

Co-opting Equity: Advancing a Neoliberal Agenda in Manitoba Education Reforms

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Article abstract

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Abstract

This paper uses critical policy analysis to investigate how the concept of equity has been co-opted to promote a neoliberal agenda in education reforms in Manitoba. Early provincial reform documents contained a narrow definition of equity focused primarily on closing achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These reform documents were rejected by the public, in part due to concerns about equity. The Manitoba Education Action Plan was introduced in 2022, which more explicitly focused on achieving equity as part of the education reform process. However, the framing of equity in the Action Plan was narrow, emphasizing individualism rather than a more systemic pursuit of equity. While some recommended actions in the Action Plan have promoted a more inclusive and culturally responsive education system, other actions have advanced a neoliberal agenda focused on work-readiness and accountability, while actions to remove barriers to education have been undertaken with limited urgency.



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Introduction

In 2019, the government of Manitoba began a process to reform education, stressing the importance of improving achievement, increasing accountability, and preparing students for the workforce, while attempting to centralize the school system. These goals are consistent with a broader neoliberal education reform movement that is evident across Canada. In Canada, each province or territory is in control of its own education system. This situation has led neoliberal education reforms to manifest in diverse, yet often familiar, ways across the country. In many provinces, market-driven decisions have been evident, often resulting in a push to privatize, marketize, or commodify elements of the school system. This has included the push to internationalize public schools in Manitoba, treating school as a commodity (Elnager, 2019). It also has included Alberta's long-standing support of private school options and the province's recent moves to expand funding to charter schools and enthusiastically promote school choice (Ganshorn, 2023). Research in British Columbia has demonstrated that market-driven decisions, such as those that focus on cost savings, often end up being at odds with the needs of local communities (Shoveller et al., 2005). In Ontario, there has been continued emphasis on the standardization of curriculum and standardized testing, while decreased funding has resulted in corporate partnerships and cutbacks to the arts (S. Carpenter et al., 2012; Sattler, 2012). In Nova Scotia, a neoliberal focus on individual achievement and achievement gaps has resulted in other losses, notably the elimination of pre-existing antiracist policy and programming (Rogers, 2021). Across Canada, there have been trends to privatize education and increase standardization of curriculum and assessment, all motivated by market-driven thinking.

Examining neoliberal education reforms in Manitoba is relevant due to the intense opposition directed toward recent reforms and the resulting shift in policy. In Manitoba, the push to enact neoliberal education reforms under Bill 64 (2021) and the *Better Education Starts Today* report (Government of Manitoba, 2021) resulted in opposition from many interest groups and the general public, in part because of concerns that the reforms exacerbated systemic inequities. As a result, the province put forward new reform documents, like the *Manitoba Education Action Plan* (Government of Manitoba, 2022b), which purported to centre equity. Despite, or perhaps because of, these claims, it is important to examine how equity has been framed within government documents relating to these reforms and how its framing changed from 2021 to 2022. An important trend in neoliberal movements is the co-opting of equity language to advance neoliberal agendas (Sardoč, 2021). I take up this idea by using critical policy analysis (Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2017) to investigate how definitions of equity have shifted over time in the policy documents and how this advances a neoliberal agenda. To support this critical policy analysis, I draw from critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) to analyze the framing of equity in the documents and from several concepts developed by critical race theorists (Bell, 1980; Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006) to demonstrate how visions of equity in the documents fall short. Through the overarching critical policy analysis, I examine how equity was defined within early documents and compare this to how equity has been framed within later documents. I contrast this framing with the recommended actions that are found within the documents to demonstrate how actual equity has taken a back seat to a neoliberal agenda.

