

**ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC EDUCATION AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY:  
VALUES, IDEOLOGIES AND LOOKING FOR SPACES OF CHANGE**

**MEGAN PEARSON**

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## Abstract

Violence and exclusion are experienced by children of colour in the Toronto public school system through disproportionate suspension, expulsion, dropout rates, police presence and the streaming of Black youth. The solidarity economy has a long history of organizing through education programs that serve to teach and mobilize groups of oppressed peoples as well as to instruct the masses about their ideological agendas. Grounded in critical theoretical approaches, this dissertation explores if and how the solidarity economy might intersect with public education in Toronto, Canada. Through analysis of empirical interview data from Toronto alternative public-school actors, and thematic analyses of policies informing the establishment of alternative public schools, the values and ideologies of the policies are uncovered, along with the logistics of how others have navigated these policies. It arrives at an understanding of the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy through brief case studies. The study concludes that while there are pockets of struggle and resistance within individual schools and classrooms in the Toronto District School Board, the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy are not able to inform a different vision of schooling, within the current Toronto alternative school system and its establishment policies.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Violence and exclusion are experienced by children of colour in the Toronto public school system through disproportionate suspension, expulsion, dropout rates, police presence and the streaming of Black youth (Maynard, 2017). This is not a new phenomenon because “for as long as they have been in Canada, people of African descent have been involved in advocacy in order to have equal access to a quality education” (James & Turner, 2017). In the wake of the “Yonge Street Riots” in 1992, Stephen Lewis was commissioned to examine “race relations” in Ontario. The result was “The Stephen Lewis Report on Race Relations in Ontario,” released in June of the same year (James & Turner, 2017). In it, Lewis names the anti-Black racism in Ontario’s institutions and systems, including the school system:

First, what we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping-out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professional and non-professional, on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. Just as the soothing balm of 'multiculturalism' cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target. (Lewis, 1992, p. 2, quoted in James & Turner, 2017)

As Lewis makes plain, it is Black children who were experiencing and who continue to experience the systemic effects of anti-Black racism in Ontario schools and beyond.

Schools in the Toronto public system use provincially produced policies and curriculum documents espousing “democratic values of fairness, equity, and respect for all” (Growing Success – The Kindergarten Addendum: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools, 2016). But in my experience as a teacher, there was an incongruency between what we stated that we valued and what we did in practice within the system that we had. Disparate suspension, expulsion and dropout rates among Black students hardly seem democratic, and may indeed, lead to a similar, conclusion; the words of the policies and how they are enacted, are dissimilar.

In his 2012 book “Life at the Intersection: Community, Class and Schooling” Carl James outlines the ways in which

societal structures (i.e., economic, political, social, cultural, judicial, collectively) create, regulate and sustain unequal relationships within society that are evident in school policies, programs and practices. The counter narrative must also tell of how students, as early as elementary school, continue to be confined to educational institutions and systems that struggle, and are failing, to recognize their inherent abilities and potential, as well as their hopes.

(p. 28)

Education is seen as a means to upward mobility and has “emerged as the lone institutional provider of a common experience for almost the entire populace. It does this in a form that is increasingly standardized, rationalized, and expanded” (Guppy & Davies, 2017, p. 75).

Education's creed as a mechanism for social and economic movement makes it difficult to imagine how schools can under-serve those who are already subjugated by the effects of systemic anti-Black racism.

How can change be made in such a system? bell hooks' (2003) notion of a gap, where spaces in seemingly closed systems can be found and used to create change, is provocative in this context: "If we are not able to find and enter the open spaces in closed systems," she warns, "(no matter the catalyst for the openness), we doom ourselves by reinforcing the belief that these educational systems cannot be changed" (p. 74). Those open spaces must be found if change is to be made.

The solidarity economy has opened spaces for profound systemic changes for marginalized groups. There are numerous local, national and global cases of organizing work done by people of colour and other excluded groups, to make change to systems that otherwise prohibit whole groups of people from social and economic participation. There is often an educational element to this organizing work; a means by which to educate and alert people to the cause, as well as to galvanise different peoples against systemic and social oppression (Peck, 2001). Perhaps then, there is a space for change in the school system, informed by the ideologies and values of the solidarity economy.

Chapter One introduces the purpose of the study and its research questions. It outlines the significance of the project, its limitations and delimitations, before outlining concepts pertinent to its interpretation. Chapter One sets the study up for a clear understanding of its intentions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this qualitative study is to describe the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies that control the establishment of alternative public schools in



Toronto, and to discover if and in what ways they intersect. The following three research questions guided the methodology of this study: (1) What values and ideologies are held in the policies that control the establishment of alternative public schools in Toronto? (2) How have others navigated these policies to successfully found alternative public schools? And, (3) Can the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy inform an alternative vision of public schooling in Toronto?

### **Significance of the Study**

Many case studies have been undertaken on social economy organizations (see Amin, 2009; Quarter, 1992; Quarter & Mook, 2010; Whyte & Whyte, 1991), as well as the solidarity economy (Allard et al., 2013; Di Meglio et al., 2011; Hossein, 2019; Miller, 2005, 2010; Satgar, 2014). There has been previous research focusing on school founders, alternative school establishment policies and the ways in which the market intercedes (see Ellis & Yoon, 2019; Heilbronn, 2016; Higham, 2014; Quirke, 2007; Rutkowski, 2007; Saunders & Blanco Ramírez, 2017; Taylor & Mackay, 2008). What is missing is an interrogation of what may lie at the intersection of the solidarity economy and education. As you will come to see, education plays a formative role in many solidarity economy movements, past and present. Knowing this, one wonders if knowledge of the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies that control the establishment of alternative schools could inform an alternative vision of public schooling in Toronto – one that addresses the needs of children who have been systemically subjugated by public schooling. This study adds to the work being done in enactment theory, by looking specifically at values and ideologies typically overlooked in policy (Ball et al., 2012). Its contributions are also positioned in a facet of enactment theory put forward by Ball et al. (2012): in the interpretive, where a founder's strategies for opening a school are

basic to the interpretation and translation of particular policies. This study will contribute to a critical understanding of the values and ideologies of the policies pertaining to the establishment of alternative public schooling. It will contribute too, to an understanding of how to navigate such policies. It offers a new lens through which to take up the exclusion and subjugation of Black children from public schooling. Exploring the intersection of the solidarity economy with public education in Canada is novel. The findings may have implications for policy makers, people involved in the solidarity economy, educators, and marginalised students and their communities. More specifically, this study will also have implications for the alternative public schools in the Toronto District School Board.

### **Limitations**

The number of school founders available for interviews was limited and thus is the generalizability of how school founders navigated establishment policies. Schools in this study were established between 1972 and present day and consequently fall under the purview of policies implemented by the Toronto Board of Education (TBE) pre-amalgamation, as well as by the TDSB, post-amalgamation. These eras reflect shifting social and historical contexts, which are addressed throughout the manuscript.

### **Delimitations**

Toronto's education landscape is situated in both the public and the private sectors, with schools that are publicly funded, and those funded predominately by individual tuition, respectively. Together, the private, independent, public and public alternative sectors are each an integral part of the educational landscape in Ontario. This landscape though, is vast and wide, comprised of multiple public and public alternative schools, Catholic boards and private and independent schools. Each sector has a layered and contextual policy environment within which

they must operate. For this reason, I have chosen to narrow the focus of this work to alternative public schools in the Toronto District School Board. This is a logical place to start, not only in terms of data manageability, but also because the solidarity economy is concerned with questions of the public good and issues of equity and access of marginalized populations. Private education is not so inclined, though it is a worthy line of inquiry in the context of the solidarity economy and education. Let me first steady myself in what at the outset, seem to be allied ideas.

### **Key Concepts**

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines school as “an organization that provides instruction” (Merriam Webster, 2019b). By this simple definition, the term school is indicative of the place or space (physical or virtual) that has been designated for the act of learning. Heavily influenced by Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* (2000), Matt Hern (1996) makes a further distinction between schools and schooling, arguing that schooling can happen outside of a formal school institution, pointing to homeschooling as an example. Schools, he argues, are predominately manifested in state run (public), formal institutions and are difficult to conceptualize in any other way. Schools, “practice a certain brand of schooling” (p. 2), that is they “are institutions devoted to schooling, or imparting a certain set of values, beliefs and practices upon their clients” (p. 2). Notice the use of the word clients here. Both Illich (2000) and Hern (1996), along with (Giroux, 2020) argue that schools are in service of industrial capitalism and that by extension, education is an “economic commodity” (Hern, 1996, ix) used to coerce students into their rightful positions in the economic and social hierarchy (Hern, 1996).

Education is defined by Merriam Webster as “the action or process of educating or of being educated” (Merriam Webster, 2019a). In the same manner as Illich (2000) and Hern (1996), Holt (1996) suggests that in the context of schools, there is a less neutral and more

nefarious meaning, where education is something put upon others – “learning cut off from active life and done under pressure of bribe or threat, greed and fear” (p. 27). He argues that true education, where people do better and help one another to do better, does not happen under the conditions of schools, where credential-seeking, grades and competition rule the roost.

“Education” and “schooling” are often conflated (Aronowitz, 2008). This deceptive conflation Gatto (2003, 2017) argues, has us believing one must go to school to be educated and that education must look the same for all learners. However, school as we understand it, is a relatively new phenomenon. Mandatory schooling took shape in Ontario in 1871 (Oreopoulos, 2005) whereas education is timeworn. Before school, education came with experience and work, and apprenticeship. It came with different seasons and mentorship. What we learn from Aronowitz's (2008) stories about his maternal grandparents is that one can be highly educated without being “schooled.”

