

# “Data my ass”: Political rhizomes of power and the symbolic violence of neoliberal governance and privatization

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Résumé de l'article

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# Critical Education

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## “Data my ass”

### *Political Rhizomes of Power and the Symbolic Violence of Neoliberal Governance and Privatization*

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#### Abstract

*In October 2022, New Brunswick Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development Dominic Cardy publicly resigned and widely disclosed his disappointment with Premier Blaine Higgs' leadership. Using Cardy's unprecedented public resignation letter as a primary source, this paper explores the inner workings of neoliberal governance and privatization in public education and critically analyzes data manipulation, governance shifts, and problematic conservative “hands-offism.” Applying a rhizomatic methodological framing and theoretically drawing from Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) conceptualization of symbolic violence and Gilmore's (2008) notion of “organized abandonment,” we argue that neoliberal governance and privatization disproportionately affect vulnerable communities and weaken democratic processes. To understand these complexities, we utilize a rhizomatic analysis, simultaneously considering historical and geographical contexts, governance structures, and political narratives. We conclude that neoliberal governance and privatization are inherently symbolically violent, as they are used in tandem to perpetually defund and dismantle public institutions.*



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Every day in public life you decide whether you are helping or hurting, with your work—which is all that each of us have to offer.”

– Dominic Cardy, *Open Letter*

In October 2022, New Brunswick Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development Dominic Cardy publicly resigned and widely circulated his resignation letter through social media platforms and news outlets (Cardy, 2022). Cardy’s two-page resignation letter provides numerous references to New Brunswick Premier Blaine Higgs’ unfulfilled, intentionally neglected campaign and throne-speech promises, restructuring without consultation or political buy-in, and intentional abandonment of education and healthcare. When combined, the examples describe the deliberate embedding of neoliberal free market principles, privatization, and “small” government to assuage conservative voters. In reality, the premier used populist, authoritarian techniques to consolidate power and restructure public systems to the detriment of his cabinet and his constituents’ health and safety.

In this paper we employ a rhizomatic methodological framing (Honan & Sellers, 2006; Kokorudz, 2023) to explore the complexity of neoliberal governance and privatization within and beyond Cardy’s resignation letter. We use this framing to describe the processes and power-laden connections of privatization in education governance and to analyze the way these work toward what Gilmore (2008) called an “organized abandonment” of public institutions. In exploring the connections through a rhizomatic methodology, using a rare first-hand account of Higgs’ conservative leadership, we show how neoliberal governance processes are operationalized in public education through various pathways: the politically strategic positioning of data, shifting undemocratic styles of governance, and right-wing conservative ideologies. By combining a rhizomatic methodological framing of neoliberal processes with a theoretical positioning of symbolic violence through Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and later Colaguori (2010), we critically analyze the New Brunswick public education context using the resignation letter as a rhizomatic node that is entangled with Higgs’ “hard-line” conservative leadership (Fry, 2023). We argue that the combined effects of neoliberal governance and privatization in education are not simply unethical, they are symbolically violent, as they undermine foundational societal structures necessary for sustaining democratic institutions.

### **New Brunswick: Contextualizing Right-Wing Political Disarray**

In his July 2023 article, “Move Over Danielle Smith: What Canadians Should Know About New Brunswick’s Blaine Higgs,” Noah Fry described Higgs as having a “hard-line conservative record to make right-wing ideologues giddy.” In his exposé, Fry (2023) stated that Higgs capitalized on a particular style of politics, “grievance conservatism,” which focuses on social grievances that a conservative voting base holds dear, such as lowering taxes for the wealthy, increasingly anti-2SLGBTQIA+ policies, austerity measures for education and health care, and consistently contentious relationships with labour. Higgs is also a proudly unilingual Anglophone in a fully bilingual province and since 2018 has intentionally deteriorated French Immersion programming and bilingual hiring practices in the province by removing bilingual hiring requirements. As Fry noted, Higgs is a “serious threat” whom Canadians should pay attention to, as he continues to aggressively pursue his agenda. It is in this political context that Cardy’s resignation letter emerged.