The Manitoba Context

In Manitoba, the education reform process has been contentious and has taken place in two distinct phases. The first phase started in 2019 when the provincial government, comprising a Progressive Conservative majority, commissioned an independent review of the education system, focusing in part on how to increase student outcomes and system-wide accountability. The review commission released the report *Our Children's Success: Manitoba's Future* (Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020), which outlined a series of recommendations relating to effective school leadership, improving achievement and engagement, and strengthening teacher capacity. Due to the pandemic, this report was not released until 2021, when the province also released Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act (2021) and the *Better Education Starts Today (BEST)* report (Government of Manitoba, 2021), a government report that outlined proposed changes partially based on the commission's recommendations. Bill 64 and *BEST* faced intense public criticism, with many critics indicating that the documents did not prioritize Indigenous education (Sinclair, 2021), paid limited attention to systemic barriers to education (Reimer & Brown, 2021), and furthered systemic racism and inequities (Ennab, 2021). Eventually Bill 64 and *BEST* were shelved due to intense opposition from various groups, including the Manitoba Teacher Society, grassroots organizations, rural communities, and others (Samson, 2021). It was replaced with the *Manitoba Education Action Plan* (Government of Manitoba, 2022b). The *Action Plan* listed achieving equity as a guiding principle and framed success in terms of "The Good Life," a concept inspired by Indigenous views of a well-balanced life. The plan also emphasized the importance of the newly released Indigenous Education Policy Framework, entitled *Mamàhtawisiwin: The Wonder We are Born With* (Government of Manitoba, 2022a). Despite these changes, many of the proposed future actions in the *Action Plan* were similar to proposed changes listed in the now-defunct *BEST*. The province proceeded to make changes within the education system using the *Action Plan* as a guide.

Some research has focused on neoliberal discourses within the Manitoba education reform documents, particularly the older documents of Bill 64 and *BEST*. Existing research has demonstrated that *BEST* was underpinned by neoliberal ideals relating to work-readiness, standardization, accountability, and achievement and that these ideals often resulted in a limited inclusion of more culturally responsive practices or pedagogy. For instance, Heringer and Janzen (2023) critically examined Bill 64 and *BEST*, particularly the intention of modernizing education that was prominently expressed in each document. They found that this impulse to modernize was not a recent phenomenon but instead was connected with ideas that emerged in the early 20th century when writers like Bobbitt viewed the purpose of schools as training students for the workforce. Heringer and Janzen indicated that this view was consistent with current neoliberal ideals and worked to constitute people as human capital, a dehumanizing approach. They also criticized the documents, noting that the tokenistic goal of closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was undercut by the standardized approach to achievement and curriculum. While goals existed within these documents that professed to promote equity, they were underpinned by neoliberal ideals of workforce preparation and standardization.

Similarly, I found that Indigenous attributes of learning were often connected with neoliberal discourses of achievement, accountability, and work-readiness (Bees, 2022). I investigated early education reform documents, including *BEST*, *Our Children's Success*, and Bill 64. I examined how key attributes of Indigenous learning were positioned in the documents. These

attributes have been defined by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) and include learning being holistic, a lifelong process, experiential, rooted in Indigenous language and cultures, spiritually oriented, communal, and an integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge. Attributes like learning being spiritual, land-based, or connected with local knowledge were largely absent within the documents. Some attributes were present but were generally found to support neoliberal discourses. For instance, discourses of achievement were common, and many Indigenous attributes of learning were discussed as a means of increasing achievement. As well, Indigenous languages were cited as a way of improving achievement, while other important purposes of Indigenous language learning were ignored, such as reconnection with culture. Overall, Indigenous attributes of learning were frequently found within neoliberal discourses of accountability, achievement, and work-readiness but had a limited or superficial inclusion in the documents otherwise.

While my preceding study examined a variety of documents, similar patterns emerge when only *BEST* is examined. In *BEST* (Government of Manitoba, 2021), references to Indigenous attributes of learning were employed to advance neoliberal views of education. For instance, experiential learning was included as a means to “advance Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) skills through experiential and workplace technical-vocational learning experiences” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 19). However, this positioning of experiential learning as a means to promote workplace skills offered a limited view of what experiential learning could encompass. The inclusion of experiential learning in connection with workplace training was consistent with the neoliberal discourse of education being job-oriented (Apple, 2001). Another attribute of Indigenous learning, learning being communal, was found in a few instances. In one case within *BEST* (Government of Manitoba, 2021), the provincial government stated the intent to start an Elders and Knowledge Keepers in Schools Initiative. This initiative was consistent with learning being a communal act and also connected with the importance of learning being based in Indigenous culture. However, other references to school being based in community were significantly different. More focus was given to the creation of School Community Councils, which would “give parents and caregivers a greater role in their children’s education by actively participating in the design and oversight of the system” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 4). These councils would have offered limited involvement for parents in the classroom and were more strongly connected with the need to keep schools accountable. In this case, community involvement was used to promote accountability, a neoliberal ideal, rather than communal learning within the classroom.

