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## *Exposing the Spectre Resisting Neoliberal Education Reforms in Manitoba*

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### Abstract

*In 2021, the government of Manitoba made their plans to reform public education overt with Bill 64. Although the legislation was withdrawn as a result of immense opposition from critically engaged Manitobans, the government did not abandon its neoliberal reform plans. Instead, the spectre of Bill 64 now lingers through a variety of new educational initiatives. In response, People for Public Education is working to keep the fight against the privatization of public education alive. Through consciousness raising and by constructing hopeful and imaginative visions of the future, this nascent community advocacy group strives to protect public education from the deleterious effects of neoliberalism. In this article, I reflexively interrogate and critically analyze the emergence, evolving objectives, values, and actions of People for Public Education for the purpose of inspiring future resistance against neoliberal education reforms.*



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“This is just lipstick on a pig!” lamented one member when describing the Manitoba government’s newly released *K to 12 Education Action Plan*. Published in April 2022—mere months after the withdrawal of the heavily opposed and criticized *Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act*—this new education action plan outlined the government’s future vision for public education in Manitoba. A small group of teachers, researchers, and graduate students, however, were skeptical of the government’s proposed “path forward”; we wondered if the government truly had the best interests of the public at heart after the Bill 64 debacle alongside years of underfunding public education. After gathering together in a small meeting room on Selkirk Avenue in Winnipeg’s North End, we started critically analyzing the new *K to 12 Education Action Plan*. The insidious neoliberal discourses that pervaded this new document were exposed within minutes of our gathering. Although Bill 64 had been defeated only a few months prior, it became evident that the ghost of that legislation—and of the government’s neoliberal education reform plans—had continued to linger. Those gathered at that late May 2022 meeting did not know it at the time, but this would be the first official meeting of People for Public Education (PfPE). What we did know is that we had to expose the spectre that continues to haunt us.

This article is a critical analysis of PfPE, a nascent community advocacy group committed to promoting public education in Manitoba, Canada. Typically, research on resisting neoliberal education reforms focuses on the work of teachers’ unions (Winton, 2018). With the notable exceptions of Winton (2018), Winton and Brewer (2014), and Winton and Milani (2017), the current literature has under-explored the work of advocacy groups within education (McDonnell, 2009), especially in the Canadian context. Therefore, this article aims to address the lack of theory and research on advocacy groups within education by pursuing a deeper understanding of how one particular community advocacy group emerged and functions within its specific sociopolitical context.

In this article, I begin with a discussion of my positionality as a founding member of PfPE. I then discuss neoliberalism and education reform with a focus on how the emergence of PfPE has been historically contingent on education reforms in Manitoba. Finally, I critically analyze the evolving objectives, values, actions, and challenges facing PfPE through a theoretical framework of resistance. With the ever-increasing neoliberalization of education, critically theorizing public education advocacy efforts is more important than ever if we are to collectively resist the commodification, marketization, and privatization of public education. Ultimately, the purpose of this article is to both “build new knowledge about the social world in order to stimulate new practices” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020, pp. 6–7) and to inspire future resistance against neoliberal education reforms in other contexts and jurisdictions.

### Positionality

Just as I cannot divorce PfPE from the sociopolitical context in which it has emerged, so too do multiple social, cultural, political, and historical forces discursively construct and shape my positionality within the context of this article (Buchanan, 2015). Therefore, a brief discussion of my positionality is necessary to account for my bias, power, privilege, and perspective, lest this critical analysis become overly parochial (Bocking, 2022). Most notably, I am a founding and active member of PfPE. Accordingly, the following analysis of this advocacy group is inherently shaped by my familiarity and “insider” experiences as a participant (Hillier & Milne, 2016). Further, I am currently a public school teacher in Winnipeg, Manitoba. My daily lived teaching

experiences within an increasingly neoliberalized public education system (Giroux, 2013; Tuck, 2013)—compounded by the devaluation of my work as a music educator (Goble, 2021)—are evidence of the ongoing assault on public education throughout Manitoba. Additionally, I am currently a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. My involvement with PfPE arises at the intersection of being both a “teacher” and “student” in these respective settings alongside my belief in the importance of public education within a democratic society. Finally, as a white settler male on Treaty 1 territory, I bring immense privilege to my public education advocacy and activism (as is critically explored in greater detail below). As a result, I acknowledge that other members of PfPE embody a range of positionalities and therefore may approach this analysis from a fundamentally different perspective. As such, I do not speak on behalf of PfPE. However—recognizing the limits of self-knowledge and my capacity to give an account of both myself and PfPE (Butler, 2005)—it is my hope that this situated analysis will inspire future resistance against neoliberal education reforms.

