

# Marginalized Children's Views of School Choice in Global Cities: The Significance of Neighbourhood and Nature

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Article abstract

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## Marginalized Children's Views of School Choice in Global Cities: The Significance of Neighbourhood and Nature

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*This study aims to illuminate the perspectives of 40 marginalized children about school choice in two global cities in Canada. It builds on the sociology of school choice and critical geography, with a focus on children. By utilizing mixed-methods geospatial research, this study finds that children prefer attending a neighbourhood school where they feel supported by the community and experience daily connections to nature. These children's perspectives offer new insights into how to move beyond neoliberal market reforms by pursuing transformative and decolonial approaches to educational policy making.*

**Key words:** school choice; marginalized children; global city; decolonization

Despite the continuing promise of choice for everyone, as espoused by market-based educational reforms around the world, most school systems that have introduced such reforms are increasingly faced with challenges of inequities in schooling opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for children, especially those from socioeconomically and racially marginalized backgrounds (Lipman, 2018; Ndimande & Lubienski, 2017; Phillippo & Griffin, 2016). In other words, while students from privileged families enjoy options and resources in their desired choice of public and/or private schools, students from underprivileged families continue to experience exclusion from school choice (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Potterton et al., 2020). For instance, Reay and Lucey (2000, 2003) illuminate children's class-differentiated relationships to (and experiences of) school choice

in some of the UK's most underserved neighbourhoods. Similarly, Bunar's (2010) study in Sweden notes that the students of immigrant and working-class backgrounds "choose to stay" in their local public schools because of a sense of community and belonging. In Canada, Yoon's (2017, 2020) research indicates that secondary school students from disadvantaged backgrounds face barriers to choosing schools, especially specialized programs of choice, such as specialty arts programs. Nonetheless, the perspectives of marginalized children on school choice in relation to their current neighbourhood-based schooling has been underresearched. Indeed, if market-based reforms of schooling continue despite the growing evidence of its limitations, as noted in the studies referenced above, it will be important to understand what our most marginalized students have to say about these reforms.

The main objective of this study is to build on the current research by illuminating an underresearched group of marginalized school-aged children and their perspectives on a broader range of questions related to school choice. These questions include what they think about school choice, but also what they like about their neighbourhood schools. The rationale for this study is thus the need to center the perspectives of marginalized children to provide more diverse perspectives on school choice and to explore what kinds of alternative educational policies might be possible in the future. Indeed, I am aware that contemporary research on school choice focuses on parental choice

and academic outcomes related to school choice (Potterton et al., 2020). These extensive foci on parental choice and academic outcomes are due in part to the epistemological dominance of neoliberalism. Market ideology has dictated not only what policies are implemented but also what research is prioritized (i.e., achievement outcomes) and who is researched (i.e., parents as consumers). Children's views, especially the views of marginalized children, are problematically missing from the research and the discussion of school choice. Policy decisions are made based on research that focuses on what parents desire, especially middle- and upper-class white parents who are the main choosers in the current school market. This study thus aims to provide research that centers children's voices so that they can be heard, because their schooling and childhoods are directly affected by the educational policy of school choice (Freeman & van Heezik, 2018; United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

I also argue that more research is needed to illuminate the contexts of global cities, where the marketization of schools is intensifying (Lipman, 2018). As Sassen (2005) argues, global cities have experienced striking inequalities, largely due to a rising concentration of headquarters of transnational corporations and a network of highly specialized firms that support the corporations. Both the corporations and firms employ a large number of high-level professionals and globally mobile elites who receive substantial compensation compared to average white-collar workers. Meanwhile, global cities have seen a significant influx of low-income racialized migrants and refugees who are largely employed in the low-end, nonunionized service sector and earn low wages. As a result of this bifurcated growth of the high-paid professional sector from the low-paid service industry, socioeconomic and spatial inequality in global cities has been intensifying. Consequently, marginalized children are more likely to experience striking inequalities because of increased and increasing wealth gaps. Indeed, the two Canadian global cities of Vancouver and Toronto were selected for this study as critical sites because of their spatial characteristics of growing inequality and diversity. They were also chosen because they are where historically and economically marginalized children continue to experience disadvantages and discrimination, and their views on this experience are underappreciated (Maynard, 2022).

This paper proceeds as follows. The study's theoretical foundation is discussed as being at the intersection of urban sociology of school choice and critical geography, with focus on children's geographies. Following that, the study's mixed-methods approach is outlined with reference to maps (generated using geographic information systems [GIS]) and interviews with 40 children in Vancouver and Toronto, two of Canada's global cities. After a brief discussion of school marketization in Canada, the key findings and themes from the children's perspectives are discussed. I argue that marginalized children's views about school choice provide a unique perspective from the margins, a space that Edward Soja (1996) suggests is "a space of radical openness" where progressive transformation can take place (p. 319). The voices of socially, racially, and economically marginalized children offer new potential for a more transformative and decolonial future and public education policy, moving beyond the epistemological limits of neoliberalism. Indeed, this study expands the current research on children in school choice by delving into what marginalized students say about their relationships to neighbourhood and nature and how these connections need to receive more attention from educational policy makers. The children's connections to nature provide new insights into rethinking a school choice policy that is based on rational choice theory. In conclusion, I discuss how children's connections to nature can be important for decolonization and Indigenization in Canadian school systems (Donald, 2021).