While some attributes of Indigenous learning were evident in *BEST*, those that were included were often present in limited ways or in ways that supported neoliberal discourses of accountability and work-readiness. A broader focus on equity might result in greater inclusion of Indigenous cultures and languages and a focus on integrating Western and Indigenous knowledge systems more systematically (Bees, 2022). Limited research exists on education reform documents that came after *BEST*, such as the *Manitoba Education Action Plan*. In this article, I analyze both *BEST* and the *Manitoba Education Action Plan* to see how the framing of equity has changed and worked to support ongoing neoliberal education reforms.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis focuses on how equity has been co-opted to promote a neoliberal agenda. Neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s as a type of capitalism that promotes a smaller governmental

role in regulating the economy and enacting social reform. Under neoliberalism, government activities are focused on the needs of businesses, industries are privatized or deregulated, and social programs are decreased (Stanford, 2008). Giroux (2013) warned that neoliberal reformers aim to commodify knowledge and privatize learning, as “free-market reforms refuses to imagine public education as the provision of the public good and social right and reduces education to meet the immediate needs of the economy” (p. 460). Neoliberal views of education are motivated by a market logic that aims to develop workers to fulfill the needs of the market with a focus on efficiency (Apple, 2001). Often this involves a standardized process that prioritizes specific skills and competencies that are oriented toward the workforce (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). With this standardized process, the idea of individualistic meritocracy emerges, which denies or ignores the impact of structural inequities on the achievement of equity-seeking groups (Au, 2016). With a neoliberal, market-based focus within education, increasing achievement is a primary concern, particularly achievement that is measured by standardized assessments (Au, 2009). This results in a narrowed definition of achievement and curriculum (Giroux, 2013; Rogers, 2021) that ignores other purposes of school, such as student well-being or the development of active citizens. Instead, neoliberal education reforms have other priorities, such as individualism, work-readiness, and achievement.

Critical theory, and in this case critical policy analysis, is useful for examining the neoliberal education reform movement. Critical policy analysis is concerned with inequitable distributions of power that are reflected in education policy and the potential inequities that might result from policy implementation (Young & Diem, 2017). Unlike traditional policy analysis, which takes a positivist approach to policy, its implementation, and its evaluation, critical policy analysts examine policy in the context of complex systems and often focus on “the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege” (Young & Diem, 2017, p. 4). Examining equity in education policy was a significant part of this critical policy analysis, particularly as it allowed for an examination of whether the *Manitoba Education Action Plan*’s guiding principle of achieving equity has been consistent with the practised reality of its recommended actions.

Safir and Dugan (2021) defined equity as “an approach to ensuring equally high outcomes for all by removing the predictability of success or failure that currently correlates with any racial, social, economic, or cultural factor” (p. 29). In this case, outcomes were not limited to academic achievement alone but encompassed a whole range of attributes, such as well-being, inclusion, connectedness, and more. Focus on equity is important in schools; neoliberal trends in school systems, however, have resulted in a narrow focus on achievement or achievement gaps that has minimized or eliminated policies that emphasize equity. For instance, Rogers (2021) found that, in Nova Scotia, focus on neoliberal policies that prioritized individual achievement and school accountability resulted in the dismantling of local policies that were based in principles of anti-racism and equity. Critical race theorist Ladson-Billings (2006) stressed that this narrow focus on the achievement gap discounts the education debt students of colour face due to historical, economic, and socio-political inequities. Equity requires a broader approach to remedying these past and present debts experienced by racialized and marginalized students.

I drew from the work of several critical race theorists, like Ladson-Billings, when analyzing equity in the education reform documents. Critical race theory originated in the study of law when scholars began to examine questions of race and racism after the Civil Rights Movement. These theorists stated that racism is part of the fabric of everyday society with wide-ranging impacts.

