been working to meet these increasing fiscal challenges is by seeking alternative revenue sources, such as through tuition-based international students (Deschambault, 2015; Winton & Milani, 2017). In Ontario, for instance, the number of international students in the K–12 system went from 15,605 in 2000, to 38,535 in 2019 (IRCC, 2019). It is important to note that international students whose parents or legal guardians reside in Canada are not charged tuition to attend public schools in Ontario, and as such, not all 38,000+ international students are currently tuition-paying international students (Education Act, 1990; Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2001). Nevertheless, Ontario’s international education strategic plan lists international tuition income as a crucial revenue source for financial sustainability (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Similar realities have been seen in British Columbia (BC), which is the second largest hosting province for K–12 international students after Ontario (IRCC, 2019). Both federal and provincial governments are noticing the benefits associated with international recruitment, which means various efforts are being made to secure Canada’s competitiveness in the international student market (HWDSB, 2020; Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015; Peel District School Board, 2020; Roslyn Kunin & Associates Inc., 2017b; York Region District School Board, 2020).

International Student Experiences in K–12 Education

Much of the literature about internationalization in Canadian education is centered on students in the postsecondary system, leaving the experiences of K–12 international students under explored (Deschambault, 2015; Kuo & Roysircar, 2006; Mockute, 2016; Nelson, 2013; Popadiuk, 2010). When literature exists, some attention has been paid to the broader policyscape of K–12 international education (Elnagar & Young, 2021; Lindenberg, 2015; Mockute, 2016; Nelson, 2013). For instance, Lindenberg (2015) examined the academic, emotional, and cultural supports that were available to adolescent students in international student programs in Ontario’s publicly funded school boards and noticed how these programs primarily operated as for-profit businesses. There is lack of regulation in the paid guardianship service and homestay industry, which make K–12 international students easy targets for profit-oriented companies or individuals (Xing & Zhou, 2018). Calling K–12 international students “vulnerable among the vulnerable” (p. 21), Mockute (2016) argues for a better legal framework to protect these students. While there is some information and guidelines for homestay services in place (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018; OASDI, n.d.), Xing and Zhou’s report showed that issues could only reach to the school board level; IRCC did not respond to complaints associated with guardianship. Such negative experiences might lead to both financial costs and mental health risks for those underage international students (Xing & Zhou, 2018). Poor mental health was also mentioned in Lindenberg’s (2015) research on school support services as an area that requires more attention.

During the pandemic, media coverage of postsecondary international students focused on their struggle with travel restrictions, flight changes, lack of support, and tuition changes (Amin et al., 2020; Averbeck, 2020; Coulton, 2020; Maharaj, 2020; Neatby, 2020); while for K–12 international students, the dominant discourse was primarily about how a decline in enrollment translated to loss in tuition and revenue instead of conversations about the social, mental, and academic impacts of COVID-19 on K–12 international students (Chiang, 2020; Silberman, 2020; Xing, 2020). The literature shows a clear gap in discourse surrounding both the neoliberalization

of public education in Canada and how it connects to internationalization in K–12, alongside the psychosocial experiences of vulnerable students who are newcomers to the country.