## Context

### *Neoliberalism and Education Reform*

Generally understood as a diverse set of ideologies, policies, and discourses, neoliberalism privileges and venerates the free market as the ultimate arbiter within society (Ross & Gibson, 2006). Neoliberalism purportedly increases efficiency, innovation, autonomy, and consumer choice through its emphases on deregulation, privatization, and a reduction in government oversight and spending. However, despite the stated benefits of neoliberalism, its sanctification of private profits at the expense of the public good both legitimates and intensifies social and economic inequities (Moore et al., 2021). It is not the public or common good that drives policy within a neoliberal framework but avarice and the incessant accumulation of capital at all costs. Moreover, neoliberalism functions as a governing rationality through its economization of all facets of life (W. Brown, 2015). In this way, “neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*” (W. Brown, 2015, p. 31). This reconfiguring of humans as *homo oeconomicus* functions as an ontological threat because “at stake in neoliberalism is nothing more, nor less, than the *form of our existence*—the way in which we are led to conduct ourselves, to relate to others and to ourselves” (Dardot & Laval, 2009/2013, p. 3). Thus, the public is not merely subsumed within the private through this process of neoliberalization but is wholly devoured within its governing rationality.

Public education has been a primary target of neoliberal reforms because of the foundational impact it has in fostering critical citizens as well as its market size (Ross & Gibson, 2006). Within this neoliberal discourse, “free-market reforms refuses to imagine public education as the provision of the public good and social right and reduces education to meet the immediate needs of the economy” (Giroux, 2013, p. 460). As such, central to the neoliberal project of education reform is defunding, destabilizing, and dismantling public education for the purpose of privatization. This subsequently creates opportunities for profit at the expense of the public good (Ross & Vinson, 2013). For example, public divestment from public education enables private businesses and corporations to profit from their investments into various aspects of education, including curriculum, food programs, standardized testing materials, and infrastructure (Moore et al., 2021; Yoon & Winton, 2020). Additionally, transferring the responsibility of education in its

funding, governance, design, and curriculum to private entities authorizes corporate interests to dictate how schools should be structured and what should be learned (Whiteley, 2017). Further, neoliberalism embodies a form of social Darwinism wherein only the wealthy can access a fully funded and robust education by rejecting the notion of education as a public good based on the market values of competition, consumer choice, and individual responsibility (Yoon, 2016). Conversely, the poorest people are labelled as irresponsible and left to fend for themselves, resulting in ever-expanding social and economic inequities (Frankel, 2012). Finally, student learning and knowledge within a neoliberal education paradigm are technicized, commodified, and reduced to serving the needs of the market. In this way, neoliberalism frames education as “human capital formation. [Education] is the business of forming the skills and attitudes needed by a productive workforce—productive in the precise sense of producing an ever-growing mass of profits for the market economy” (Connell, 2013, p. 104). Consequently, these neoliberal education reforms result in immense social, economic, and educational inequalities through the accumulation of wealth, power, and control in the hands of the elite (Samoukovic, 2013; Tuck, 2013).

### *Neoliberal Education Reforms in Manitoba*

It is necessary to first outline Manitoba’s political and educational context in order to understand how and why PfPE emerged to resist neoliberal education reforms in the province. As Winton and Brewer (2014) state, “the understanding of possibilities for resistance and domination is wholly made of the cultural resources available in a given historical moment, thus a full explication of the temporal context is important” (p. 1092). In other words, PfPE’s emergence and tactics of resistance against neoliberal education reforms are contingent on historical context (Winton, 2018).

Despite its relatively small population, accounting for only 3.6% of the total population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022), the province of Manitoba has not been immune to the deleterious effects of neoliberalism. Neoliberal policies and reforms have been enacted in the province by both the right-leaning Progressive Conservative (PC) Party and the left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP) since the late 1970s (Camfield, 2018). This has included, but has not been limited to, the privatization of publicly owned corporations, the defunding of social services, personal and corporate tax cuts, wage increase restrictions, and a reduction in public-sector employment (Janzen & Heringer, 2023). However, the extent to which PC and NDP governments have embodied and reinforced neoliberal ideals has varied greatly. As Camfield (2018) states, the NDP government of 1999 to 2016 can be understood to have embraced “social democratic themes subordinated to an overall acceptance of neoliberalism . . . it should be seen as a government of mild neoliberal consolidation, in contrast to the preceding PC government of neoliberal reorientation” (p. 106). Funding for social services, including public education, was a primary area of investment for the NDP government during their 17-year rule (Yoon et al., 2020). Thus, the election of a majority PC government in 2016 marked a significant shift away from the social democratic ideals of the NDP government and toward economic austerity (Saunders, 2019). For example, even as the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the provincial healthcare system—already underprepared and overwhelmed due to the PC government’s destructive 2017 healthcare reforms and cuts—the government continued along its path of austerity in an attempt to balance the budget (Hajer & Fernandez, 2021).

