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# Providing for the Priceless Student: Ideologies of Choice in an Emerging Educational Market

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The growing popularity of school choice is typically linked to the spread of neoliberal ideology. Identifying four components of this ideology, we examine the rationales of providers in an emerging private school market. Data come from interviews and site visits at 45 “third-sector” private schools in Toronto, Canada. We find that only one of the four components has a strong resonance among these educators. Few private school operators sharply criticize public schools, compete via quantitative performance indicators, or are strongly business oriented. However, they voice a philosophy of matching their personal talents to the needs of “unique” children. Overall, rather than being influenced by neoliberalism, these providers are more directly driven by personalized rationales that prize tailored education in specialized niches. We draw two conclusions from these findings. First, they demonstrate how ideologies of choice are shaped by their market setting, in this case, small proprietorship, in contrast to a corporate environment. Second, they highlight how providers can be motivated by new cultures of consumerism and intensive child rearing when working in highly uncertain conditions. We recommend that theories of choice recognize the range of educational markets and the specific motives of their providers.

## Introduction: Neoliberalism and the Provision of School Choice

Over the past 20 years, school choice has been a political lightning rod in most English-speaking nations. The act of choosing schools outside the confines of public education exposes raw political nerves. For opponents, it erodes spirits of civic duty, threatens equity, and undermines attempts to provide equal opportunity. For advocates, the freedom to choose schools is a long overdue right, central to individual liberty, and an essential lever to lift the standards of a flagging public system. These politics are connected to key social trends. Many jurisdictions are witnessing a distinct growth in private

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education provision. For instance, Canada has seen a sharp rise in the number of private schools, preschools, tutoring businesses, and vocational colleges (Aurini 2002; Aurini and Davies 2004; Quirke 2003; Sweet and Gallagher 1999). Such growth, along with the mounting push for charter schools, vouchers, and home schooling, has brought choice to the fore of education research agendas.

Much of the choice literature examines how political elites have shaped public discourse, how choice appeals to parents, and how it affects school outcomes. What is missing is an analysis of the educators who themselves provide choice. Choice in its varying guises—charter schools, homeschooling, private schools—is not possible without some grassroots support among educators. Its rising popularity cannot be fully fathomed without examining the supply side of educational markets, whose services are the ultimate basis by which these markets are judged. This article examines the motives and actions of newly emerging private educators.

Why are more private educators now emerging in countries such as Canada? Historically, Canadian “choice” has had collective or noncompetitive goals. Most provinces extend their funding beyond regular public schools to include Catholic, Protestant, or other religious schools, often to meet constitutional obligations to religious minorities. Many schools fund French immersion and heritage language programs, premised to meet public goals like national unity or cultural retention. However, the growth of most of the private initiatives discussed above tends to have more individualistic goals and sometimes has rationales of using market mechanisms to compete with public schools.

To understand that kind of privatization, much of the recent literature points to the international spread of neoliberal ideology (Ball 1998; Davies and Guppy 1997). While choice movements are often disparate coalitions of social conservatives, business advocates, disaffected liberals, disadvantaged minorities, and alternative pedagogues, what neoliberals have done is articulate these varied concerns in calls for more market alternatives in education (see Apple 2000; Ball 1998; Cookson 1994; Labaree 1997; Marginson 1997; Wells 2002; Whitty and Edwards 1998). To understand the specific impact of neoliberalism on the provision of education, we distinguish four related components.

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First, neoliberals view public education institutions as mediocre monopolies. Chubb and Moe (1990), the most renowned advocates of choice, fault public schools for lacking incentives for excellence and accountability. Like many critics, they depict public schools as flagging institutions that offer poor value for the tax dollar. Public school bureaucracy demands educators conform to legal conventions, which, they argue, causes them to lose touch with their true clients—parents and their children. For instance, by making seniority the basis of teacher salaries, unions are seen to have severed any connection between teacher performance and student outcomes. By forcing schools to hire certified teachers and comply with myriad guidelines, boards are seen to rob schools of the freedom they need to innovate. Chubb and Moe thus champion the creation of educational markets that allow schools to evade most regulations, “bust bureaucracy,” and devise ingenious services for their clientele.

Second, neoliberals call to unleash competitive pressures in education. The power of markets, they argue, is that schools are no longer guaranteed public funds. Lacking bureaucratic security, schools must please their clients, else educational dollars will flow elsewhere. Markets thereby reward pedagogical success, punish failure, and foster well-defined school missions, demonstrable quality, and satisfied customers.<sup>1</sup> One key neoliberal initiative is to marry the burgeoning choice and standards movements by publicly ranking schools along some quantitative measure, such as standardized test scores (Persell 2000; Wells 2002). The rationale is that in a market setting, customers need to judge differences in quality among schools and thus search for a simplified benchmark or “gold standard.” Parents and politicians, according to this argument, are able to use such measures to hold schools accountable for minimal outcomes, make learning activities more transparent, and create a lever for continual quality improvement (Fuller 2000; Persell 2000; Wells 2002).

Third, neoliberals call for schools to be run in a more businesslike manner. They believe that inserting business practices into schools will boost their productivity and accountability. Over the past 20 years, a “new managerialism” has been introduced into schooling, with a renewed emphasis on generating revenue, expanding market opportunities, and reducing costs (Ball 1998). Guided by the advice of economists, more politicians view school expenses as an investment, linked to education’s impact on later wages, and call to refashion schools according to these business principles. Neoliberals want schools to use entrepreneurial ingenuity to channel their resources efficiently in the pursuit of well-focused human capital goals.

Fourth, neoliberals hail markets as the best medium for matching the preferences of parents to educators. Encouraging parents to pursue their self-interest and downplaying philosophies of using public education to unite citizens for some common good (Labaree 1997), they champion markets as the

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prime tool to connect families' educational preferences to those of pedagogues, both of which, they note, are increasingly varied (Schneider et al. 2000). In contrast to the outdated "one best system" imposed by public bureaucracies, markets are seen to deliver schooling that is tailored to the interests of both students and teachers.