Imperatives for Neoliberal Policymaking

The benefits of hosting international students are backed by various financial reports and strategic plans grounded in neoliberal foci. A study conducted by Elnagar and Young (2021) revealed how, at the institutional level, the provision of international student programs and the recruitment of K–12 international students was perceived by some school boards as an alternative revenue stream to maintain the viability of low domestic school enrollment. For instance, Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc. (2017a) prepared a report for Global Affairs Canada, which highlighted the economic impact of international education in Canada. International students' overall spending and economic impact was listed and used to compare with Canada's total value of service exports in 2015. Data in this report was used in the International Education Strategy 2019–2024 to rationalize directives such as improving Canada's competitiveness in the international student market and the need to diversify its "customer base" by targeting countries other than China and India where a large proportion of students were coming from (Global Affairs Canada, 2019, p.4). Similarly, in Ontario's Strategy for K–12 International Education, the social, cultural, and economic benefits associated with internationalization were highlighted (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The report prepared by Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc. was cited again to call attention to international students' economic contribution to Ontario through direct spending and jobs. Similar instances were evident in BC, Manitoba, and Alberta (Alberta Government, 2017; Elnagar, 2021; Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc., 2013, 2017b). The market ideology promoted by neoliberalism is favoured by some as it focuses on efficiency, competition, and customer satisfaction (Cucchiara, 2016; Enache, 2011; Guilbault, 2018). Marketing has become an essential skill for schools to perform well in competition with other schools (Cucchiara, 2016). Cucchiara (2016) stated that despite the disconnection between marketing theories and practical contexts, schools were able to construct their identities through the marketing process. A contextualized understanding of marketing in public education is needed for better implementation of marketing strategies in public education (Cucchiara, 2016). In terms of treating students as customers, "that ship has sailed"; it is the steering of the ship, i.e., adapting to the marketing culture, developing a customer mindset, and focusing on students'/customers' satisfaction, that matters the most (Guilbault, 2018, p. 297).

While the discourse of accountability, efficiency, competition, and customer satisfaction seems beneficial, ultimately, this model turns education into a corporate style enterprise that is based on customer or parent choice. Neoliberalism treats parents as consumers who should be able to choose the kind of education they like best, which underscores the fact that not all parents have the ability to make such choices. While families with high social capital can afford private schooling or even lobby for specialized programs and high-quality infrastructure in schools, families from low socioeconomic backgrounds (many of whom can be racialized given systemic interconnections between racism and poverty) are less able to do so (Dei & Karumanchery, 1999; Wadhera, 2021). In this regard, it is important to contextualize, neoliberalism is not just another economic trend that is taking most of the world by a storm, it is a specific policy imperative grounded in a quest for maintenance of power and privilege. Those who benefit most from neoliberalism are often also socially privileged along lines of race, gender, class, ability, and other such markers.

Anti-Colonial Responses to Neoliberalism

Anti-colonialism affirms the need to respond to education policies driven by neoliberalism and globalization in ways that unpack power structures of who benefits from hegemonic policymaking (Dei, 2016). In framing internationalization of education from an anti-colonial lens, Dei (2016) contends that we need to understand the unequal relations between the Global North and Global South in response to the political economy of education (i.e., the commodification, commercialization, and privatization in education). The neoliberal underpinnings of education have contributed to the devaluation of the epistemology, agency, beliefs and value systems of the colonized creating an internalized sense of inferiority and inadequacy (Nyamnjoh, 2012).

Singh (2004) analyses the fundamental differences that play out on how internationalization, for example, is framed between countries from the Global North and Global South. He argues that Global South countries are primarily the sending countries of mobile students, while the Global North becomes receiving countries in relation to current cross-border provisions. In this case, the North-South partnership manifests in a one-sided and exploitative way (Dei, 2016). Aside from the current one-sided trend which has resulted in a brain gain for the Global North, neoliberalism has increased the hegemony of Western knowledge systems, cultural values, and languages at the expense of Indigenous knowledges, resulting in the dangers of cultural homogenization, curriculum homogenization, and loss of cultural identity; which further exacerbates the continuing unequal power relationships between education in the Global North and South (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Jowi, 2009; Knight, 2014). Furthermore, the practice does not question instances of power and privilege in sending countries, which likely enables those with more social capital and privilege to be able to send children abroad in the first place.

International education continues to propagate coloniality of knowledge and associated power imbalances (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Taking up an anti-colonial stance enables us to challenge dominant Eurocentric viewpoints that promote universality of knowledge and ways of knowing which assume Western episteme as the only site through which universal consciousness and civilization could be attained (Grosfoguel, 2007; Walton, 2018). Anti-colonial education responds to neoliberalism by creating space(s) to enable us to destabilize existing power relations and colonial systems and structures as well as re-center equity, power, and social justice in education policies. From an anti-colonial lens, we understand that the purpose of education is not just about individual achievements, self-improvement, or the actualization of corporate/private needs, interests, and a narrow conception of educational and life success, rather it is about providing an education that centers the cultural values, worldviews, teachings, and traditions of all learners (Asante, 1999; Dei, 2012). It envisions an alternative to schooling and education, while contributing to the search for an anti-racist, non-exploitative and anti-oppressive educational policies.