### **Theoretical framework: Children, neighbourhood, and nature**

To explore the school choice and marketization reforms from the perspectives of marginalized urban children, this study uses an interdisciplinary lens of the sociology of school choice and critical geography, with attention to children's geographies. As discussed above, the sociology of school choice, especially that of Reay and Lucey

(2000, 2003), informs this study's focus on socioeconomically and racially marginalized children's experiences of schooling and school choice. Building on their work, this study extends into critical human geography and children's geographies in global cities. To start, this study begins with an understanding of a neighbourhood as a geographical area surrounding and within walking distance of one's home, as well as an affective space where most individuals feel relaxed and find comfort (Brower, 1996). These neighbourhood feelings are *generated* by active relationship building with residents in the vicinity as well as the built environments and nature (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001). Compared to adults, children's sense of neighbourhood is somewhat more localized, as children tend to spend more time in their immediate neighbourhoods (Christensen & O'Brien, 2003). Children value their neighbourhoods based on social connections, playable spaces, and a sense of belonging and happiness that is not necessarily related to the material conditions of their neighbourhoods (Cope, 2008). Also, children become more aware of different neighbourhoods through popular media and the stories they hear from their networks while learning to navigate through urban neighbourhoods (Cahill, 2000; Cope, 2008). They gain knowledge and construct meanings of their and other neighbourhoods from the stories they hear about neighbourhood folklores, myths, and imaginaries (Kraftl, 2013; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2003). Children thus make meanings of different parts of the city while carrying mental images, especially in cities where neighbourhoods are very culturally diverse and differ to striking degrees because of their growing inequalities (Huyssen, 2008).

In global cities, children are more likely to be struck by the growing inequalities between well-established neighbourhoods and low-income neighbourhoods (Sassen, 2005). The established and gentrifying neighbourhoods are likely to reflect the wealth of white settler colonialists and globally mobile elites, while low-income neighbourhoods are often pathologized as unsafe and transitory spaces (Ley, 2010). Marginalized racial minority children in these contexts thus navigate carefully based on neighbourhood affordances (e.g., engagement), safety, and notions of "us vs. them" by social, racial, and neighbourhood classifications and stereotypes (Karsten, 2005; Kytta et al., 2012). Nevertheless, amid these changing and contrasting urban landscapes, where spaces for children are shrinking (Karsten, 2005), children continue to interact and develop important relationships with their environment and the nature surrounding them (Freeman & van Heezik, 2018). Indeed, children's relationships to nature have been underexplored in the current literature on school choice. Hence, this study expands to take account of their everyday experiences with nature and neighbourhood to retheorize school choice and schooling from marginalized children's perspectives.

### **Critical space analysis: Children's views of schooling and school marketization**

To examine critically marginalized children's views of schooling and school choice/marketization in the two highly diverse and strikingly unequal global Canadian cities of Toronto and Vancouver, this study applies a mixed-methods methodology. Qualitatively, it examines children's views from their own perspectives via interviews. Quantitatively, it maps and analyzes the unequal global cities to contextualize the spatial conditions of the children who were interviewed. I suggest this mapping is important to analyze the strikingly uneven playing field on which marginalized children find themselves. This mixed-methods critical space analysis approach is conducted through a lens that views place and space as integral to each other and continuously (re)produced by unequal power relationships in society (Bourdieu, 1999; Harvey, 2009; Massey, 2005). This mixed-methods approach is also critical to creating a contextualized understanding of the lived experiences of marginalized populations (including children) within the structures and changes that shape their spatial conditions (Elwood, 2009; Kwan, 2008).

Hence, on the quantitative part of this research, geo-referenced 2016 Canadian Census data was used to create maps that represent the two cities' socio-economic spatial distributions. GIS was used to organize and analyze the data using a program called ArcMap. Mapping was done using several variables that indicate socioeconomic

spatial distributions at the smallest census unit in the two cities, such as housing value, poverty rate, occupational category, or highest level of educational attainment; however, in this article only the variable of after-tax family income is mapped due to space limitations (see Figures 1 and 2). This income variable was selected to capture the more nuanced differences across contrasting neighbourhoods (cf. housing value maps tend to overgeneralize the spatial distribution of families with different income levels). The income maps were generated to illustrate the patterns of income inequality from the lowest (bottom 20%) to the highest (top 20%) income bracket. Figures 1 and 2 show clear evidence of the extent of income inequality in these global cities. In addition, the maps were used to identify the sites of participant recruitment, namely, elementary schools and community centres in the lowest-income areas of these two cities. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that census-based maps alone cannot provide a full picture of the spatial characteristics. For instance, a block that is noted as being low-income on a city's map (a map that is composed of thousands of blocks) may indicate an area of a regional park with a small number of low-income households. Hence, maps as data need to be triangulated with qualitative data, site visits, or Google Maps street views.

