Neoliberalism and the Current Educational Climate: The Effect on

School Culture and At-Risk Students

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Abstract

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Riccardo Virone

This study is primarily concerned with uncovering the school culture proliferated by neoliberal education reforms, and the exploration of its effect on students who are at risk of academic failure. A theoretical approach was adopted for the study, which involved a thorough review of the past and current peer-reviewed research literature on neoliberalism, school culture and students who are at risk. In doing so, an overview of neoliberalism was provided, with a focus on examining the influence of the neoliberal process on Canada's public education system. Additionally, the neoliberal influence on school culture was systematically outlined using Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) four dimensions of school culture, which aimed to reveal how such a school culture affects the academic experiences of students at risk. These dimensions are: Professional outlook; Organizational structure; Quality of the teaching environment and Student-centered focus. Lastly, a comparison was drawn between Freire's (1970) notion of "banking education" and today's Canadian school culture in order to provide insight into the aspects of a neoliberal school culture that are not conducive to the fostering of a critical consciousness among students. The examination of the literature revealed that a school culture, entrenched with neoliberal values and objectives is unconducive to fostering positive academic experiences for students who are at risk of school failure.

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Chapter 1: Neoliberalism

Introduction

Neoliberalism has a profound impact on the educational, economic, social, and political

landscape of our increasingly globalized world. The dominant neoliberal discourse of today has

transformed contemporary perception of a government's responsibility towards its citizens, and

has deeply altered the conception of an individual's role in society (Hursh, 2007a). Seen through

a neoliberal lens, market forces supersede public interest, while social services such as education

and health are perceived as being increasingly exempt from government responsibility. With

regards to education, this neoliberal shift towards a decentralized government and a

progressively market-driven economy has had a significant effect on the pedagogical outlook of

the Western world (e.g. Apple, 2000; Allodi, 2013; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber,

Schugurensky, 2012; Hursh & Henderson, 2011; Lissovoy, 2013; Smyth, 2014; Tienken, 2013).

Such an outlook, studies reveal, has substantially altered the social and organizational structure

of Western schools, generating a school culture that has a profound effect on the academic

experiences of at-risk students (e.g. Allodi, 2013; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber &

Schugurensky, 2012; Carter, 2012; De Lissovoy, 2013; Hursh & Henderson, 2011; Kretovic,

Farber & Armaline, 2004; Smyth, 2014; Tienken, 2013).

In such a school climate, test scores are the predominant and nearly exclusive

determinant of student success (Carter, 2012). Advancing such a skewed definition of student

achievement, neoliberal education reforms have enforced rigid accountability measures in order

to ensure students are effectively acquiring and retaining knowledge deemed necessary for being

competent members of the labour force. As a result, public schools are encouraged to place a significant amount of effort on improving student performance on standardized tests, while placing little emphasis on whether such a rigid and accountability-oriented school environment is conducive to the enrichment of students' academic experiences.

Past educational research on neoliberalism has primarily focused on examining how neoliberal forces shape and govern education policies, objectives, administration, and curriculum (e.g. Allodi, 2013; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; Carter, 2012; De Lissovoy, 2013; Hursh & Henderson, 2011; Kretovic, Farber & Armaline, 2004; Smyth, 2014; Tienken, 2013). Such research illustrates that neoliberal education reforms have generated an increasingly privatized and accountability-oriented education system predominantly suited for students of privileged backgrounds, as opposed to students at risk of struggling academically. Furthermore, studies examining school culture have demonstrated that a school's climate plays a significant role in influencing student behaviour and academic achievement (e.g. Carter, 2012; Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007; Hudley, Daoud, Polanco, Wright-Castro & Hershberg, 2003; MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Pierce, 1994; Tubbs & Garner, 2008). More specifically, past research has uncovered that certain types of school cultures are more conducive to student achievement than others, and are in turn more capable of enhancing the academic success of at-risk students. In spite of the growing amount of research concerning neoliberalism and school culture, few studies directly examine the school culture neoliberal policies actively propagate, and how such a school culture in turn affects the academic achievement of at-risk students.

Research Questions and Expected Contributions to Future Policy Formation

In light of this gap in research, the current study examines the influence neoliberal education reforms have on school culture. Secondly, it aims to uncover whether a school climate

entrenched with neoliberal motives and values can promote or mitigate the academic success of students at-risk of academic failure. Thirdly, it intends to provide insight on whether Canada's progressively neoliberal education policies are congruent to its purported educational values and objectives.

Purpose

The primary objective of the current study is to examine how the infiltration of neoliberal policies and practices in the educational realm affects the school culture of Canadian schools, and in turn how this influences the academic outcome of Canada's at-risk student population. To this author's knowledge, there exists limited research on the effects of neoliberalism on school culture and its direct effects on the academic achievement of at-risk student populations. Furthermore, this research is an attempt to provide insight into factors that influence a school's culture and subsequent student outcomes, with an emphasis on those students who are most at-risk for academic failure and attrition. The hope is that in turn, this will inform the development of educational policies and school-level interventions for fostering a positive and effective school environment conducive to student academic achievement and emotional well-being. In doing so, the present study aims to inform future policy formation for those concerned with promoting the academic achievement of vulnerable students. Finally, this study will also support the dissemination of knowledge to parents, educators, and other professionals working with children in an educational setting, informing a positive professional outlook on providing the most appropriate student services to all students, including those most at-risk.

Method

Scope of Literature Review and Definition of Main Concepts

In order to examine the neoliberal effect on policy-making in the educational setting, and its subsequent effect on school culture and at-risk students, the current study adopts a theoretical approach to this investigation. More specifically, the author attempts to develop a framework for understanding the neoliberal effect on the educational environment of Canadian schools through a theoretical approach derived from a review of the past and current peer-reviewed research on neoliberalism, school culture and at-risk students. The terms that will be of interest when identifying pertinent research are the following:

Neoliberalism. Defined as, the various policies, forces, and values gaining prominence in the 1970s, that advocate a decentralized government, deregulation, privatization, free trade, and a market-based economy (De Lissovoy, 2013).

School culture/climate. Defined as, the explicit and implicit characteristics of a school environment that constitute the perceived ethos, norms, values, and objectives of a school (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

At-risk student. Defined as, students who exhibit a wide range of educational problems, including the failure to respond positively to the instruction offered in basic academic skills, the manifestation of unacceptable social behaviour in school, the inability to keep up with their classmates in academic subjects, and a limited repertoire of experiences that provide background for formal education (Pierce, 1994, p. 37).

We shall now review the literature on neoliberalism, and explore its influence on Canada's education system. In the next chapter, we shall examine school culture and students who are at risk of academic failure, as well as uncover how such students respond to an

educational climate embedded with neoliberal values and goals. Finally, the last chapter of the thesis will consider Freire's (1970) notion of problem-posing education as a viable alternative to today's educational climate.

Neoliberalism

Overview of Neoliberalism

It has been said that neoliberalism "transforms how we conceptualize the role of government and the relationship between the individual and society" (Hursh, 2007a, p. 496). Gaining prominence in the 1970s, neoliberalism embodies the efforts of corporations to mitigate the economic and social advancement of the working class for the purpose of redistributing wealth upwards (De Lissovoy, 2013). Such an objective was predominantly undertaken, De Lissovoy maintains, through the denouncement of the "welfare state and progressive economic and social policy" (p. 424) and the casting of "traditional institutions…as retrograde and paternalistic" (p. 424). As elucidated by Hursh (2007a), this was largely achieved by disseminating the belief that government interventions through the form of regulations and taxation are impeding factors on one's personal liberty.