Methodology

Policy documents about internationalization from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) were chosen for analysis. As the largest school board in both Ontario and Canada, the TDSB had about 2,200 tuition-paying international students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (TDSB, 2020). The board has over 246,000 K–12 students (TDSB, 2019c) and receives about \$3 billion in education funding every year, the most in the entire province. The TDSB is also one of the few boards with comprehensive access to publicly available policy documents about its international student

program. As such, we chose to ground our analysis on international student education in the K–12 sector through a case study (Yin, 2003) of TDSB’s program and policies (Table 1).

Document analysis was restricted to six publicly available documents that referenced TDSB’s international student program. In addition to these six documents, two more documents were analyzed: the *TDSB Multi-Year Strategic Plan* and the *2020 Ministry of Education Funding Technical Paper*. These documents were referenced in the initial five documents and provided relevant contextual background about internationalization policies. Within this analysis, three of the documents highlighted TDSB’s financial facts from the last 3 years (2019–2021). A key limitation of this study is the limited documents available for our document analysis. Nonetheless, the documents used for our analysis provided significant data about international student enrollment in the TDSB and their cumulative tuition fees from the preceding 5 years.

Table 1: Documents Chosen for Policy Analysis

	Year	Document	Referred in the paper as
1	n.d. -a	<u>International Education Webpage</u> Main public facing webpage for International Education programming in the TDSB.	Webpage
2	n.d. -b	<u>Program Brochure</u> Brochure of International Education programming in the TDSB for students/families.	Brochure
3	2018 (Updated 2019)	<u>TDSB Multi-Year Strategic Plan</u> TDSB’s Strategic Plan that guides all aspects of board operations (2019–2022).	Strategic plan
4	2019	<u>Committee of the Whole (Special Meeting) Report No. 04</u> Board meeting agenda discussing budget reductions / implications for international student programming.	Report No. 04
5	2019	<u>TDSB Financial Facts: Revenue and Expenditure Trends (February 2019)</u> Annual financial facts that provide key statistics around the International Education program.	2019 financial facts
6	2020	<u>TDSB Financial Facts: Revenue and Expenditure Trends (February 2020)</u> Annual financial facts that provide key statistics around the International Education program.	2020 financial facts
7	2020	<u>Education Funding Technical Paper 2020–21</u> Provincial funding details as set out by the Ministry of Education.	Technical paper

8	2021	<u>TDSB Financial Facts: Revenue and Expenditure Trends (February 2021)</u> Annual financial facts that provide key statistics around the International Education program.	2021 financial facts
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The selected documents were analyzed using Bacchi’s (2012a) “What’s the problem represented to be?” (WPR) critical policy analysis approach. WPR allows space to question the accepted “truths” of policy, as well as the bodies that create such “truths.” To this end, WPR forms the crux of our methodology as we analyzed policy documents about internationalization in K–12 education. The premise of the WPR approach is that policy constitutes a problem, as policy implies that there is a problem to be fixed (Bacchi, 2012a). In the context of this study, the accepted “truth” is the policy discourse in international recruitment and the bodies that create the “truth” include ministries and school districts. According to Bacchi (2012a), problematizing policies is a process of revealing the complex rules of producing truth to all *players in the game*, namely those who are involved in and influenced by the policy discourse. This approach is based on six guiding questions (Bacchi, 2012b), which informed our data analysis:

1. What’s the problem represented to be?
2. What assumptions underpin this problem representation?
3. How has this representation of the problem come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?
5. What are the effects of this problem representation?
6. How can this problem representation be questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