#### Research Questions: Are New Private Educators Driven by Neoliberal Ideology?

This article examines the role of neoliberal ideology in a Canadian school market, namely, the "third sector" of private schools in the city of Toronto. We define third-sector schools as private entities that are neither religious nor elite. This sector is quickly growing, with one in five Ontario private school students now attending these schools. Comprising both elementary and secondary schools, they are physically small, often located in humble locales, such as office buildings, old houses, or shopping plazas. Only a few rent standard school space. About one-quarter originated as private tutoring businesses, though none are operated by large tutoring franchises—all are run by independent proprietors. Compared with public and local elite private schools, their distinguishing traits are their specialized pedagogy and intimate class sizes. Rather than boasting prestigious name brands or religious offerings, they specialize in a variety of unique pedagogical themes, including intensive academics, women-centered studies, liberal arts, social justice and environment issues, museum-based studies, multiple languages, core knowledge, accelerated learning, and alternative pedagogy. Many offer special services, such as alternate hours, enrollments on a per-credit basis, part-time hours, and day-care services. Some serve distinct student populations, such as gifted students, athletes, dancers, or students with learning disabilities or special needs. Their average school size is just over a hundred students, and their mean class size is only about 10 students. These small classes make them relatively expensive. Annual tuition fees for these schools range from \$10,000 to \$20,000. Given these high costs, we believed our interviewees who told us that the bulk of these schools' clientele were from professional, middle-class backgrounds (data on students were not available). Three-quarters of these schools were governed with a for-profit status, with the principal serving as both the business proprietor and the educational head. The remaining schools were nonprofit entities governed by a board of directors, to which the principals were accountable.

Given these characteristics of third-sector schools, we investigate whether and how neoliberalism inflects the concrete practices and expressed motives

of their operators. Specifically, we extrapolate four testable ideas from the choice literature:

- 1) *Attitudes toward public education*: If private providers are influenced by neoliberal ideology, they ought to associate public schools with low quality and support tougher regulations on them. In theory, private educators have a stake in these neoliberal views, since they compete with public schools for clients and since their market environment is usually seen to weaken commitment to public goals (Cookson 1994; Labaree 1997; Wells 2002).
- 2) *Competitive accountability*: Markets are said to pressure schools to focus on measurable outcomes. Hence, we expect school providers to promote ideals of quality and accountability in the form of quantitative information about their performance and in the form of their graduate placement rates, test scores, or other such measures.
- 3) *Business orientation*: Neoliberals believe schools should be run like corporate enterprises, gathering information about market opportunities, rationalizing their practices, and striving to entice parent-customers. If private schools are indeed guided by neoliberal ideology, we would expect them to operate according to market analyses, formal business strategies, and plans for expansion. Further, we would expect them to attract clients using some sort of economic rationale.
- 4) *Matching*: Finally, if neoliberalism is the guiding ideology of new educational markets, then it is reasonable to expect providers to embrace some sort of “matching” rationale in which markets are the optimal medium for connecting their special talents to the unique wants of customers. This rationale should be embodied by the creation of a population of new schools marked by a variety of niches and specializations.

#### Contributions: Studying a Pure Market

By addressing these research questions we contribute a needed empirical study of a largely unstudied market setting. The bulk of empirical research on choice is American or British, and the few Canadian studies (e.g., Bosetti 2001; Taylor and Woollard 2003) focus on the province of Alberta. Toronto’s third sector is a strategic testing ground for theories of school markets and neoliberalism because it closely approximates “pure market” conditions. These schools are largely unregulated and are required to comply with few guidelines.<sup>2</sup> Bound to few government regulations yet totally without state subsidies, third-sector schools can (and must) charge what the market will bear. Unlike well-institutionalized elite private schools, they are directly vulnerable to market pres-

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tures. Their ability to attract students has an immediate impact on their revenue, costs, and ultimate survival. Almost all of these schools are “close to the market,” with little economic security. But beyond the discipline of the market, they have few other constraints, being free to hire whomever they please, entirely beyond the reach of teacher unions.

Ontario’s provincial government has done little to encourage choice overtly, having quashed initiatives for charter schools and having recently canceled a small tax credit for private school tuition. This lack of central orchestration contrasts with Alberta, whose provincial government has established charter schools and created extensive menus of choice in city public schools such as those in the city of Edmonton, and with those U.S. and U.K. jurisdictions where politicians have strongly pushed charter schools and vouchers (Mintron 2000; Witte 2000).<sup>3</sup> Yet, while not promoting the development of private school choice, the province has recently imposed reforms on public schools that are usually applauded by neoliberals, such as implementing a regime of standardized testing that is reported in school-by-school “league tables.”

Since the third sector represents a relatively spontaneous and unregulated educational market, we believe it is reasonable to investigate whether its participants adhere to various aspects of neoliberal ideology, since that ideology is typically used to justify the current spread of market thinking in schooling. All of the schools we examined opened in the past 15 years, a period in which neoliberal ideas became popular throughout the educational world. During this same period of time, Ontario’s private school sector has flourished, with growing enrollments and favorable public opinion, judging by recent polls (Angus Reid 2000). None have collective mandates for religion, minority languages, or equity. All express very individualistic educational goals. Hence, we believe it logical to examine whether this pure market setting serves as a breeding ground for neoliberal thinking among educators.

### Data and Methods

Our data come from site visits and interviews at third-sector schools in Toronto.<sup>4</sup> We operationalized this sector as those private schools that the provincial ministry of education has not identified as religious, that are not listed on an independent registry known as an association of venerable elite schools. Further, we focused on academic schools, excluding language or reform schools. By this definition, the city has 64 third-sector schools. We elected to then focus on newer schools, reasoning that less-established entities are more subject to market pressures and, hence, should better reflect the processes identified in theories of choice. We thus focused on schools that were 15 years old or less, thereby limiting our population to 49 schools. We contacted all

by phone and requested an interview with the principal. Only two declined to be interviewed, while three did not return our repeated calls.