Critical race theory offers important insights into equity in education. As previously mentioned, Ladson-Billings' (2006) discussion of the achievement gap and the education debt is important for conceptualizing a broader and more systemic definition of equity. As well, I drew from Bell's (1980) concept of interest convergence. Bell considered the Brown versus the Board of Education decision to desegregate schools in the United States and concluded that Black people were only able to make progress toward equity when it was in the best interest of the white people in power. This paper will take up these ideas when examining Manitoba education reform documents in general and more specifically in connection with Indigenous students and the achievement gap, which has been a key focus in the documents. While Ladson-Billings and Bell originally focused on Black people in the United States, Tribal Critical Race Theory (or TribalCrit) further emphasizes why concepts like the education debt and interest convergence are relevant when discussing Indigenous students. TribalCrit was developed by Brayboy (2005) to address issues pertaining to Indigenous peoples. Tenets of TribalCrit emphasize that educational policies connected with Indigenous students are often linked with the pursuit of assimilation. These concepts are relevant when discussing how equity has been co-opted within the Manitoba education reform documents.

Methodology

Critical policy analysis works to investigate policy and its implementation, examining the difference between policy rhetoric and actual implementation, as well as how policy changes over time (Diem et al., 2014). In this critical policy analysis, I investigated how equity has been defined and enacted within *BEST* (Government of Manitoba, 2021) and the *Manitoba Education Action Plan* (Government of Manitoba, 2022b). I examined how equity has been defined and how this framing changed between the documents, and I contrasted the stated goal of achieving equity with the actual implementation of actions from the later policy documents.

Critical policy analysis allows for a variety of methods and theories to investigate policy, including qualitative inquiry approaches, such as critical discourse analysis (Diem et al., 2014), which many researchers have used for analyzing education policy (B. W. Carpenter & Diem, 2015; Colorado, 2018; Smith, 2013; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). To support my critical policy analysis, I used critical discourse analysis in one part of my analysis to consider how equity has been framed in *BEST* and the *Manitoba Education Action Plan*. Analyzing policy as a discourse is useful, since critical discourse analysis is “fundamentally interested in analysing hidden, opaque, and visible structures of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 12). More specifically, I made use of Fairclough's (2016) dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis, which aims to examine semiotic aspects of a social wrong, to determine barriers that may prevent resolving the social wrong, to identify if the social wrong is supported by the current social order, and to identify ways forward. In this case, the social wrong was defined as an inequitable school system, so I started by examining obstacles to dismantling this wrong, particularly how equity has been framed discursively within the reform documents. This understanding was key for the broader critical policy analysis, which took this new understanding of how equity has been framed and compared this framing of equity with the documents' recommended actions in order to analyze how policy documents may have co-opted equity to further neoliberal aims.

To start this analysis, I provided a critical discourse analysis of the *BEST* report and then the *Manitoba Education Action Plan*, identifying references to equity and equity-related goals. For

each reference to equity, I identified how equity was framed or positioned by examining several categories. This included looking at which group or groups were considered equity-seeking groups as evidenced by the references to equity, which outcomes the documents were seeking to improve, and which factors were identified as affecting those outcomes. I also considered whether the framing of equity used a narrow focus, particularly centred on individual circumstances, or a broader focus that acknowledged the need to address systemic issues. By examining an early and a current reform document, I tracked how the framing of equity has changed over time.

The next stage in the critical policy analysis involved examining how the current framing of equity compared to the recommended actions in the *Action Plan* and the actions that are currently underway. This meant engaging with a comparison of policy rhetoric to actual implementation, which is a key part of critical policy analysis (Dien et al., 2014). As a result, I completed an analysis that contrasted more transformative definitions of equity (Safir & Dugan, 2021) with the equity definitions in the *Action Plan* and with the actual practiced reality of how these actions have been implemented. I contend that the actual implementation of many actions has been in line with neoliberal ideals in education, which contrast with the *Action Plan*'s stated principle of achieving equity.

Analysis

Defining Equity Within BEST

Past research has examined how *BEST* (Government of Manitoba, 2021) and other Manitoba education reform documents have promoted neoliberal discourses (Bees, 2022; Heringer & Janzen, 2023), with some focus on how the proposed reforms have fallen short when it comes to equity. This paper offers more attention to how equity was defined within *BEST* and the subsequent *Manitoba Education Action Plan*, and how equity has been positioned in relation to neoliberal discourses. Examining how equity has been framed within reform documents is an important step to identifying the barriers to a more equitable education system. To start my analysis, I examined *BEST* and looked for where the term “equity” appeared in the document. Searching for terms like “equitable,” “equity,” “inequities,” and “equitably,” I found two references to a report by the Manitoba Education Commission, two vague references to inequities that were revealed by the pandemic, and seven specific references to the need for more equitable distribution of resources and funding across the province. For instance, when discussing lessons learned from the pandemic, *BEST* (Government of Manitoba, 2021) emphasized that:

Combined with longstanding inequities in funding, resources and prioritization, the result was vastly different experiences and resources for parents and students across the province. We need a consistent and unified provincial education system that provides similar levels of service no matter where families live. (p. 25)

Generally, equity was connected with distributing resources and programming more equitably across the province. Motivations for this redistribution were to improve student outcomes as well as to move away from property taxes and toward a different funding model. This definition of equity focused on geographic equity between different regions in the province. It made no mention of specific groups of people and was consistent with the colour-blind focus of *BEST* (Bees, 2022). Colour-blindness works to erase attention to race and racism, downplaying

systemic barriers that racialized people face (Leonardo, 2007). A colour-blind framing of equity suggests a narrow and incomplete definition of equity.

BEST and the Achievement Gap

Direct references to equity focused specifically on resource redistribution without naming particular equity-seeking groups. This omission or absence suggested that equity focused on marginalized people was not a main priority in the document. However, one equity-seeking group did receive additional attention, in a section of the document that focused on improving outcomes for Indigenous students. In this section, *BEST* described the achievement gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and indicated that “improving outcomes for Indigenous students and advancing reconciliation will require dedicated efforts” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 16). This statement set an intention to pursue equity for Indigenous students, with the goal of improving outcomes and advancing reconciliation.

Improving outcomes in *BEST* was framed as closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, which was mentioned six times. The report cited graduation rates and passing grade nine mathematics and language arts. It recommended monitoring and reporting on the achievement data of Indigenous students. While other goals were listed in relation to Indigenous students, these goals were paired with closing the achievement gap. For instance, integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and being was positioned as a way to “build a sense of community for all learners and help close the achievement gap” (2021, p. 16). Implementing an Indigenous Inclusion Strategy was cited as a way “to advance reconciliation and close the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students” (2021, p. 16). While other goals were mentioned, achieving equity in this section was most consistently linked with closing the achievement gap, a narrow goal that focused on a colonial definition of success. This definition of success ignored more culturally responsive definitions that are connected with community and collective well-being (Bouvier et al., 2016), a view of success that could be linked with a broader definition of achieving equity.

The focus on achievement was not surprising, given that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) stressed the need to close the achievement gap. However, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave context to explain the origin of the achievement gap. The traumatic history of residential schools, the resulting intergenerational impacts, and widespread systemic discrimination all have contributed to this gap. This kind of context was absent in *BEST*, which failed to discuss the past and present impact of colonialism on Indigenous students in Manitoba. Acknowledgement of this context is necessary, particularly for a broader and more justice-oriented focus on equity. While the achievement gap needs to be closed, other changes are also necessary for more equitable and just schools, such as culturally responsive curriculum, culturally safe school spaces, the elimination of discriminatory disciplinary practices, and more. In particular, Indigenous scholar Battiste (2013) stressed the need to displace cognitive imperialism, which prioritizes Eurocentric knowledge systems, excludes Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and works as a tool of assimilation. Ladson-Billings (2006) emphasized reframing achievement gaps as education debts. Past and present injustices committed against racialized students need to be acknowledged and addressed in order to create a more just and culturally responsive school system. Focusing exclusively on achievement gaps without context emphasizes a deficit narrative of Indigenous students, as it does not acknowledge the other systemic factors that have caused these gaps to exist. This deficit focus individualizes the problem

of achievement, emphasizes the “neoliberal conceptions of individualist educational attainment” (Au, 2016, p. 42), and provides a narrow vision of equity for Indigenous learners.

Instead of focusing on broader systemic barriers within the education system and other systems, *BEST* posited that equity can be achieved through the narrow goal of closing the achievement gap. At the same time, there were hints of broader equity recommendations within the document. For instance, *BEST* indicated that “learning environments for Indigenous students must infuse culturally and evidence informed strategies that embed Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing” (Government of Manitoba, 2021, p. 16). However, incorporating these strategies was not categorized as a priority action, and it is notable that evidence-informed strategies were paired with culturally informed strategies, undercutting the emphasis on culturally relevant learning strategies. A broader focus on equity would emphasize culturally relevant strategies in their own right. However, as previously mentioned, Indigenous attributes of learning were only superficially included or were found supporting neoliberal discourses of accountability, achievement, or work-readiness. This suggests interest convergence, where inclusion of Indigenous attributes of learning were emphasized when they reinforced the prevailing neoliberal discourses within the document. This superficial inclusion, alongside the emphasis on a Eurocentric definition of achievement, suggests that assimilation rather than transformative equity was the goal. A narrow focus on equity, as defined by closing achievement gaps, was emphasized, as it was consistent with a neoliberal education reform agenda, while broader definitions of equity were absent.