The conceptual underpinning of our document analysis was guided both by an understanding of the ways in which neoliberalism operates, as well as anti-colonial theory (Dei, 1996, 2017; Dei & McDermott, 2014; Dei & Opini, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatesheni, 2020). We began the analysis by focusing on Bacchi’s six guiding questions. To do this, we met as a research team to discuss each of the documents and familiarize ourselves with the contents. Then the selected documents were analyzed independently by the three authors noting similarities and differences. During this phase, each researcher individually examined the contents of the selected policy documents, and “worked backwards” to “read off” the implied problem represented with each document (Bacchi, 2009, p. 40). Next, we compared and discussed our results in order to check our understanding and application of WPR, and the consistency of our findings. We developed tables for both of the policy documents to compare our independent representations and annotated the tables with comments. Afterwards, we discussed the differences in our identified representations and returned to the policy documents to re-interrogate and/or defend our understandings. Having compared our tables, we produced abridged findings supported with discussion for all the policy documents. We ensured that the iterative process of individual and group analysis utilized all the six WPR questions.

Realizing the International K–12 Education Polycscape

Our combined findings and discussion of how internationalization was created, sustained, and expanded in the TDSB is explored through the following key themes:

1. Self-fulfilling neoliberal governmentalities
2. Colonial underpinnings of neoliberal internationalization
3. Effects on policy actors

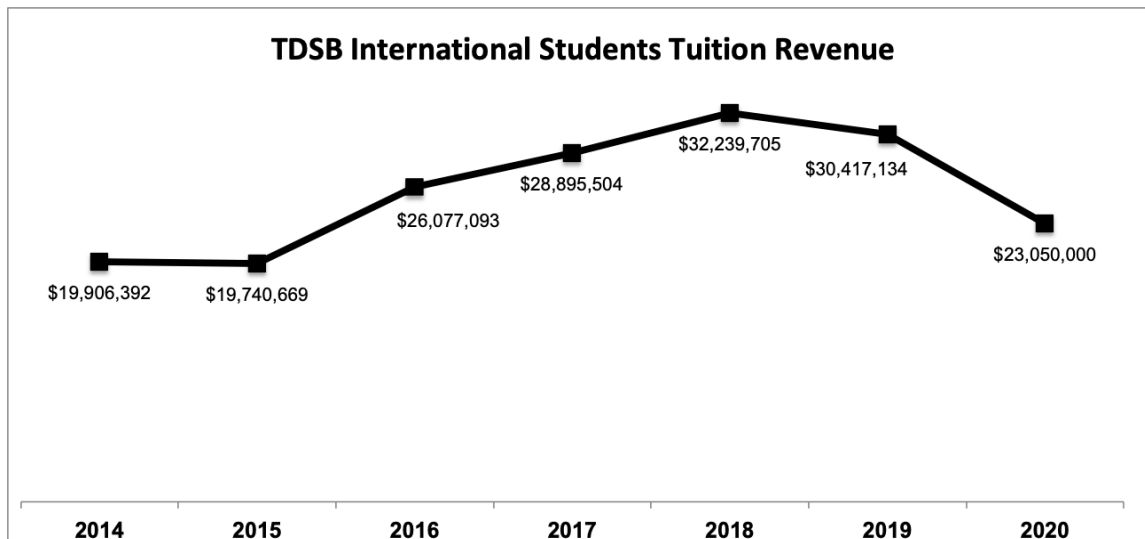
Self-Fulfilling Neoliberal Governmentalities

An analysis of TDSB’s financial documents revealed that the revenue generated from tuition-based international students supported the TDSB to mitigate fiscal pressures imposed by provincial funding cuts. Before the pandemic, the TDSB was incurring over \$32 million in revenue from international students. While the onset of COVID-19 led to an incremental decrease in enrollment, almost \$23 million of the 2020 operating budget was estimated to come from international student tuition fee revenues. As shown in Figure 1, 5 years ago, revenue generated from international student tuitions stood at approximately \$19 million a year. Similarly, Figure 2 shows that international student enrollment saw a 53% increase from 1,406 students in 2014 to 2,153 students in 2019. Enrollment in the elementary grades in particular increased three times as much from 139 students in 2014 to 429 students in 2019 (TDSB, 2019b). The key problematization which led to the policy solution of international recruitment then, was in response to insufficient public funding.