From 2001 to 2003, we visited 45 of these 49 schools (each is identified with a pseudonym borrowed from Toronto-area transit stations). By having a response rate of over 90 percent, we have captured almost the entire population of these schools as we define it. We toured their premises and conducted interviews lasting 45 to 120 minutes. During interviews we asked principals about their attitudes toward the public school system, accountability, standardized testing, business orientations, parental preferences, and philosophy of education, as well as about their school's history, practices, and goals. We also collected information from their brochures and Web sites.

These data were analyzed with both quantitative and qualitative methods. To quantify some of their responses, we coded answers into variables, shown in table 1. First, each school was coded according to whether its principal discussed public schooling in terms that were "positive/neutral," "mild," "moderate," or "severe." Principals who defended public schools or portrayed them as victims of the government were coded as "positive" or "neutral." Conversely, characterizations of public schools as inept or fundamentally flawed were coded as "severe." We then coded how principals attributed these problems, whether to government cutbacks, poor teacher training, unions, and so on. With respect to standardized testing, we coded whether schools participated in the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized tests and examined principals' opinion of such testing, coded as "positive," "negative," or "mixed" if they were ambivalent. Next, we asked the principals about business practices, origins, and class sizes and posed open-ended questions about their plans and strategies. A final set of variables, based on interviews as well as supplementary information from Web sites and promotional material, identifies schools' specialties, coded into one of three niches. In addition, we also present quotes from our interviewees. Our interview questions were always posed in an open-ended format, so we supplement the quantified data with passages from these conversations. This, we believe, uncovers richer and more nuanced meanings, sometimes revealing ambivalent attitudes that are difficult to capture in a survey format.

## Findings

### *Attitudes toward Public Schools*

Third-sector principals do not shy from voicing concerns about public schools. Yet, few can be characterized as harshly "antipublic." Table 1 shows that few voiced severe criticisms of those schools. Only six of 44 who answered the



TABLE 1

*Principals' Attitudes and School Characteristics*

| Attitude/Characteristic                            | Number |
|--|--------|
| Attitudes toward public schools ( $N = 44$ ):      |        |
| Mild criticism/neutral stance                      | 28     |
| Moderate criticism                                 | 9      |
| Severe criticism                                   | 6      |
| Did not answer                                     | 1      |
| Number mentioning source of problems:*             |        |
| Large classes/bureaucracy                          | 15     |
| Teachers' competence/attitudes/unions              | 13     |
| "One size can't fit all"                           | 10     |
| Government strife/underfunding                     | 15     |
| Inferior quality/lack of discipline/rigor          | 5      |
| Number using standardized testing ( $N = 44$ ):    |        |
| Provincial EQAO tests                              | 4      |
| Other tests  | 12     |
| No testing   | 28     |
| Attitude toward standardized testing ( $N = 44$ ): |        |
| Positive   | 23     |
| Negative   | 13     |
| Neutral/mixed                                      | 5      |
| Did not answer clearly                             | 3      |
| Background of proprietor ( $N = 44$ ):             |        |
| Teaching/education                                 | 33     |
| Business   | 6      |
| Social services                                    | 2      |
| Tutoring   | 2      |
| Concerned parent                                   | 1      |
| School origins ( $N = 45$ ):                       |        |
| Tutoring service                                   | 11     |
| Spin off from another school                       | 12     |
| Group of concerned parents                         | 13     |
| Former teachers seeking new schools                | 6      |
| Business   | 3      |
| Average class size ( $N = 44$ ):                   |        |
| < 5  | 2      |
| 5–10   | 20     |
| 11–16  | 18     |
| > 17   | 4      |

\* The total number of responses is greater than 44 because some offered more than one attribution.

question were severely critical, while 28 offered only mild criticism or a neutral stance, and nine offered moderate criticism (one principal did not clearly answer the question). Typically, principals would mildly describe some flaws of the public system in one breath and then hasten to defend public schools, seeing them as victims of bad government policy, sensational journalism, or inadequate funding. One principal lamented: “The disillusionment with the [public] system—that I think is excellent—is rampant” (Spadina High). Some principals praised local public schools for their quality. For instance, one principal has his children in the public system, despite its flaws: “I am a great public school supporter. I have three daughters, two of which are in the public system, and one is in day care, but will end up in the public school system. Even though I’m running a private school, they are in the public school system” (Mimico High). Another principal echoes this support: “The political fights that have gone on in public education in the last few years [make me] really feel sorry for kids. I feel sorry for [parents] because they don’t all have an option of saying, ‘You know what, I’m sick and tired of this; I’m going to send my kid to Hamilton Private.’ So that is really sad and I pull for public schools. I’m a public school product and it could be a wonderful experience” (Hamilton High).

Those interviewees who were critical offered a variety of attributions. The most common was that public schools are overly bureaucratic and saddled with large classes. Large schools and classes and the anonymous conditions they create were identified as core problems by 15 principals. One characterizes public schools as such: “They are as good as they can be when you have 30 children in a class” (Mount Joy Academy). Next, 14 tied problems to the political strife and funding cuts in recent years. Several lamented the disintegration of special programs that had catered to a type of child. A principal faults provincial policy for making public schools and its teachers beleaguered and overworked:

Public schools don’t have time! A kid says to you, “Can I come to you after class?” “Gee, no, I have something else I’ve gotta do—coaching.” I know teachers who are having students come in for extra help, especially in math, at 7:30 a.m. But you don’t hear about those. And they’re not getting paid anything [extra], but they believe it’s their job to teach the kid and give them as much as they possibly can to be successful. When are you going to do it? And all the “administrivia” that’s going on in the classroom now is just unbelievable. It’s unbelievable. So, somewhere, oh yeah, and we’re going to teach. It’s too bad. (Broadview High)

In a similar vein, 10 faulted public schools for having the impossible task of serving a “mass system” to a diverse multitude of unique learners. Such

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criticisms were usually qualified by sympathy for public schools, however. Many principals characterized public schools as overburdened victims of misguided government policies, hamstrung by chronic underfunding and thus unable to cope with the demands of a diverse population.