More specifically, proponents of neoliberalism are guided by the perception that the state is weak, and wholly incapable of fostering a viable, and competitive economy (Apple, 2000). This view is predominantly fueled by an ardent belief that the state is excessively supporting the public sector, and thus underestimating the value and significance of the private sector. For, according to neoliberals, "[p]ublic institutions such as schools are 'black holes' into which money is poured-and then seemingly disappears-but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results" (Apple, 2000, p. 59). Guided by such a vision, advocates of neoliberalism posit that what is private is inherently good and worth pursuing, while the opposite is thought of the

public sector, representing to the neoliberal a source of expenditure that is not only unaccountable, but wasteful as well.

In light of this, neoliberals have worked to diminish government interference over the economy, boasting that the marketplace will not only fulfill and address the public's social welfare needs and concerns, but will also dictate and realize the needs of the economy (Bulkley & Burch, 2011). This unbridled confidence in the marketplace stems from the belief in the "essential fairness and justice of markets" (Apple, 2000, p. 63), and the claim that markets will ultimately "distribute resources efficiently and fairly according to effort" (Apple, 2000, p. 63). As elucidated by Apple, neoliberals conceive the market as being the "ultimate arbiter of social worthiness" (p. 64), and they contend that a society and economy primarily dictated by market forces will be one devoid of the irrationality associated with politics and government interventions. Indeed, advocates of neoliberalism profess that market forces must regulate and govern social and economic decisions in order to facilitate the development of a globally competitive and affluent economy.

In essence, neoliberalism and its associated policies, norms, and values, have defaced the traditional notion of democracy by eschewing its political orientation and transforming it into an entirely economic concept (Apple, 2000, p. 63). As underlined by Apple, through neoliberal processes, "[e]fficiency and cost-benefit analysis" (p. 64) have become the driving force of social, economic, and political change. Such a rationale has infiltrated all areas of government, in the Western world, and has been disseminated to such a degree that they have been accepted as inevitable and imperative to the maintenance of social and economic order (De Lissovoy, 2013). This is alarming, as the economic, political, and social worth of neoliberalism is increasingly being questioned, as many researchers are discovering the perilous social and financial

consequences associated with the adoption of neoliberal policies (e.g. Coburn, 2004; Hall & Lamont, 2013; Navarro, 2007; Peck, Theodore & Brenner, 2009; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Over the course of the last quarter of the twentieth century, and almost two decades into the twenty-first, the process of neoliberalization is continuing its infiltration into all realms of society, bringing about significant changes to the institutional, social and economic realms of the countries in which it has taken root. This neoliberal process has been identified on a global scale, initiating and effecting varying degrees of change in the Western countries of North America and Europe, as well as in newly industrialized countries in Africa, Asia and South America. It must be noted that the neoliberal influence has not been solely negative, and the process' capacity for positive change has been primarily documented in countries where their citizens were previously subsisting on traditional rural ways of a time long past, relying on local markets and personal relationships for subsistence, with little room for economic growth or change (Hall & Lamont, 2013). With the advent of open markets in these typically poor countries, the opportunity for growth and economic improvement became a reality (Hall & Lamont, 2013).

For the majority of those living in a time of neoliberal-driven change, they are witness to the "problematization" (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 381) of this process. The encouragement of international corporations led governments to privatize services that were normally public, presumably in order to encourage market competition through implementation of ranking systems in social services such as health care and education (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Thus, it is possible to now display "self-interest market behaviour" in public spheres where it would have once been considered inappropriate, initiating change in social norms and relationships (Espeland & Sauder, 2007).

Overall, in developed democracies, the increase in market competition has served the upper classes well, redistributing wealth upwards, whereas these large gains have not been equally matched in the middle classes, which have stagnated (Hall & Lamont, 2013). The result of this imbalanced concentration of wealth is one of intergenerational inequality, a growing sense of resentment in the public, and a sense of mistrust in governance (Hall & Lamont, 2013). Furthermore, in order to support competition in the market place, international corporations have encouraged the decrease in social protection through the deconstruction of social organizations supporting workers, leading to increased competition in the job market, and consequently an increase in employment uncertainty and insecurity (Hall & Lamont, 2013). The anxiety perpetrated in the public with the increase in material insecurity is said to be attributed to the rise in feelings of fear towards those in lower social classes and newly arrived immigrants, resulting in xenophobia and decreased support for social welfare assistance (Art, 2011).

Surprisingly, despite these alarming consequences, over the last few decades neoliberalism has solidified itself as the hegemonic discourse of the West, and its market-driven ideology has permeated into Canadian society (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). Emerging neoliberal policies, "promised to promote economic growth and efficiency through competition, tax reductions, deregulation, trade liberalisation, incentives to the private sector and reductions in the role of government and in public expenditures" (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012, p. 147). As we will soon discover, such policies have had a profound role in shaping the current landscape of Canadian society, and its education system.

Neoliberalism and Education

The neoliberal influence on Canada's public education system commenced in the mid-1980s under the Mulroney government as a reactionary response to the belief that the Canadian

education system was failing to adhere to the demands of an increasingly complex and globalized world (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). As highlighted by Bhardwaj (2010), there was a growing concern over public education's ability to equip Canadians with the tools and skills needed to be competent members of an increasingly knowledge-based economy. As information technology progressively transformed the nature of labour and how individuals interacted and communicated amongst each other, there was a potent conviction that Canada's education system was failing to adapt to such transformations.

What was needed, neoliberals asserted, was an education system entirely driven by market forces that would equip Canadian citizens with the tools necessary to become effective workers and consumers for the Canadian economy (Saltman, 2014). This was said to be achieved through the conception of education as a private good that would aim to cultivate "radical individualism and a social Darwinian ethos" (p. 251), as opposed to a public good that would seek to advance democratic notions of freedom and social responsibility. As such, advocates of neoliberalism worked to propagate a pedagogical system consumed by competition that disseminated the view of students as self-serving economic actors that contend against their fellow students for increasingly sparse resources. In an effort to foster such a system, neoliberal forces have worked to engender an education system primarily concerned with producing a competent workforce (Arshad-Ayaz, 2008), decrease public school funding, increase student and teacher accountability (De Lissovoy, 2013), restructure teacher education and the teaching profession (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012), and engender a rigid and teacher-centered school environment.

More specifically, abandoning education's traditional role of fostering democratic and socially conscious citizens, recent reforms have worked to engender an education system

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primarily concerned with fostering a workforce that adheres to the demands of the global economy (Arshad-Ayaz, 2008). As underlined by Arshad-Ayaz, the former "aims at employing education as a means of equipping student-citizens with civic and democratic values" (p. 490), while the latter conceives education as a vehicle for the "production of a flexible work-force" (p. 490). Under such a vision of education, students are seen as human capital (Apple, 2000), and as "consumers of marketable forms of knowledge" (Arshad-Ayaz, 2008, p. 491). As future members of an increasingly complex and competitive labour force, students must be provided the skills and knowledge needed to be effective and efficient workers (Apple, 2000). This entails overlooking subjects such as humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences, and to encourage schools and students to focus on material that is more market oriented, such as the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (referred to as STEM fields), and business fields (Arshad-Ayaz, 2008).