For the qualitative part of this study, a total of 40 children and youth participated. These participants came from historically marginalized families living with high rates of poverty in the lowest-income areas (see Table 1, Participant Characteristics). They were recruited from their schools and community centres through word of mouth, flyers, and posters stapled onto bulletin boards. Most children belonged to racial minority groups in these global cities. To ensure that this research with children was conducted ethically (Morrow, 2008), all parents of the children received a written consent form and were asked to provide, in writing, their consent for their children's participation in the study. Informed assent was also obtained from the participating students. The parents accompanied the children to the interviews, so I was able to verbally explain the study and address any questions they had. The interviews with the children took place where parents felt it was convenient or comfortable, such as in their home, a library, the school, or a community centre. Drawing was used as a strategy to engage the children who may have found drawing an easier way to express their thoughts and views. The study received approval from the ethics committee of the academic institution where the researcher was affiliated at the time of this research, and the two public school divisions in Vancouver and Toronto approved the circulation of recruitment letters in their schools.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

City	Toronto	Vancouver			
	20 50%	20 50%			
Gender	Female	Male			
	18 45%	22 55%			
Grade	K–3	4–6	7–12		
	13	16	11		
	32%	40%	28%		
Housing	Co-op	Family/Own	Renting	Social housing	
	4	10	16	10	
	10%	25%	40%	25%	
Income	0–10K	11–20K	21–30K	31–40K	
	13	16	4	7	
	33%	40%	10%	17%	
Heritage	Asia	Africa	Middle East	Europe	Indigenous
	27	4	3	2	4
	68%	10%	7%	5%	10%

Interviews were conducted to understand children's meaning making of their schooling, neighbourhoods, school choice, and the relationships among these things. Questions were asked to capture children's perspectives about their own neighbourhoods, other city neighbourhoods, and schools. The interviews were facilitated with sketch mapping to increase children's engagement and responses (Lundqvist et al., 2019). Each participant was given a piece of blank paper (A4) and a black marker and was asked to draw their home, neighbourhood, school, and ideal school. The children drew different parts of the city that they knew, as well as what they did (or did not) like about the other parts. Sketch mapping kept children active during the interviews and most children were able to recall in granular detail their daily routines and neighbourhood characteristics, with attention to the natural environment and their relationship with it. Nonetheless, the children's sketches were not collected for the purpose of analysis because an interpretive framework for children's sketches had not been developed at the time of this research. Interview data was thematically coded (Berg, 1995; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In identifying themes, attention was paid to children's views about schooling and school choice, while following open coding techniques in combination with in vivo and descriptive coding techniques using participants' key phrases (Saldana, 2009). The interview transcripts were coded reiteratively; the subsequent rounds of coding built the initial set while more themes were added. One of the strengths of this study is that it centers the views of marginalized children against the backdrop of increasingly unequal global cities where their perspectives often go unheard in policy research or in decision making. Nevertheless, given the study's small number of participants, the perspectives of these children should be considered for locally specific insights rather than as generalizable or conclusive across all global cities.

## The emergence of school marketization in Canada's global cities

The marginalized urban children in this study attended public schools (i.e., funded by taxation) in two Canadian

cities where school policies differ somewhat. These differences are in part due to the nature of Canadian education, which does not have a national system or ministry of K–12 education, unlike other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Canada's 10 provinces and three territories have their own education authorities who make decisions about K–12 education governance, policies, and laws. This federal system of education has resulted in varying styles and degrees of market-based reforms over the past five decades of neoliberalization, which has been driven by a market theory of schooling, namely, that more choice and competition between schools improves schooling outcomes and satisfaction (Friedman, 1982). Even within each province and territory, public school districts have a certain degree of autonomy when it comes to programming. As a result, districts have undergone locally specific versions of deregulation, funding cuts, and privatization, and most districts have introduced open enrollment or specialized programs of choice, either formally or informally. The emergence and intensification of school choice and marketization are particularly notable for the growing menu of specialized choice programs on offer, including specialty arts; gifted; sports academies; science, technology, engineering, (arts) and math (STE[A]M); French immersion; information technology (IT); and leadership programs, among others. Acceptance into these programs is competitive, although Toronto has recently changed its admission policy to be more equitable (a change that was introduced after this study was completed). There are currently no publicly available official enrollment statistics on how many families choose schools and what their socioeconomic or racial backgrounds are. Yet, considering that there is no free bus service for children to attend choice programs, it falls to their families to support daily commutes, financially or otherwise. Within this policy context, this study delves into what marginalized children view as important for their schooling in cities where school marketization is intensifying. Few of the participants were attending their schools of choice at the time of this study; nevertheless, this study does not see this pattern as a deficit. Instead, it aims to illuminate marginalized children's understandings of their neighbourhoods, schooling, and nature to ensure future educational policy making takes their views into consideration.

### **Children value their neighbourhood and nature**

Children's narratives indicate their conceptions of neighbourhoods as both human communities and natural environments, echoing the existing scholarship on children's geographies (Cahill, 2000; Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Cope, 2008). People, animals, plants, and familiar environments make children feel safe and grounded. A neighbourhood community is somewhat marked as being within walking distance, and it extends even further to include their schools. Children perceive their neighbourhoods as spaces where they feel comfortable and knowledgeable (Cope, 2008; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2003). The neighbourhood is where children can reach their family, friends, and support network if/when needed. Marginalized children tend to possess stronger social capital in the neighbourhoods where they live because they spend more time building these relationships by attending nearby schools but also by spending more time locally during holidays and vacations (Freeman, 2010; Yosso, 2005). The neighbourhood thus makes children feel safe, which is one of their most basic needs (Lundqvist et al., 2019). Everyday surroundings and encounters constitute a neighbourhood community for marginalized children and give them feelings of predictability, safety, and familiarity (Reay & Lucey, 2000; Visser, 2019). Marginalized children also value community-based resource centres and gathering spaces, such as community centres, playgrounds, and churches, as well as friends' houses. These places serve as the social infrastructure for relations that provide them with a sense of belonging and well-being (Day & Wager, 2015; Elsley, 2004; Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, even in dense urban contexts, it is noteworthy that children identify the value of nature. They value their daily intake of fresh air when walking; they enjoy seeing and interacting with the spirit of the nature; and they love walking through urban forests to get to school (Freeman & van Heezik, 2015).