Defining Equity Within the Manitoba Education Action Plan

BEST and Bill 64 faced intense backlash from the Manitoba Teachers’ Society, grassroots community groups, other organizations, and the general public, including many op-eds and campaigns in opposition to the proposed education reforms. Much of the criticism focused on the inequities that would result from the adoption of *BEST* and Bill 64 and the need for greater equity for marginalized groups in the education system. As a result, in 2022 both documents were shelved, and the provincial government released the *Manitoba Education Action Plan* (Government of Manitoba, 2022b). There were notable changes between *BEST* and the *Action Plan*. *BEST* contained four pillars for student success, which included governance and accountability for results, future-ready students, high-quality learning and outcomes, and excellence in teaching and leadership. The *Action Plan* shifted by removing sections focused on governance and accountability, plus future-ready students, and replacing these pillars with student engagement and well-being, as well as responsive systems. While achievement was a frequent focus of *BEST*, achievement and well-being were more frequently paired in the *Action Plan*. Out of the sixteen times that achievement was mentioned, *BEST* only paired achievement and well-being twice, whereas the *Action Plan* paired achievement and well-being seven of the ten times achievement was cited. As well, the definition of success shifted, with the *Action Plan* indicating that “student success will look different for every child and it always means they are prepared to reach their full potential and to live The Good Life in which they: have hope, belonging, well-being and purpose” (p. 8). This suggests a more holistic approach to student outcomes than was present in previous reform documents, which were oriented to a neoliberal definition of achievement. It also worked to mute criticism after the contentious Bill 64 was withdrawn. The *Action Plan* contained a land and treaty acknowledgement and included guiding principles that focused on advancing truth and reconciliation, ensuring inclusion, prioritizing well-being, and achieving equity. Overall, these

examples indicated that much of the neoliberal language was softened in the *Action Plan* with more explicit mention of well-being and equity, likely in response to critiques of the previous reform documents.

Achieving equity was listed as a guiding principle of the *Action Plan*, but it is important to consider how equity is defined. The document described achieving equity as:

Ensuring that personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to developing skills, abilities and achieving full potential. An equity focus prevents and prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, ability, health status, language, cultural background or socioeconomic status. Equity must be integral to all engagement, policies, programs and decision making. (Government of Manitoba, 2022, p. 9)

In this case, personal and social circumstances were positioned as obstacles for individuals, which individualizes the problem of not reaching their full potential. It is a person's own circumstances that are at fault, which results in a deficit view of the individual. A broader view of equity would position larger systemic factors as the cause of the barriers, not the individual's own circumstances. Similarly, when the document discussed how an equity focus prohibited discrimination based on various factors, this suggested that interpersonal discrimination was to blame, which again individualized the problem. While one can make a move to prohibit interpersonal discrimination, a statement that prohibits systemic discrimination is unlikely to achieve much without efforts toward making deeper systemic changes. However, systemic discrimination did not seem central, based on this wording. It is also of note that race, sexual orientation, and religion were not mentioned in these categories, which suggests a narrow view of achieving equity that excludes some groups. While the final sentence did contain some acknowledgement of the importance of equity in larger systems, the former sentences focused on a narrower view of equity that was more centred on individuals than on systems. This focus on individualism and the exclusion of specific equity-seeking groups undermined the pursuit of a more transformative kind of equity.

This definition of equity was also connected with neoliberal education discourses. The focus on achieving equity emphasized that people's circumstances were "not obstacles to developing skills, abilities and achieving full potential" (Government of Manitoba, 2022, p. 9). In this case, equity was operationalized as a means to ensure that individuals are able to develop skills and abilities, suggesting an orientation toward the workforce. Achieving equity could be motivated by the desire for a socially just, inclusive, and safe education system or society. However, a narrower vision of equity, that was consistent with neoliberal visions of education for job-readiness, worked to support the current social order.