In 2019, public education came into the crosshairs of the PC government in the form of a commissioned review of Manitoba’s Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system. This review was tasked with “modernizing”—a code word for neoliberal reform (Lenardão, 2008)—the province’s

education system as a response to the manufactured crisis of the high cost of education, low test scores, poor teaching, and unnecessary bureaucracy (Heringer, 2021; Janzen & Heringer, 2023). Additionally, the review was a purported attempt to “set students up for success—in the workforce, in post-secondary education, and in life in general” (Government of Manitoba, 2019, p. 2). After receiving the review commissioners’ report in March 2020, the PC government officially responded in the spring of 2021 with the release of *Better Education Starts Today*, a report outlining the government’s priority actions, as well as *Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act*. With sweeping reforms that would impact all facets of education in the province, including changes to governance structures, curriculum, taxation and funding, financial administration, collective bargaining, and the role of homeschooling and independent schools, Bill 64 made the PC government’s neoliberal education reform plans both explicit and overt (Bees, 2021).

Bill 64 was an attempt to “modernize” public education according to the neoliberal values of productivity, high performance, accountability, efficiency, standardization, individualism, and employability (Ball, 2016; Heringer & Janzen, 2023). Notably, this legislation also proposed abolishing local school boards and their locally elected school trustees. In their place, a centralized and appointed—and therefore not elected—Provincial Education Authority board would be created to provide oversight and accountability within the reformed education system. However, Bill 64 was met with immense scrutiny and collective resistance from across the province. A variety of groups and individuals, including the teachers’ union, school boards, school divisions, parent councils, educational leaders, teachers, researchers, and concerned citizens from both rural and urban communities, organized in opposition to Bill 64. In the face of this resistance and political backlash, the PC government withdrew the proposed legislation. This was a significant victory for public education in Manitoba.

As a follow-up to Bill 64, the PC government published the *K to 12 Education Action Plan*. The four guiding principles of this document, reportedly inspired by critical feedback from Manitobans in response to Bill 64, include high quality learning, student engagement and well-being, excellence in teaching and leadership, and responsive systems (Government of Manitoba, 2021). The April 2022 release of this action plan went largely unnoticed by the public, potentially because the language in the document was much more tempered than that of Bill 64. As Janzen and Heringer (2023) contend, “although the PC government eventually walked back [Bill 64], the government’s reform efforts persist, only now using more palatable language and less public (and more subversive) approaches” (p. 549). Further, there was little publicity around the action plan’s release compared to its 2021 legislation counterpart. The Manitoba Teachers’ Society (2022), the teachers’ union representing Manitoba’s 16,000 public school teachers, stated that it was “cautiously optimistic” about the action plan because many of the policy issues that it opposed in Bill 64, including the removal of principals and vice-principals from the teacher bargaining unit, were discarded. However, not everyone was convinced that the provincial government would suddenly turn away from their neoliberal vision of and for public education. In the weeks following the release of the action plan, two university faculty members invited multiple practicing public school teachers, graduate students, researchers, and faculty members to a critical discussion of the *K to 12 Education Action Plan*. Around a dozen interested individuals, including myself, responded to that invitation, and we gathered for the first time in May 2022.

Our analysis of the *K to 12 Education Action Plan* quickly revealed – perhaps unsurprisingly after years of defunding and denigrating public education – that despite withdrawing Bill 64, the provincial government did not abandon its neoliberal education reform

plans. Instead, its reform attempts simply became much more covert. Our critical analysis during that first meeting immediately drew attention to the action plan's prioritizing of efficiency and accountability (Tuck, 2013), shift toward global competencies (Ruitenbergh, 2019), reductionist and economizing focus on literacy and numeracy (Black & Yasukawa, 2016), emphasis on high and measurable standards based on standardized assessments (Connell, 2013), and proposed development of a fully online high school (Farhadi, 2019; Moore et al., 2021). Worse yet, these neoliberal discourses were veiled in the language of truth and reconciliation, equity, and inclusion (Bees, 2024). Although this was certainly not the first nor only group critical of the provincial government's education policies, our critical analysis revealed once again that the neoliberal spectre embodied by Bill 64 now took corporeal form in the new *K to 12 Education Action Plan*. Knowing that we had to expose the spectre, it was this small group that would become PfPE.

### People for Public Education in Theory

Who and what is PfPE? We are a nascent group of educators, academics, parents, and members of the general public committed to promoting public education in Manitoba. Although the group is novel, the premise behind our work is not. Our resistance follows in a long line of several other public education advocacy groups in other provinces, including École Ensemble (Quebec), the Institute for Public Education British Columbia, Nova Scotia Parents for Public Education, People for Education (Ontario), and Support Our Students Alberta. While individuals involved with PfPE bring a diversity of experiences and perspectives to bear on our work, it is worth outlining a theory of resistance to help frame our existence and actions.

Put succinctly, power is not unidimensional. It is not something that emanates from a single source in a "top-down," purely hierarchical manner. To conceive of power in such a way leads toward deterministic and fatalistic assumptions that preclude agency and the possibility of change (Flohr, 2016; Giroux, 1983). Instead, drawing on Foucault (1976/1978), I contend that power is diffuse, omnipresent, and operates throughout society at all times, acting in a network-like fashion. Further, power is continually (re)produced through discourse, the iterative processes, practices, and socially organized frameworks that subjectively construct knowledge, meaning, and reality (Burman, 2017; Paechter, 2001). As such, power is always open to contestation through the cracks that emerge from its ongoing and continual restructuring. In other words, when power is understood as emanating from multiple points via social relations rather than from "on high" through unassailable structural forces, opportunities for agency, resistance, and the construction of counter-discourses are made possible (Waling, 2019).