For instance, in this study, one of the interviewees, Carla (a grade 5 student), noted that her neighbourhood was

where she formed everyday intimate relationships with caring individuals. While sketching her neighbourhood fondly, Carla mapped out her comfort zone where she had developed a sense of belonging, including the nearby community centre where she hung out regularly. Her perceived neighbourhood boundaries indicate the parameters of familiarity and security in her everyday spaces—home, neighbourhood, a friend's house, after-school spaces, and familiar streets where other children walk.

Carla: I like to see other kids walking to school.... My school and home are part of my neighbourhood.... I like playing games outside, that's close to where I live, and at friends' house. Also, after-school care at the community centre. About five minutes from here [her school]. (female, grade 5, Southeast Asia)

Likewise, Kyle echoed what other children said about their neighbourhoods.

Kyle: My neighbourhood? It's gotta be around my house.... It is 'cause I walk there [my friend's house] every day. Okay, let me draw something first ... one of my friends' house.... When I go to school we usually meet and then another friend here.... She just lives right next to the church. Yeah. (male, grade 6, Southeast Asia)

Jason illustrated the people and surroundings where he enjoyed doing things that made him feel he belonged to his neighbourhood community. He noted the importance of the urban forest that he walked through when going to school every morning.

Jason: My house, my school, in my neighbourhood. I like basketball. I like everything about my neighbourhood. I like my friends and the teachers. They are very nice to me. I like sports, PE [physical education].... I like to see the trees, the green lushness. (male, grade 5, Southeast Asia)

Similarly, Ellen drew her neighbourhood and her interactions with animals in her natural environment.

Ellen: My school? Oh, it's so close to my house. I just walk ... uh, there's my school. My neighbours are right beside my house. I like my little birdie. Of course, I can draw a little birdie.... I'll just draw me going to school ... and then there's the school.... Oh, I like to do this—visit the library and read a book. I'll just do a book—it shows you it's the library. (female, grade 2, Northeast Asia)

The importance of urban forests and everyday encounters with birds and trees are aspects of daily schooling experiences that have been little discussed in the literature on school choice and marketization. Yet, in this study, children from high-poverty backgrounds pointed to their familiar playgrounds and school grounds as important spaces that made up their community and sense of peacefulness. These neighbourhood spaces are where they hang out with their friends—playing tag, riding bicycles, and playing with hula hoops. The children come to know their neighbourhood spaces intimately while doing everyday mundane things such as walking around and taking different routes to their frequent destinations, including school. The neighbourhoods are where children run into acquaintances and those with whom they are close, especially their parents, siblings, and (best) friends. Children also acknowledge the importance of nature, including birds, flowers, and trees that ground them in their natural environment. This research is thus a good reminder of children's connectedness to nature. These sentiments should inform educational policy but are often absent from policy reforms.

### **Ideal schools: Market theory of education vs. marginalized children's views**

Indeed, the market theory of schooling tends to underappreciate schooling in low-income neighbourhoods and undervalue the importance of neighbourhood or place-based education for children. For instance, the late American economist Milton Friedman, an advocate of school choice using vouchers, advanced the view that ideal



schools would be located in wealthier neighbourhoods, arguing that “the ‘good’ public schools are in the high-income neighbourhoods. The family might be willing to spend something in addition to what it pays in taxes to get better schooling for its child. But it can hardly afford simultaneously to move to the expensive neighbourhood” (1982, p. 92). By expressing this view, Friedman promoted parents choosing schools in wealthier neighbourhoods. Yet, children in this study indicated that they value their neighbourhoods. Moreover, they want to attend their neighbourhood schools. Most children indicated that they are happy in their schools and would prefer to continue to attend their current school rather than choosing another school. When asked whether they would be willing to attend a school outside their neighbourhood, most students said no. There was one exception in the case of a student who attended a school outside his neighbourhood for a specialized program. The rest of the children wished to continue to attend a school within walking distance of their home, where they felt most comfortable and connected. Home neighbourhoods provide children with a sense of emotional well-being and connectedness to their environment and nature. Attending a school outside their neighbourhood is hard for them to imagine.