The criticism that had the most affinity with neoliberal ideology was the targeting of teachers and their unions. Twelve interviewees sharply criticized public school teachers, doubting their effectiveness or commitment. Some targeted teachers as lazy, uncaring, miserable, and in some cases, simply inept: “There’s a [public] high school just up the street here, and they have a terrible math department. . . . The only teacher worth anything does not work at the OAC [senior] level. My class is mostly Public High students and a few others who have heard from other students who have been here” (Bay High).

Among the six principals that voiced “severe” criticisms, four pointed to overly powerful unions as impediments to a healthy system. They vilified unions for curtailing the freedom of principals, protecting apathetic teachers, and imposing a “union mentality” that makes educators uncreative, inflexible, and unwilling to toil for their students. Yet, even these complaints resonated with neoliberalism only to a limited extent. Principals tended to blame inflexible regulations rather than the socioeconomic function of teacher unions. No principal begrudged public-sector teachers for earning good salaries or gaining some measure of autonomy. None called for teachers to be deskilled, paid less, or “casualized” via part-time hours. Our interviewees strongly identified with teaching as a skilled and vital calling and faulted unions mainly for making it difficult to remove bad teachers, sheltering mediocrity, and imposing seniority as the basis of teacher salaries.

These discussions of teaching quality led us to an unanticipated finding. Some principals did not strongly criticize public schools because these schools were not visible on their “radar.” That is, they looked instead to other private schools as their competition and were equally critical of those schools and their teachers. Many principals openly discussed how their clients do not reserve their complaints for public schools: parents also spread horror stories about private schools. This point bears emphasis. Since many respondents drew students from both local public and private schools, they talked as much about the shortcomings of well-established private schools as they did of their public counterparts:

People are more concerned about giving their student an opportunity, an environment that is conducive to their learning, than about anything else. If you ask them, they may knock the public system a bit or they might knock the previous public school they were in a bit because that model wasn’t exactly working for their kid. But for the most part that’s not their concern. Their concern is to find the proper environment for their student. . . . Fifty percent of our kids have left from other private

schools; I hear as much about that as I do about public schools. (Long Branch High)

Given the emphasis on recognizing differences among schools, regardless of whether they are public or private, no principal recommended that the public system be privatized or radically overhauled. Only three mentioned charter schools or vouchers at all (Agincourt Academy, Long Branch High, Mount Joy Academy). Only one expressed a clear preference for a charter system, citing the experience of the province of Alberta (Agincourt Academy). One, who was otherwise critical of public schools, saw the likelihood of a voucher system coming to Ontario as quite slim:

If they [the government] have a vested interest in maintaining public education which I think they do, then I don't see the voucher system happening anytime soon. The voucher system will immediately create a climate where the existing public school has to compete with the private school around the corner. I just don't think under the present circumstance, they're equipped to do that. I don't think at this point, I think they've lost the memory, if that's the way you put it, because they've never, they haven't had to do it in so long. They've just been very comfortable. They don't see it that way but that's the way I see it. (Long Branch High)

Principals rarely spoke of sweeping choice reforms largely because they did not perceive many parents as desiring such radical change. One principal, in response to a question about whether parents expect a choice of schools, claims never to have heard parents talk to her about vouchers, despite having their children in the private system: "Like a voucher system? I've never heard it. I've discussed it myself with people but I have never really heard that come to me in a professional way, in my role here. I haven't really had people discuss that . . . I would think if it was really out there that I would have heard some of that" (Mount Joy Academy).

In summary, while most principals identified weaknesses with public schools, very few voiced a determined antipublic sentiment. Rather than condemning public schools or championing markets, their prevailing tone was one of ambivalence. Many claimed to sympathize with public schools and did not see themselves in opposition to the public system.<sup>5</sup> One interviewee who is also a retired public principal rationalized her actions as entirely consistent with the goals of public education: "Our [teachers'] federation for years has been saying that small classes are the way to go, and I'm doing it" (Spadina High). When they criticized the public system, they voiced multiple attributions, including political turmoil, funding cutbacks, tumbling teacher morale, and excessive bureaucracy. Crucially, they did not offer a clear neoliberal inter-

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pretation of these problems. None called to abolish public schools. In fact, many were skeptical of the province's neoliberal actions. Most enter the private sector for its flexibility rather than for any deeply held ideology, and many claim to be apprehensive about working in that sector.

### *Attitudes toward "Competitive Accountability"*

Do third-sector schools use some sort of quantitative indicator to advertise their quality? We reasoned that, if they identified with the standards and accountability movements and believed parents choose schools using quantitative indicators, they would welcome some comparative measure of their quality. Third-sector schools are not compelled to engage in any such exercise but have at least three options if they so wish. First, they can participate in the province-wide EQAO tests that are used to compare schools in published results. Second, they can cooperate with a well-known think tank, the Fraser Institute, that has been inviting schools to offer data in creation of a general "quality" rating. Third, most third-sector schools have Web sites and/or promotional material in which they advertise their offerings. We reckoned that any school with a "competitive accountability" ethos would join one of these initiatives or would advertise some sort of quantitative measure.

Our major finding is that, while third-sector school principals express a strong desire to be accountable to parents, crucially, few use any quantitative indicators. Almost none report test scores, university placement rates, or league table school rankings. Specifically, only four of 44 schools that responded wrote the EQAO tests. Of these, only two principals claimed that neither they nor their parent clients were concerned about such rankings. Moreover, only three volunteered to be included in the Fraser Institute ratings.<sup>6</sup> Finally, only one of 29 schools with Web sites advertised any quantitative indicators of their quality.<sup>7</sup> Thus, based on their lack of participation in any of these three options, the vast majority of third-sector schools choose to opt out of any competitive ranking scheme.