However, it is important to ensure that addressing the limits of deterministic understandings of power does not devolve into particular forms of voluntarism wherein subjects are understood as completely free, no longer accountable to nor bound by power relations (Flohr, 2016). Recognizing the impossibility of existing outside of power relations, agency and resistance are therefore inherently conditioned, partial, and contingent (Johansson & Lalander, 2012). As Butler (1997) argues at length regarding power and agency:

Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's "own" acting. As a subject *of* power (where "of" connotes both "belonging to" and "wielding"), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power . . . the subject

emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency. (pp. 14–15)

From this understanding of conditioned agency in the context of inescapable power relations, it becomes evident that resistance, as a particular mode of agency, is inherently entwined with power. As Foucault (1976/1978) famously argues, where there is power, there is also resistance. Moreover, “resistance often constitutes the other side of power. Thus, resistance and the struggle for justice and fairness can never be separated from power relations” (Johansson & Lalander, 2012, p. 1085). In other words, it is only through the exercise of power that resistance becomes possible.

Concerning PfPE, although neoliberal education discourses in Manitoba constrain agency and critical consciousness by constructing students “as objectified and homogenous, and as being valued for economic contributions” (Janzen & Heringer, 2023, p. 545), these discourses simultaneously open up the possibility for conditioned agency and collective resistance. This is evidenced through the very formation and existence of PfPE. As previously discussed, PfPE’s first meeting in May 2022 was in direct response to the release of the *K to 12 Education Action Plan*. If power was not exercised by the provincial government in reforming public education according to neoliberal ideals, then PfPE and its concomitant acts of resistance would not have emerged. Therefore, power and resistance are fundamentally intertwined; there is a dialectic relation between the practices of resistance and the power relations through which subjects act (Johansson & Lalander, 2012).

Importantly, the concept of resistance is not merely concerned with that which it is contesting. Rather, resistance is simultaneously focused on reimagining futurity. As Flohr (2016) suggests:

[Resistance] always points beyond itself, to something, which is being resisted. It is, in other words, not a self-contained concept, but always refers to and relies on something else. Yet, if it is to be considered resistance in any meaningful sense of the term it cannot be limited to inconsequential friction in regard to what is being resisted; it must simultaneously point beyond this initial premise; it must point towards the possibility of overcoming it. . . . Resistance can thus be understood as the immanent and irrepressible possibility that the network of power relations, which constitute the field(s) of possible action in society, the contemporary horizon of political possibility, can always be contested and changed. (pp. 39, 51)

Put differently, through its dual orientation toward both the condition of its possibility as well as the possibility of change, the concept of resistance inhabits the liminal space between what is and what might be.

### *PfPE’s Evolving Objectives*

In the beginning, PfPE focused exclusively on advocating for increased funding for public education in light of the provincial government’s chronic and ongoing funding cuts. Evidenced through our first post on X (formerly Twitter) on July 25, 2022, we introduced ourselves by stating that “We are a group of educators, parents, and community members who want to promote consistent, substantive public funding for public education in our province.” However, this initial approach was rightly critiqued by members of the community for not attending to issues of inequity and injustice within the public education system. Generally, PfPE members do believe that public

education is our best hope for fostering critical and creative citizens who can participate in and contribute to a substantive democracy (Winton, 2022). Through ongoing group reflection and critical discussions, however, PfPE has also come to explicitly acknowledge the complex and contradictory ways that public education simultaneously embodies carceral, colonial, and capitalist logics.

In particular, Ennab's (2022) study on Indigenous and Black families' experiences of school safety and policing in Winnipeg, Manitoba demonstrates that "anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism are structured into the education system. Public schools continue as sites of racialized violence and carceral discipline for many Indigenous and Black students" (p. 9). Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) contend that the project of schooling and curriculum in North America promotes imperialist views of the world that simultaneously justify and reinscribe settler colonialism and white supremacy. Relatedly, Justice (2023) argues that "schooling has never been a public good, nor has 'the public good' been its primary goal. Since its origins in the early nineteenth century, schooling has been a *white* good" (p. 154). Thus, to uncritically promote public education in Manitoba is to promote the settler colonial status quo that privileges particular students over others.