Dominic Cardy served as a minister in the Blaine Higgs' Progressive Conservative government for four years and left the position with a public display of disappointment for the premier's leadership, bringing to the surface years of workplace toxicity, issues with internal conflict, and lack of due democratic process. The public resignation letter details the inner workings of the Higgs' conservative government, including issues within the public education system. Since Cardy's resignation in October 2022, three additional ministers have resigned, and one has decided to not run in the next election, leading to much public debate on the state of the provincial government and the legitimacy of Higgs' leadership. Those who have resigned from the cabinet include Dorothy Shephard, Minister of Social Development and Post-Secondary Education, Trevor Holder, Minister of Training and Labour, and Arlene Dunn, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, and a fourth, Mike Holland, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, will not run in the next election (Poitras, 2024).

Ministers Shephard and Holder resigned in June 2023, in the wake of New Brunswick's controversial changes to Policy 713, a policy that was originally designed to promote safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. However, Policy 713 was amended in June 2023 to no longer require teachers to use students' preferred pronouns, instead making it mandatory to contact parents or guardians to notify them of the student's pronoun change, regardless of whether their home and family are safe to notify (Mazerolle, 2023). Despite six members out of the 29-member conservative caucus speaking out about the policy change (Fry, 2023), Higgs shuffled his cabinet to remove remaining dissenters who had not yet resigned and continued with his anti-2SLGBTQIA+ agenda, betting that the anti-trans policy direction would be "an election winner" (Alam, 2023). Policy 713 creates an ethical conundrum for teachers and schools, which are legally required to keep students safe, and produces a potentially dangerous situation for trans, gender-diverse, and gender-nonconforming youth whose homes might not only be non-affirming but physically unsafe spaces. It is also clear in his intentions to use Policy 713 to stoke right-wing fervour ahead of an election that Higgs' decisions are divorced from the needs of vulnerable New Brunswick populations and instead favour keeping himself in power under the guise of "parental rights." Despite public discourse calling for Higgs to resign amid the Policy 713 controversy, the political fallout, and substantial protests, the premier has remained in a position of power, with an upcoming provincial election in October 2024. Although several ministers have since resigned, their departures from the New Brunswick political scene were not as pronounced as Cardy's exit and accompanying resignation letter.

Shifting to analyze neoliberal governance through a rhizomatic conceptualization demonstrates (not) simply that certain outcomes are symbolically violent, but more deeply, how their very processes of production are symbolically violent, as they consistently configure the expanding organized abandonment of democratic and public institutions. Through a rhizomatic analysis, we show how Cardy's letter exposes the inner workings of the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and provides context for understanding how neoliberal governance becomes strategically embedded in public education systems in Canada.

### **Rhizomatic Methodological Framing: Exploring Neoliberal Governance Nodes**

Poststructural theorists Deleuze and Guattari (1987) used the concept of the rhizome to describe a non-hierarchical mode of relations that explained the complex, contingent, contextual,

and temporary relations of social processes they were seeing and experiencing in the world. As they described, theoretical modes of understanding the world have been dominated by hierarchical part–whole relations in Western thinking. Yet, these modes do not attend to the way social processes occur outside of hierarchical structures and processes—where complexity and non-linearity, opportunism, and continual emergence occur. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offered the concept of the rhizome as a way out of predetermined taxonomies of thought. They wrote, with the rhizome, “it is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 20). As such, the rhizome provides conceptual *and* methodological fodder for understanding neoliberal governance as multiple processes in flux—simultaneously interacting at various points—to focus on the assemblage of power relations and their modes of becoming.