Among the minority of schools that did some form of standardized testing, most used them in a noncompetitive manner. For those 12 schools, 10 used tests for internal purposes, such as using the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, either for admissions, to chart the personal progress of students, or to provide teachers with a benchmark. Most did not associate tests with competition among schools, often claiming that few parents are concerned about such measures. One principal claimed to "dabble" with these tests, knowing their limitations: "We made the decision this year to write the grade 9 math test. The reason isn't the sense of accountability; it is more for us from an internal perspective to see what kind of grasp have they got. . . . We've gone away

from standardized testing. For example, a number of schools have SSATs as a requirement for admissions; we don't have any requirement whatsoever, because we are interested in character, values, passion" (Lakeshore High).

Likewise, another principal uses similar tests to assess a child's progress rather than to judge and compare school quality:

All of our students complete the Canadian Test of Basic Skills each year. Believe me, parents look at that; they're looking from year to year. We send it home to the parents, but not all our students' results, but only their own child's results. Is their child making progress? How is their child doing? What percentile is their child in? These are important questions for them. . . . We know parents are paying a lot of money, and we're here to make sure the students are doing well, that's why I started the school. Not only academically, I want to make sure they're emotionally, that they're happy, that they're happy at school. (Milliken Academy)

Fully 28 schools did not engage in any kind of standardized testing. This was partly due to costs but also because a significant minority of principals were critical of such tests. They had never seriously considered using them and questioned their value. For example, one principal, asked if parents wanted to know average test scores in order to evaluate the school's effectiveness, doubts the validity of standardized testing: "No. We're not huge believers because in order for standardized tests to work effectively, you have to have a standardized student, which we don't have. And I don't think anybody really does. Standardized tests are good for a number of things; I'm not sure that one of them is predicting student performance" (Long Branch High).

Since most schools did not use standardized tests, how did third-sector principals signal their quality to parents? Based on interviews and from examining their promotional material, it appears that many use informal, and sometimes idiosyncratic, conceptions of accountability. While never explicitly advertising figures, some principals do claim to have high placement rates in prestigious private high schools or universities as markers of success. As one principal said, addressing whether parents asked about how the school rates academically and how many students go on to university: "Yeah, all the time. We had our first graduating class last year. There were 18 kids and they all found a spot in a reputable Ontario university so that was nice, because so far we have 100 percent university admission rate" (Hamilton High).

While such figures are a point of pride for principals, none take the step to present them in a systematic manner that implies a ranking among schools. Most third-sector principals instead claim that parents merely ask for verbal assurances that their graduates fare well in Ontario universities. Beyond verbalized indicators, a significant minority of principals reported that parents

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are uninterested in quantitative measures of any kind and are instead attuned to a more intuitive set of criteria to judge schools. For instance, Web sites contained a staggering number of platitudes, parent testimonials endorsements, and inspirational language. But when we asked if clients ever inquire about harder indicators, such as rankings in “league tables,” we heard replies such as these:

No, there are a lot of parents who compare their children with other [public school] children, and they’re all ahead of them. All the girls that Alicia plays with in her little area, she was reading before all of them. . . . Parents just look at those things, and they’re okay with it. (African Academy)

I don’t see any of that going on but that may well just be a reflection of the fact that we are so new. (Lakeshore High)

They never ask us, but I think that’s where they try to make comparisons with other kids they know, and they see the quality. . . . Parents see what their children are doing. They are reading, and they say to me, “My kid’s a better writer than I am.” And these are bright people, it’s not like they’re illiterate parents. So they know. I’m never questioned. (Stouffville Academy)

I don’t think that’s the most important thing for parents. A lot of parents don’t even know that, even if we have it in our published information, a lot don’t keep track of that. What parents are keeping track of is how their own child is doing. That is what’s important to them. (Milliken Academy)

No, I think parents are really very realistic, more realistic than we give them credit for, than society at large gives them credit for. These parents are saying, “Hey, he wants to come to school, he’s happy, he’s not hanging out with his druggie friends anymore, he actually finished the book last night!” Things like that. They’re seeing it more holistically than how many kids got an A or a B or however the province guidelines stratify that . . . what is it—level 1, level 2, level 3, level 4. (Davisville Academy)

What these quotes suggest is that quality is communicated in implicit, local, and personal terms, quite unlike an explicit ranking of schools. Parents appear to casually compare their child’s present circumstances to either other children, or to their past circumstance. One principal sees parents as comparing their children with those in public schools: “They’re comparing their kids [in my school] with public school kids. And my kids are advanced, in language, the

way they speak, in the homework that they're doing. . . . I think that's the mark that people use" (African Academy). Even a principal who claims her school ranks at the top in the Canadian Test of Basic Skills doubts many parents are concerned with such rankings:

The most important thing for parents, I don't think it's that (test score rankings); I think that a lot of parents don't even know about that, even if we have it in our published information, a lot of parents don't keep track. What parents are keeping track of is how their own child is doing. That is what's important to them. I think they're looking for a more personalized education for their child, for their family. A place that's going to take into account their child's academic abilities and very often, they're looking for a school that has a certain feeling. We're a small school and when parents come in here, one of the things that we hear time and time again is that they really like the feeling of the school. They walk around, they see that the children are happy, they're smiling. (Milliken Academy)

As this quote indicates, several principals see parents judging their school according to intuitive criteria. "Success" does not have to hinge on test performance but can be about fostering student happiness and emotional well-being. Many schools thus aim to provide a warm, nurturing atmosphere, reckoning that parents seek such an environment. If a child fares well within that frame of reference, clients are satisfied.

In summary, third-sector principals believed that few parents search for rankings to judge schools, and almost none advertised themselves accordingly. Not driven by standardized competition, choice in this market is often based on highly personal criteria. Hence, many third-sector principals understand accountability in terms of customer satisfaction. Not needing to compete via universal measures, they can be successful simply by satisfying their small pool of constituents.

### *Business Orientations*

Third-sector schools are not corporate businesses. None are education management organizations or large enterprises. Most have humble physical origins, often in old houses, church basements, or rented commercial space.<sup>8</sup> Only 14 have more than 100 students. The remaining schools are small operations that reflect the personal expressions of their proprietor. Most proudly proclaim their intimate surroundings and atmosphere.