Writing for Statistics Canada, Oreopolous (2005) cites several studies that have found compulsory schooling to have many social and economic returns, including better health, less crime, an increase in civic activities, and better jobs with higher earnings. Others argue that schools produce consumer-citizens and reproduce class and race structures and inequalities (Giroux, 1983). “School,” Gatto (2017) says, “is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned (p. 18). Illich (2000) also reminds us that there is a difference between school and education: “But if schools are the wrong places for learning a skill, they are even worse places for getting an education. School does both tasks badly, partly because it does not distinguish between them” (p. 17). With so much disagreement and conflation, it is clear that education and school are ideologically contentious issues.

In his book, *Life in Schools*, McLaren (1989) draws on Paolo Freire and Henry Giroux to distinguish between schooling and education where, “the former is primarily a mode of social control; the latter has the potential to transform society, with the learner functioning as an active subject committed to self and social empowerment” (p. 165). In this treatment, education and learning are separate entities. As Holt (1996) argues, learning happens by doing and cannot be separated into experiences from which we learn and those from which we do not. It is not prescribed under particular and coercive conditions. Learning, instead, happens through all life experiences. Learning then, is not because of teaching, it is the result of living. As Illich (2000) argues, it may be the result of teaching, but should not be coupled with promotion or certification. Learning then, will be defined as “acquir[ing] a new skill or insight” (Illich, 2000, p. 11). “School” will be used in reference to the formal, sanctioned and institutionalized spaces and places that have been designated for education. Education will be defined by the Merriam Webster definition above but with the caveat that it is within this understanding of the school.

### **Teaching and Pedagogy**

Teaching and pedagogy are also terms that are often conflated. What we read in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000) is that pedagogy is not a teaching method, but rather a “philosophy or a social theory” (p. 24). Many of the ideas around educational reform are in reference to the reform of curriculum and policy. While there are studies and initiatives that call for an improvement in student achievement (Zavadsky, 2011) there have also long been notable calls for changing the ways in which we teach and conceptualize schooling and education in order to achieve democracy (Dewey, 1997, 2010; Giroux, 1979; Hall & Dennis, 1968). Teaching reform is one consideration in thinking about the ways the solidarity economy can interact with formal, public education in Toronto but they – that is pedagogy and teaching – must remain

ideologically distinct. Teaching is central to, but not synonymous with pedagogy. As Alexander (2013) explains,

Teaching is a deliberate cultural intervention in individual human development that is deeply saturated with the values and history of the society and community in which it is located. Teaching is not, and even in the most technicist and centralising political regime never can be, a mindless act. Practice, as they say, is ‘theory- soaked’. If that is so, we need a separate word to connote the combination of the act of teaching and the values, evidence, theories and collective histories that inform, shape and explain it, a word that will lead us away from the blinkered pragmatism of ‘what works’ into the realm of ideas and argument. That word, for centuries in common use elsewhere, is pedagogy (p. 173).

McLaren (1989) uses Roger Simon’s definition of pedagogy as a means by which to distinguish teaching from pedagogy, defining pedagogy as:

the integration in practice of particular curriculum content and design, classroom strategies and techniques, and evaluation, purpose and methods. All of these aspects of educational practice come together in the realities of what happens in classrooms. Together they organize a view of how a teacher’s work within an institutional context specifies a particular version of what knowledge is most at work, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment. In other words, talk about pedagogy is simultaneously talk about the details of what students and others might do

together and the cultural politics such practices support. In this perspective,  
 we cannot talk about teaching practices without talking about politics  
 (McLaren, 1989, p. 161).

Taken together, these definitions position teaching as measured training and pedagogy as a teaching practice that is culturally and politically mediated. This is the distinction I wish to make.

### **Curriculum**

Then there is this issue of curriculum. Egan (1978) pointed to the debates around what was entailed in curriculum, whether it should include instruction,

or whether curriculum involves all learning experiences, or refers simply to a blueprint for achieving restricted objectives in a school setting, or includes the statement of objectives as well, or also the evaluation of their achievement, and so on. The field seems to have no clear logical boundaries.

(p. 10)

Egan (1978) provides a brief outline of the history of the use of the term curriculum and trajectory that influenced the taking up of methods of instruction. That is, the content of the curriculum was taken as a given in many learning circumstances and the question of the *how* remained. With Rousseau's assumption that all children are inherently good if not obstructed by "social and institutional constraints" (Egan, 1978, p. 13) the taking up of Senguin's methods by Maria Montessori, and the subsequent criticism of those methods by John Dewey, the methods and procedures of curriculum delivery slowly became salient to mainstream schooling (Egan, 1978). With a focus on the ways in which individuals may learn differently from one another came an emphasis on the "how" of the learning, not just its content. Egan (1978) also points to

the dilemma that if the purpose of education is unknown, how will the content be determined? He resolves the dilemma of defining curriculum by concluding that “focus on either *how* or *what* at the expense of the other is improper” (p. 16, emphasis is original) but goes on to say that as a matter of common sense, the *what* must be focused on, intimating that specific content will better prepare children for the future. This is in line with the Merriam Webster definition which defines curriculum as “the courses offered by an educational institution” (*Definition of Curriculum*, n.d.)

Recent reflections on curriculum point to nuanced sociological approaches to the curriculum. Of relevance here, is the range of poststructuralist approaches to curriculum. Gewirtz & Cribb (2009) make small distinctions between the ways in which curriculum is taken up by critical theorists and poststructuralists. Situating an understanding of curriculum in poststructuralism constitutes a recognition that it is discourse that produces truths – that “everything is ultimately a social construction”:

There is not a single reality – or truth – outside the construction of knowledge  
– only multiple realities, multiple truths that are produced through discourse  
and which reflect the different standpoints and interests from which the  
knowledge is constructed. (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p.115)

That is to say that the written curriculum documents used by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), for instance, are a set of truths constructed through discourse, which is specific to context, the interests of the people who wrote it and their influences. The truth that is to be “delivered” by the teacher to the students through curriculum is contextual. This is confirmed if one is to look at curricula between provinces and between countries. What is important, changes depending on contexts. There are multiple truths. But who is to say which truth is more important and accordingly which curriculum to teach? Here, a battleground is formed where



“different versions of authority, history, the present, and the future struggle to prevail”

(McLaren, 1989, p. 165).

### **The Hidden Curriculum**

In *Dumbing us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling – the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Gatto, 2017) takes up the concealed curriculum of obligatory school which serves to position us according to class, make us intellectually and emotionally dependent, avail ourselves to surveillance, regimentation and provisional self-esteem. This hidden curriculum he argues, usurps any learning of content, and instead makes us cogs in the wheel of production and consumption. This idea of a hidden curriculum is not new. In the introduction to *Chomsky on Mis-Education* (Chomsky & Macedo, 2000), Donaldo Macedo uses the themes made so prevalent by Freire to conceptualize school as a place of indoctrination that systematically “combs out” critical thought and trains students to become “compliant workers, spectral consumers, and passive citizens” (p. 4) through the expectation of the regurgitation of knowledge passed on from teacher to pupil. This is not unlike Freire’s banking model of education, nor does it depart from Gatto’s assertion that formal curriculum has the ideological task of “dumbing down” (to use Gatto’s vernacular) or contributing to the “stupidification” (to use Chomsky’s) of people so as to relinquish any critical thinking skills and become domesticated in the social order (Chomsky & Macedo, 2000, p. 4). Gender, race and class play an important role here too, as Bowles and Gintis argue that “there is a direct relationship – or ‘correspondence’ – between the requirements of capital accumulation and the curriculum” (quoted in Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p. 113), where certain students are taught skills that will help them into professional or managerial occupations while the curriculum for other students pushes them into the semi-skilled or unskilled labour force. Gramsci’s analysis of ideology, “which illuminates the ways in which

social control can be achieved without ‘dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination’” (quoted in Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p. 113) is prominent in the work of critical theorists of curriculum.

The idea of the hidden curriculum is important to this work, the aim of which is to ascertain if and how the values of the solidarity economy might inform a different vision of schooling in the TDSB. In their treatment of the curriculum as it pertains to the ways it is approached, Gewirtz & Cribb (2009) use the term to refer both to the formal, official curriculum and the hidden curriculum (p. 208). In so doing, they acknowledge the interconnectedness of knowledge production and the values and ideologies inherent within this production. Thus, “curriculum” will refer to the formal curriculum (including curriculum documents), as well as the hidden curriculum within these documents and the policy documents that govern the opening of alternative public schools.

Finally, education system will be used as an umbrella term to encompass schools, learning, pedagogy, curriculum, teaching and education; recognizing the complex ways in which they interact, the policies that shape them, the values and ideologies that underpin them, and the interconnected systems that hold them in place.

### **Values**

Identifying values and ideologies within policy frameworks will be a difficult task, because they are slippery concepts, which have proven arduous to grasp unqualifiedly. Evidence of this can be seen in the many ways in which values have been defined, to which Roberts (2012) points in his study of the values of media codes of ethics. This difficulty may be in part due to their unstable nature; that, much like policies (discussed below), values “change in accordance to the changing physical, social, and spiritual environments of the individuals or groups that

embrace them” as Seevers (2000, p. 71) suggests in her study of organizational values. Seevers (2000) situates her definition of values within the work of Rokeach who wrote at length about values, defining them as:

An enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states among a continuum of relative importance (quoted in Seevers, 2000, p. 70).

It is this definition of values I will use in the undertaking of this study.

### **Ideology**

Saunders & Blanco Ramírez (2017) explore the use of excellence as a tool of neoliberal ideology in higher education policy documents across five countries. The study defines ideology as “a body of meanings and values encoding certain interests relevant to social power” (quoted in Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2017, p. 398). Freeden (2003) distills this definition, identifying four functions played by ideology in political life and outlining a political ideology as:

a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that (1) exhibit a recurring pattern, (2) are held by significant groups, (3) compete over providing and controlling plans for public policy, and (4) do so with the aim of justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangement and processes of a political community” (p. 31).