Therefore, if we are to work toward social change, "we have to be prepared to confront ourselves, to become *undone* in relation to others, and to accept moments of unknowingness" (Johansson & Lalander, 2012, p. 1086). It is in these "moments of unknowingness," of being discomfited and unsettled, that PfPE has been afforded the humbling opportunity to engage in critical reflexivity, a necessary practice if we wish to engage in more meaningful resistance and political struggle. As a result, our advocacy has shifted over time to include not only issues of inadequate funding but also issues of equity, justice, inclusion, and access. As now summarized by the first objective on the PfPE website, our purpose is "to advocate for a public education system that is equitable, justice-oriented, and accessible to all." For example, despite our sustained opposition to the PC government's effort to eliminate education property taxes because they increase inequities, inefficiencies, and ineffectiveness (Yoon, 2022), we simultaneously acknowledge that the property tax model is one that inherently taxes stolen land to fund schools that legitimate settler colonialism (Carleton, 2023).

In further response to critiques that our initial focus on funding was both limited and limiting, we have adopted the "public school ideal" as outlined by Winton (2022) and Henley and Young (2008). Accordingly, the homepage of the PfPE website now states that "public education should be universally accessible, be publicly funded and free for families, provide equal opportunities for students, engage in public decision-making, and serve the public interest." Although advocating for increased public funding for public education is still a significant part of our mission and objectives, it is in the fuller and more robust public school ideal that we currently situate ourselves. Ultimately, PfPE must continue to be willing to evolve and reimagine itself as a result of our engagement with those who bring unique and critical perspectives to public education advocacy. Owing to our ethical responsibilities to the communities in which we serve, our evolving politics of resistance demonstrates how this is an inherently—and necessarily—dynamic and fluid group. Importantly, our shifting tactics and strategies also have to attend to the dynamic and fluid ways that neoliberalism is unfolding in the Manitoba context, which is further evidence of the dialectic relation between power and resistance.



*Embodying a Stance of "Public Intellectual"*

Because the majority of PfPE members are educators, academics, and researchers, many of us in the group have taken up the stance of “public intellectual” within our politics of resistance. Drawing on Giroux’s (2004, 2013, 2016) development of the concept, a public intellectual is one who—with a deep understanding of the problems that a society faces—uses the tools, skills, and knowledge they have to critique domination, expose injustice, inspire people, and create public spaces where ideas matter. As Morris (2012) opines at length on the role of public intellectuals in society:

That we should act to resist the indignities and injustices of current dominant systems and institutions is not in question; that we can resist is a given; but one of the key, persistent, and pressing pedagogical questions is, of course, ‘how best to resist?’ While there are no prescriptions for best forms of resistance, one of the responsibilities of critical public intellectuals in times of catastrophe is to articulate reasons why educating for and acting toward radical popular democracy, opposition to all forms of exploitation, mobilization of the collective intelligence and imagination, collective construction of knowledge of a better world, and mass mobilizations from below, are crucial contributions to the advancement of current struggles against oppression and for liberation at all levels of society. (p. 649)

Concurrent with neoliberal discourses that instrumentalize, deprofessionalize, and technicize our work as educators in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary contexts (Ball, 2016; Connell, 2013), much of our critical resistance as public intellectuals is fundamentally concerned with speaking truth to power (Said, 2000). As such, “one is obliged to offer critique of policies and practices [one perceives] as problematic in terms of logic or evidence or that will not serve the best interests of school-children and teachers” (Cochran-Smith, 2006, p. 97). I believe, as an individual privileged to teach, research, and work within the field of education, that it is our ethical and moral responsibility to work toward a public education system that is equitable, inclusive, justice-oriented, and accessible to all. In light of harmful and dehumanizing neoliberal education reforms, “academics, teachers, students, parents, community activists, and other socially concerned groups must provide the first line of defense in protecting public and higher education as a resource vital to the moral life of the nation” (Giroux, 2004, p. 340). It is this responsibility that grounds much of our resistance.

*Uniting the Languages of Critique and Possibility for Resistance*

To date, PfPE’s resistance generally fits within two overlapping categories. First, we have endeavoured to contribute to the raising of the critical consciousness of our communities. Inspired by the work of critical pedagogues, we have engaged the public in “conscientization,” which is coming to understand and critique the social conditions and unequal power relations manifest in our lives (Freire, 1968/2000; hooks, 1994). In our roles as public intellectuals, we “are committed to an informed and engaged citizenry. Indeed, [public intellectuals] believe that only if citizens are informed and knowledgeable about the issues can democratic debate flourish and democracy be deepened” (Stein, 2013, p. 15). Specific to our context and objectives, conscientization includes fostering a critical awareness in the community of how neoliberal education reforms and government actions to defund, destabilize, and dismantle public education function as an assault on democratic society (Houser, 2023). Additionally, we have worked to raise critical consciousness

by deconstructing neoliberal discourses that construct schools as factories, students as production workers, teachers as technicians, and education as human capital formation (Ball, 2016; Connell, 2013).