The noncorporate character of these schools is illustrated by their histories. Fully 33 of 44 proprietors had a teaching or education background. Only six



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came from the world of business. The remaining five proprietors were former tutors, social service professionals, and concerned parents. Thus, lacking entrepreneurial backgrounds, most third-sector proprietors are former educators who founded their school more by happenstance than by following a concerted market ethos. Almost none of the operations originated from nonschool enterprises. Thirteen schools emerged from the collective efforts of concerned parents to create a new school, as they contacted, encouraged, and supported teachers with whom they had prior contact. Twelve were spin-offs from other private schools. Eleven began as tutoring services, which grew into schools once the tutors (often former teachers) realized that many of their clients were interested in full-time private schooling. Only three originated from other types of businesses (a dance studio, a speed-reading courseware business, and an adult computer-training operation).

Very few third-sector schools embrace formal business models. As small independents, they largely eschew investors. None of their principals describe the founding of their schools as a strategic decision to start a lucrative venture and create an instrument of profit. An indicator of this is their small classes. Only four of 44 have classes larger than 17 students, with most in the 5–15 range. These intimate settings represent a key business move. While most principals claimed that small classes were their prime competitive advantage over public schools, they also noted their sheer expense. Having to pay a full-time instructor to teach only eight or so students is quite costly, they admitted, and those costs limited their profit margins. As a result, most proprietors gladly accepted their role in a small personal business with few grand plans for expansion.

Rather than entering the third sector for business reasons, virtually all principals reported to be motivated by a personal brand of education. Many are retirees from public school who yearned to run a school their way, to serve a certain student niche, or develop a novel program. In fact, they stressed how operating a school is a very difficult way to make money, and that their philosophy runs counter to the logic of making a profit:

I really see education as an art form. Every student who comes through here is like a fine painting. As a teacher, you get to make a couple of strokes on the canvas as they pass by. Understanding that student allows you to hopefully put good strokes onto the canvas that are going to make for a better composition, and that's where the artistry of teaching is. . . . Running a school is very hard, in that you have a complete contradiction most days in terms of your fundamental instinct. If you see education as being an art form, then there's no student that's not salvageable. But if you're trying to run a business, and your staff is all ticked off, and everyone's frustrated, and you know that you're making \$3,600 a term to educate this kid, but he's costing you \$4,500 because

of wear, tear, and aggravation. Do you make the right educational decision? Do you make the right business decision? The problem in education is the fundamental instinct is counter to a business instinct. (Mimico High)

Another principal emphasized the importance of privileging one's philosophy of education over pecuniary considerations:

If you read our philosophy, if you get any bigger to the point where you don't recognize students, then you have defeated the purpose . . . you have to pay the bills one way or another and things don't get cheaper over time . . . there is an economic imperative but at the same time you have to try to balance that off against your philosophy. So the one thing that makes for interesting times in private schools especially is balancing those two things. I don't really get the impression that there are many schools out there that focus specifically on the economic to the detriment of the other. (Long Branch High)

Others explained that rather than expecting to expand, they instead wish to remain small and not grow beyond their current enrollment.

I keep my school small because then I can actually work with the children and have a more intimate environment where I can keep track of how everyone is doing. I'm really not in this business to make a lot of money; I'm in it because I really enjoy working with the children and teaching them. . . . I'm not really power hungry; I don't know if I should say these people that run those big schools are power hungry, but I'm just comfortable where I am, and I'm happy in life, and I don't really want to have any more stress and I make a comfortable living and that's fine. (Whitby Academy)

Most claimed to be comfortable with their limited enrollments and eschewed expansion strategies to preserve the character of their schools. Since many cater to niche segments, rather than larger markets, overexpansion could alter that character. A small number of principals regarded their schools as a temporary endeavor, and even hoped to "put themselves out of business." One explains: "It's not my intent to bring a child here in grade 1, and hang on to them until grade 8. I want to bring them in and work with the student and the parents so that the child can integrate back into the system. When asked, "So you want to put yourself out of business?" this principal responded, "Absolutely. If I could do that before I retire, I'd be happy, happy, happy . . . this is one of the things I hate about this school. In some ways, it's a school where parents can come only if they can afford it, which is why I'd love to

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put myself out of business. I hate that. I hate that elitism. I don't like it, and it makes me crazy, because all kids should have access to these services" (Finch Academy).

In particular, some principals who catered to academically struggling students aimed to work intensively with those youth, raise them to grade level, and then return them to the public system. They are sensitive to not admitting students for whom their school is not, or no longer, well suited. For instance, one principal discusses her practice of asking parents to withdraw their children if they could benefit from attending a larger school: "I actually encourage parents sometimes to have them take their kids out if they need the socialization. I don't think about tuition and getting the numbers and the income. I think about you know what, what's best for your child is to get them into a classroom with 20 children so they have a larger student body to interact with to develop the social aspect of their character" (Whitby Academy).

Principals thus framed their motives in light of their pedagogical philosophies and aims, rather than in economic goals, some noting the irony of struggling to actually turn a profit in a "for-profit" school. One joked of taking a "vow of poverty" when he opened his school, a vow that continues 10 years later. These principals believed their brand of education does not lend itself easily to making money, and instead claimed to be spurred by pedagogical aspirations. A principal of a new school admits that he will likely lose money for a number of years: "You can't really have dollar signs on your mind when you are developing programs. If you do that, you're ruined . . . we spend a lot of money on kids and we don't really think of the profit at the end of the year. We're not going to make any profit for a number of years" (Hamilton High).