For Freeden (2003), ideologies are necessarily political because “the requirement of competing over public policy reminds us that we are dealing with political ideologies... aimed at the public arena” (p. 33). In *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple (2004) takes up

education as part and parcel of politics, arguing that a critical engagement with education must move beyond technical issues of teaching and instead “think critically about education’s relationship to economic, political, and cultural power” (Apple, 2004, p. vii). Apple’s interpretation of education in relation to power and politics is persuasive, as it aids in the conceptualization of the education system as situated within complex and politicized economic and social ideologies. As values and ideologies emerge in the analyses of written and discursive policies, Freeden’s (2003) definition of ideology will support an effort to untangle these constructs that shift in time and space.

### **Ontario’s Education System**

Canadian education is provincially regulated. The Ontario education system consists of two dominant parts: the public system, funded by the government, and the private system. The Government of Ontario considers any school not provincially funded, to be private. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) outlines private schools as schools that “operate as businesses or non-profit organizations independently of the OME and in accordance with the legal requirements established by the Education Act” (Government of Ontario, n.d.). In Ontario, private elementary schools are not accredited by a government accrediting body though they are required to adhere to the “Private Schools Policies and Procedures Manual” (Ontario and Ministry of Education, 2013), ensuring a modicum of control and quality in content and evaluation, student record maintenance, reporting and attendance policies. Secondary schools are subject to policies and procedures regulating and overseeing the granting of Ontario high school credits.

Actors in the private system generally decipher between independent and private schools on the basis of governance, funding and legal structure (Kennedy, 2019). Where private schools

are generally for-profit organizations, founded and governed by one or more individuals, “independent most often signifies a not-for-profit school that is accountable to a board of trustees, which operates at arm’s length from the administration” (Ourkids.net, n.d.).

Independent and private elementary school curricula are not regulated by the OME.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is the largest schoolboard in Ontario. It is the result of Bill 104, the Fewer School Boards Act of 1997 (MacLellan, 2007) which amalgamated many of Ontario’s boards and cut the number of Trustee positions. The Toronto Board of Education (TBE), a board in its own right prior to 1997, operated several publicly funded alternative schools, beginning with SEED (Summer of Experience, Exploration and Discovery) in 1968 (Shukyn, 1973). SEED began as a summer program for the many students experiencing unemployment and ran for two summers as well as the school year in between before being granted official status to run as a year-round school in 1970 (*SEED Part One – Michael Barker*, 2013). Several of the alternative schools that started in the TBE including SEED, continue under the purview of the TDSB, along with several alternative public schools that were established after the 1997 amalgamation.

Alternative Schools are defined by the OME as schools that have been established by the board “to provide an option for some students who have educational needs that cannot be met in their existing schools, and/or to respond to needs expressed in the community” (Ontario Schools: Kindergarten to Grade 12, 2016, p. 80). In the Toronto context, there are varying types of alternative school and program choices to which this definition could potentially point. The TDSB accommodates what it refers to as “Elementary and Secondary Alternative Schools”, “Elementary Academies”, “Elementary Central Student Interest Programs”, “Secondary Central Student Interest Programs”, and “French Programs” (Toronto District School Board, 2023).

Elementary Central Student Interest Programs are board-initiated programs with a focus on teaching the Ontario Curriculum through a specialized area of interest. The admission of students to these programs is based on the availability of space as well as application processes which vary with the focus of each program or school. Some programs are housed in mainstream public schools, while others are schools in their own right, such as the two arts-focus schools.

Conversely, academies are board-initiated, full-day schools, to which “equal access” is provided to all students in the TDSB. That is to say that there are not specific requirements for admission, though the concepts of choice and equality of access are challenged, as will be seen throughout the manuscript. Academies are comprised of their own school buildings, teachers and staff. Transportation is not available for academy students.

Within the French Language Programs offered by the TDSB, French Immersion is offered as a “choice” at the elementary level and Extended French and French Immersion are offered as “choices” at the secondary level. Each program issues formalized certificates upon successful completion of specified requirements. Admission to French Language programs at the elementary level is based on available spaces within the programs and student proximity to schools that offer the immersion programs. All students who meet the application deadline are offered a French Immersion program space, but are not guaranteed a proximate school. Transportation options are available for French Language Program students who meet the criteria as they pertain to distance. At the secondary level, admission is based on available space and having an comparable French background. Transportation is not available for secondary students.

TDSB Alternative schools are small school environments (usually located within a larger, mainstream school), each with a distinct focus and philosophy. Schools are required to teach the

Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum; however, schools claim to offer diverse approaches to teaching and learning, which seek to meet the needs of individual students. Alternative schools are “ideal for students seeking an alternative to mainstream education” (Alternative Schools, 2023). At the elementary level, students may apply online, to up to two alternative schools and are chosen through randomized selection, with priority given to particular and traditionally underserved groups, when the number of spaces is insufficient to accommodate the number of applicants. In the case of secondary alternatives, admission varies between schools, with some schools requiring an interview as part of the admission process, to others which simply requiring registration. Transportation is not offered to students who attend alternative schools. The Alternative Schools Policy (P062) defines an alternative school as “a TDSB school in which flexible methods of teaching in non-traditional learning environments meet the needs of learners. Alternative schools are characterized by community collaboration, choice, inclusivity, and flexibility” (Toronto District School Board, 2007, p. 1). This is the definition to which alternative schools will refer.

## **Summary**

Chapter One provided an Introduction to the paper and overview of key concepts and definitions related to education as well as other key concepts relevant to this study. It delineated between alternative schools and other specialized schools and programs of choice offered by the TDSB. Chapter Two will review the literature from alternative schools, and the social and solidarity economies, drawing on case studies to decipher the values and ideologies of the social and solidarity economies and make important distinctions between them.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study is to describe the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies that control the establishment of the alternative public schools in Toronto, and to discover if and how they intersect. In Chapter Two, an overview of alternative schools in Toronto is presented with a review of extant literature. The social and solidarity economies are introduced, along with a review of their literatures. I build on past qualitative case studies of social economy organizations which outline their values in various contexts and the ways in which the social economy fills a gap between the public and the private, providing services and securities that are not provided by the government, or afforded in the marketplace (see Amin, 2009; Quarter, 1992; Quarter & Mook, 2010). I draw on key solidarity economy cases to offer insight into the ideologies and values of the solidarity economy. Taken together, this review of literature provides an overview of the literature of alternative schools, establishing a familiarity with their histories and apposite policies, and calling attention to the need for more research on Toronto alternative schools in general and for interdisciplinary inquiry in particular. The chapter makes important distinctions between the social and solidarity economies and allows for an understanding of the ideologies and values of the solidarity economy, important in answering whether its values and ideologies might inform another vision of schooling. Finally, it aids in understanding why I endeavor to use the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy and not those of the social economy and thus accentuates the importance of an understanding of the solidarity economy to this project.

### **Alternative Schools**

The notion of alternatives to mainstream schooling has been around since mandatory schooling took shape. From curriculum reform in order to meet the needs of a widening segment



of the population compelled to attend school, to the establishment of technical and vocational schools in order meet the varied needs of the “many children [who] were neither able nor willing to follow the traditional academic program offered at the secondary school level” (*Focus #3: Education in Upper Canada II / Foundations of Education*, n.d.). School reforms also came with changing cultural ideologies, like the changing perception of children and the changing perception of girls and women. Placing students in various courses based on perceived skills and abilities has been consistently revised during the 1900s, and specifically after World War II (*History of Education in Canada / The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2022). There were separate schools for Black children established in Ontario and Nova Scotia in 1850 (Winks, 1969) and the last Residential Schools, designed to eradicate Indigenous peoples remained open into the 1990s (Union of Ontario Indians, 2013) In the 1960s and early 1970s, alternative schools started emerging in North America (Maton & Nichols, 2020). Toronto is often credited as the epicenter of the alternative school space and the Hall-Dennis Report in Ontario was the impetus for much of the flurry surrounding alternative schools, especially in Toronto (Bascia et al., 2017; Livingstone, 1987). This overview is of course a generalization; however, it speaks to the constant calls for alternatives in the Ontario school system.

Part of the discourse around reform is that schools are not meeting the needs of students – students of colour, gifted students, at-risk youth, students with behavioural “needs” – and many of these students end up in alternative schools. The gender, race, class and socio-economic status of students in alternative schools was a significant theme from interviews with several participants. And there is significant literature around the failings of students themselves as well as how the school system is failing our kids (Raywid, 1994). Sarah, a founding teacher from School One and Nate, the founder of School Three spoke openly about the demographics of their

students, both working to absorb children who didn't fit in, in traditional schools. Is it the schools then, or the children, who are the problem? On one side, school reformers are working to change schools and curriculum – a “rejection of traditional mainstream schooling” (Bascia et al., 2017, p. xv); and on the other side, others (teachers, administrators, parents) are working to find places and programs that will accommodate children who do not fit within the traditional school, as if they were the problem (Brophy & Guilford Press, 2003; Gold & Mann, 1982).

The international free schooling movement was most popular in the 1960s and 1970s, at which time many thousands of free schools were founded outside of the school system (Bascia et al., 2017). Toronto was named as a locale for the international free school movement in “Free Schools” by Jonathan Kozol (1972). The factors that created such fertile ground included the Hall-Dennis Report, released in 1968, and “This Magazine is About Schools,” a well-known Toronto magazine (Bascia et al., 2017). These, “combined with a generation that was just having children that had gone through the sixties as a formative part of their identity” (ibid. p. 13) created a “moment of possibility” (ibid. p. 13) in Toronto. In this moment, ALPHA Alternative school emerged as Toronto's first alternative public elementary schools and is based on A.S. Neill's Summerhill School, founded in 1921 (Appleton, 1992).