Second, we have striven to construct hopeful and creative counter-narratives that disrupt oppressive neoliberal discourses. Although critique is essential in coming to know and name the unequal power relations manifest in our society, this critique must be followed up with imaginative visions of the future. It is here that our resistance “occupies a threshold between contemporary configurations of power and the possibility that things might be otherwise” (Flohr, 2016, p. 39). As Giroux (2016) reminds us:

Criticism is not the only responsibility of public intellectuals . . . Public intellectuals could work with social movements doing their best to address social problems, provide resources for popular movements, work with other academics to make connections and alliances across and beyond the university, and use their talents to construct policy measures for alternative political movements. (p. 18)

Our hopeful visions are fundamentally inspired by the public school ideal (Henley & Young, 2008; Winton, 2022). This ideal is diametrically opposed to neoliberal education reforms that seek to privatize, economize, and marketize public education. As such, we work to unite the languages of both critique and possibility for the purpose of “awakening public memory, arousing moral awareness, establishing social priorities, developing alternative economic and political models, nourishing intellectual and physical will and ability, and nurturing political agency” (Morris, 2012, p. 654). In this way, it is our hope that our work and resistance do not lead people into cynicism and despair but rather to a place of critical and creative imagination and possibility.

### *Foregrounding Hope as a Precondition of Resistance*

I would be remiss if I did not ground the work of PfPE in the notion of hope. It is easy to despair when the assault on public education is as unrelenting as it is. Confronted with seemingly ceaseless neoliberal education reforms that strip students, teachers, educational leaders, and others of agency (Janzen & Heringer, 2023)—the dehumanizing discourses of which are further compounded by neoliberalism’s economizing political rationality (W. Brown, 2015)—public education advocates are faced with the ever-present threat of descending into cynicism. For PfPE members who teach within the K–12 setting, this threat has become all the more salient as a result of our daily lived teaching experiences in public schools that are underfunded, overcrowded, and increasingly modelled after factories, prisons, or both (Giroux, 2013). However, to not embody hope is to be complicit in the neoliberal systems, structures, and discourses that work to commodify, marketize, and privatize public education. Without hope, we become agents of the status quo.

Specifically, our hope is located in the future vision of a more equitable and just public education system, and therefore society. As educators in various contexts, we are privy to glimpses of this future vision through our students—whether kindergarten students or graduate students—who daily exhibit the criticality and creativity necessary for constructing a more substantive democracy. As Giroux (2004) argues at length regarding the intersection of hope, possibility, and the role of public intellectuals:

Leadership demands a politics and pedagogy that refuses to separate individual problems and experience from public issues and social considerations. Within such a perspective, leadership displaces cynicism with hope, challenges the neo-liberal notion that there are no alternative visions of a better society, and develops a pedagogy of commitment that puts into place modes of literacy in which competency and interpretation provide the basis for actually intervening in the world. Leadership invokes the demand to make the pedagogical more political by linking critical thought to collective action, human agency to social responsibility, and knowledge and power to a profound impatience with a status quo founded upon deep inequalities and injustices. (p. 340)

Ultimately, we embody hope as a precondition for imagining new and equitable ways of supporting, funding, and protecting public education.

### People for Public Education in Action

One of PfPE's first actions came in September 2022 when we hosted a "Picnic for Public Education" at The Forks—a national historic site located at the confluence of the Red River and Assiniboine River—in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Sunday afternoon rally featured a variety of mini-speeches on public education as a public good, how the privatization of public education is manifesting in Manitoba, and the impacts of neoliberal education reforms on students, teachers, schools, and communities. Thus, the purpose of the picnic was to raise awareness about the consequences of defunding public education, to demonstrate the benefits of consistent and substantive public funding for public education, and to offer ideas on ways to create a more equitable and justice-oriented public education system. The speeches were deliberately brief, and attendees were encouraged to engage in critical dialogue with one another during intentional 10-minute gaps between each five-minute speech. Additionally, the rally included a station for attendees to write letters to elected officials, an art station for creative engagement with the rally's themes, and a "wish wall"—a large chalkboard where attendees were encouraged to post sticky notes labelled with their hopes and dreams of what they wanted for and from public education. The rally was attended by a variety of individuals, including politicians, school administrators, school board trustees, teachers, researchers, parents, media, and community members. Aligned with our two main categories of resistance, this event included both a critique of government actions to undermine public education as well as an opportunity to envision hope-filled possibilities of a future with a fully funded public education system.

In September 2023, PfPE hosted its second annual "Picnic for Public Education." However, responding to earlier critiques of our limited focus on education funding as well as to the upcoming provincial election to be held in October 2023, this edition of the picnic focused on educational issues concerning equity and the importance of keeping public education in the public dialogue, respectively. Additionally, PfPE created a guide to help other advocacy organizations, groups, and concerned citizens host their own "Pop Up Picnic for Public Education" on the same date. Although education is the responsibility of provincial governments, neoliberal efforts to undermine public education are concurrent across the country. Therefore, supporting and encouraging other advocacy groups to host their own picnics was an opportunity to demonstrate unity and solidarity in our resistance against neoliberal education reforms.