Furthermore, in an attempt to bolster the influence of market forces and entirely privatize Canada's education system, neoliberal trends have resulted in an increasingly disinvested public school system (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). Public schools across Canada are progressively being underfunded, and are being stripped of their already limited financial resources. In fact, the neoliberal defunding of social policies has progressed to such an extent that a plethora of Canadian public schools are struggling to address their students' pedagogical needs (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012).

As a result of this significant underfunding, public schools are increasingly dependent on corporations to alleviate their growing financial concerns (Sloan, 2008). However, such financial aid is rarely provided solely out of the benevolence of the corporation, and is often an exchange accompanied with demands to be fulfilled by the receiving schools. These demands

predominantly consist of marketing opportunities for the donating corporation, and range from being relatively non-intrusive, such as placing company logos on school property, to being highly intrusive, such as infiltration of classroom teaching time, as exemplified by Channel One's in-class TV channel that broadcasts commercials during a portion of class time every day (Apple, 2000). Essentially, the neoliberal assault on public school funding has reduced public schools into becoming "prime real estate for corporate marketing interests" (Sloan, 2008, p. 569), as "resource-strapped school[s]" (p. 569) have become inescapably reliant on conditional corporate financial support.

Additionally, facing an increasing amount of pressure from budget cuts and austerity measures, Canadian public schools are forced to lay off several of their teachers, and thus increase their classroom sizes (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). Thus, teachers are expected to teach a greater number of students, while increasingly being deprived of their job security, as many are being hired on a part-time basis or losing their jobs entirely. In fact, as Carpenter and colleagues underline, Canadian public school teachers "face great difficulties with the increased size of their classes, some between 35 and 44 students, and often with a wide range of learning abilities and behavioural issues that teachers are expected to attend to" (p. 151-152). In light of these changes, Canadian teachers are feeling over-worked, unconfident that they are fulfilling the pedagogical needs of each of their students, displeased with the level of interaction they have with their students, and anxious about the longevity of their careers.

Moreover, in light of neoliberal mistrust towards the ability of public schools and teachers to effectively educate Canadian students, policy makers have employed stringent accountability systems that attempt to monitor and enhance student and teacher efficiency (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). As a result of such efforts, "one-size-fits-all

mandated curricular standards and…results from mandated standardized test[s]" (Tienken, 2013, p. 305) are utilized in order to "judge the effectiveness of schools, students, teachers, and principals" (p. 305). As underlined by Tienken, such accountability measures reflect the social Darwinian notion of the "survival of the fittest", as they are guided by the assumption that the fittest, and best-adapted schools, students, and teachers will excel in these measures, and be rightfully rewarded for their competence.

In spite of this assumption, however, a plethora of studies illustrate the significant invalidity of these standardized measures (e.g. Allodi, 2013; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; De Lissovoy, 2013; Jacob, 2001; Marchant & Paulson, 2005; Tienken, 2013), and underline the fact that they merely "advantage students from middle class and wealthy environments who come to school with middle class vocabularies and life experiences" (Tienken, 2013, p. 305). In fact, test questions on these standardized exams are often reported to neglect the values, cultures, and perspectives of minority students, and students from underprivileged families.

Despite the inherent biases and statistical incompetencies of these accountability measures and standardized tests, failure to adhere to these set standards has proved to have drastic consequences for students and teachers (Tienken, 2013). For instance, students who underperform in even a single state test can be "denied entrance into quality academic program tracks, retained in grade, placed in low academic tracks, or denied the opportunity to graduate high school" (p. 305). Furthermore, teachers whose students poorly perform in these mandated tests "can be penalized with a salary reduction, loss of tenure, or denial of merit pay" (p. 305). It can be argued that such dire consequences are irrational, given the fact that there is a significant positive correlation between students' family income, and their test results (Tienken, 2013).

Furthermore, in light of these drastic consequences, teachers are pressured to "teach to the test", as opposed to enriching their student's knowledge of a given subject (Tienken, 2013; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). Essentially, teachers are more inclined to limit the material covered on a given subject merely to the components of the subject that will appear on the standardized test. Thus, in focusing solely on that which will be tested, teachers are doing a disservice to their students by neglecting to transmit some crucial aspects of the subject to them, and are thus ultimately failing to cultivate an enriched and meaningful knowledge of school content. Fundamentally, standardized tests encourage the transmission of superficial knowledge, to the detriment of the depth and breadth of understanding (Tienken, 2013; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012).

While students, teachers, and school administrators alike fail to benefit from these standardized tests, publishing companies are reaping the rewards (Saltman, 2014). As elucidated by Saltman (2014), for-profit publishing companies, such as NCS Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and ETS, are enjoying immense profits from the advent of standardized testing. This is predominantly the case, as such corporations not only publish a wide range of textbooks to help students excel in these intrinsically flawed tests, but they are commonly responsible for publishing mandated standardized tests as well. As highlighted by Tienken (2013), this "outsourcing of assessment...to big business align[s] to the neoliberal model of shifting public funds and decision-making to private entities and out of the public sphere" (p. 308). The neoliberal expansion of standardized testing merely serves to diminish curricular control of local education agencies and to instead place it in the hands of corporations and the private sector. As a result, "[e]ducators become mere assessment implementers and imitators, not decision makers

or creators" (p. 308), while profit-driven corporations pervert public schooling through their increasing pedagogical influence and control.

Additionally, as a reaction to the growing mistrust of the effectiveness of public school teachers, neoliberal forces have "systematically degraded" (Baltodano, 2012, p. 497) schools of education. Proponents of neoliberalism have worked to disseminate the belief that teacher preparation is "lengthy, expensive, and unnecessary" (p. 497). In light of this contention, neoliberal forces have urged the erection of fast-track teacher preparation programs that ostensibly prepare prospective teachers more efficiently. In truth, however, it can be argued that such programs oversimplify teacher education, and ultimately serve to create underskilled, uncreative, and complacent educators that are merely trained to implement mandated standardized curricula (Baltodano, 2012).

Neoliberal trends have fostered a public education system that inescapably yields to corporate demands and marketing in exchange for financial resources. In addition, under the guise of promoting an education system driven by market forces, neoliberal proponents disseminate the notion that public schools and their teachers are incapable of efficiently cultivating a population that addresses the needs of the global market. In light of such claims, neoliberal policymakers have implemented rigorous accountability systems that work to ensure public schools and teachers alike are equipping their students with the tools necessary to address the needs of the market. The expansion of standardized testing and curricula have also served to reward those of privileged backgrounds, while disregarding those of lower socioeconomic status, due to their inherent biases. In the end, neoliberal forces have cultivated an education system that fosters a climate of global competitiveness that rewards complacency and passivity by orienting its educators and students towards receiving knowledge and training in order to fulfill global

market demands, to the detriment of seeking knowledge for the sake of learning and critical thinking. Essentially, this neoliberal influence is woven into the fabric of every Canadian school's culture through the rigorous application of its accountability systems and educational ideals.

In sum, this chapter illustrated the profound social, economic, political, and educational ramifications associated with neoliberal policies, objectives, and values. In spite of its alarming consequences, it is posited that neoliberalism has become the hegemonic discourse of the West, including Canada. Additionally, this chapter has outlined how the process of neoliberalization has skewed the pedagogical scope of Canada's public schools, and has ultimately rendered an accountability-oriented education system, primarily concerned with instilling in students the knowledge needed to meet the demands of the global economy. The following chapter will elucidate how such changes have cultivated a school culture that is vastly unfit to address the pedagogical needs and concerns of students least likely to succeed academically.