The Manitoba Education Action Plan, Recommended Actions, and Equity

While equity was explicitly discussed in the *Action Plan*, the vision of equity continued to be narrow and motivated by neoliberal ideology. The lack of focus on broader, systemic equity was apparent in many of the recommended actions. This section examines three specific recommended actions in order to demonstrate how they have furthered neoliberal education reforms, how they have been inconsistent with principles of equity, and how in practice they have made limited progress toward equity.

Provincial Data and Performance Measurement Strategy

Some recommended actions have made progress toward greater inclusive and culturally responsive practices, such as the introduction of a new Indigenous Education Policy Framework. Other actions have been more oriented toward enacting neoliberal education reforms. For instance, one action outlined the plan to “develop a provincial data and performance measurement strategy that will measure and report on all students’ achievement and well-being at the provincial, school division and school levels” (Government of Manitoba, 2022, p. 19). This suggests a move toward more exams and other provincial assessments, which has started to become a reality (Froese, 2023). However, when schools and divisions are compared via assessment data, this often means racialized students are objectified and commodified within the school system, leading to inequitable school experiences (Au, 2011, 2016). Similarly, Rogers (2021) found in Nova Scotia that neoliberal discourses relating to achievement gaps worked to “white out” previous goals related to addressing institutional and systemic racism, instead shifting focus toward a narrative of individual achievement. The neoliberal drive for accountability through data and measurement are not consistent with the purported goal of achieving equity, particularly when there is a narrow focus on achievement data.

Collecting performance data typically results in a focus on increasing the education system’s accountability for student achievement. However, the *Action Plan*’s inclusion of data related to well-being was notably different from traditional concerns of academic accountability. Focus on well-being was more present in the *Action Plan* than in *BEST*, as student well-being and achievement were frequently paired throughout the *Action Plan*. It is worth questioning how measuring, reporting, and comparing data related to well-being could authentically be done across the province. Safir and Dugan (2021) identified different levels of data that can be used to make decisions regarding students, classrooms, schools, and education policy. The *Action Plan* was likely referring to “satellite data,” which is broad quantitative data such as graduation statistics or absenteeism rates, or “map data,” which is more specific data that can come from student surveys or common assessments. Safir and Dugan were critical of relying solely on these types of data, as they can reinforce deficit thinking about equity-seeking groups and do not offer specific enough information for equity-driven transformation. They advocated for collecting “street data,” which involves seeking qualitative data using culturally responsive methods that focus on stories and observations that centre students and community members. This method is better suited for pursuing equity-driven reforms; however, it does not seem consistent with the *Action Plan*’s stated goal of measuring and reporting about students’ well-being at the provincial level. The May 2023 update to the *Action Plan* did not clarify how measuring and reporting on students’ well-being would be performed, although much progress had been made toward academic testing and assessments (Government of Manitoba, 2023b). Based on these documents, it appears that equity-driven data collection has not yet been a priority.

Framework for Learning and Global Competencies

Other recommended actions result in questions. For instance, the *Action Plan* recommended developing a new Framework for Learning that will guide assessment and curriculum. This Framework is currently in development (Government of Manitoba, 2023a). While equity is a guiding principle of this Framework, it is also grounded in global competencies for learning, based on the OECD model. Much criticism has been levelled at these global

competencies, which are intended to promote the development of skills students will need to participate in the global economy (Hunter, 2019). Takayama (2013) indicated that global competencies have been decoupled from lifelong learning discourse, meaning the expectation that many state, economic, and civil stakeholders are responsible for ensuring people learn key competencies. Without the acknowledgement that competencies are meant to involve lifelong learning, an unrealistic expectation emerges that schools should equalize students' learning of key competencies without wider community supports. This decoupling results in greater reproduction of inequalities through schooling. Further to that point, other researchers have shown that the global competency measurement model has privileged students in mind as the ideal, which contradicts its espoused purpose of promoting global competency (Ledger et al., 2019). Moreover, the framework conflates global competency with multicultural education and as a result tends to focus on individual skills for success, without questioning the structural barriers to active citizenship (Idrissi et al., 2020). The global competencies as they are currently envisioned play a role in reproducing inequalities and privileging particular students, without necessarily casting a critical eye at structural barriers to active citizenship. Because global competencies form a solid basis of the Framework for Learning, it is worth questioning how they conflict with the pursuit of a more equitable education system.