When children were asked about what their ideal school would be like and where it would be located, they provided the following responses:

Jason: [My ideal school offers] social studies, math, science. The school has a library, computer lab, gym, everything that my [current] school has. Any kids can come to this school. I would build my ideal school near my house. (male, grade 5, Southeast Asia)

Maya: I like to do math. I like my friends, teachers. My favorite one is Mr. D... I want to put [my ideal school] on like [my current] school (in her sketch). (female, grade 3, Southeast Asia)

Ellen: I would make [my ideal school] like a little farther than my [current] school, maybe there. Yeah. Because if I could still make it close to my house and I could walk to my house [to] visit my family ... oh yeah. Inside my neighbourhood, 'cause then I would be closer to my house in the neighbourhood. I could just walk there; I don't have to drive the car, waste the gas. (female, grade 2, East Asia)

Harry: I don't want to go somewhere which I know no one. I'd stay with [School A] or [School B] 'cause I know lots of people who go there and have lots of friends. (male, grade 7, Middle East)

Children's preferences indicate that their current neighbourhood-based schools are desirable. These marginalized children value familiarity and security; they also desire locality and proximity (Reay & Lucey, 2000). The children wish to be schooled where they feel they belong, which for most children is in their neighbourhood-based community. Children's spatial relationships and meanings, as discussed in the previous section, thus underpin their conceptualizations of schooling and school choice. In global cities in Canada, marginalized children of racial minority backgrounds are often the first (generation) in their family to attend a public school in one of the official languages, English or French. These global city contexts could thus influence their views of the ideal school and their needs (and right) to attend a school close to their home, family, and diverse community. Hence, the children highlight that an ideal school would be near where they live and near their current school location, where they have support and connectedness to people and friends whom they like and enjoy.

### Imagined school choice in natural and desirable places

Marginalized children rarely consider choosing a school other than their neighbourhood school, but when prompted, some children said they could imagine themselves attending a school in or near a natural setting toward which they feel positive emotions, like the lake, beach, or park. In dense cities like Vancouver and Toronto, children's connectedness to nature is often limited to lakes, ponds, creeks, or parks between busy streets or buildings. Even

so, life-renewing natural environments and green spaces matter to children. Also, in their imagined geographies in their city, some children viewed well-kept and vibrant neighbourhoods as more desirable places where they would consider attending a school.

Sean: I would kinda want it by the water; it would be nice.... I like water. Um, I would want it to have like lots of different programs. So, like I'd want ... [the school] to have a nice-size gym and then like a nice view of the water. (male, grade 6, Central East Africa)

Shirley: This is the lake, and I like the park near the lake ... and then, um, like these really cool condos and stuff, and then also it has lots of parks and like, trees. (female, grade 9, Southeast Asia)

Shaun: Oh, lakeshore would be nice. It's like, um, it's like south.... There's nice parks there and really calm, peaceful, and ... you can take a nice bike ride. It's really, that's what I'd want. Yeah. (male, grade 9, Northeast Asia)

Most children noted their desire to attend a school near natural settings like lakes or parks because they have positive emotions toward these settings. Some children, like Shaun, made further connections to how the surrounding natural environment provided them calm and peacefulness. Some children were able to state more explicitly that the reason they liked natural environments was because they had developed a sense of connection to natural beings and environments, which affected and animated their spirits and their daily lives. This theme has been underexplored in the mainstream literature on school choice and marketization, which focuses on parental choice. Children, especially marginalized children in global cities, indicate that their imagined ideal school would be somewhere they could connect to a refreshing body of water or the spirit of nature. Indeed, the literature on children, nature, and cities indicates that children are in much need of natural settings and encounters in their daily lives for their well-being and health (Freeman & van Heezik, 2018).

In addition, the children in this study noted their desire to attend a school in trendy and vibrant urban areas where new condos and shops are located, echoing Larsson and Hultqvist's (2018) study in Sweden. Yet, many of these new modern condo buildings or highly sought-after neighbourhoods are located along the shorelines, which are often far from the more affordable housing areas where the children reside. For instance, Shaun and Shirley live in the lowest-income areas of Toronto's northern neighbourhoods, and the lakeshores are on the southern side of the city. Similarly, Sean in Vancouver lives in the southeastern corner of the city, which is quite distant from the city's waterfront on the western and northern sides. Indeed, these views reveal the marginalized spatial positions of these children and their families in global cities: If their families could live in beautiful waterfront properties or neighbourhoods, the children might not have to imagine attending a school in those areas. Hence, to understand marginalized children's preference for schools in their city's pleasant neighbourhoods and waterfronts, it is important to provide some context to their spatialized marginalization in Vancouver and Toronto, which is discussed next.

### **Strikingly uneven global city neighbourhoods: Unequal access to the waterfront**

Toronto and Vancouver, two Canadian cities, have risen in their status as globally attractive destinations for middle-class immigrants and global investors (Ley, 2010; Sassen, 2005). The residential areas that front large bodies of water with trendy shops have become some of the most affluent enclaves and are more easily accessible to those who reside in wealthier parts of these cities. Average home prices in these neighbourhoods are well above the average or median home prices in their respective cities.

In Toronto, the average home price in 2016 in the neighbourhoods with the lowest property values was CAN\$

125,256; in comparison, the average price of a home in the neighbourhoods with the highest property values was CAN\$ 3,247,789, which is 25 times higher. The lowest median family income (after tax), as measured in the poorest neighbourhoods in 2016, was CAN\$ 26,272, while the highest median family income after tax was CAN\$ 437,248. The centre of the city and the areas in the south are wealthier than the rest, while some pockets of the centre have residents from the lowest income group (see Figure 1). Broadly speaking, the low-income areas are located on the north side of the city. In contrast, the south side of the city has waterfront condos and properties along the shores of Lake Ontario, including grassy parks, well-maintained boardwalks, and beaches. In addition, because the economically wealthier populations in both cities tend to be white, the affluent neighbourhoods are thus also predominantly white, with some exceptions for some upper-middle-class racial minority populations.