Because most PfPE members are educators in some capacity, many of us gravitate toward engaging in various forms of popular education and community outreach. This has included using

the “privatization playbook” (Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, 2023) as a critical educational resource to help organizations and individuals better understand how privatization is currently being played out in Manitoba. For example, using the privatization playbook as a template, we presented at a labour group meeting with over 40 affiliate unions in attendance. This presentation allowed us the opportunity to assist others in coming to know how neoliberalism has been manifest in Manitoba’s public education system as well as to build solidarity with other groups that have also been experiencing the negative impacts of funding cuts and privatization. Additionally, alongside one metro Winnipeg school division, the University of Manitoba, the University of Winnipeg, and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, we co-sponsored a free public lecture on privatization and public education in Canada. Finally, we hosted a two-part book club that proved beneficial not only in raising the critical consciousness of community members but also in making new connections and building solidarity. Through these various public education and community outreach events, PfPE has continued to expand both in size and influence.

Owing to the skills, knowledge, and positionalities of PfPE members, much of our ongoing public education advocacy has come in the form of writing and dialogue. Once again drawing on the notion of the public intellectual alongside the desire to unite the languages of critique and possibility, we have aimed to make our writing rigorous yet accessible (Gerstl-Pepin & Reyes, 2015). We have refused to “dumb down” our writing as if the public is incapable of understanding, nor have we believed that oversimplification necessary for the sake of the reader. Instead, our writing has attempted to make complex ideas meaningful and relevant for the purpose of engaging a larger audience. Put differently, our writing as public intellectuals has aimed to connect, not separate, people and ideas (Nash, 2015). As argued at length by Houser (2023):

We cannot assume others will understand why we are concerned with these matters . . . Thus, educating about the importance of resisting and transforming dominant impulses and practices must be accompanied by thoughtful scaffolding and compelling illustrations as to why these factors are problematic in the first place. (p. 16)

Therefore, we have published several op-eds, articles, and letters to the editor in various print and online media regarding a range of educational issues (e.g., Janzen & Tosi, 2023; Moore & Fraser, 2022). In collaboration with the *Winnipeg Free Press* and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, we adapted and published our mini-speeches from the “Picnic for Public Education” (e.g., Moore et al., 2022; Yoon, 2022) to reach beyond those who attended the rally at The Forks. Not wanting our ideas to be stuck as mere words on a page, we have also engaged a local artist in transforming our written work into graphic form (e.g., A. Brown, 2023). This has allowed us to visually communicate our ideas to a wider audience in ways that are accessible, comprehensible, and engaging (Landa, 2020). Further, in response to the PC government’s increased use of “parental rights” rhetoric and the recent push in several Manitoba school divisions to ban books related to gender identity and sexual orientation, PfPE published a newspaper op-ed and open letter denouncing these censorship attempts (e.g., People for Public Education, 2023). The open letter in support of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, teachers, and community members was signed by over 60 researchers, academics, teachers, and educational leaders from across Manitoba and made explicit our belief that safe and inclusive schools are a fundamental component of a robust public education system.

PfPE has also engaged in various forms of traditional and new media. We have regularly been asked to comment on a range of educational issues by local news media, which has ensured that conversations about the importance of protecting public education remain salient in our communities and society. Additionally, we have used social media extensively in order to reach out into the community, highlight inequities and injustices manifest by privatization, and translate private concerns into public considerations (Giroux, 2016). Although the use of social media in activism can be problematic because of its propensity to perpetuate echo chambers, increase polarization, and be disrupted by trolls and disinformation, it has been an effective way for PfPE to be “present” in the community and to communicate in a direct and succinct manner (Calibeo & Hindmarsh, 2022). Many different groups, organizations, and individuals have reached out to PfPE solely because of our presence on X (formerly Twitter), which has helped us then support and build solidarity with others. It is our hope that our writing and media engagement inspires critical dialogue in the community as it relates to both consciousness-raising and providing counter-narratives to neoliberal discourses that seek to privatize, commodify, and marketize public education.

Based on our values, objectives, and belief in the public school ideal, our resistance and actions to date have focused on a variety of educational reforms and neoliberal discourses. Since the group’s formation in May 2022, PfPE’s advocacy and writing has addressed: (a) the chronic underfunding of Manitoba public schools, (b) tax cuts and education funding models via Bill 71, (c) teacher de-professionalization via Bill 35, (d) the ubiquity of fundraising in public schools, (e) ever-increasing school fees, (f) public–private partnerships, (g) increased standardized assessment practices, (h) issues of equity, inclusion, and accessibility in schools, (i) school board trustee elections, (j) aging and unsafe infrastructure, (k) proposed book bans, and (l) dehumanizing anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric. There appears to be no limit to the ways that neoliberal discourses and reforms—whether subtle through creeping privatization or overt through legislation—are manifest in Manitoba. As a result, our resistance must flexibly attend to these dynamic power relations.