According to key informants, there were a couple of prominent people “responsible for getting the first proposal together and for working with [a] very chaotically diverse group of parents who were interested in starting a school” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021).

And what he did was he and a few... other people... put ads in “Community Schools Magazine,” in “This Magazine is About Schools,” I think even in “The Star” – inviting people to meetings twice a month at OISE [Ontario Institute

for Studies in Education]. And universities in those days were different, the doors weren't locked! [Michael] was a professor there, so he booked his room. There were even free schools that were just teaching out of empty classrooms at OISE. The group would just convene and find an empty classroom to work in. So, it was very interesting, the kinds of stuff that was happening. But [Michael] and the people that were drawn by these ads met twice a month. He describes... I don't know, one of my interviewees at that time described about the smell of diapers and coffee in those rooms. And the arguments. But they did manage to cobble together a document based on the work of MAGU (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021).

MAGU, or Multi Age Grouping Unit was North York's first public alternative elementary school and was also founded by a small group of parents in September of 1969. MAGU was a free school, democratically run by its parent committees, four teachers and its students who ranged in age from four to fifteen years old (Kirsh et al., 1973). ALPHA was modelled after MAGU's culture of democracy, where students and parents were an integral part of decision-making in every aspect of the school.

The passage above helps to illustrate the democratic nature of ALPHA's beginnings and the alternative and often radical educational milieux in which it took place. For example, *This Magazine is About Schools* was a leftist political magazine that started in 1966 (Goloubovich, 2013) and still remains in circulation over 50 years later<sup>1</sup> (THIS Magazine — Summer Back-Issue Blowout, 2016). It was started by George Martell, Bob Davis and Satu Repo, "a trio of radical teachers" (Jacob, personal communication, 2021) at an alternative school in Guelph,

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, the magazine changed its name to This Magazine to reflect its shift to focus on a wider range of topics in politics and culture.

Ontario. It originally sold issues from an ice cream shop in a Toronto neighborhood but grew to have a readership of over 5000 paid subscribers (Goloubovich, 2013). The “initial issue of Toronto’s “This Magazine is About Schools” encapsulated the contradictions within school critique of the time” (O’Rourke, 2009). “This Magazine is About Schools” drew a particular, left-leaning readership, as the magazine “focused on radical education reform and activism” (*Celebrating Our Education Roots*, 2016) in its early days. In its nascent state, the idea for ALPHA drew interest from presumably left-leaning educational reformists who read “This Magazine” and who gathered at OISE, a place that the “Free School Handbook” notes had schools running out of its classrooms, “with nobody knowing or caring.” (The Free School Handbook, 1972, p. 12; quoted in O’Rourke, 2009, p. 96).

O’Rourke (2009) explores further in her own work, outlining the ways in which Ontario, and Toronto specifically, were hubs for the alternative schooling movement. Ontario, she relays from the 1972 “Free School Handbook,” had among the fewest barriers to creating an alternative school (O’Rourke, 2009).

The Hall-Dennis Report, published in 1968, also set the stage for an era of school reform and innovation, as “it very much emphasized democratic values [and] a lot of its ideas were actually counter to profound cultural values that we have, like of competition, respect for authority and hierarchy” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021). In addition, the smell of diapers and coffee may have been indicative of a diverse community gathering, coming together to “converse, argue and cobble together” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021) what would become ALPHA’s foundational document.

The foundational document is called “the ALPHA Experience” and is based on the work of MAGU. It served as the proposal to the Toronto Board of Education in 1971 (Denise, personal

communication, January 8, 2021). The document outlines the beliefs and values of the school and the ways in which their aims for education are not being met by Toronto schools “in any one program, throughout the grades, or with sufficient parent participation” (*The ALPHA Experience / ALPHA School*, n.d.). It emphasises the design of the educational environment towards the development of particular competencies and outlines the ways in which these competencies will be developed: through non-competitive and ungraded opportunities for learning that are initiated by the child and guided by teachers and other community resources. The foundational document was approved by the Toronto Board of Education in 1971 and ALPHA opened its doors in 1972, to almost 100 students as Toronto’s first free school and first elementary alternative public school. Jacob, who once sat on the Toronto Board of Education’s Alternative and Community Programs Committee, recounts “a procedure whereby proposals for new alternative schools could be vetted and approved. The main criteria were presenting a distinctive philosophy and demonstrating parental support/demand” (Jacob, personal communication, 2021). Ben gives credit to Toronto’s liberal policies and to a small group of reform trustees, for making Toronto’s climate ripe for alternative schools. The release of the Hall-Dennis report was also a key component to the emergence of several alternative schools beginning in 1968 with S.E.E.D (Shukyn, 1973), and later, ALPHA.

To date, there are 19 elementary public alternative schools and 21 secondary alternative public schools in the TDSB (Toronto District School Board, 2014). Thirty schools were established before amalgamation between 1968 and 1998. Since amalgamation in 1998, nine new alternative schools have been established, the last of which were opened in 2009.

What we learn from Gulson and Taylor Webb (2013) is that of the four alternative public schools that were proposed in 2007, Toronto’s Africentric Alternative School (AAS) was the

only proposal to garner wild controversy and admonishment. The other school proposals, with focuses on social justice and the environment, a Waldorf – inspired curriculum, and a holistic learning approach, were passed with no publicized contestation. Gulson and Taylor Webb (2013) use AAS as a way to demonstrate that “some forms of choice are seen as discomforting, unsettling and dangerous and others as normal or natural” (p. 173).

The reason for the absence of AAS in this study is discussed below. For now, it can simply be stated that in its absence, the missed opportunity to interrogate the values and ideologies of establishment policies as they relate to the establishment of AAS, and how the values and ideologies of the SSE might inform existing practices within AAS, is noted. Preliminary searches regarding the curriculum at AAS, suggest that the solidarity economy is not addressed there.

“School choice, social class and distinction: the realization of social advantage in education,” Ball et al., (1996) argue that within education, policy choice is taken to be both neutral and individualistic” (abstract). They challenge this presupposition, arguing that race and class mark issues of school choice and affect one’s ability to choose. Choice, they argue, is not neutral, nor individual, but rooted in systems of privilege and inequality.

Toronto’s alternative schools represent one of several school choices in Ontario. School choice is both a contentious and ideological issue. Some of its proponents contend that the needs of many students are unmet by mainstream schools and that an ability to choose from many options motivates competition between schools which in turn stimulates school improvement (Davies & Aurini, 2011). Other arguments for choice include the perception of a greater accountability of schools, and better academic performance among students (Jeynes, 2000). Opponents of school choice argue that it exacerbates inequalities by favoring the white

majority and the affluent (Jeynes, 2000) and by turning parents and students into customers (Jeynes, 2000; McLaughlin & Bridges, 2005). With the exception of the (pre-neoliberal) 1968 Hall-Dennis Report, school choice features in each of the policies pertaining to Toronto alternative public schools, yet the ways in which it is taken up ideologically, vary over time with the rise of neoliberalism (Winton & Staples, 2022).

Vivian urged me to consider choice:

I hope you will critique that idea that alternative schools are offering parents and families a choice because what I'm coming to learn is that alternative schools are sites that reinforce privilege and that create a very privileged sense of belonging and that aren't really choices. When you start to unpack who feels welcome in these spaces, which families choose these spaces; there's a lot there to unpack, about whether these alternative schools are creating choices or limiting choices and reinforcing privilege.

(Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020)

Gulson and Taylor Webb (2013) relate how policies around school choice in the TDSB allow parents, among others, to establish alternative public schools but remind us that “rather than merely advocating choice as the opportunity to attend different types of schools, policy conflates both the provision and choosing of education” (p. 169). The problematic of school choice is that it is not an option for everyone. It is in fact, discriminatory, exacerbating racial and class inequities (Froese-Germain, 2010).

Webb & Gulson (2015) also use policy problematization to interrogate the establishment of AAS in Toronto, by “mapping the emergence of the policy decision” (p. 156) leading to its establishment. The authors position alternative schools within neoliberalism and

invoke Foucault to locate school choice within a neoliberal framework, arguing that policies are a necessary tool of neoliberalism, and that “school and schooling have long been forms of biopolitical governance, with neoliberalism and school choice policies now ushering in new forms of racial biopolitics” (p. 159). Schools can offer a stark glimpse into the connections between socio-economic status, race, class and gender and the ways in which they intersect.

In his study of free school establishment policies and the implications for free school proposers in England, Higham (2014) interrogates the motivations of individuals who propose free schools, who these individuals are, and what kinds of proposals were accepted by the government. Higham (2014) maps the demography of school proposers using social media and media coverage, along with 50 semi-structured telephone interviews and concludes that successful proposers shared particular social and economic capital that allowed them to navigate the system. Those without particular forms of capital were not successful in their school proposals.

Taylor & Mackay (2008) offer a similar conclusion of their case studies of three alternative programs in Edmonton, finding that the success of these programs can be traced back to their establishment; who was doing the establishing dictated the kind of support received, much of which was predicated on the social, economic and cultural capital of the founders. A connection can be drawn between Webb and Gulson’s (2015) notion of white supremacy and the ways in which who gets to establish alternative schools is dictated by ‘market forces,’ and policies; analogues for the government’s desire for particular (white) schools and particular (white) students. Both Higham (2014) and Heilbronn (2016) point to the fracture between the mandates and stated values of educational policy, with its actual practices. In her qualitative literature review of academy schools in England, Heilbronn (2016) notes that inequitable



establishment and admissions practices of academy schools do not align with government policies of equity and inclusion, calling into question the dissonance between policy and enactment. This is a recognition that a policy is never merely implemented, but rather subject to the historical, temporal and social contexts in which it resides and thus, according to Ball et al., (2012), will be “open to erosion and undercutting by action, the embodied agency of those people who are its object” (p. 3).