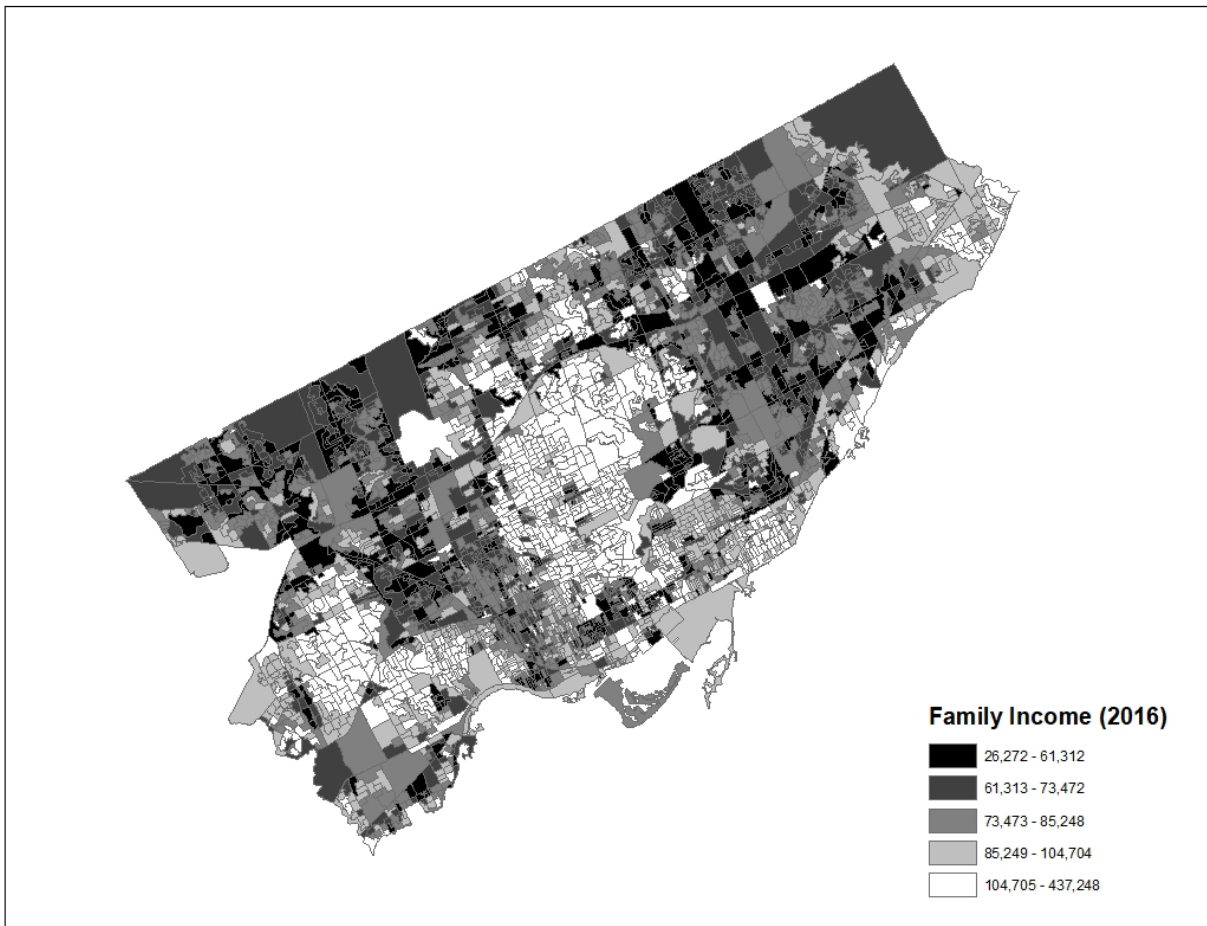


Figure 1. Median family income (after tax) in the smallest neighbourhood census unit in Toronto (2016, Canadian dollars).

Similarly, in Vancouver, the average home price in the neighbourhoods with the lowest property values in 2016 was CAN\$ 277,521; in contrast, the average home price in the neighbourhoods with the highest property values was CAN\$ 4,338,131, which is 15 times higher. As noted in Figure 2, the lowest median family income (after tax), as captured in the poorest neighbourhoods in 2016, was CAN\$ 28,224, while the highest median family income after tax was CAN\$ 178,688. The Vancouver map is a bit more complicated, for it has many parks, light industrial areas, and First Nations reserves. Nevertheless, the map shows that the city's social geography is largely divided between the affluent west side (coloured in light grey and white) and the relatively lower levels of wealth on the east side (coloured in dark grey and black). On the map, the residential areas are small rectangular-shaped polygons,

while larger polygons represent parks or light industrial areas. The far western tip of the city is the site of a globally reputable university with mixed-income groups of university students and residents. The children recruited for this study were mostly from the parts of the city that are far from the seashore.