Indeed, most claimed they could easily earn more money, bear fewer financial risks, and expend less time and energy doing a job other than creating a school. Two principals report to be not yet drawing a salary (Agingcourt Academy, African Academy). Another two revealed that during their first few years in operation, they relied on savings and spouses to remain solvent (Finch Academy, Wilson Academy). These financial realities would be unappealing to any budding entrepreneur who lacked a keen interest in education. But most are firmly committed to their pedagogy. One principal explains that these struggles are worthwhile, nonetheless:

[You] can see these children growing in front of [your] eyes. Whereas there isn't very much monetary return, there's a lot of emotional and structural return in terms of being involved in an activity—when we were in business, we used to be paid easily, four or five times what it is we can make here. But we came here because my business partner first of all said that she hated business. She didn't want to remain in the business community because of the values that were there. We felt that,

hey, we wanted to change the world. We could change companies, but that was not that serious. We want to change the world. The way we can change the world is to develop young people who can change it.  
(Bronte High)

Many principals describe themselves as reluctant converts to the private sector and feel uneasy about charging money and operating as a business. They worry about equity and accessibility, knowing their fees are prohibitive to most families. But they are strongly attracted to the idea of being a for-profit enterprise (rather than a nonprofit foundation) for its freedom and flexibility. For-profit governance structures allow them to avoid boards of directors and instead to wield direct control over virtually all matters, from administrative to pedagogical. In fact, third-sector proprietors are critical of any operating form that would entail more impersonality or bureaucratization, and thus few entertained any corporate ambitions.

In sum, third-sector schools are seldom run by the corporate principles that are touted by neoliberals. They are small businesses with few detailed business plans. None advertised in the language of “investment” or “value-added” benefits. If they must be described as espousing any market ideology, it is rooted in small, local, individual proprietorship, expressive of their personal desires and preferences. While hoping to turn a profit, they prize their specialized pedagogy and small classes, neither of which is pursued through a rational economic calculus.

### *Matching through a Market*

As stated in an earlier section, few principals were sharply critical of public schools. When they boasted of their own schools, it was for their ability to serve a particular segment of students. They rarely saw themselves in competition with public schools. But if there is one aspect of neoliberalism that resonates with the emerging norms of the third sector, it is the emphasis on matching the talents of students and educators. Many principals viewed public schools as unable to accommodate the sheer variety of student needs in society. As an example, one principal declared sympathy for the aims of public education while questioning its monolithic “one best system” capacity: “The thing I’ve learned is that there’s no one clear-cut answer for every child. So that’s why I think the public school system, and the idea that it’s for every child, well, no. It’s not for every child, because every child is different. And that’s an unfortunate perspective. It’s a very noble goal to have public funds so every child can get an education. Whether it’s the best education each child can get, that’s another matter” (Milliken Academy).

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One principal sees public high schools as clearly unable to meet the needs of a large, diverse population: “There are a million students, and one system. The system is not going to meet the needs of a million students” (Mimico High).

As we have argued elsewhere (Davies and Quirke, forthcoming), these schools pride themselves on their small class sizes and their personal touch and contrast these traits to the overly standardized and bureaucratized public system. These principals do not claim to appeal to a large segment of the population but instead cater to a specialized niche. No principals declared their own brand of schooling to be superior above all others, and many were open about their limitations, never claiming to be the perfect choice for every student.

What unites third-sector schools is a philosophy of delivering a tailored educational experience. This philosophy creates the distinguishing trait of the third sector: sheer diversity. We found an astonishing array of programs, mandates, and philosophies of teaching, as described above. Among the 45 schools, we identified three types of niches, based on curricular focus, special services, and student population. By offering such specialized diversity, third-sector providers had a strong affinity with one neoliberal dictum: that choice is an optimal medium to match certain types of educators to certain types of students. This individualism is expressed by the varied, niche-like character of the third-sector market. Small, specialized classes—perhaps the primary appeal of the third sector—may make little business sense, since they make economies of scale difficult. But they are very sensible when the guiding motive is expressive and individualistic and when personal contact, not efficiency, is the goal.

### Conclusion: Implications for Theory

The emerging ideology of choice in the third sector is quite different than what is imagined in neoliberal theory. Our findings suggest that this expanding sector has only limited affinities with this brand of politics. Few providers voiced harsh judgments of public schools or wanted them subject to tougher regulations. They valued matching with client tastes and being free from regulation but had little regard for competitive notions of accountability. Accountability was instead understood in consumer terms, as providing attentive service to suit the student rather than adapting to a competitive environment. Being small proprietors, they were driven not by corporate rationality but instead by expressive motives. Thus, in this market, choice serves as a vehicle to provide small-scale, tailored education, not to leverage schools toward stan-

standardized forms of competition. From these findings we draw two lessons for theories of choice.

First, choice researchers need an empirically sensitive theory of educational markets. Not all market settings are the same, and they shape a variety of choice ideologies. The third sector, for instance, is composed of small, local businesses, not corporate enterprises, whose owners embrace markets largely to serve their expressive and pedagogical goals. This reality is not readily comprehended in some theories of choice. For instance, critical theorists who adopt classic Marxist conceptions of markets (e.g., Marginson 1997) tend to assume that all markets necessarily commodify social exchanges, that is, reduce service to exchange value, degrade social relations to a purely instrumental cash nexus, and create an anonymous, self-interested, and amoral environment.

While this is undoubtedly true in some settings, it obscures the sheer diversity of markets. Such critiques implicitly assume large-scale, highly rationalized corporate markets. However, settings like the third sector have local proprietors who are “embedded” (using the term from economic sociology; see Granovetter [2001]) in local communities and for whom educational exchanges are largely personal. Because the third sector is marked by easy entry and few physical plant requirements, while still necessitating some educational experience, it entices pedagogues with little business investment and planning skills and who eschew the trappings of large-scale organization. The schools are small and informal and promote more personal contact than do most public schools. Indeed, clients often have prior ties to the proprietor. Thus, it is misleading to describe choice in the third sector as commodification, since it is driven by personal relations and expressive sentiment.

Some educational market conditions do promote more overt “commodification,” of course. The most obvious example is for-profit vocational colleges and universities. As described by Ruch (2001), this market segment is increasingly marked by large corporations, investors, and stock options. As they grow, they promote an economizing mind-set, appealing to would-be students with claims of “adding value” to a tuition “investment” by boosting career chances. Venerable academic artifacts like faculty research and even libraries lose their near sacred status, get scrutinized for their “return on investment,” and are cut if unprofitable. In such settings, education is explicitly treated as an instrumental commodity by both providers and students.