In 2019, provincial funding cuts imposed a \$67.8 million shortfall for the TDSB (2019a). Since boards are not allowed to run deficit budgets in Ontario, this meant the board had to find ways to make savings, or find alternative forms of revenue, to meet this fiscal challenge. One of the many solutions TDSB proposed to balance the 2019 budget was increasing the tuition fees of international students while expanding the program (2019d). The tuition fee increase was proposed to become \$16,000 per year for both elementary and secondary students, where it previously used to be \$12,500 for elementary students and \$14,500 for secondary students.

Figure 1: TDSB International Tuition Revenue

**Note: 2020 revenue is based on a revised estimate.*

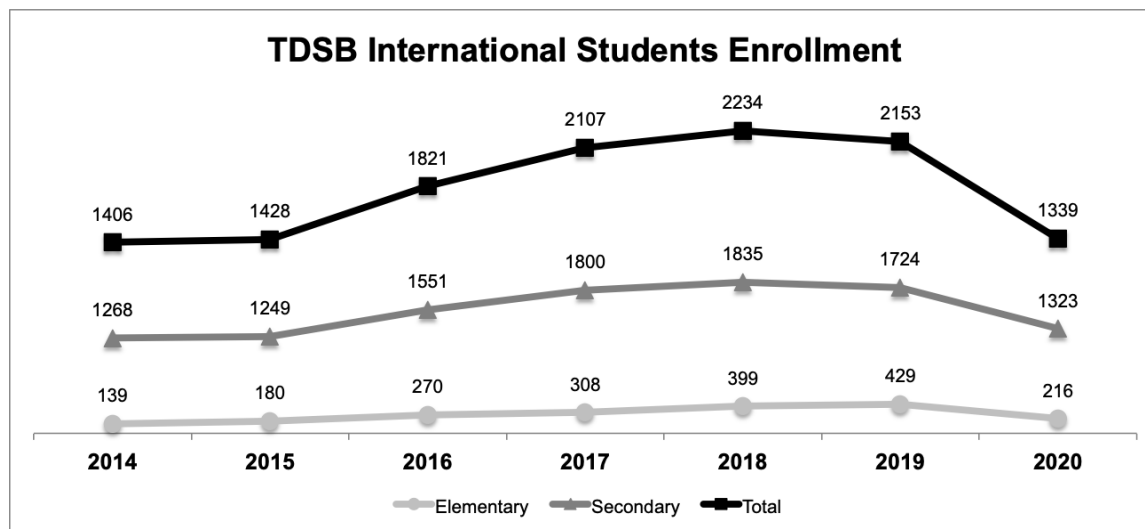


In 2019 for the first time, the provincial government imposed a \$1,300 fee for every international student a school board brings in (TDSB, 2019a), which became an additional reason behind the TDSB rationale to increase tuition fees. In this instance, neoliberalism perpetuated self-fulfilling governmentalities and thus more neoliberal policymaking: where the TDSB had to rely on internationalization in the face of neoliberal cuts, this very solution contributed to a form of more neoliberalization where the Ontario Ministry of Education chose to capitalize on the international student market by legislating a recruitment fee. When the logic that international student recruitment serves the purpose of revenue generation is left unquestioned, further actions

based on such logic, i.e., the \$1,300 fee, would go unquestioned as well, which would in turn reinforce the very logic that should be problematized in the first place.