## Challenges

Because PfPE is a relatively new group, we still have much to learn about community engagement, political struggle, and resistance. In solidarity with those whose resistance embodies different forms than ours, I assert that there is no one single way to effectively engage in political struggle. Yet difficult questions are being asked within and beyond the group regarding the most effective, inclusive, and relevant approaches to resistance. For example, there is ongoing dialogue regarding whether our discursive approach to resistance—typified through our emphasis on writing as public intellectuals—neglects to include more meaningful material actions. Phrased as critical questions, are our current acts of resistance actually making a difference? Are we successful in educating for critical consciousness? Do our counter-narratives inspire meaningful and actionable hope within our communities? Further, there is an enduring debate within PfPE whether our resistance is too reactionary and fragmented. Although a “whack-a-mole” approach is effective in responding to a multitude of issues, there is the potential that it may distract us and our communities from proactively resisting the larger governing rationality of neoliberalism. Finally, there is the ongoing and humbling nature of becoming “*undone* in relation to others, and to accept moments of unknowingness” (Johansson & Lalander, 2012, p. 1086), especially as it concerns the potentially negative impacts of our power, privilege, and positionality in relating to community members. Specifically, how do those of us who embody a variety of privileges along lines of race,

class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, education, and/or employment engage in public education advocacy that is accountable to sociohistorically marginalized communities? These are questions we continue to grapple with through our public education advocacy.

As previously discussed, many PfPE members' resistance is manifest through their acting as public intellectuals. However, it is worth noting that embodying the role of public intellectual is both buoyed and complicated by the reality that many PfPE members are K–12 educators. This has two contrasting consequences. First, critically engaged K–12 educators have an intimate understanding of the material impacts of neoliberal education reforms and are therefore uniquely situated to respond to these matters. Second, and conversely, many of these same K–12 educators are at risk of being disciplined if they speak out publicly. Compliance and conformity are not values imposed merely on students, but on teachers as well. Responding creatively to this reality while still embracing the role of public intellectuals, other members within the group have humbly taken on unofficial roles as “spokespeople.” Typically, this role has included tenured university professors working outside of the K–12 public education system responding to media requests. This has allowed the collective voice of PfPE to be represented—including the critical perspectives of those who do not feel safe speaking publicly—while ensuring more vulnerable participants are not placed at unnecessary risk.

Finally, one of the greatest challenges to the work of PfPE is that of capacity, wellness, and mental health. It is increasingly evident as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic that educators are exhausted, stressed, and burned out (Bascia, 2022). This exhaustion is amplified for those working in underfunded and overcrowded schools that lack the supports and resources necessary to provide a robust and meaningful educational experience for all students. Arguably, this is all part of the neoliberal plan: using a crisis to defund, destabilize, and dismantle public education for the purpose of privatization (Klein, 2007; Moore et al., 2021). While PfPE attempts to work with and through this challenge, it is clear that the strength and sustainability of the group is not located solely within K–12 educators. Rather, it is in the diverse and varied composition of the group, including teachers, researchers, academics, parents, school trustees, and community members. This allows individual PfPE members to step up when able and step back when necessary, all while supporting both one another and public education.

## Conclusion

After seven years of PC rule in Manitoba, the New Democratic Party won a majority government in the October 2023 provincial election. This election victory signified a rejection of the PC's deleterious neoliberal cuts to public services, including public education. However, this does not mean that advocacy efforts can cease. Camfield (2018) argues that it was the absence of labour unions and community organizations challenging the NDP throughout their 1999 to 2016 mandate that “contributed to the remarkably dormant conditions of most unions in Manitoba. This will probably have dire consequences for efforts to defend public-sector jobs and services from the PC government that was elected in 2016” (p. 120). Indeed, the consequences were dire throughout the PC's time in government. Therefore, despite the recent election of the NDP government and all the work that PfPE has engaged in since our first meeting in May 2022, public education advocacy remains a critically important task.

The analysis of PfPE throughout this article has demonstrated that critically theorizing public education advocacy efforts is important in coming to know the multiple and dynamic ways

that resistance is embodied within specific sociocultural contexts and through unique power relations. As Foucault (1976/1978) states:

There is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial. (pp. 95–96)

In this way, resistance is an inherently multilayered and contingent process (Johansson & Lalander, 2012). For PfPE, resistance up until this point has typically meant engaging in consciousness-raising within our communities as public intellectuals and holding power accountable as we advocate for a fully funded, equitable, justice-oriented, and accessible public education system. Moreover, it has required embodying an ongoing stance of critical reflexivity as we have endeavoured to build on the past while projecting a hope-filled vision of the future. As such, it is my hope that this article will inspire future resistance(s) against neoliberal education reforms.

In conclusion, I return to the notion of hope. There is much to be hopeful for despite the enduring neoliberal assault on public education. The very existence of PfPE demonstrates that there are critically engaged individuals in Manitoba who are willing to take risks, speak truth to power, and work toward a more equitable and just future through public education. We are only three years removed from the defeat of Bill 64, so we know through experience that collective resistance can lead to change. Therefore, we hold onto hope, because without hope, there is no resistance. And there is no resistance without a vision of the future rooted in the ideals of equity and justice for all.

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