Chapter 2: School Culture and Students at Risk

The previous chapter discussed how today's predominant neoliberal discourse is significantly altering all realms of government and society, with a focus on its effect on Canada's education system. In order to better understand the effect of neoliberalization on the Canadian educational climate, and in turn, on its most vulnerable students, an overview of what constitutes a school's educational climate, or school culture, will be provided in the following chapter, including a description of those students who are most at risk of academic failure in such an environment. In addition, a thorough discussion regarding the relationship between a school culture influenced by neoliberal values and the academic outcome of those students who are most at risk will be provided.

Overview of School Culture

School culture can be defined as the various elements that make up a school's palpable spirit and nature, which in turn influence teacher and student engagement and learning (MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009). More specifically, school culture refers to:

> A number of variables in the school social environment including, but not limited to, student sense of academic futility, student perception of teacher push, student academic norms, teacher ability, teacher expectations for students, teacher-student efforts to improve, perceptions of the principal's expectations, parental concern for quality of education, perceptions of present school quality, and efforts of the principle to improve (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993, p. 18).

Several studies reveal that a school's culture or ethos plays a profound role in determining the performance and engagement of school faculty and students alike (e.g. Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007; Hudley, Daoud, Polanco, Wright-Castro & Hershberg, 2003; MacNeil, Prater & Busch,

2009; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Tubbs & Garner, 2008). In light of this significance, MacNeil and colleagues (2009) posit that the first and foremost purpose of a school is to engender an environment and culture that facilitates and encourages human learning.

For the purpose of this study, Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) conceptual model of school culture will be utilized. According to this model, school culture is comprised of four dimensions: (I) Professional Orientation, (II) Organizational Structure, (III) Quality of the Learning Environment, and (IV) Student-Centered Focus. The authors define the Professional Orientation dimension as involving the various "activities and attitudes that characterize the degree of professionalism" (p. 140) of a school's faculty. Such a component of school culture is primarily concerned with the professional lives of teachers, and uncovering whether their professional development and growth is in line with the promotion of student learning. Variables of this component include teachers' expectations of students, and teachers' professional self-confidence (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

Additionally, Organizational Structure represents the second component of Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) model of school culture. The authors posit that such a component includes the "style of leadership, communication, and processes that characterize the way the school conducts its business" (p. 140). Factors of this component include, but are not limited to: a school's leadership style, the purported objectives, goals, and mission statements of a school, and the style of communication and relationships between school staff members (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

The third dimension of school culture, Quality of the Learning Environment, concerns the "intellectual merit of the activities in which students are typically engaged" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008, p. 140). According to the authors, this component is primarily geared towards how students form and apply knowledge. More specifically, Schoen and Teddlie's third dimension of

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school culture involves the degree to which students are "routinely involved in meaningful, cognitively challenging experiences" (p. 141) at school, as well as the quality of interactions that they take part in with their teachers and peers alike. Additionally, Quality of the Learning Environment is also concerned with the degree to which schools offer "opportunities for students to interact with each other, teachers, and others" (p. 141) within a school.

Finally, Student-Centered Focus represents the fourth component of Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) model of school culture. This dimension represents the "collective efforts and programs offered to support student achievement" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008, p. 140). In particular, the author's fourth dimension of school culture is concerned with determining whether a "school's programs, policies, rituals, routines, and traditions" (p. 141) meet the academic needs of individual students. Essentially, this component assesses the degree of a school's parental involvement, as well as the availability of "student support services, and differentiated instructional strategies based on a student's unique interests and abilities" (p. 141).

With regards to the first dimension of school culture, Professional Orientation (i.e. faculty members' level of involvement in professional growth, motivation and academic attitude), studies show that under such a component, healthy school cultures contain teachers who hold high levels of expectations for their students, and who are deeply committed to enriching their academic experiences (Tubbs & Garner, 2008). Furthermore, such schools also possess teachers that are intensely engaged in their profession, and confident in their professional abilities. As highlighted by MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009), however, schools that employ teachers who have low expectations of their students, who express strong dissatisfaction with their careers, and who are not motivated to excel in their profession, are likely to lend to a school culture unconducive to student success.

Considering Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) second dimension of school culture, Organizational Structure, concerned with how a school "conducts its business" (p. 140), school cultures that enjoy a high degree of organizational structure are those that effectively promote high academic standards, and that emphasize collegiality and cooperation among staff members (MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Tubbs & Garner, 2008). Such schools, according to Tubbs and Garner, enjoy an orderly school environment with clearly defined objectives and goals. Moreover, the authors maintain that these schools are characterized by a high consensus among staff members over the curriculum, and discipline strategies. In addition, Macneil and colleagues (2009) underline that schools possessing a strong organizational structure also contain principals with exemplary leadership skills, who successfully enforce and promote a school's purported goals, values, and objectives in the hope of enhancing student learning and development. According to MacNeil and colleagues, school cultures that display poor organizational structure are those that are easily "deterred in their mission and goals by parental and public demands" (p. 75). Such schools also typically possess principals who ineffectively lead their staff and students, and who fail to implement the professed objectives and goals of their schools.

Moreover, bearing in mind Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) third dimension of school culture, Quality of the Learning Environment (i.e. the "intellectual merit" (p. 140) of a school's activities), healthy school cultures promote the development of strong and positive relationships between teachers and students (Hudley, Daoud, Polanco, Wright-Castro & Hershberg, 2003). These schools place a great deal of importance in providing opportunities for teachers, staff, and students to meaningfully interact amongst each other (Tubbs & Garner, 2008). As highlighted by

MacNeil and colleagues (2009), such schools also possess an academically rigorous environment that deeply recognizes and values the importance of academic achievement.

Finally, Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) fourth dimension of a school's culture is identified as the Student-Centered Focus dimension, concerned with the efficacy and appropriateness of a school's application of programs, policies, routines and traditions. This fourth component can be assessed in schools by considering the presence and quality of such elements as "parental involvement, student support services and differentiated instructional strategies based on student needs" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008, p. 141). In regards to policies and practices, healthy schools will display consistent and appropriate reward and disciplinary actions, leading to clearly defined rules and goals for students to work towards, and ultimately fostering student-teacher understanding (Tubbs & Garner, 2008). This in turn will engender a school culture that is conducive to positive learning outcomes and academic achievement in students (Tubbs & Garner, 2008). Essentially, a school's culture benefits most from consistency in student support services, continued consideration for the needs of individual students, and where there are clearly defined school goals and values (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

Overview of Students at Risk

For many Canadian students, school can be a stimulating, rewarding, and wondrous place that offers them the opportunity to quench the curiosities that abound in their minds. For some students, however, school life can be rife with feelings of unworthiness, alienation, anxiety, and discontent that can significantly affect their level of academic success (e.g. Carter, 2012; Couillard, Garnett, Hutchins, Fawcett & Maycock, 2006; Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007; Johnson, 1997; Kretovics, Farber & Armaline, 2004; Pierce, 1994). These feelings can arise out of numerous environmental and cognitive factors that may have been experienced by individuals in

their past or present daily lives, consequently rendering them vulnerable to poor academic achievement and school failure. The following section will illustrate the profile of a student who may be considered by those in their proximal and distal environments as being "at-risk", followed by a breakdown of the cognitive and environmental variables associated with a student who is at-risk, and finally a discussion regarding the genesis and perseverance of these risk factors in the lives of students.