Figure 2: TDSB International Student Enrollment

**Note: 2020 enrollment is based on a revised estimate; all enrollment statistics have been rounded to the nearest whole.*



Colonial Underpinnings of Neoliberal Internationalization

While TDSB claims they can offer world-class education to all students, this discourse is reminiscent of South-to-North colonial pattern and values. Internationalization seems to be predicated on the notion that Western education in a settler-colonial state like Canada is better, echoing colonial tropes of White saviorism which implies a need for people in the Global South to look to the Global North to become “world class.” For example, in the documents we analyzed, a push for internationalization in the TDSB involved rationalizing, financially and morally, international recruitment as a win-win solution for both school boards and international students. It was made explicit in the brochure that TDSB provides a “world-class education” (TDSB, n.d.-b), alongside “unique opportunities to become engaging global citizens” (TDSB, n.d.-b). If we follow Bacchi’s line of reasoning that all policies are responses to problematizations, the discourses that Canadian education is world class, then it implies that this policy solves the problem of how education outside Canada, primarily in the Global South where many international students come from, is not *world class*. There is an underlying assumption that the home countries of international students cannot provide an education which will work to ameliorate their national problems. As a result, they need Canadian education to help them gain the expertise necessary to help transform their countries or their livelihoods. This is similar to internationalization in higher education where, “Universities in Canada and elsewhere in the Global North are treating internationalization as a means of generating revenues to make up for declining public funding from local and national governments” (Stein et al., 2019, p. 24); but as Larkin contends, internationalization as a result is also reproducing

Canada’s geopolitical hegemony, particularly in relation to partners in the Global South ... in the rush for revenues and other international opportunities, Canadian institutions have failed to create culturally responsive environments for international students and scholars (Guo & Guo, 2017), or

to adequately consider and manage the ethical complexities of international study and service abroad experiences and research partnerships. (Beck, 2012; Khoo, 2011; Larkin, 2015) (as cited in Stein & Andreotti, 2015, p. 24)

It is important to note that this rhetoric does not problematize how long-standing systems such as neocolonialism worked to deteriorate education quality in modern day Global South countries in the first place. For example, in the 20th century, colonized countries started obtaining independence from colonial rule, but former ruling powers established structures that allowed them to continue stealing wealth from previously colonized countries. By the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) became the new supervisor of treasuries in countries that were supposed to be independent, with significant power to make political choices. The IMF and other organizations such as the World Bank, imposed various policies that led to things like cuts to health, education, social services, etc. (Maynard, 2017). These realities in turn, have taken a particular toll in both creating and positioning education in the Global South as less advanced.

Furthermore, in 2019, the majority of the international students in the TDSB came from China, Vietnam, Korea, and given recent political contexts, Iran. Similar patterns exist in higher education where the two biggest markets for international students come from East and South Asia (IRCC, 2021). This marketization mimics Canadian immigration patterns which historically used to only prefer White settlers from Europe, but starting in the 1970s, moved towards a less explicitly racist immigration policy to welcome immigrants from around the world. Immigrants from predominantly Black countries continue to be less welcome because of underlying anti-Black racism in immigration policy (Maynard, 2017). In the same way immigration policy has always had colonial and racist underpinnings, internationalization mimics similar patterns. When education policies are underpinned by colonial values, public education structures will continue to create inequitable outcomes. If we want “world-class” learning outcomes for all students, the discriminatory value systems which contribute to policymaking must be interrogated.

Effects on Policy Actors

A key impact on students was how this policy heightened the importance of global connections as a metric of success. This policy was marketed to international students by highlighting how the diverse context of Toronto would expose them to many cultures and languages. This discourse was also applied to local contexts: the expansion of this program was argued to provide benefits to current TDSB students because international students “enrich the community within the schools they attend” (TDSB, 2019a). It remains unclear, however, to what extent both local and international students are able to fully make or benefit from meaningful global connections: Do international students interact primarily with students from their home country? Or are they welcomed by local peers from different backgrounds as well? Are students able to benefit from multicultural ways of thinking and knowledge systems, or despite coming from diverse backgrounds, are students forced to assimilate into a dominant Eurocentric, settler-colonial way of life? Research on international students in postsecondary education revealed international students struggle with integration due to language, cultural, and financial barriers and often are rendered invisible (Beck & Ilieva, 2019; Chira, 2013; Sigalas, 2010). Scarcity of literature on K–12 international students poses questions in a similar vein because it is unclear the kinds of pressures these students have to face.

Similarly, the policy is rationalized as contributing to meeting all areas of board’s Multi-Year Strategic Plan (TDSB, 2019c):

- Transform student learning.