Assemblages are complex non-hierarchical productions and have been used in social analyses to describe complex systems like the creation, production, and maintenance of Blackness and its myriad racializations at a global scale (Ibrahim, 2014) and the emergence of spaces of-and-for learning (Grellier, 2013). For our purposes here, we use the rhizomatic assemblage to understand neoliberal governance in education and the proliferation of symbolic violence. First, rhizomes as assemblages are not reproductions or representations; we do not see the rhizome as a metaphor that re-presents neoliberal governance. Importantly, the rhizome is what some feminist new materialist scholars call a *figuration*, a concept to “think with” that encompasses the forms and modes of production used in processing and not simply the illustrative result of the processing (see, for e.g., Braidotti, 2011; Theile & Das Wissen der Künste, 2021). As such, we employ the rhizome not as a concept to illustrate neoliberal governance but rather as a visual and methodological conceptualization—a figuration—for describing and understanding the contours of neoliberal governance and privatization in education. Second, as a figuration, a rhizome is not about a finished or established entity but an entity always in formation. As such, we understand the New Brunswick context, including Cardy’s resignation letter, as one particular node in a larger rhizomatic assemblage of neoliberal governance that is connected and similar to, yet geographically and politically distinct from, other provincial and territorial contexts across Canada.

### *Neoliberal Governance in its Complexity*

Education scholars have defined and traced neoliberal governance and privatization in public education in complex ways, making it difficult to define and follow as a concept (Tilak, 2009), since privatization processes operate in a multiplicity of ways, including exogenous, endogenous, and deeply transformative restructuring pathways (Courtney & Lee-Piggot, 2022; Yoon & Winton, 2020). Due to this complexity, neoliberal privatization analyses in public education governance structures often end with a focus on one aspect or facet of privatization that relies on context-specific material consequences, such as test scores or specific policies (Rogers et al., 2022). Similarly, studies that engage global dimensions of privatization show the complex tensions within education privatization, yet the tensions described are less engaged in *how* they appear and are enacted in local contexts (Zancajo et al., 2022). Though these studies are important for continuing to show the “where” of educational privatization due to neoliberal ideologies (see, for e.g., Gutiérrez et al., 2023), scholarship has been less successful at explaining how the ideological aspects of neoliberal governance and privatization work in their complexities and manifestations (Verger, 2016), and how such manifestations are lived and experienced.

We turn to the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Colaguori (2010) to explore the symbolic violence that is entangled in the ongoing assemblage of neoliberal governance and privatization in public education.

### **Symbolic Violence and Neoliberalism: The Organized Abandonment of Public Education**

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) theorized that school systems are inherently symbolically violent, with an analysis ranging from whose knowledge and cultures are included, to potentially harmful or conformist classroom pedagogies and the structure of the system itself as only benefiting particular student populations. Their theorizations are not without critique (see Lakomski, 1984), yet as Burawoy (2019) noted, symbolic violence remains a useful concept that has potential if further developed and situated within a broader field of scholarship. As such, we draw on Bourdieu and Passeron's macro-level theorizations but align with Colaguori's (2010) more recent theorizations to situate our use and understanding of symbolic violence in neoliberal governance and privatization.

Colaguori (2010) explained the concept of symbolic violence as generally referring to “the subordinating effects on people of hidden structures that reproduce and maintain social domination in covert ways” that “involves numerous mechanisms through which overall social domination is achieved from institutions to ideologies” (p. 389). Drawing on Colaguori's (2010) work on symbolic violence and the violation of human rights, we understand symbolic violence as existing outside “physical acts of destruction,” as it is “also about the dominant rationality that maintains other forms of destruction, including the destruction of life, of economic opportunity, of personal liberties, of freedom of action and conscience” (p. 398). While a Bourdieusian understanding of symbolic violence is often framed as the hidden or covert structures of domination that uphold and reproduce societal inequalities, Colaguori (2010) added that, while it is indeed covert, “violence...enters into the emotional and the political realms of social life” (p. 391) through “persuasive political actions that generate social policy against the public interest such as corporate lobbying which disrupts the integrity of democratic processes and selectively victimizes certain members of the population” (p. 389). Symbolic violence then exists as a dominant force that is also lived and experienced through the effects of daily political decisions that are created to only benefit the few.