Addressing Poverty

Another recommended action that deserves some scrutiny is the *Action Plan's* approach to addressing poverty, particularly in how this approach has been enacted in practice. Manitoba has the highest level of child poverty of any province in Canada, with a rate of 24% in 2020 (Campaign 2000, 2022), and many educators in the province have indicated that addressing child poverty is necessary for improving attendance and achievement (Macintosh, 2022). In 2022, the *Action Plan* indicated that one action under way was to “establish a Poverty and Education Task Force to identify actions to remove barriers to participation and engagement in learning” (Government of Manitoba, 2022b, p. 14). The task force met for eighteen months and released a report in February 2023 that outlined fifty recommendations across nine categories, which included food security and nutrition, mental health and well-being, racism and discrimination, transportation, supports for children in care, and more (Poverty and Education Task Force, 2023). While all of these categories are worth exploring further, I will examine the food security and nutrition category as an example to see how the province's response toward this goal has worked in reality.

In the February 2023 press release that accompanied the release of the Poverty and Education Task Force report, the province promised to review in-school nutrition programs in order “to improve access and explore needs-based distribution of funding and resources” (Government of Manitoba, 2023c, para. 5). It also referenced a previous \$1.3 million funding increase to the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba, a non-profit that distributes funding to schools for nutrition programs via grant applications. This council has had a persistent waitlist for its services, despite the province's increase in funding (Child Nutrition Council, 2023). The province committed spending \$525,000 to expand the Community Schools Program by five additional schools, which would bring additional resources to those selected schools. By the May 2023 update to the *Action Plan*, the only further action that was announced was the directive for school divisions to write their own report in response to the *Poverty and Education Task Force Report* (Government of Manitoba, 2023b). Considering that after the eighteen-month development of the report, the main actions included a pledge to further review nutrition programs and the request for more

reports, the province responded with limited urgency. By contrast, the Manitoba opposition leader made a campaign promise in June 2023 to create a universal nutrition program in schools if elected (Kives, 2023), illustrating that stronger actions are possible. While the government at the time emphasized the importance of removing barriers to education in order to achieve equity, its actions did not demonstrate strong urgency toward this goal. Overall, when the actions of the *Action Plan* are considered, it is clear that many actions exist in tension with the pursuit of a more equitable education system, either contradicting the goal of achieving equity or ignoring it in pursuit of other neoliberal aims.

Conclusion

While there were some notable shifts between *BEST* and the *Manitoba Education Action Plan*, some elements remained the same. *BEST*'s focus on equity was grounded in the equitable distribution of resources between regions. While not linked with equity outright, *BEST* also focused on increasing achievement of Indigenous students, but in a way that lacked context and individualized the achievement gap. By contrast, the *Manitoba Education Action Plan* directly discussed achieving equity, although the definition of equity was narrow, centring on individual circumstances instead of systemic barriers. Notably, actions recommended in the *Action Plan* were consistent with various neoliberal ideas of accountability and work-readiness, which in some cases actively conflicted with the principle of achieving equity. Other actions seemingly demonstrated commitment to equity-oriented goals, such as removing obstacles for students experiencing poverty. However, the slow progress toward these goals and the inadequate monetary investment suggested a limited commitment, or perhaps a desire to appear to act without actually leveraging many resources.

Research has demonstrated how neoliberal education reforms in Canada have worked to eliminate or reduce focus on pre-existing policies that have emphasized anti-racism and equity in favour of policies that have been oriented toward accountability and a narrow definition of achievement (Rogers, 2021). In Manitoba, while neoliberal education reforms have been moving forward, the concept of achieving equity has not been erased, but rather has been superficially included in policy documents. Heringer and Janzen (2023) demonstrated that while *BEST* and Bill 64 made tokenistic claims toward diversity, both documents refused to unsettle the current colonial system and instead were committed to neoliberal goals of accountability and achievement. Similarly, my research has demonstrated that while the *Action Plan* more explicitly mentioned equity compared to earlier documents, it was within a narrow focus that reinforced neoliberal education reforms rather than a broader focus that pursued equity-driven systemic change. Displaying this co-opting of equity makes it clear that the government's commitment to achieving equity was a façade and that the public must demand a more transformative equity within the education system.

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