- Create a culture for student and staff well-being.
- Provide equity of access to learning opportunities for all students.
- Allocate human and financial resources strategically to support student needs.
- Build strong relationships and partnerships within school communities to support student learning and well-being.

It is unclear how exactly international recruitment will meet all of these strategic drivers. For example, does the assumption that this policy will create a culture for student and staff well-being take into account the mental health impacts of this policy on K–12 international students? As mentioned in the literature review, K–12 international students might face special complications outside of the school context (e.g., homestay family) or due to reasons that don't normally apply to domestic students (e.g., language competence, cultural differences, etc.). A recognition of such factors in policymaking will substantiate its arguments as bringing in more international students may not automatically create positive cultures for all student and staff well-being. The TDSB proposal to expand international recruitment also claimed a need to, “Focus on improving retention rates by increasing the number of available courses. Currently, approximately 20% of students do not return to TDSB after one year” (TDSB, 2019a). The document does not explain reasons for why these students are not returning: What challenges are they facing in the TDSB that leads to them not wanting to return? Likewise, is the need to improve retention guided primarily by neoliberal ideals of retaining revenue, or is it also being guided by moral, ethical duties to provide a supportive learning environment for all students?

This policy compels school boards to adopt marketing discourses, which push boards to operate more as education enterprises. In its marketing material, the TDSB highlights its ability to “serve” international students well regardless of COVID-19. That is, the TDSB is resourced and well prepared to offer “world-class” education to international K–12 students even in a pandemic. Neoliberalism has normalized the marketing discourse that international students and their parents are customers in a free market because the TDSB is very happy to serve their children (TDSB, n.d.-b).

Conclusion

This paper draws attention to the less discussed consequences of profit-oriented international recruitment and its impact on K–12 international students and the market ideology that is driving international recruitment. By examining the discursive effects of the international recruitment policy, how neoliberalism functions as the dominant discourse that “limits on what can be thought and said” is revealed. The representation of the problem is disseminated through marketing agents who create this market in many countries and the representation of the problem is defended because of the need for funding. That is, we need more money to fund our public education system and we can do this by recruiting more international students who bring a huge revenue to the Canadian economy. However, neoliberal austerity measures which create such fiscal needs, do not problematize capitalist economic systems that contribute to a lack of funding for public services to begin with. International recruitment, a neoliberal policy, becomes one way to mitigate pressures that are in itself created by neoliberalism. In doing so, this “solves” the problem of international students getting access to a “world-class” education, and local students getting access to “international exposure.” While it was not in the scope of this paper to discuss the myriad impacts of this policy on international students in particular, other research does point to exploitation in the system where young minors are being brought in primarily as “cash cows”:

imperatives for internationalization do not start with robust analyses of the various challenges that young children and youth might face, including but not limited to, homestay support, English language support, discrimination from peers/educators, academic support, mental health support, and more. Revenue-centered policymaking does not create systems of care and mutual aid. However, as Winton (2018) highlighted, challenging impacts of neoliberal policymaking as equity issues is not sufficient to “overcome neoliberalism’s pressure on parents to provide their children with educational advantages, a trend toward privatization in public education, neoconservative interests in less government spending, [and] Canadians’ belief in meritocracy...” (Winton, 2018, p. 66). Essentially, as Winton suggests, policy problems need to be defined in ways that they “address and respond to broader cultural discourses and highlight how aspects of a policy’s social context may themselves need to be challenged (e.g., neoliberalism, meritocracy) as part of local policy change initiatives” (Winton, 2018, p. 67). This presents unique challenges for school districts because it requires system-level mobilization to create discourses that challenge neoliberal policymaking in the first place, and it also requires careful thought before proposing solutions to escape neoliberal impacts, because as we have seen, while the international recruitment policy brought in more revenue for a while, it also contributed to further cuts through the provincial international student tuition fee. More importantly, in the short term, it also requires robust care-centered planning that can center negative impacts of neoliberal policy on international students and their families to work towards harm reduction in this now established policyscape.

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