Colaguori split from Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) functionalist understanding of symbolic violence—as serving a function in society that works to reproduce dominant and unequal social relations—by adding that violence is also generative, insofar as it “makes social life happen in specific ways” (p. 392) depending on the needs and desires of the people, institutions, and ideologies in power at a given time. Symbolic violence, then, can have a cumulative, generative effect—especially over decades of austerity measures, changes to policy and governance, and the slow threading of neoliberal ideologies into public systems. The system generated out of decades of decisions to slowly increase neoliberal privatization in public education, for example, has real-world consequences that are unequally lived by students, teachers, education workers, and communities alike (Ennab, 2022). Colaguori equated these processes, and the organized abandonment of the state they entangle (to return to Gilmore, 2008), to long-acting human rights violations, adding, “Do not the official policies that govern the unequal distribution of wealth also produce human death and social suffering?” (Colaguori, 2010, p. 397). Colaguori's conceptualization of symbolic violence shows how strategic political decisions, their processes,

and policies, as well as the bodies that produce them, can all produce symbolic violence, and that this violence is generative beyond its immediate materiality. As such, we align with Colaguori's conceptualization of symbolic violence to forward an analysis of neoliberal governance and privatization that moves beyond a policy inventory or list of negative consequences. Instead, we draw attention to the violence of its productive forms and political manoeuvres. These elements rhizomatically assemble toward a strategic and organized abandonment of democratic values and public education. Using Cardy's resignation letter as a rhizomatic node of neoliberal governance and privatization, we work through connective themes to show the ways in which symbolic violence becomes entangled in public education systems.

### **Cardy's Letter: A Rhizomatic Node in Neoliberal Governance**

#### *"Data My Ass": The Symbolic Violence of Democratic Mass Deception*

Gates and Matthews (2014) have described data as the "new currency," as it holds value and can be sold for profit. Personal data is collected, monetized, and sold to corporations that develop highly attuned individualized marketing plans to increase potential sales and profits. Systems data, on the other hand, is also required for decision-making purposes in all levels and types of organizations, making its collection and analysis an institutional necessity, as data has become widely understood as an important, rational tool for governing well. In this sense, organizational data holds value and can be used as currency to justify and create a sense of reliability in decision-making, particularly around reform and restructuring. The use of data in public education has grown over the last two decades alongside the increase of neoliberal policies and practices (Gulson & Sellar, 2019; Taylor, 2020). Data has been used as the relational material to garner support, and shields decision makers when they move away from a given political priority, promise, or practice as it can be pointed to as the reasoning behind a given decision or policy. In essence, data is the materiality needed to mechanize neoliberal ideologies – it is the needle to the neoliberal thread in education policy.

Despite its efforts to remain arms-length, evidence-based decision-making is inherently political and does not always live up to scrutiny. Questions around the use of evidence including whose data is used, how the data is analyzed, what conclusions are made, and if the process is reliable, are disregarded in the push to make data fit the evidence that is needed. The details of such processes are difficult to pinpoint, as this would require a public servant to divulge conversations around the use of data and decision-making. In his resignation letter, Cardy not only made this point but provided such evidence, albeit anecdotally.

In his resignation, Cardy cited numerous reasons for his departure from Higgs' cabinet including the lack of follow-through on campaign promises related to evidence-based decision-making and education reform: "We campaigned against politicizing the education system, and you rightly condemned 'Thirty-seven education reforms in 35 years.' You promised to make decisions based on evidence and to do politics differently" (Cardy, 2022, p. 1). This example is important for several reasons. First, Cardy described Higgs' leadership run as one that would be "different." On its own, this is not a novel claim for a politician to make during a campaign, but when the comment is taken in its entirety, including the fact that he also promised to not politicize the public education system, these were campaign pledges made to position the Higgs' government as "different" from the previous Gallant Liberal government. This quote also insinuates that the prior government did not make decisions based on evidence and that the education system *had* been

used as a political lever, enduring many reforms in a short time. Nevertheless, as we will see, Higgs' government did not uphold such promises, and these claims were used to appeal to voters who wanted less interference in public education and a "different" (conservative and hands-off) approach to governing that would use evidence to make change only when needed.