There is a dearth of alternative school research in the Toronto context. *Alternative Schooling and Student Engagement: Canadian Stories of Democracy within Bureaucracy* (Bascia et al., 2017) provides a glimpse into the origins of Toronto’s alternative schools while revealing just how much there is to study in the Toronto alternative school context alone. It is my hope that this study contributes to this topic of inquiry.

### **The Social Economy**

With little unanimity on what comprises the social economy, its global and lengthy history is not simply told. According to Defourny and Develtere (1999) the term social economy appeared first in France in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, though it can be traced back “to the oldest forms of human association” (p. 4). Social economy organizations (SEOs) take on numerous formal and informal arrangements including cooperatives, mutuals, rotating savings and credit unions (ROSCAs), self-help groups, non-profits, social purpose enterprises, non-governmental organizations, and credit unions, among others. The study of the social economy has undertaken many approaches, dependent upon its definition. M. Thompson & Emmanuel (n.d.) provide four qualifying criteria for social economy organisations, while Defourny & Develtere, (1999) outline two general approaches to its understanding. Quarter & Mook (2010) note that a specific set of defining characteristics is difficult to pinpoint, as the boundaries

between the private, public and social economies are blurry and variable, depending on the definition employed. L. Brown, the Director of the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network, offers a comprehensive, yet flexible description of the social economy:

Rooted in local communities and independent from government, Social Economy organizations are democratic and/or participatory, pull together many types of resources in a socially owned entity, and prioritize social objectives and social values. While they may intend to make a profit, they do so in a context that sees profit as a means to meet social goals, not primarily as a means to create individual wealth. They may rely on volunteer labour as well as, or instead of, paid employees. The Social Economy is characterized by mutual self-help initiatives, and by initiatives to meet the needs of disadvantaged members of society (*Social Economy & Sustainability Research Network*, n.d.).

Quarter et al., (2017) outline several Canadian examples of social economy organisations each of which collars shared concerns through a variety of socially focused business models. Other, more conventional businesses are outlined as well, each with mandates focussed on the environment and the social, along with profit making motives. This three-party focus of social economy organisations is often referred to as the triple bottom line and considered the very basic criteria for any social economy organisation.

In his book, *The Social Economy: International Perspectives on Economic Solidarity*, Amin (2009) introduces the reader to the various definitions of the social economy and the dilemmas of each. He then introduces a number of international case studies as evidence of the possibility for successful organizing; and finally, Amin (2009) presents case studies through a

policy lens, documenting the ways in which government policy and support have moved to strengthen social economy movements around the world. This collection represents a large scope of social economy industries and movements and provides many theoretical and practical undertakings to underscore the importance, potential and possibilities of the social economy.

Several examples of successful social economy organisations reveal the possibility of financial and community empowerment through associations that work to maintain democratic values within a capitalist system. Formal social economy organizations function in the capitalist economy to provide services to people who may not have access to them otherwise. There are numerous models for social economy organizations with many intersecting with the public or the private sectors. Utting (2015) considers the social and solidarity economies (SSE) together as one concept to address the potential for the SSE to be scaled up. Satgar (2014) however, argues that the two terms cannot be combined or conflated, and that in fact, the

social economy is no longer a grassroots response to the global crisis of capitalism. In many respects it has been coopted by the transnational neoliberal consensus developed by the global development apparatus and diffused into neoliberal government policies. (p. 16)

### ***A Brief History of the Social Economy***

The history of the social economy is age-old, dating back to “the oldest form of human association” (Defourny & Develtere, 1999, p. 4). Globally, it took on various types; religious brotherhoods, guilds, monastic associations, corporate and trade associations and communities, to name a few. Defourny and Develtere (1999) are careful to point out that many associations were within the jurisdiction of the Church or State, or had to act within particular rules including those of admission and operation. Nevertheless, they argue many forms of association “survived

or came into being on the fringes of this corporate monopoly and hierarchical structures, which continually tried to repress, subdue or ban them” (Defourny and Develtere, 1999, p. 5). Freedom of association underwent many assaults from the state in many parts of the globe where freedom of association “meant either creating special-interest bodies representing long-standing privileges or creating centres for anti-establishment and subversive activity that needed to be repressed for the sake of a supposedly greater national interest” (Defourny and Develtere, 1999, p. 5). Freedom of association did make headway with formal laws in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in many European countries in the form of a legal framework for formal organisational arrangements recognizable as today’s social economy.

The Mondragon cooperatives in Spain are case studies to explore the ways in which democratic principles and values intersect with market pressures. The question driving Cheney’s work (2002) is “to what extent is it possible for a business to maintain a core of social values – such as participatory democracy – while growing, becoming more complex, and being financially successful” (p. ix). FoodShare<sup>2</sup> Toronto is an impressive example of the ways in which issues of equity and accessibility can be addressed through innovative initiatives and work within market principles to make a difference.

In *Understanding the Social Economy: A Canadian Perspective*, Quarter, Mook and Armstrong (2009) offer numerous case studies as means by which to help the reader understand the Canadian social economy in a global context. Each study is categorized into various organizations from what they label as the “components of the social economy”: (1) Social Economy Businesses, (2) Community Economic Development, (3) Social Enterprises, (4) Public Sector non-profits, and (5) Civil Society Organizations. According to Quarter et al. (2009), these

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about FoodShare Toronto, visit [foodshare.net](http://foodshare.net).

components of the social economy interact in various ways with both the public (state) and private (business) sectors to form a multilateral economy. The social economy, or the third sector is used as an “umbrella concept for the many types of organizations created to meet social need but also involving economic aspects” (ix). The book makes the point that it isn’t possible to separate the economic from the social and also emphasises the many ways in which the social economy can be interpreted. In francophone parts of Europe, the social economy includes organizations with earned profits, excluding those who rely on government funding or who are influenced by government policies (p. 5). Organizations excluded in the French European understanding of the social economy are included in Quarter et al.’s rendering:

Social economy is a bridging concept for organizations that have social objectives central to their mission and their practices, and either have explicit economic objectives or generate some economic value through the services they provide and the purchases that they undertake (Quarter et al., 2009, p. 4).

Quarter et al. (2009) underscore that unlike in Quebec, which has taken a similar approach to the French European tradition, the social economy is not taken up as a social movement “but as a unique set of institutions that are part of a broader society” (p. 6). Canada’s east coast also has a long and celebrated history of development through the social economy.

What we learn from Caroline Shenaz Hossein (2020a) is that the histories and literatures on the social economy are most often written through a Eurocentric lens. Hossein (2020a) uses examples like the Rochdale Weavers, Raiffeisen, Desjardin, and the Mondragon Cooperatives to draw our attention to the white historicizing and theorizing of the social economy and the erasure of timeworn Black organizing. Hossein’s extensive body of work captures the myriad examples

of Black social economy organizations right here in Toronto (see, Hossein, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Her work with the Banker Ladies in Toronto (2013) and case studies of Black women leaders in the social economy (Hossein, 2018) begin to address “the generic white gaze of social economy literature” (Hossein, 2013, p. 753).

There are many examples of third sector organizations in Canada and abroad (see Amin, 2009; Quarter et al., 2015, 2017; Mswaka et al., 2016; McMurtry, 2010). Each example interacts with the other parts of the economy to emphasize a human and environment-centered approach to the economy, working in concert with the state and business sectors. In Canada, the social economy is defined as “a bridging concept for organizations that have social objectives central to their mission and their practice, and either have explicit economic objectives or generate some economic value through the services they provide and purchases they undertake” (Quarter et al., 2009, p. 4). As we have seen from the work of Hossein, (2017, 2018b, 2019, 2020a) this is not true in all contexts, as histories and storytelling from the social economy are still largely exclusionary to racially marginalized groups.

Canadian and international cases highlight the predominant values of the social economy and the ways in which these values have enhanced the lives and livelihoods of people who have been socially and/or economically excluded. With an understanding of these cases, what emerges are the values of cooperation, ethical economic decision-making, sustainable economic livelihoods, education, community organizing, environment, social participation, explicit ethic of care, self-help, capacity building and social integration. As we have seen, these values all have the potential to work in concert within the prevailing capitalist economic order and are compatible with the state and the market.

## **The Solidarity Economy**

The solidarity economy has its origins in the global south. Allard & Matthaëi (2008) credit the language of ‘solidarity economy’ to the work of Chilean professor of philosophy, Luis Razeto. It is now used world-wide and by several international organizations including the International Labor Organization, the United Nations and the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development. The International Solidarity Group meeting in Lima, Peru in 1997 (Neamtan, 2002) was the impetus for a global solidarity movement. According to Miller (2010),

instead of telling a narrow story about economies as varying combinations of market and state, a solidarity economy approach suggests that we define economics much more broadly as all of the diverse ways that human communities meet their needs and creative livelihoods together (p. 8).

The solidarity economy

changes the isolating stories that often shape our realities and allows us to experience new stories of connection. Once we open the realm of ‘economics’ and are able to see some of the many economies that exist in our midst, we can begin to identify those spaces and initiatives that are embodying liberating, life-affirming, non-capitalist values (Miller, 2005, p. 4).

Solidarity economies have always existed in locations outside the purview of the dominant capitalist system (Mullings, 2021). Part of the work taken up by the solidarity economy is in the opposition of oppression and colonization in the interest of a holistic integration of solidarity movements with one another (Miller, 2010). Integration, argues Miller (2010) “offers possibilities for collective action and institution building that no single initiative could imagine

on its own” (p. 8). Gibson-Graham (2006) asks us to recognize the partisanship of knowledge and underscore the often context specific and localized nature of solidarity organizing.

A language of solidarity works to make visible, an antiquity of the social economy that is erased by the white, Eurocentric narratives comprising its memoire (Hossein, 2020b). Hossein's (2013) treatment of the Banker Ladies highlights the vast and informal cooperative associations operating on the margins of the mainstream and formal social economy and which are erased from the social economy literature.