We doubt that similar thinking will soon pervade the third sector, most readily because K–12 schooling is very difficult to rationalize. Facing competition from public schools, corporations have struggled to devise a large-scale, standard form that is readily profitable. The history of performance contracting is of recurrent failure (Tyack and Cuban 1997), and the recent experience of Edison Schools will likely deter other corporations from entering K–12 provision.<sup>9</sup> Our research suggests that the private K–12 market has a

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distinct character, with clients seeking small classes and personal attention, factors that hinder large-scale profitability. Corporate forms are thriving in other segments of private education that are easier to rationalize, however. In supplementary education, tutoring and corporate training businesses are being transformed as franchising gradually supplants small proprietors (Aurini and Davies 2004; Davies 2004). But the personal nature of its demand, along with the stiff competition by local public schools, make us doubt that corporate forms will have a strong future presence in K–12 schooling.

The second lesson stems from how market forces and new cultures shape the motives of educational providers. Neoliberal theories of choice presume a certain type of information infrastructure (i.e., league tables of standardized test scores) and a culture that equates educational excellence with such scores. Yet, Toronto's growing third sector lacks these norms and infrastructure. Further, while reformers believe markets push schools to respect parental wishes and to engage in academic competition, only the former occurs in the third sector. Why? We believe the third sector highlights how the private education of children is driven by a very unique form of economic action.

Choice in the third sector is conditioned by a key fact: most of these schools are new. Lacking prestigious alumni or long-standing track records, earnest attempts to judge quality are fraught with problems. This uncertainty, we argue, shapes the provision of school choice. To deal with it, providers and parents rely on expressive criteria—small classes, personal attention, open customer relations, curricular niches—to guide their choice. It rewards those providers who are impassioned educators and who identify strongly with these criteria. Uncertainty thus allows a certain culture to condition choice.

To shed light on this, economic sociologists have examined the changing idioms of economic action. For instance, Zelizer (1994) has investigated situations in which economic rationality collides with our most emotive sentiment—how we raise our children. In her words, children over the past century have been increasingly regarded as “emotionally priceless but economically useless.” These ideas shed light on third-sector choice. Those parents are engaging in market behavior, certainly, but that action is not merely instrumental. School choice is a unique species of consumerism. Choosing a school is “more akin to choosing a family doctor or pastor” than a car or stereo (Paul Hill, quoted in Schneider et al. 2001, 40). What is making this choice increasingly sentimental, we argue, is a culture that sociologists are calling “intensive child rearing,” which increasingly prizes children as unique individuals and offers a premium to specialized forms of education in which these unique children thrive physically, emotionally, and developmentally (Lareau 2003; Quirke 2003).<sup>10</sup> Third-sector providers are embedded in this culture, are motivated by its concerns and values, and hence take a less economizing approach to their job. The point is that the third sector, when placed in

context of other forms of private education, highlights the variety of motives held by providers of school choice.

For those who oppose the encroachment of neoliberal thinking in education, our conclusions offer some solace. Third-sector providers are not against the public sector or uncritical of business incursions into education. They embrace a “small is beautiful” ethic that has affinities with versions of progressive pedagogy that have inspired public educators for decades. Proud of their customized offerings, many oppose those neoliberal initiatives that standardize schools and prize pedagogical freedom, variety, and intimate relations above all. But these humane philosophies notwithstanding, third-sector schools, as tuition-charging entities, lack a mandate that can ensure equal access. Despite good intentions, only wealthier families can afford the luxury of its intimate classes and personal treatment. Our respondents were deeply ambivalent about this reality and hoped that Toronto public schools would remain strong. The third sector illustrates that the tension between satisfying yearnings for choice while providing equity remains unresolved.

## Notes

1. These, of course, are only the expressed aims of neoliberals. Their critics detect a hidden agenda of downsizing government and privatizing public services to create huge markets for corporations (see, e.g., Ball 1998).

2. Ontario laws for private education are as follows: The government will approve an elementary private school if it enrolls at least five students and complies with health and safety guidelines, along with physical inspections. Private secondary schools must meet these requirements and also show that they are following the provincial curriculum. They are not required, however, to write the province’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests that have recently been introduced for public schools in grades 3, 6, and 9. Private secondary students must pass a grade 10 literacy test to graduate. If private schools partake in any testing, they must bear the associated expense. Catholic schools are fully funded by the province and are not deemed to be private.

3. For a description of differences among Canadian provinces, see [http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/activities\\_CACE.htm](http://www.cup.ualberta.ca/activities_CACE.htm).

4. As part of a larger project, the authors, along with Janice Aurini, also visited 20 tutoring businesses and interviewed several key figures in Toronto private education, including homeschoolers, parents, and consultants.

5. This may be due to the fact that almost half of the third-sector principals were previously employed in the public system. Of 45 principals, 23 were former public school teachers or principals, many working for several years or even a full career in that system.

6. See <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/reportcards/index.asp?snav=rc>. None of the third-sector elementary schools participated in the 2003 ratings.

7. Milliken High claims to rank in the top 1 percent for the Canadian Test of Basic Skills.

8. The one exception was Lakeshore High, which began with the new construction



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of a state-of-the-art building. That school, however, was bankrolled by a local business tycoon whose motivation was personal, not financial; his son was labeled “special needs,” and the father, frustrated by his son’s experiences in a variety of local private schools, decided to start his own, enrolling his son as the first student.

9. There are some exceptions though: a few school boards in American inner cities have turned to private corporations like “Edison Schools” in the face of dire financial trouble. This has not been the experience in Canada or other English-speaking nations, however. From what we have seen, corporate investors detect potential for profit not in running K–12 schools, but in selling those schools supplements, such as teacher training courses, software, and testing material. For an example, see <http://www.edventures.com>.

10. Economists simply label this culture a “preference” and regard it as exogenous to their models, not requiring explanation.

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