Ideals such as small government, less interference, and use of data are keystones of neoliberal privatization. On the one hand, these ideals appeal to voters who are wary of government interference, who are fiscally conservative, who believe that free enterprise should be integrated into public systems, and who do not want to continue to pay for reforms that are unsuccessful. On the other hand, such promises create the appearance of a type of conservative "hands-offism" that suggests the government will not interfere in political processes and will allow data to guide best practices for public systems. On the surface, this is not necessarily damaging. However, the Higgs' government's act of positioning itself as holding certain values, while acting in ways that are ideologically in opposition to what the government claims to be true, is a tactic Colaguori (2010) described as the symbolic violence of democratic mass deception (p. 397). Colaguori suggested that, since public votes are based on information provided by political parties, and that voters assume that is an accurate representation of the truth, the use of political "spin" to deliberately misinform the public should be considered gross misconduct. The supposedly informed vote (or other action) based on this fallacy leads to negative consequences for self and others. In this case, the use of evidence-based decision-making ideologically positioned the Higgs' government as being well-informed and skilled, while, as Cardy detailed and as is shown in the amendments to Policy 713, this was far from the truth.

As we have established, data can be used as a currency to bolster support for decision-making and used ideologically to push for changes that might not benefit the people they claim to help. Data can also be strategically invoked to support a political narrative; in these ways, it has utility. On the second page of Cardy's resignation, however, he described a scenario where Premier Higgs yelled at a civil servant for providing him with evidence that did not align with the decision he wanted to make. In the letter, Cardy described this as the "end of Higgs' political project" for him:

Your behaviour at a recent meeting, where you refused to even read evidence you had specifically requested, instead choosing to yell "data my ass" at a senior civil servant because you didn't like what the data showed; well, that was the end of your political project in my eyes: If you reject evidence because you dislike it then you don't believe in evidence. (Cardy, 2022, p. 2)

As Cardy noted, this was the instant that Higgs' leadership was no longer viable. In a moment, Higgs showed his true intentions—that he did not care to use data or evidence to inform decision-making; he wanted the evidence to *fit into* his decision. Data can be a way for governments to claim some emotional distance from their decisions; as the rational, logical, and empirical method to approach government and governance, and because of its power to shape narratives, it holds significant influence. However, when the illusion of data neutrality is gone, evidence can be positioned as simply another means to an end, and in this case, to push through changes based on the premier's beliefs, and as Cardy maintained, "Higgs' emotional state." By yelling at a civil servant and refusing to look at evidence that was contrary to his personal beliefs or goals, Higgs showed that he has little regard for data, going as far as saying "data my ass"—meaning that he did not believe and/or did not accept the information provided. This rude retort also demeaned the effort put into creating or finding said evidence and openly shamed the senior



civil servant who was tasked with communicating the information. In this situation, as Cardy showed elsewhere in the letter, Higgs demonstrated his lack of tact and provided an explicit example of the “greatly reduced morale” experienced by staff.

Higgs’ intentional distancing from his original election promises and disregard for evidence that was contrary to his agenda are staples of ideologically driven leadership. On the surface, without the evidence from Cardy’s letter, the Higgs’ conservative government sustained the veneer of acting in the best interests of the public and using evidence-based decision-making to create fiscally responsible government without interfering in the lives of the public and without entangling itself in “too much” governance. Since Cardy’s letter was released in the fall of 2022, further evidence of this government’s toxic work culture through additional minister resignations in 2023 and 2024 and mass protesting against Higgs’ about-face decision to amend Policy 713 demonstrate the reality beneath the veneer.