### **Education and the Solidarity Economy**

Education and pedagogy have played prominent, integral and radical roles in many social and solidarity movements, world-wide. In 1930s Atlantic Canada, for example, the Antigonish Movement used study clubs as part of St. Francis Xavier University’s Extension Department, as means by which to educate and empower “farmers, miners, and factory workers in economically oriented adult education programs” (Coady, 1939, abstract). These programs allowed workers to learn about, and organize around economic collectives including cooperatives, lobster factories and credit unions; organizations that aided in sustainable economic livelihoods of otherwise impoverished workers in rural Nova Scotia. Anne Alexander (1986) presented a conference paper of the study she undertook in an effort “to understand the meaning of liberation in adult education” (p. 13). What she found was that the work of Moses Coady and the St. Francis Xavier Extension workers was both a social movement and a critique of societal systems of oppression:

Coady wished for people to live fully, starting by obtaining economic justice. To this end he challenged the existing economic system by encouraging the development of the “double-barrelled” program of adult education and economic cooperation.



(Alexander, 1986, p. 17)

Adult education, Alexander (1986) concludes, must work for the most underserved people, and must consider change by empowering people at individual and societal levels. In Antigonish, study clubs led to economic action, economic justice and sustainability.

“African Americans have long linked education with liberation” (Williamson, 2005, p. 137). In the United States, the Black Panther Party (BPP) “introduced to Oakland some of the most interesting and audacious community welfare experiments of the era” (Lazerow & Williams, 2006, p. 46) beginning in 1968. Among them were breakfast programs for school-aged children, a free clothing program, the Intercommunal Youth Institute, the People’s Free Medical Research Health Institute, the Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation, and a free food campaign at Black Panther Rallies (Lazerow & Williams, 2006). They also included the establishment of “liberation schools” for Black children. BPP’s pedagogical approach was to use the schools to teach both children and the general public about the Black Panther’s ideological agenda, often through the media (Peck, 2001). “As models of black self-determination and pride, the programs combined self-help and education in revolutionary diction with the free-spirited, animated public displays of political commitment” (Lazerow & Williams, 2006, p. 47). For the BPP, education served as a means to by which to garner support, mobilize and challenge “the logics of American Capitalism” (Roach-McFarlane, 2021).

Freedom School – Toronto was established in 2016 (Maynard, 2017) as part of the movement for Black lives and “created to respond to a lack of humanizing, self-affirming, queer positive educational opportunities for Black children in the GTA [Greater Toronto Area]” (*About Us – Freedom School Toronto*, n.d.). Freedom School Toronto teaches children about Black histories of defiance and engages its children in “political resistance to anti-Black racism and

state violence through a trans-feminist lens” (*About Us – Freedom School Toronto*, n.d.).

Freedom School Toronto is part of a long history of Black folks and other marginalized communities organizing around education when society provided inferior education for their children (Maynard, 2017). It is critique of formal state practices that harm children of colour and curriculum that erases Black history and culture. In its work to make societal change for all Black bodies and its recognition of the intersectionalities of Black identities, Freedom School Toronto is a fundamental part of the solidarity landscape, which has sought to improve the economic and social conditions of impoverished peoples.

In Central America we saw a revolutionary use of the internet during the Zapatista uprising (Cleaver, 1998) in order to mobilize and disseminate information beyond the local. In the work of Paulo Freire’s educational praxis, theorizing and activism in Brazil and internationally, we saw too, a “concern for the connections between education and socio-economic development” (Gadotti & Torres, 2009, p. 1257). Before he was exiled from Brazil in 1964, Freire spent his early career teaching and conceptualizing of education as a tool of empowerment for all peoples. Freire rejected the state’s “banking model” of education (Freire, 2000). He instead conceived of a “paradigm in which teacher and student are capable of dialogue and of problematizing together, and in which the teacher has guileless faith in the students” (Gadotti & Torres, 2009, p. 1259). Faith in the ability of marginalized peoples is central to the tenets of the solidarity economy, where organizing is often grass-roots and bottom up. Freire also conceptualized organizing and mobilizing as part and parcel of education:

I think that both mobilizing and organizing have in their nature education as something indispensable—that is, education as development of sensibility, of the notion of risk, of confronting some tensions that you

have to have in the process of mobilizing or organizing... Until some years ago, among the left groups and left parties, we had strong examples of how education was not taken seriously during the process of mobilization and organization, which were seen just as political process.

In fact, they are educational processes at the same time.

(Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 117 - 118)

Education, it would seem, plays a large part in the organizing of solidarity movements. What we learn from Peck's 2001 dissertation is that political education and pedagogical activism have played vital roles in "efforts to ignite or inhibit social change" (p. 8). Together, these stories of organizing and their use of education give pause to consider the ways in which the solidarity economy and public-school education might intersect. Within this particular work, I consider specifically, how the values of the solidarity economy might inform the public education sector in Toronto, Ontario.

### **The Values of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)**

In "Social and Solidarity Economy, Sustainable Development Goals, and Community Development: The Mission of Adult Education & Training," Quiroz-Niño & Murga-Menoyo (2017) conceptualize how to improve adult teaching practices within an SSE framework and what education might look like in the context of a curriculum for sustainability. They argue that "training in the competencies for sustainability, essential in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals [of the United Nations (UN) 2030 agenda], is among the main functions of education within the SSE framework" (p. 2). Accordingly, this means working within the current capitalist construct to endorse social entrepreneurs in creating social businesses that meet the needs of people presently, without compromising the needs of people in the future. Quiroz-Niño

and Murga-Menoyo (2017) base their project on the values they ascertain are those of the SSE: “cooperation, solidarity, reciprocity, and respect for the environment” (p. 2). While the article engages perceived values of the SSE, it also positions the SSE within a capitalist framework. Quarter and Mook (2010) visualise this as a Venn diagram in an effort to show the relationship between the three sectors within a capitalist system.

Like Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo (2017), Panagiota Vathi et al. (2018) study aims to enrich pedagogy in higher education through the values and principals of the social and solidarity economies. There are projects using the principals and values of the SSE to think about higher education in South America (see Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo, 2017; Pérez Muñoz et al., 2019), social entrepreneurship (see Esteves et al., 2021; Fraisse et al., 2016), the revitalization of urban ethics (see Murtagh, 2018), and neoliberalism (see Allard et al., 2013; Satgar, 2014).

### **The Values and Ideologies of the Solidarity Economy**

Solidarity economy movements aim to disrupt and transform the capitalist system instead of working within it (Miller, 2010). Satgar (2014) moves us beyond the social economy which has in many ways been reduced to, and understood as the purview of businesses that prioritize people and planet over profit. He works to situate the solidarity economy as the politicization of the social economy, removing it from the confines of capitalism and presenting “the practices of the solidarity economy as part of a counter-hegemonic political economy” (p. 4). In doing so, Satgar (2014) positions the solidarity economy as anti-capitalist and examines its “actual and potential anti-capitalist practices” (p. 4).

There are numerous histories of organizing with intent to seek refuge from and transform the dominant economic system that has continued to exclude Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour (Hossein, 2019). These annals point to the long histories, as well as to the current

resistances to the prevailing systems, with people choosing to struggle against, rather than work within them. With these histories in mind, it becomes clear that the solidarity economy values mutual aid, self-help, cooperation, education (as a means of empowerment), ethical economic decision making, environment, social well-being and participation, explicit ethic of care, and sustainable economic livelihood. The ideologies of the solidarity economy are democracy and struggle and resistance against capitalism.

An important distinction can be made in regards to the values and ideologies of the social and solidarity economies. That is, that the values of the social economy and the solidarity economy are similar but they are comprising of two different ideologies. Social economy values of cooperation (over competition), ethical economic decision-making, sustainable economic livelihoods, education, environment, social well-being and participation, democracy, mutual aid, explicit ethic of care, and self-help, can in many cases, comprise a capitalist ideology. That is, the emphases on the formal organizations of the social economy are economic engagement and inclusion, and navigating the ways in which democratic principles and values intersect with market pressures. They are working within the status quo of capitalism. Conversely, while there are some differences in the values of the social economy and the solidarity economy, there are two key values which differentiate them: struggle and resistance. The solidarity economy is underpinned by a fundamental opposition to capitalism and as Hossein, (2019) reminds us, those who participate in the solidarity economy are actively engaged in struggle and resistance against it .

## **Summary**

In the literature review, I reviewed studies pertaining to Toronto alternative schools, as well as providing a brief history using information from key informants. A review of the

literature included works from the social economy which revealed case studies from both local and international contexts as well as several definitions for consideration. Literature on the social economy introduced its importance, potential and possibilities, and offered insight in terms of its values. I moved beyond the social economy to a solidarity economy approach that pointed to the racialized, informal and politicized origins of the solidarity economy and the integral nature of education to its organizing. Expounding upon, and then moving beyond the social economy renders the solidarity economy a comprehensible concept for readers, who may be unfamiliar with its theorizing. I identified the values and ideologies of the social and solidarity economies in order to make an important distinction between them. The conflation of the social and solidarity economies was discussed. The literature positioned the solidarity economy as anti-capitalist and connected it to the importance of education to mobilization and organizing efforts both here and abroad. Current efforts to apply the values and principals of the social and solidarity economies to enrich pedagogy in higher education was used as an example of the ways in which solidarity values might be exercised in formal educational settings. In sum, Chapter Two positioned the importance of education to solidarity economy movements and made plain, there could be a clear connection between the solidarity economy and alternative public school system in Toronto. In Chapter Three, the qualitative methodology for this study is presented.