Most of the children in this study lived in the areas of Toronto and Vancouver that are identified as impoverished neighbourhoods, with the highest rates of substandard housing and a prevalence of children living in poverty. All the children came from families who lived in the neighbourhoods where after-tax family income was in the lowest quintile (i.e., the bottom 20%). Most children lived in rental apartments or publicly subsidized homes in the neighbourhoods with deep poverty. The divided urban geographies of the global cities are an important piece of context in this study's marginalized participants' views of schooling and school choice. The schools in the neighbourhoods with higher wealth levels are indeed perceived as desirable, as they have "profits of localization" compared to other city neighbourhoods, reflective of the highly polarized inequalities (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 127; see also Larsson & Hultqvist, 2018; Reay & Lucey, 2003). Yet, the wealthy areas and upper-class leisure activities in these areas, such as sailing, are not easily accessible to children who live in the same cities but in deep and complex poverty, which stems from intergenerational economic, racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and geographical inequities. The schools in the wealthy areas—both private and public—are not easily accessible, either physically or financially, by the marginalized students.

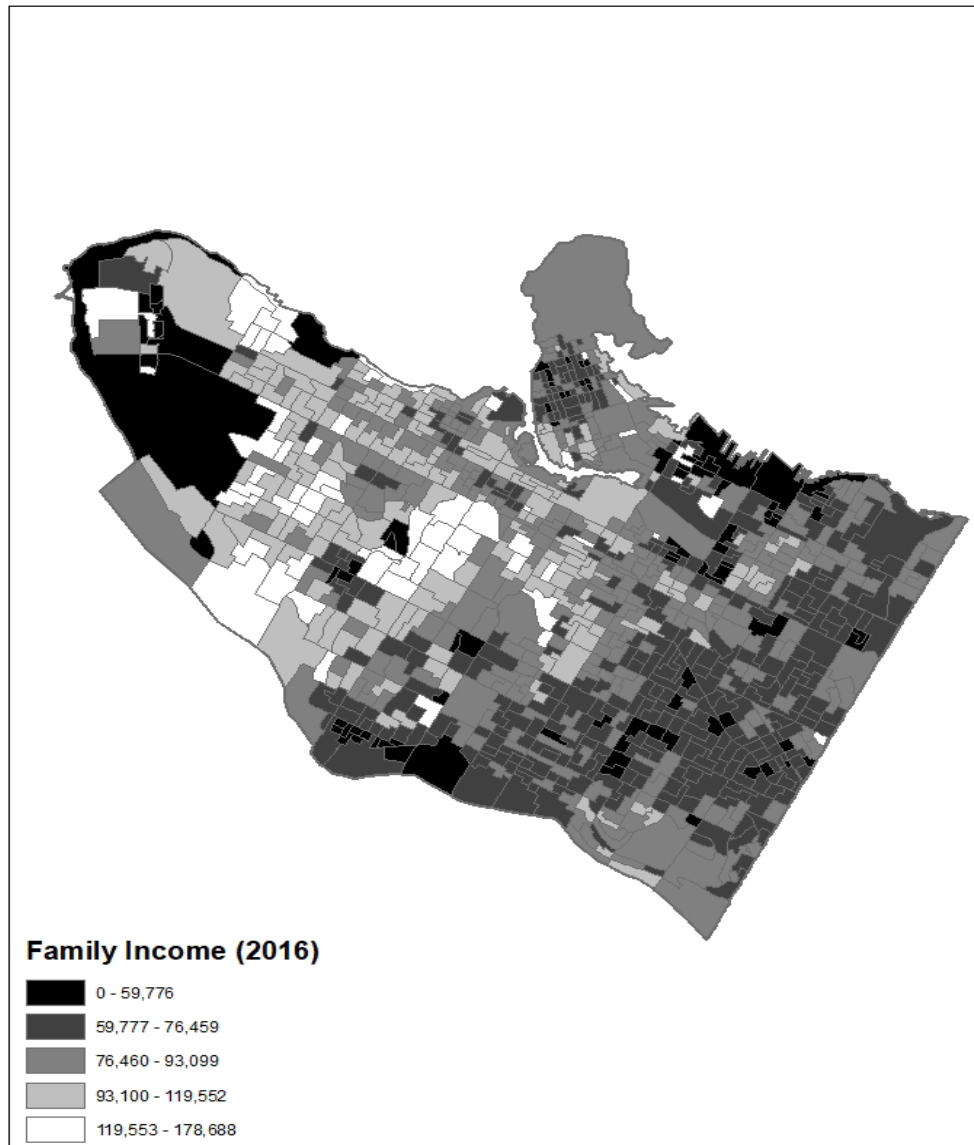


Figure 2. Median family income (after tax) in the smallest neighbourhood census unit in Vancouver (2016, Canadian dollars).

## Urban imaginaries and school choice in global cities

Before concluding this paper, it should be mentioned that marginalized children seem to be disinclined to attend a school in a pathologized neighbourhood. This finding echoes earlier studies in the UK (Reay & Lucey 2000, 2003) and elsewhere (e.g., Phillippo & Griffin, 2016). When asked whether they could imagine going to a school in a neighbourhood perceived or portrayed by popular media as dangerous or unsafe, the children responded with a clear and resounding no.