The “mass deception” of the public, psychologically unsafe workplace violence against civil servants, and reversal of policy intended to create safe, inclusive schools, all point to the premier who has been enacting symbolically violent governing, while trying to uphold the ideological image of a government that is “hands-off.” Each moment has been created and produced through a perpetual, deeply problematic set of relational ties (to the ministers, the premier’s staff, policies, data and evidence), upholding the illusion of governing and relationships with the public. Such ties have been tension laden, have been filled with deception, and have intentionally worked (and are *working*) to distance Higgs’ government from values of inclusion, consultation, and collaboration with communities. Instead, we can see the relational pattern of symbolic violence being threaded through every area of public life. Though Higgs positioned his party as “different” and as a group that would govern by using evidence-based decision-making, under his leadership, changes to the education system have been created without consultation and evidence, such as the unilateral abolishing of structures, as will be discussed in the next section.

### **“Change Requires Care, Not a Wrecking Ball”: The Symbolic Violence of Neoliberal Governance**

Another component in Cardy’s resignation letter that exposes ongoing systemic symbolic violence is the strategic ways in which democratic structures have been connected and/or broken under Higgs’ leadership. There are ways to make privatization easier to embed into education systems, for example, by removing democratic processes such as proper checks and balances, public input, and democratic feedback mechanisms (Ball, 2021; Courtney & Lee-Piggot, 2022). Every piece that is abolished or removed allows for a greater consolidation of power. In a rhizomatic understanding, the elements that are abolished or removed, as well as those that are connected and continued, are equally at play in the production and continuance of neoliberal governance. Cardy’s letter exposes several instances of strategic decision-making that show these tensions at play: This decision-making has reinforced elements linked to neoliberal sensibilities like individualistic, hierarchical structures and unequal power relations, while these same elements have broken or stifled avenues of democratic and collaborative structures in government.

In one example, Cardy explained of Higgs:

Your recent efforts to pressure EECD [the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development] to abolish French Immersion by September 2023, an initiative not included in our platform or Throne Speech, and

not shared or approved by cabinet or caucus, would place huge stress on the education system and damage the education of our province's anglophone young people. (Cardy, 2022, p. 1)

Here Cardy mentioned several democratic governance structures: the Progressive Conservative party's political platform and Throne Speech, provincial cabinet, and caucuses, as well as the Department of Education and Childhood Development itself. In Cardy's explanation, each of these governance structures—in place to ensure proper input, accountability, and public voice are maintained in decision-making—were silenced, circumvented, or ignored in Higgs' efforts to “abolish French Immersion.” This example shows the way neoliberal governance strategically connects and breaks elements to benefit from an opportunistic, easier, or more profitable pathway. Cardy mentioned how Higgs' efforts to abolish French Immersion were “not included” in the party's platform and Throne Speech—two discursive devices that situate the ideological and practical agenda and goals of a political party as well as inform the public so it can make informed decisions and can hold government accountable. Higgs' government employed these discursive devices to connect with the public and outline the major actions of their party, which, as Cardy reminded Higgs, had promised to “make decisions based on evidence and to do politics differently” (p. 1).

As described above, this was itself a means of positioning that entangled conservative hands-offism with goals of the provincial government that it did not hold up in reality. Cardy revealed that neoliberal processes can result in the tension of upholding certain democratic governing practices that are largely discursive and public-facing, while abandoning others that occur without public scrutiny. This strategic orientation included publicly declared intentions through party platforms and the Speech from the Throne, while at the same time democratic decision-making was sidestepped by not including or consulting elected cabinet officials, caucus, and/or advocacy groups. As such, while Higgs employed these practices to outwardly satisfy the public and position his government as regularly working within its intended democratic structures and processes, Cardy explained that these connections were strategic and abandoned when Higgs came into power as premier.

Yet without Cardy's letter, the actual workings and processes that occurred in the provincial government would have remained hidden. In other words, Cardy exposed the disjunction between the narrative of democratic processes and structures working to continue public institutions like public education, and the intentional, strategic opportunistic restructuring of these processes while maintaining a public narrative of coherence. As Cardy made clear, these strategic decisions were harmful: they placed stress on and damaged the provincial public education system. They were also harmful in the end result Higgs hoped to achieve in denying the ability and right of young people to have access to quality French language education. Yet, the deeper harms here are the disjunctions themselves. When public education is strategically positioned as functioning in the way it was positioned to function through election promises and Speeches from the Throne, while in reality it is not functioning in this way, this creates a false sense of trust in the government.