Essentially, students are considered at-risk if they possess a number of characteristics and factors that make them vulnerable to poor academic standings, truancy, and dropping out (Couillard, Garnett, Hutchins, Fawcett & Maycock, 2006). As highlighted by Pierce (1994), these students typically express feelings of hopelessness and disenchantment with regards to school, as well as possess a deep-seated belief in being incapable of effectively learning and succeeding academically. Such students are not only at risk of failing to learn, but are also susceptible of entering adulthood "illiterate, dependent upon drugs and alcohol, unemployed or underemployed, as a teenage parent, dependent on welfare, or adjudicated by the criminal justice system" (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 3). Most significantly, however, these students are vulnerable of being absolutely "disconnected from the functions of society, from economic productivity, and as citizens in a democracy" (Johnson, 1997, p. 36).

In light of these alarming potential consequences, several studies examine the circumstances and risk factors that predispose these students to experience unfulfilling, and ill-fated academic careers (e.g. Couillard, Garnett, Hutchins, Fawcett & Maycock, 2006; Ferguson, Horwood, & Lynsky, 1994; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder & Sameroff, 1999; Johnson, 1997; Luthar, 1991; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Sameroff, Gutman & Peck, 2003; Williams, Anderson, McGee, & Silva, 1990). According to Johnson (1997), the principal categories of

educational risk factors include: student characteristics, family circumstances, community factors, and school environment. Some of the most commonly cited factors are:

substance abuse, illegal activity, school truancy, suspension, expulsion and failure, poor parenting, familial transience, poverty, English as a foreign language, residing in the inner-city, counterproductive sibling behaviours such as dropping out of school and criminal activities, lone-parent families, lack of extracurricular involvement, poor home-school relations, ethnic minority status, and having an uneducated mother (Johnson, 1997).

As elucidated by Sameroff, Gutman and Peck (2003), at-risk students are not likely to experience all of these factors in their lifetime, and several studies have concluded that it is not the impact of any single risk factor that is most significant, but an accumulation of risk factors that result in a significant negative impact on a child's social, cognitive, and behavioral development (e.g. Ferguson, Horwood, & Lynsky, 1994; Williams, Anderson, McGee, & Silva, 1990). Thus, the majority of children who experience one risk factor from the numerous possible negative variables will not have a significant developmental issue in any one area, but those who experience multiple risk factors will experience their negative effects in all spheres of their life in an exponential fashion (Sameroff, Gutman & Peck, 2003).

In fact, research conducted by Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder and Sameroff (1999), which focused on cumulative risk factors on child development, looked at risk factors at several ecological levels of the environmental microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of 500 Philadelphian adolescents between the ages of 11 and 14 years old and of varied SES status. In order to analyze the environmental risks experienced by the sample of adolescents, the researchers grouped variables of interest within the children's ecological subsystems in order to

approximate an environmental model. Within the community subsystem, the main factors of interest were the adolescents' neighbourhood and their school's culture (Furstenberg et al., 1999).

In order to measure developmental competence, numerous assessments were completed by the researchers that tapped into the adolescents' psychological adjustment, self-competence rating, drug use and abuse, history of delinquency, involvement in extracurricular projects, involvement in sports, and academic performance based on grades (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Finally, scores were calculated for each participant, and it was found that with increasing risk accumulation scores, there was a decrease in normalized outcome scores for adolescents. Interestingly, the most significant difference in outcomes when compared to cumulative risk scores was in academic performance, with those students experiencing eight or more risk factors performing 45 percent more poorly than those students in the lower risk groups (three or fewer risks). Thus, it is evident that students who experience elevated risk factors in their environments are significantly more likely to have negative academic outcomes in comparison to their same-aged peers who have experienced fewer risks (Furstenberg et al., 1999).

The research on cumulative risk and its presence in various environmental domains of a student's life is significant, for it highlights how a school environment can act as a domain where students who are at-risk can seek solace. The student who is at risk because of a variable in, for example, their family, or in their neighborhood, can attend a school where the culture is conducive to their attainment of the best education possible, or they can be enrolled in a school where the culture introduces additional risk factors, an accumulation proven to be detrimental to their development as successful adolescents and young adults. Thus, it is imperative that a school provides at-risk students with an environment where the cognitive, social, and emotional needs

of students take precedence over its ability to meet the stringent demands imposed by the neoliberal policies that pervade today's educational climate.

Effect of Neoliberalism on School Culture and Students at Risk

As the previous section demonstrates, today's educational climate is being significantly altered by the neoliberal forces that dominate present-day Western and Canadian society (e.g. Allodi, 2013; Apple, 2000; Arshad-Ayaz, 2008; Baltodano, 2012; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; De Lissovoy, 2013; Jacob, 2001; Marchant & Paulson, 2005; Sloan, 2008; Spring, 2008; Tienken, 2013). These neoliberal influences can be found to infiltrate all aspects of a school's culture, which will be outlined with explicit evidence using Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) four dimensions of school culture. More specifically, the process of neoliberalization has deeply altered the pedagogical scope of Canada's public school system, has led to the underfunding of public schools, has increased teacher and student accountability, and has ultimately engendered a rigid and teacher-centered school environment.

Educational scope under neoliberalism. As highlighted previously, neoliberal education reforms have eschewed public education's traditional role of promoting democratic and social consciousness, in favour of one that predominantly views education as a means of vocational training. As such, neoliberal forces have urged public schools to employ a curriculum that primarily focuses on market oriented STEM fields, and that largely discounts fields concerned with engendering critically and democratically conscious citizens such as humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences (Arshad-Ayaz, 2008). Considering Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) third dimension of school culture, Quality of the Learning Environment, such a shift in pedagogical scope leads to a school culture that fails to promote and offer a well-rounded curriculum, concerned with instilling in students a wide breadth of knowledge. A school culture

that merely conceives education as a form of vocational training, and that overlooks the importance of ingraining in students a critical consciousness, and of offering them a well-rounded curriculum, is one that does not afford students "meaningful, cognitively challenging experiences" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008, p. 141).

Disinvested public school system. As Canada's public education system increasingly faces financial instability as a result of neoliberal trends, underfunded and disinvested public schools are struggling to meet the pedagogical needs and demands of their students (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). Reflecting on Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) fourth dimension of school culture, Student-Centered Focus, it is evident that financially strapped Canadian public schools do not have the financial resources to address the growing needs of a progressively multicultural and diverse student body (e.g. Swain & Lapkin, 2005), with a variety of cognitive and social needs and abilities. Essentially, neoliberal austerity measures and defunding of public education has led to a school culture where the opportunity for a student-centered focus on services and curriculum individuation is increasingly difficult as the available financial resources are spread increasingly thin.

Moreover, decreased funding of public schools has forced schools to compensate in several ways. For example, schools are forced to decrease the number of teachers and resource support staff they employ on a full-time and part-time basis as a result of annual budget cuts (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). This decrease in teaching and resource positions available within public school boards in Canada has resulted in both new and seasoned teachers and staff feeling insecure about the availability of their future placements within schools of their choice (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). When considering Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) Professional Orientation dimension, it can be posited that such factors are unlikely to

elicit a positive school climate that encourages teachers' "professional growth and development centered on student learning" (p. 140). In addition, a reduced number of teaching staff have a tendency to feel overworked and underappreciated, thus taking away from the sense of positivity in the professional attitudes that characterize and contribute to a school's culture (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012).