### **Chapter Three: Methods**

The purpose of this study is to describe the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies that control the establishment of the alternative public schools in Toronto, and to discover how and if they intersect. Chapter Three will present the qualitative methodology that was employed to answer the research questions presented in Chapter One: (1) what values and ideologies are held in the policies that control the establishment of alternative public schools in Toronto? (2) how have others navigated these policies to successfully found alternative public schools in the TDSB? And, (3) can the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy inform an alternative vision of public schooling in Toronto? Case studies, interviews and thematic analysis are discussed in turn, to provide a sound understanding of the role of each in ascertaining the research questions.

#### **Case Studies**

Hosseini (2019) argues that “using stories that draw on theorizing that reflects the Black experience, we can move away from a one-dimensional understanding of Black and racialized peoples’ role in the SSE” (p. 5). There are many such stories from the solidarity economy to be told. Adichie (2009) teaches us “the danger of a single story” by reminding us that historical literatures are subjugated by a singular narrative, thereby effacing the experiences of marginalized groups. “Story is central to human understanding” (Lewis, 2011), and is central too, to the humanization of diverse experiences.

Case studies give us a deeper meaning through rich examples (Hosseini, 2019) and can “enhance our understanding of contexts, communities and individuals” (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 2). While definitions of case studies are contested (Gerring, 2004; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013), case studies generally support multiple forms of data collection and can

be approached as holistic/intrinsic or instrumental/delimited, where instrumental is focused on one aspect of a case (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). For example, in an instrumental case study of Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood, Carl James (2012) uses a series of in-depth profiles of the community, its schools and programming, along with interviews of community insiders, and analyses of media coverage to create a case study that focuses on the structural barriers that create the inequities faced by residents. He works to create a narrative counter to that of a "troubled neighborhood." Similarly, Hossein (2018) uses case studies to capture the contextual intricacies of five Black women leaders in Toronto. Profiling Black women using theory that speaks to the Black experience allows Hossein to contextualize the social economy, housing within it, the "Black social economy" and creating an understand[ing of] the place of the social economy among racialized people.

Like those of James (2012) and Hossein (2018) this study is instrumental, narrowing in on the values and ideologies embedded in the policies that pertain to the opening of alternative public schools in Toronto, and uncovering the practical logistics of how others have navigated these policies to successfully found alternative public schools. In a 2011 study, Hemmer included thematic analysis of interviews of alternative school teachers, as well as Fairclough's critical discourse analysis of "governmental artifacts" (p. 9), teacher interviews and "school observations" (p. 12) to construct case studies of five alternative schools in the United States. This methodology allowed Hemmer to relate the theory of policy implementation to teachers' practices. While Ball et al., (2012) differentiate implementation from enactment, policy implementation shares a focus on context with enactment theory.



## Thematic Analysis

With the use of NVivo software, a thematic analysis of the policies regulating the establishment of alternative schools in Toronto as well as with the transcripts from interviews with several people involved in Toronto's alternative public schools in varying capacities, was the first stage of the methodology. In his comparison of three qualitative analysis methods in health research, Aguinaldo (2012) points to the ways in which thematic analysis remains wide-ranging. He suggests that "the goal of thematic analysis is simply to paraphrase and summarize a data set as a whole or in part in relation to particular research questions" (p. 769). Similarly, the intent of this initial thematic analysis was to section policies and transcripts into a "set of concepts, ideas, or narrative segments that are similar to each other and are also different from comparable elements," or put succinctly, into themes (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 3465). Themes helped to point to the discourses being drawn upon in and across texts, as well as to the common assumptions (ideologies) held by the discourse.

Guest et al. (2012) outline an overall summary of thematic analysis as having three main steps and have identified various approaches within these steps. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), and Bazeley (2009) also outline generalized steps and strategies for thematic analysis. Given the eclectic nature of qualitative inquiry (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009), below is a summary of the approach to thematic analysis to be undertaken by this study using elements from each within the three main steps outlined by Guest et al. (2012). While the process appears linear, it must be noted that it was both iterative and simultaneous.

### 1. Read verbatim transcripts

- a. Transcribe interviews – A confidential transcription service was used to transcribe interview data verbatim.

- b. Segment text – Guest et al. (2012) describe a typical approach to text segmentation used by data analysis programs as “one where the analyst identifies a beginning point and an ending point for each segment while reading the text during the coding process” (p. 3).
2. Identify possible themes
  - a. Propose themes from text – the initial step in an iterative approach to generating codes
  - b. Initial codebook development – Guest et al. (2012) highlight the importance of reading without coding in the beginning stages of thematic analysis. Development of the codebook is an iterative undertaking, beginning with initial notes, labels and preliminary definitions.
3. Compare and contrast themes
  - a. Codebook development with clear definitions and applications – defined concepts are used to code the data upon subsequent readings. Codes and definitions are refined and text is recoded accordingly.
  - b. Review categories for “internal consistency” (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 255) – this entails ensuring that each theme or category is coherent and mutually exclusive.
  - c. Code one sample twice – this step ensures consistency in the interpretation and application of codes, and helps to “avoid conflation of what people say with our interpretation of what they said” (Guest et al., 2012, Ch. 3, p. 25).
  - d. “Describe, compare, relate” (Bazeley, 2009, p. 10) – In her process of thematic analysis, Bazeley (2009) uses three steps to “work through and record the results of an analysis” (p. 10). The description step entails describing context, details about data sources, the ways in which different themes are characterized and how they were spoken/written about and by whom. The second step “compares differences in the characteristics and

boundaries for just [one] category or theme across contrasting demographic groups or across variations in context” (p. 10). Finally, the third step relates themes to other themes by asking probing questions.

Bazeley (2009) is careful to note that a simple identification of themes is not in itself sufficient. Themes must be connected and contextualized.

### **Choosing Policies**

Formal written frameworks constitute only one type of policy; policies are not limited to texts, nor are they created, implemented or enacted in a vacuum (Ball, 1993). Ball et al. (2012) define policy as “texts and ‘things’ (legislation and national strategies) but also as discursive processes that are complexly configured, contextually mediated and institutionally rendered” (p. 3). This is the definition of policy I employ, as it allows for a more complex and holistic interrogation of the written texts, as well as a contextual examination of interview responses that recognizes the subjectivities of respondents and how their experiences and histories may be brought to bear in their readings, interpretations and enactments of the policy texts (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). Be that as it may, this definition means that there are innumerable policies in the context of the alternative school landscape in Toronto. Because of the broad expanse of policies, formal policies pertaining directly to the establishment of alternative public schools were selected as a means of discernment. Policies were identified through the Ontario Ministry of Education and TDSB websites. A set of TBE policies dated from 1978 was obtained through a key informant and the Hall-Dennis Report was obtained through a school website. Together, nine policies representing only the written documents that have been sanctioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Toronto District School Board in relation to opening a state sanctioned and recognized alternative public school were analysed using thematic analysis:

- Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario (Hall & Dennis, 1968)
- General Policy for Alternative School Programs (Shuttleworth et al., 1978)
- Alternative Schools, A General Policy (Toronto Board of Education, 1982)
- Provincial Review Report: Alternative Schools and Programs in the Public System (Doris, 1986)
- Issues Paper on Alternative Schools (Crisp, 1987)
- Toronto District School Board Operational Procedure (PR.584 CUR): Alternative Schools (Toronto District School Board, 2007)
- Toronto District School Board Policy 62 (PO62): Alternative Schools (Toronto District School Board, 2007)
- Ontario Schools: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Policy and Program Requirements (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016)
- The Review of Alternative Schools: Research Analysis 2016-2017 (S. R. Brown, 2017)

Ball (1993) points to the ways in which discourse must be taken into account where policy is concerned. Calling on Foucault, Ball (1993) reminds us that discourses dictate “what can be said, and thought...who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (p. 14). As we have seen, the idea of power and discourse has emerged early within the context of cultural capital and social class in the literature review, where only particular kinds of people were successful in even having an opportunity to establish an alternative school.

In taking up the ways in which discourse is linked to and constitutive of policy, as Ball (1993) does, “discursive circumstances that we cannot, or perhaps do not, think about” (p. 15) can be taken into account. Perhaps more importantly though, Ball (1993) contends that “the effect of policy is primarily discursive; it changes the possibilities we have for thinking ‘otherwise’” (p. 15).

## **Participant Interviews**

Seventeen open ended, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with school founders and other apposite actors in the public alternative school sector were included. Each phone or Zoom interview lasted between one, and one and a half hours. Two interviews were conducted via email. Interviews focused on answering logistical questions about how alternative schools have emerged within policies governing the opening of alternative schools in the TDSB, explored the implementation strategies undertaken by founders, and aimed to capture the contextual dimensions of policy enactment. They were conducted remotely via Zoom or over the phone and the privacy and anonymity of subjects was protected as per the guidelines for internal review boards, outlined by Pech et al. (2007). A thematic analysis of interview transcripts was completed with the use of NVivo software, with an aim to identify the underlying values and ideologies of the policies informing the establishment of alternative public schools as reflected by the strategies and experiences of school founders and other key informants. Using a similar strategy, Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al. (2017) were able to use thematic analysis of open-ended survey questions to determine the alignment of teacher ideologies with those of a dual language program.

### **Choosing Participants and Choosing Schools**

Schools, school founders and key informants were identified in large part, through online searches and snowball sampling. Emails were sent requesting participation in the study. Participants were recruited via email, as per the approved ethics protocol. Efforts to mitigate potential bias in snowball sampling were made through data triangulation of participants (Wilson, 2014). That is, interviews were conducted with people at all levels within the Toronto alternative school landscape, from classroom teachers who were also alternative school founders,

to principals, to superintendents, to board trustees, to a former Ontario Education Minister. Participants were also representative of both elementary schools and high schools. In these ways, “sample diversity” (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018) was achieved and bias in the snowball sampling, moderated. The schools included in the study were a result of the study’s participants and the schools with which they were associated. This approach aided in having access to participants’ perspectives in regard to particular schools instead of more generalized perspectives, or perspectives that were disconnected from the schools included in the study. This led to more nuanced understandings of how school founders navigated formal establishment policies as well as the values they may have held. Additionally, if also contradictorily, the approach was also in response to the methodological decision to thematically analyze only formal policies, which made access to school-specific policies largely irrelevant. The only school that was sought after in particular, was the Africentric Alternative School (AAS), as the inclusion of AAS might have served as a powerful and rich source of data regarding the very population this study sought to address. Email and other electronic messages to potential participants from AAS were not returned, and because this study was conducted during the height of the COVID19 pandemic and its subsequent school closures, attending the physical school building for recruitment purposes was not a possibility.