As Cardy described later in the letter, “The difference between parliamentary democracy and an executive presidency or dictatorship is that New Brunswickers should expect that major decisions will at least be discussed with a group of elected people, representing the public” (Cardy, 2022, p. 2). This expectation was not met and, in reality, Higgs sidestepped democratic processes and even got rid of elected committees, “personally appointing [his] cabinet” and having power to “fire them at any time.” In this act, Higgs abandons officials who were elected to represent their

constituents. In turn, the democratic processes themselves become instances of symbolic violence, as they were opportunistically weaponized—Higgs cut off democratic checks and balances if they did not operate in a way to further consolidate his power.

In another instance, Cardy provided several examples how the actual work of their government shifted under Higgs to where conservative ideals of hands-offism were not the reality, and instead Higgs created a working environment that was individualistic, volatile, competitive, and micromanaged. Cardy explained in the letter that part of the work within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development under Higgs was to make “serious changes to our French second-language education system” (Cardy, 2022, p. 1). Cardy described how processes for education system reform require meeting and reporting on targets for progress. Higgs instead “change[d] deadlines on large systems based on [his] emotional state” and stalled progress “because of [his] micromanagement.” Cardy exposed the intentional circumventing of reform processes and how Higgs strategically used a position of power to unilaterally shift reforms to meet his personally preferred timelines, ideals, and goals.

Cardy described Higgs’ approach to education reform processes as a “wrecking ball.” The symbolic violence in this process is overt. Higgs’ form of governance has been violent and destructive to established processes of government that should be “carefully” considered and collaboratively worked through. Cardy also stated that “too many people have left on bad terms, on your watch” and noted that Higgs’ consolidation of power, strong-arming tactics, and toxic leadership had resulted in losing staff. These instances are in stark contrast to classic conservative and neoliberal ideologies of hands-offism and the desire to portray small government, to be “against politicizing the education system,” and “do politics differently” (Cardy, 2022, p. 1). As such, neoliberal governance has been produced through the tension of at once claiming to support and campaigning on platforms of “doing politics differently” in terms of being “against politicizing the education system” while in actuality leading by micromanaging, disrupting democratic checks and balances, and making decisions based on a single person’s “emotional state.” This tension has ensured that the pursuit of private personal interests and goals has continued underneath a surface of public process and governance.

### **“All Violence Is Paid For”: Organized Abandonment and Political Rhizomes of Power**

A further complicating aspect to the already complex rhizomatic assemblage is that processes of neoliberal governance and privatization are also occurring in other locales at all levels of governance. Looking at these complex issues through a provincial lens, it can be seen that the side-stepping of ethical processes or the utilization of strategically chosen evidence to push through reforms by circumventing or abolishing democratic processes and/or structures has recently taken place in Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Quebec, and Ontario. Sattler (2012), for instance, described neoliberal entanglements and their effects on Ontario’s shifting government terrain over two decades. Rogers et al. (2022) discussed the neoliberal privatization pathways in Nova Scotia that abolished democratic processes in education governance, which were then attempted in Manitoba using identical tactics. Bhardwaj (2011) has also documented the moves of neoliberal governance reform in Quebec that have consistently undermined and obfuscated important educational work on social inequalities. All are examples of (mostly) conservative governments attempting to dismantle democratic processes to allow space for further consolidations of power and neoliberal policies and agenda and to lower one of their largest budget

lines—public education. Yet, as Froese-Germain (2016) has noted, few studies have examined the multitude of relations between provincial processes and their material effects. Nevertheless, often the connections between processes in different provinces and territories can be informative for understanding the deeper layers of the assemblages that make up neoliberal governance and privatization in public education in Canada and more largely, globally. While a further inter-provincial rhizomatic analysis is warranted, in this paper we analyzed New Brunswick as one particular rhizomatic node in the complex assemblage of neoliberal governance and privatization in public education across Canada.