Alaska: No. No. [Street name], with homeless people ... they take drugs. Downtown [Vancouver]. Yup. Not that fun. Because homeless people, they take drugs and then the children go to that school of the homeless people. (female, grade 7, Southeast Asia)

Kate: [Neighbourhood name]. People are like being shot there and there are a lot of robberies and stuff, and I'm like, "okay, then that's not a safe place. Uh, not really." I don't hang out there. I drove by... I wouldn't want to really go there with the things that I heard, and I feel like the school may be not that good. (female, grade 9, Southeast Asia)

Shirley: [Neighbourhood name] 'cause there's lots of gangs and criminal activity here, and also like this one area in [area]. I hear about shootings every day. Hopefully this looks like a gun.... I don't really would like it here 'cause I don't feel really safe. (female, grade 9, Southeast Asia)

In particular, Shirley's comparison of different neighbourhoods in Toronto provides a fitting illustration of the importance of marginalized children's perceptions of "bad" neighbourhoods in their imagined geographies of school choice. Gangs, violence, drugs, and poverty were huge concerns for children, even for those who lived in or near some of the neighbourhoods that were perceived negatively. The children thus possess an acute sense of bad/dangerous areas based on anecdotes they hear, with narratives and urban myths of gangs, drug (ab)users, and folk devils (Cahill, 2000; Cohen, 2002; Huyssen, 2008; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2003). Children's urban imaginaries are deeply linked to their sense of unpredictability and unfamiliarity (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001). Notably, the marginalized children did not necessarily see their own schools and neighbourhoods as undesirable or dangerous, although some do live in the areas that are perceived and represented as such by popular media. Their perceptions may reflect their connectedness to the community and nature in their current schools and neighbourhoods.

## Concluding discussion and future directions

By drawing on the scholarship on the sociology of school choice and critical geography, with a focus on children's geographies, this study has illuminated marginalized children's views of school choice in light of their values of neighbourhood and nature in two starkly unequal global cities in Canada. While the marginalized children's imagined school choice geography somewhat mirrors dominant urban imaginaries, the children also feel safe in their own neighbourhoods because they have a well-developed sense of community, belonging, and connectedness. Hence, the children's imaginaries help us understand in part children's views of school choice, much like we try to understand parents' views of the relationships between place and school choice (Bell, 2009). However, what the children in this study highlight is the importance of the neighbourhood and the natural environment to which they feel connected for providing them with a sense of stability and calm in these strikingly unequal global cities.

The findings illuminate that the market-based reforms of schooling have significantly undervalued children's right to enjoy a sense of community and an environment to which they feel (spiritually) connected (Day & Wager, 2010; Freeman & van Heezik, 2018). In particular, incentivizing historically and socially marginalized children and their families to choose schools out of their own localities disrupts their connectedness to neighbourhood-based social and ethnic networks and the funds of knowledge and community support available in these areas (Yosso, 2005). The marginalized children in this study assert that their neighbourhoods are the foundational social structures and places of belonging that support their learning, which are eroded through the marketization of schools. The individualization unleashed by neoliberal market ideology increases the children's sense of risk by separating them from their community and the land to which they feel connected.

Future research and scholarship can dig a little deeper into children's connections to the land. The children in this study, largely settler children, indicated that they enjoy connections to the natural environment where they can deepen their relationship with nature. Also, as Ullrich (2019) highlights, daily interactions with the land create an important sense of connectedness that develops and strengthens the well-being of Indigenous children. I hope that non-Indigenous children can learn to develop this kind of connectedness to the land from Indigenous ways of life

and Elders from the lands where they currently reside (Donald, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013).

In addition, future research could further develop visual methods that can utilize children's drawings. The current research used children's drawing mainly as a tool of engagement with participants. In retrospect, I realize that these children's drawings contained many details about their homes, schools, and neighbourhoods, while their drawings of other city neighbourhoods appeared fragmented or were left blank, which may indicate that their spatial knowledge outside their immediate neighbourhood is limited. As Lynch (1960) suggests, a noticeable "decrease in the vividness of impressions" and details in mental mapping may indicate feelings of uncertainty and associated anxiety beyond their familiar neighbourhood boundaries (p. 29). Children's drawings thus could be used in future studies as an important source of data to visually interpret children's views (Morrow, 2008).

In brief, this study advances the argument that marginalized children's voices need to be reflected in future policy making about school choice. Compared to more advanced market systems in the UK and US, Canadian school systems have adhered somewhat closely to the principle of neighbourhood-based education with the goal of cultivating learning conditions with supportive teachers, sufficient resources, and well-designed programs. Indeed, the marginalized children in this study expressed relatively little resentment toward the schools they attend, unlike students in another study who described their schools as being "demonized" (Reay & Lucey, 2003). Nevertheless, Canadian school systems are rapidly changing due to continued funding cuts and resource constraints, with increasing pressure pushing them toward marketization and privatization, particularly in global cities such as Toronto and Vancouver. In Canada and globally, policy makers should listen to marginalized children. Indeed, their voices should be heard more frequently and prioritized over other voices, especially those of privileged parents, when making public education policy. To make global cities more inclusive of marginalized children, policy makers ought to respect their spatial and spiritual needs and rights. Marginalized children need to have opportunities and resources in their neighbourhoods. More alternative programs and greater resources should be made available in the neighbourhood schools where these students feel safe and connected to nature and the land. These approaches would be more in line with equitable and decolonial futures that would better support the children and schooling in marginalized areas.

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