In addition to this increase in employment anxiety, teachers are faced with larger classrooms in order to account for less staff, sometimes teaching upwards of 35 to 44 students in one Canadian classroom (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). These larger classrooms lend to a school culture where teachers are afforded less opportunity to connect with students individually, and less time to spend creating appropriate curriculum-based work that meets the needs of all of their students. The impact of these issues can be better understood when one considers Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) third component of school culture, Quality of Learning Environment, which explains that positive school cultures are fostered by the degree to which students are afforded opportunity to be involved in meaningful interactions with teachers inside and outside of the classroom. Thus, with increasingly limited time available for individual student-teacher interactions in school, there will be less opportunity for meaningful student-teacher moments to unfold.

The culmination of such factors is a school culture unfit to address the pedagogical needs of at-risk students, as it disregards the existence of a diverse student body, and inhibits the development of positive and meaningful teacher-student relationships. For, educational reforms that impede on a school's financial ability to provide students with sufficient pedagogical support, inherently overlook the various cognitive and social abilities that exist within each classroom (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). As elucidated by Tomlinson and McTighe, teachers:

stand before students of advanced ability and students who come trailing disabilities, students from poverty, and students from plenty, students who dream bold dreams and student who do not believe dreams are worth their time, students who speak a language of power and students to whom that language is unfamiliar, students who are compliant and those who challenge authority on every hand, students who trust and those who are damaged and devoid of trust. (p. 16)

Essentially, by progressively disinvesting in public schools, neoliberal reforms have generated a public school system that is increasingly incapable of fostering a school culture that acknowledges and welcomes student diversity, and that is equipped with the necessary financial resources, staff, and curriculum to meet their ever-varied pedagogical and emotional needs. It is evident that such a school environment is suited most to those students who enjoy the many virtues and comforts associated with being from a middle class background, as opposed to those whose home life renders them in desperate need of positive and supportive interactions and experiences.

As several studies illustrate (e.g. Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007; Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997), one cannot underestimate the profound role teachers play in the lives of their students, especially those who are most vulnerable to attrition and dropping out. In examining the effects of school culture on the motivation and academic achievement of 282 at-risk African American middle school students through the use of surveys, Fenzel and O'Brennan (2007) illustrate that the students who perceived their teachers as nurturing and supportive, were significantly more likely to be intrinsically motivated to succeed at school. In fact, the participants rated the quality of their relationship with their teachers as more crucial to their level of academic engagement and academic success than the quality of their peer relations (Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007).

Furthermore, in a study conducted by Vallerand, Fortier and Guay (1997), Quebec high school students who dropped out were surveyed in an attempt to reveal the nature of the relationships they had with their school's teachers and staff. In their study, the authors uncovered that the majority of students who dropped out expressed significant dissatisfaction with the relationships they had with their school's teachers, as they believed that their teachers failed to ingrain in them a sense of academic competence and autonomy. Additionally, Vallerand and colleagues also discovered that such students possessed very low levels of self-determined motivation to succeed in school.

According to the authors, the lack of self-determined motivation found in these students who dropped out is proposed to be attributed to the type of relationship they perceived to exist between themselves and their teachers (Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997). More specifically, these students identified one main factor that exists within these student-teacher relationships that is not conducive to the fostering of their sense of competence and autonomy, namely: a controlling teaching approach (e.g. not being given choices, but instead being told what to do). Essentially, the less positive and more controlling a student-teacher relationship was perceived to be by the student, the less positive the students self-perceptions of competence and autonomy, and consequently, the lower their levels of self-determined motivation, something found to be essential in driving a student towards academic completion. The more a teacher has to deal with issues in their increasingly large classrooms, the more likely it is that they will revert to authoritarian, or inflexible, disciplinary measures in order to maintain order in a room full of students with an array of learning styles (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Accountability measures. As underlined previously, stemming from a deep concern over the ability of Canadian public schools and teachers to effectively educate students

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neoliberal education reforms have enforced rigid accountability measures in an attempt to enhance the efficiency of public schools and teachers (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). As elucidated by Tienken (2013), rather than enriching students' academic experiences, such measures have instead resulted in an unyielding, "one-size-fits-all" (p. 305) standardized curriculum. Furthermore, as numerous studies reveal, these accountability measures merely advantage white students who enjoy a middle class upbringing (e.g. Allodi, 2013; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; De Lissovoy, 2013; Jacob, 2001; Marchant & Paulson, 2005; Tienken, 2013). Additionally, given the drastic consequences of failing to meet these highly biased measures and standards, Canadian public school teachers are pressured to "teach to the test", thus limiting the scope of knowledge engendered to their students (Tienken, 2013; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012).

Today's curricular emphasis on accountability measures, and the significant ramifications and pressures exerted by them, has led Canadian public school teachers to have less control over the curriculum, reducing their sense of professional autonomy and leaving less room for creativity (Skerrett & Hargreaves, 2008). Furthermore, the severe consequences associated with not fulfilling these measures have also engendered a highly stressful work environment for teachers (McCarthey, 2008). For instance, through her interviews of 18 public school teachers, McCarthey revealed that today's curricular "emphasis on testing...caused stress and affected teachers' sense of themselves as professionals" (p. 467). In her analysis on the impact accountability measures have on teachers, educators credited today's recent emphasis on standardized testing for eroding their sense of agency in the workplace, and for alienating them from the curriculum that they are compelled to adopt. In fact, teachers have expressed a "sense of powerlessness" (p. 488) due to being "enmeshed in a complexity of forces that were beyond their

control" (p. 488). Finally, by covertly labelling teachers as failures, incapable of enriching student knowledge and learning, the author posits that accountability measures have also damaged teachers' professional self-esteem. Considering Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) first dimension of school culture, Professional Orientation, it is clear that such a school climate is not conducive to yielding confident and motivated teachers whose professional goals are congruent to the enrichment of students' academic experiences. Instead, such a climate thwarts teachers' sense of self-efficacy and autonomy, and mitigates their ability to construct an engaging and creative curriculum.

Moreover, mandated accountability measures have also been found to garner a significant amount of opposition among school teachers and staff members (Skerrett & Hargreaves, 2008). As elucidated by Skerrett and Hargreaves, staff of both Canadian and American public schools have expressed a great deal of hostility towards standardized tests, as many teachers, especially younger ones, have grown wary over the pedagogical worth of such measures, and the effect they have had on their professional autonomy. Additionally, given the pervasiveness and inflated importance of these tests, accountability measures have superseded the purported values and goals of public schools. In light of such factors, it is evident that the neoliberal emphasis on standardized testing and accountability measures has deterred the Organizational Structure (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008) of public schools. Essentially, neoliberal education reforms have engendered a school environment where there is little consensus over the curriculum, and where outside forces deeply distort and dictate a school's objectives and values.

In addition, as mentioned previously, the intense pressures exerted by such culturally biased measures and the associated consequences of not meeting them, has led several teachers to merely teach students the material that will be included in standardized exams (Tienken, 2013;

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Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012). The end result is a top-down, rote-based teaching style, overly concerned with ingraining in students a superficial understanding of course materials. When considering Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) third component of school culture, Quality of the Learning Environment, it is clear that accountability measures do little to cultivate a school climate that instills in students a well-rounded and complex understanding of diverse subject matter. Additionally, the test-prep curriculum that accountability measures support also instil a school environment bereft of the qualities of Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) fourth dimension of school culture, Student-Centered Focus. This is the case, as in such a school culture, the pedagogical and social needs of students are secondary to the curriculum's fulfillment of the standards enforced by such measures.