In many ways, the lack of engagement in the connections between various layers and differing locales is itself an important part of the production of the rhizomatic assemblages of neoliberal governance and privatization in the abandonment of public education in Canada (Rogers et al., 2022). In other ways, as Bhardwaj (2011) described in Quebec, we see how these processes of maintaining certain democratic processes while undercutting or side-stepping others have deeper effects than market-oriented policies in public education or the consolidation of certain leaders' power over democratically elected groups or officials. The rhizome of neoliberal governance and privatization shows how these processes extend and infiltrate *with* conservative ideological sensibilities, notions of what government and governance is and how it functions and the broader understanding of the role of government in supporting and working for the public that elects it. This means larger and more diffuse forms of symbolic violence entangle in the processes of neoliberal governance and privatization between locales, provinces, and countries.

In Cardy's letter, he explained this in terms of the ways Higgs' decisions and governance "delay and undermine" important reconciliatory efforts with linguistic and Indigenous communities in the province (Cardy, 2022, p. 2). These tactics have enacted a form of symbolic violence through decisions not to prioritize social and equitable changes that negatively affect not only public education but, as Cardy explained, also other public institutions like healthcare. Without the explanations from Cardy regarding the ideologically driven decisions within the workings of Higgs' government, such connections would have been hearsay or much more difficult to discern. Yet, with Cardy's description of these connections, we can document and understand the way neoliberal sensibilities are part of governance processes themselves, opening pathways for greater neoliberal privatization. This example also shows, to return to Colaguori (2010), how generative symbolic violence is for the production and proliferation of neoliberal governance and privatization. Higgs' continual decisions pushed ministers to resign, produced a toxic work environment within the provincial government where many other employees have left "on bad terms" (p. 2), and led to detrimental policy changes, decreasing the capacity for equitable and socially responsible public systems, including education. These decisions also cut ties to input and consultation processes and allowed for the appointment of advisory groups instead of democratically elected officials—making it easier for Higgs to drive through decisions with little pushback.

In rhizomatic terms, Higgs' consistent decisions, as described in our analysis of Cardy's letter, have produced and sustained the connective tissues in the rhizomatic assemblage. What we have described in our analysis is that these types of decisions have not simply fostered neoliberal governance and privatization in New Brunswick (and arguably in other locales across Canada more broadly), but that the newly created forms and their ensuing effects are symbolically violent and increase the likelihood of organized abandonment of public systems by starving the democratic tissues that hold together public and democratic bodies, processes, and practices. As Cardy

explained in the quote we used to preface this discussion, governing requires ongoing, daily decisions between helping and hurting. Each moment defines and redefines that work, the balance of its violence or harm, and its ability to support, aid, and help or hinder the collective. The effects of decisions that tip the scales to harm may not immediately appear unless we have further witnesses like Cardy who report the connection and breakage points as they occur. Yet, even without witnesses, the rhizomatic way in which neoliberal governance and privatization operates means the symbolic violence of their processes may be diverted underground, only to pop up in another node, locale, or time. In other words, although neoliberal processes may not be visible, the connections being created underground have the potential to strengthen neoliberal governance and privatization in other places. Therefore, we end with a warning from Bourdieu (1998) that captures the need to keep the notion of the organized, strategic, and opportunistic processes of neoliberal governance and privatization enmeshed with its violent material effects. Bourdieu wrote:

You cannot cheat with the law of the conservation of violence; all violence is paid for, and, for example, the structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc., is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence. (Bourdieu, 1998, as cited by Colaguori, 2010, p. 388)

In this vein, symbolic violence is cumulative, often unseen, and specifically tied to myriad processes that exist through political rhizomes of power. Such figurations are at once invisible but felt and lived through the experiences of those affected by decades of neoliberal policies. As Bourdieu (1998) noted, sooner or later, the cumulative effects of decisions to turn away from education as a public good, or the daily decisions in public life to create governance structures that support the symbolic violence of neoliberal governance and privatization, will, intentionally or not, assemble a strategically organized abandonment of public education.

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