Ultimately, accountability measures have helped to propagate a school culture that overlooks the pedagogical concerns of at-risk students by placing the demands of inherently biased, and pedagogically questionable, standardized tests over the needs of students in dire need of a supportive and attentive school environment. As elucidated by Marchant and Paulson (2005),

> [r]esearch repeatedly yields two findings related to instruction and high stakes testing: teachers tend to narrow the scope of their curriculum to that which is tested, and they tend to abandon more innovative teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and creative projects in favor of more traditional lecture and recitation. (p. 11)

In addition, Hursh (2007a) alarmingly highlights that under such stringent accountability systems, public school teachers are encouraged to focus their energy on "raising the test scores of those students who are closest to passing the standardized tests" (p. 506), while neglecting students who are least likely to pass the exams. Thus, standardized testing is eroding the

curricular quality of public schools by emphasizing the significance of raising test scores, as opposed to focusing on the pedagogical concerns of those who require the most support, namely those students most at-risk.

Furthermore, while visiting urban schools across the United States, Kozol (2005) uncovered that underprivileged students and students of colour receive an education that very few middle-class and upper-class families would deem acceptable for their children. The author maintains that with today's relentless emphasis on increasing students' test scores under any circumstances, the "failing" schools attended by impoverished and minority students are subject to an "ordering regime", in which students are "subjected to behaviorist approaches to teaching and learning" (Hursh, 2007b, p. 303). Such pedagogical approaches, Kozol (2005) asserts, are akin to those "commonly employed in penal institutions and drug-rehabilitation programs, as a way of altering the attitudes and learning styles of Black and Hispanic children" (p. 65). Under today's accountability-focused public school system, an "educational apartheid system" (Kozol, 2005, p. 87) has emerged, where underprivileged students are subject to a "drill and kill" (Hursh, 2007b, p. 304) approach to education, while privileged students, "within the limits of the federal testing regime" (Hursh, 2007b, p. 304), are offered a more satisfactory curriculum.

Additionally, in her interviews of American K-12 teachers, McCarthey (2008) unveiled that teachers of low-income schools feel a great deal more pressure to raise the test scores of their students than teachers of high-income schools, and are also significantly less capable of dealing with such stress. Because high-income schools attract teachers with a great deal more confidence, experience, and job security than low-income schools, educators of high-income schools feel less inclined to meet the stringent demands of accountability measures. More specifically, being more experienced and stable than low-income teachers, high-income teachers

followed a more flexible and creative curriculum than their colleagues of low-income schools. The ardent fear of losing their jobs, however, compelled low-income teachers to strictly adhere to the demands of such measures. In essence, the standardized measures that have infiltrated today's public school system reinforce, as opposed to reduce, educational inequalities by suppressing teachers' abilities and drive to effectively teach students who require a more creative and individualized curriculum that attends to their unique pedagogical needs.

Moreover, in a study examining the impact graduation tests have on students' academic performances and dropout rates, Jacob (2001) unveiled that states that did not employ graduation tests enjoyed significantly less dropout rates than those that did enforce such tests. However, the author observed that "graduation tests have no appreciable effect on the probability of dropping out for the average student, [although] they seem to increase the dropout rate among the lowest achieving students" (p. 116). In actuality, students in the bottom-decile in states that administered graduation tests were 33 percent more likely to drop out of school than peers of comparable circumstances in states that did not carry out such tests. In light of these findings, the author concludes that standardized tests "primarily affect low-achieving students, who disproportionately come from economically disadvantaged and racial minority groups" (p. 117).

Similarly, in their examination of how accountability measures affect the graduation rates of American public school students, Marchant and Paulson (2005) discovered that states that did not require graduation exams averaged a 72 percent graduation rate, while states that did require such exams averaged only a 64 percent graduation rate. Importantly, the authors have uncovered that being of minority status and of low SES backgrounds significantly predicted students' performances of these tests. Given the profound effect such measures have on at-risk students, who have "worked, perhaps harder than most, to overcome obstacles, it seems unconscionable to

establish a policy that places a potentially insurmountable barrier between them and a diploma" (p. 11). Essentially, these studies reveal that accountability measures have propagated school cultures that, in attempting to fulfill imposed accountability demands, have in turn imposed barriers to learning on the most vulnerable of their students, those at risk of academic failure and attrition based on their circumstances in life.

In short, this chapter provided an overview of what constitutes a school's culture, and outlined the various characteristics and factors that embody students who are most at risk of suffering from adverse academic experiences. Additionally, an illustration of a school culture enmeshed with neoliberal values was offered, as well as a depiction of how such a school environment is detrimental to the academic experiences of at-risk students. It has become clear that the neoliberal process has significantly influenced the pedagogical scope and objectives of Canada's public school system, ultimately yielding an educational climate unsuitable for students who thrive most in schools that recognize and aim to fulfill students' diverse pedagogical needs. The final chapter will explore the similarities between a school culture in line with neoliberal objectives and values, and Freire's (1970) conception of "banking education".

Chapter 3: Freire's Banking Education and Today's Neoliberal School System

The previous chapter offered a depiction of a school culture entrenched with neoliberal values, and offered reasoning as to how such an educational climate is unconducive to the fostering of positive academic experiences for vulnerable students. The following chapter will elucidate how neoliberal education reforms have cultivated a school culture alarmingly similar to Freire's (1970) notion of "banking education". Additionally, this chapter will offer a brief exploration of what a school culture conducive to the academic achievement of at-risk students would resemble.

Banking-and Problem-Posing Education

In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) maintained that traditional pedagogy served to reinforce the dichotomy between the oppressed and the oppressors, and helped cultivate a dehumanizing society. This is the case, Freire maintained, as the rigid and autocratic nature of conventional pedagogy significantly impedes on a student's "pursuit of self-affirmation" (p. 55), and thus ultimately oppresses them. Furthermore, Freire warns that the oppressed have internalized crippling defamations incessantly declared by their exploiters.

More specifically, as a result of constant accusations of being unintelligent, and unproductive members of society, Freire (1970) posits that the oppressed begin to believe that they are in fact inferior to their oppressors. This belief reinforces the feeling that the exploitative nature of their oppressive society is inevitable, while any attempts to change their circumstances are deemed futile. As a result, the oppressed "fatalistically accept their exploitation" (p. 64), and are ingrained to "prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by freedom" (p. 48). This false reality is supported and disseminated, Freire asserts, through an exploitative and marginalizing education system.

Freire (1970) referred to such an oppressive pedagogical system as "banking education", which predominantly serves to reinforce the polarity that exists between the oppressor and the oppressed. Under a banking education system, students are likened to mere "listening objects" (p. 71) that must passively and unquestionably store, or "bank", the knowledge transmitted to them by their educators. Students, then, are reduced to being passive and inert receptacles of knowledge that fail to develop a critical consciousness as well as the recognition that they have the potential to acquire, hold, and transmit learning that is worthwhile. As such, by preventing the development of critical thinking amongst students, and by encouraging complacency, banking pedagogy ultimately fails to equip the oppressed with the tools necessary to question and transform their oppressed state and their oppressive society. As Freire elucidates, "the capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power...serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (Freire, 1970, p. 73).

As an alternative to banking education, Freire (1970) proposes problem-posing education as a path towards the development of critical consciousness. Problem-posing education can be best understood as a constant dialogue through which knowledge is disseminated by teachers and students alike, with the recognition that both parties can learn while they teach. According to Freire, the problem-posing educator and student both "create...the conditions under which knowledge" (p. 81) is transmitted. Essentially, through increased involvement and commitment, students within a problem-posing education system are no longer passive recipients of oppression, but instead are encouraged to respond to the "problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world" (p. 81).

Parallels between Banking Education and the Neoliberal Conception of Pedagogy

Although Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was written nearly half a century ago, his notion of banking education uncannily parallels the state of education today. Under today's neoliberal educational climate, students are indeed reduced to mere "listening objects" (p. 71), as pressures from accountability measures have yielded a curriculum exceedingly concerned with implanting in students facts that would chiefly allow them to pass standardized exams, as opposed to cultivating in them a rich understanding of subject matter (e.g. Allodi, 2013; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; De Lissovoy, 2013; Jacob, 2001; Marchant & Paulson, 2005; Tienken, 2013). As elucidated by Torrance (2015), students of today's neoliberal school climate are urged to "bank" knowledge that standardized tests both "organise and legitimate" (p. 8), hence alienating and distancing students from not only the learning process itself, but the curricular content as well.

Additionally, those who are not able to adhere to the stringent conception of a "learned student" that today's school culture disseminates (Torrance, 2015), due to numerous potential risk factors, are at a significant disadvantage. Under today's increasingly disinvested public school system, where teachers are expected to educate a growing number and progressively diverse amount of students, financially strapped schools are not equipped to meet the individual needs of their students. Thus, today's school climate is one that affords teachers and schools little opportunity to attend to all of their students in such a way as to capture the essence of what will motivate them and foster their resiliency, especially those who are at risk of straying furthest from the norm. The end result is a stringent, teacher-centered school culture, which emphasizes rote learning as opposed to the development of a critical consciousness, and which rewards students innately equipped to succeed in such an educational climate, while oppressing those in

desperate need of a responsive and student-centered school environment. Such a school culture not only reinforces today's educational gap, but also mitigates at-risk students' (i.e. oppressed students) ability to challenge and overcome their pedagogical struggles.

It is posited that an education system with certain elements of Freire's (1970) notion of problem-posing education would be a relevant and an appropriate alternative to today's education system, which has been marred by the neoliberal process. As illustrated in the previous chapters, today's Canadian education system is progressively moving away from a student-centered approach to learning, towards a teacher-centered school culture that circumvents students' individual needs and concerns. Congruent with Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) fourth dimension of school culture, Student-Centered Focus, a problem-posing educational climate is one that recognizes the multitude of students' individual difficulties and interests. Such a school culture would enforce a curriculum in harmony with all students' pedagogical needs, as opposed to one that considers the individual differences in students as something that is taxing and effortful for the educational system, instead of something that is to be acknowledged and appropriately supported through a student-centered approach to learning.

Moreover, in line with Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) third dimension of school culture, Quality of the Learning Environment, a problem-posing educational climate (Freire, 1970) would encourage students to engage in positive interactions with teachers, and school staff members. This is the case, as problem-posing education dispels the notion of the classroom as a rigid environment, where inert students are force-fed facts undiscerningly put forth by their teachers, in favour of a conception of the classroom as a setting where both teachers and students are equally engaged and involved in the process of learning.

Essentially, it becomes apparent that Freire's (1970) criticisms of the education system of his time are in line with what is oppressive about Canada's current neoliberal-influenced school system. As highlighted by Freire, a pedagogical approach bereft of the voices of all students, and centered on the transmission of rote facts and knowledge, is not conducive to the development of critical thinking in students. Instead, such a pedagogical approach merely widens the gap between those students who are at risk and those who are able to keep up with the stringent demands of a teacher-centered and rote-based approach to learning. It must be reiterated that this teacher-centered approach to learning is significantly detrimental to those students who are most at risk of experiencing academic difficulties. Thus, unfortunately, as we have seen with Freire, it seems as though it is not a new development to oppress students by denying them the type of learning most conducive to fostering meaningful student-teacher interactions and opportunities to develop critical thinking. Instead, it is currently the norm to place students who are most in need of help and support in an educational system where they are at risk of being overlooked, due to the current system's adherence to neoliberal policies that make it increasingly difficult to actualize a student-centered approach to learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the neoliberal process has significantly altered Canada's education system, and subsequently generated a school culture ill-equipped to meet the pedagogical needs and concerns of students least likely to succeed academically (e.g. Allodi, 2013; Apple, 2000; Arshad-Ayaz, 2008; Baltodano, 2012; Bhardwaj, 2010; Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; De Lissovoy, 2013; Jacob, 2001; Marchant & Paulson, 2005; Sloan, 2008; Spring, 2008; Tienken, 2013). Over the past few decades, neoliberal education reforms have progressively engendered a public education system consumed with ingraining in students marketable forms of knowledge, with the hope of cultivating a student body sufficiently equipped to meet the demands of an increasingly global and knowledge-based economy. The end result of such reforms is a marginalized, pedagogically skewed, disinvested, and accountability oriented education system.

Through this work, it has become evident that the educational climate such a school system perpetuates, is one that is significantly unconducive to the enrichment of students' academic experiences. For, when considering Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) dimensions of school culture, namely Professional Orientation, Organizational Structure, Quality of the learning Environment, and Student-Centered Focus, the negative impact of neoliberalism can be traced in each of the four areas said to make up a school's climate, as shown in Table 1. Although such a school culture adversely affects the academic experiences of all students, it has been shown to be especially destructive to the academic careers of students who thrive most in a nurturing and uplifting educational climate, where students' individual curricular and social needs are recognized and supported.

However, there is still hope in Canada, for in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 8th report on the promotion of educational equality, the Councils of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) acknowledged the "rights of students to be free from discrimination, encompass[ing] not only access to education, but also the quality of the educational experience itself" (CMEC, 2012, p. 2). As this report suggests, those in the federal government who are responsible for Canada's education system, are aware of the importance of a free and equitable school system for all Canadian students. Based on the current study, it is strongly recommended that this in fact be made a priority, with Canada's government being true to their own words, and striving to provide a truly inclusive pedagogical system "centered on the best interests of the students, promoting social cohesion, belonging, equal opportunities for success, and active participation in learning" (CMEC, 2012, p. 14).

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Table 1

Impact of Neoliberalism on School Culture using Schoen and Teddlie's (2008) Four Dimensions

of School Culture

I. Professional Orientation	II. Organizational Structure
- Lower teacher job security; - Teachers feeling anxious/overworked; - Less teacher autonomy; - Less teacher belief in self-efficacy.	- Little consensus on curriculum; - Outside forces distort and dictate school values and objectives;
III. Quality of the Learning Environment	IV. Student-Centered Focus
- Skewed curriculum (focus on vocational training); - Increase in students per classroom; - Decrease in meaningful interactions between students and teachers; - Teaching to the test; - Less complex/meaningful understanding of subject matter.	- Lack of financial resources to attend to individual student's needs; - Accountability measures take precedence over student's pedagogical needs; - Accountability measures take precedence over student's social needs;