## **Summary**

Policies can be seen as a “kind of social practice, specifically, a practice of power” (Levinson et al., 2009); the regulatory frameworks that govern the opening of public alternative schools in Toronto, Ontario serve as important indicators of the values held by the Ministry of Education, as well as the ideologies that underpin them. The strategies that others have used to found alternative schools in Toronto within these regulatory frameworks lend themselves to

understanding whether the values and ideologies of school founders align with those of the regulatory frameworks they must work within and where the possibilities for divergence lie. hooks' (2003) notion of a gap rejoins us here, this time as a means by which to identify and dismantle the discursive constructs that serve to block the opportunity for thinking otherwise. This has in turn provided insight into whether an alternative vision of schooling can be informed by solidarity economy values and ideologies.

Chapter Three introduced and outlined the methodology for this study. First, case study methodology was described. It was summarised that several interviews of key actors in the alternative public sector in Toronto, including school founders were conducted. Thematic analyses of interview transcripts and of key policies regulating the establishment of alternative public schools in the TDSB were outlined. In Chapter Four, the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study are described.

## **Chapter Four: Theoretical Perspectives**

The aim of this qualitative study is to describe the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies that control the establishment of the alternative public schools in Toronto, and to discover if and how they intersect. As such, concepts of critical pedagogy, critical policy analysis and enactment theory, poststructuralism, neoliberalism, capitalism and democracy frame this work. Chapter four outlines and describes each of these theoretical frameworks, defining the specific vantage points I took in the analysis and interpretation the data.

### **Critical pedagogy**

In thinking about the complex connections between education, social justice and social change, in its imagining of a better, more humane world (Freire, 2000), and in its emphasis on “the importance of discovering and rectifying societal problems” (Rubin et al., 2005, p. 6) this study is framed by critical pedagogy. It draws on the works of Paolo Freire (2000), Henry Giroux (1983, 1997, 2020), Patricia Hill Collins (2010), bell hooks (2003), and Peter McLaren (1989), among others, to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions and to judiciously engage with the solidarity economy as a possibility that disrupts traditional models of schooling by taking up the ways that power, politics, culture and economics are central to our understanding of schools (McLaren, 1989). This is an important lens through which to view this work, as it helped to unearth the ideologies and values in the policies that guide the opening of alternative schools in the TDSB. It also serves as an important link to concepts of power, culture, and economics that are central to the solidarity economy.

In “Interrogating Critical pedagogy: the voices of educators of color in the movement” (Orelus & Brock, 2015), Black feminist scholars, Evan-Winter and Piert use short case studies to



explore the contributions of women of colour to critical pedagogy and argue that “women of colour endure interlocking systems of oppression, which fosters a spirit of resistance against race, class and gender domination” (p. 30). They use Giroux's (2006) work to outline the ways in which critical pedagogy centers schooling and education within critical dialogue and action:

The critical question here is whose future, story, and interest do[es] the school represent? Critical pedagogy argues that school practices need to be informed by a public philosophy that addresses how to construct ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students becomes the defining feature of schooling.

(Giroux, 2006, p. 52)

What Evan-Winter and Piert add to this definition is a critical engagement with Black feminist theorizing. They highlight the ways in which Black, female scholarship in critical pedagogy has largely been unseen which necessarily privileges a white male perspective. Likewise, schools serve to reinforce the hegemonic discourses that continually see racialized and other minoritized populations streamed in ways that uphold systems of oppression (Gulson & Webb, 2016; James, 2012) and “protect notions of meritocracy” (Orelus & Brock, 2015, p. 33). When perceptions of meritocracy are upheld, so too is white privilege as racialized culture and political interests are diminished, white-washed, culturally appropriated or ignored altogether (Orelus & Brock, 2015). What Evan-Winter and Piert argue for then, is critical pedagogy as a means to Black liberation, through its criticism of “mainstream education and oppressor/oppressed relationships while championing the voices of the marginalized” (Orelus & Brock, 2015, p. 31). This is important because minoritized students face systemic barriers that serve to perpetuate disproportionately higher dropout rates (Johnson, 2013a; D. Thompson & Wallner, 2011), as well as unbalanced

representation in vocational programs and special education, and in suspensions and expulsions among Black students in the Toronto District School Board (Johnson, 2013a). Calling on a Black liberatory lens through which to interrogate structures of power necessarily addresses the hegemonic discourses that serve to keep minoritized students on the margins.

The irony of citing Giroux's description of critical pedagogy in the wake of citing the perils of school for Black students, and the possibilities of Black feminism for critical pedagogy, has not been lost. I do however call on his definition to ground my work as a starting point for the possibilities it offers. In *On Critical Pedagogy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Giroux (2020) outlines in great detail, the tenets of critical pedagogy, of which there are many. What this particular excerpt does, is catechise the very objects of analysis that my thesis seeks to critique;

The principles guiding my work on critical pedagogy are grounded in critique as a mode of analysis that interrogates texts, institutions, social relations and ideologies as part of the script of power. Put simply, critique focuses largely on how domination manifests as both a symbolic and as institutional force and the ways in which it impacts on all levels of society.

(p. 2)

Giroux's definition intersects seamlessly with this project, which used critical pedagogy in part, to identify the values and ideologies in the policies that control the opening of alternative schools in Toronto; Maxine Greene (1986) discusses critical pedagogy in the context of the need for its development, recognizing that "constrained discourse" limits possibilities for teachers to imagine the "possibilities for change" (p. 427). Critical pedagogy offered a lens through which to view the possibilities for intersections between the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy

and alternative education in Toronto: first, in its ability to interrogate dominant institutional forces and second, in its own discourse of hope and possibility:

While it is important to politicize the process of schooling and recognize the gritty sense of the limits it faces within a capitalist society, what is also needed to supplement this view is an ennobling, imaginative vision that takes us beyond the given and commonplace. (Giroux, 2020, p. 3)

Critical pedagogical theorizing offered a lens through which to look at, not only the education system but also the systems in which it is embedded, and to identify spaces for opportunity.

A space for opportunity is opened too, in the likening of democracy to education (Dewey, 1997, 2010; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2020; Hill Collins, 2010). “In their attempts to explode the popular belief that schools are fundamentally democratic institutions, critical scholars have begun to unravel the ways in which school curricula, knowledge and policy depend on the corporate marketplace and the fortunes of the economy” (McLaren, 1989, p. 162). Critical pedagogy identifies the ways in which capitalist ideology works to hide systemic oppressions and emphasises the educative means by which to realise true democracy. Democracy is a fundamental part of the solidarity economy, a concept to which I return.

Paolo Freire spent his career working toward an intersection of community and education. His work offers a means by which to critically engage with education in relation to social change and social justice (Giroux, 2020); an orientation to which this study turns, through critical pedagogy, in its disruption of traditional ways of thinking about schooling. For Freire, critical pedagogy offered an opportunity to engage with language as a means by which to intervene in common-sense understandings of one’s place in the world and to uncover the power structures at play (Giroux, 2020). This is true for this study, which used critical pedagogy to

unearth the common-sense understandings (and thus the power structures) at play in the policies that control the opening of alternative public schools in Toronto.

Critical pedagogy challenges tepid analyses of schooling in their disregard for historical and political implications (McLaren, 1989). “It provides historical, cultural, political, and ethical direction for those in education who still dare to hope” (McLaren, 1989, p. 160). Critical pedagogy also implores us to “act collectively” (Hill Collins, 2010) in our work to subvert and transform systems of oppression and ideological understandings of capitalism and democracy. The work of collectivity is fundamental to social and solidarity economics, and thus, critical pedagogy informed this study by supporting links between collective action in Toronto’s alternative public schools, and the values and ideologies of the SSE.

### **Critical Policy Analysis**

In “Rhetorical Analysis in Critical Policy Research” Sue Winton (2013) outlines a critical perspective in policy analysis in which policy is understood as “complex, inherently political, and infused with values” (p. 159). Policies are not limited to texts, nor are they created, implemented or enacted in a vacuum (Ball, 1993). Policy was considered through a critical lens, allowing the potential for an understanding of policy as moving beyond written and spoken words, and instead through the ideologies and values that permeate them, and the discourses that may serve to disguise such ideologies. Taking up policy through a critical lens allowed too, for a broad conception of what policies entail.

### **Enactment Theory**

In considering the ways in which people have navigated the frameworks that regulate the opening of alternative public schools in Toronto, this work is fundamentally about policy enactment and is accordingly framed by enactment theory. Specifically, it is informed by the

work of Ball et al. (2012), who differentiate enactment from implementation, locating in enactment the importance of context, policy actors, discourse and “apparatuses of power” (p. 3). Enactment theory conceptualizes schools as diverse and complex, disrupting the assumption of schools as uniform. There is an inherent danger in looking only at the ways in which policies are implemented because it assumes that schools and the people looking at policy are alike and that policies will be read and applied in the same ways. Enactment theory informed this study at its outset, by complicating my understanding of policy, its forms and how it is enacted upon. This understanding allowed for a contextualized interrogation of the ways in which policies could be “made sense of” (Ball et al. 2012, p.3) in the context of their critical analyses. Attention to themes of physical space and to the materialization of policy are a direct result of Enactment Theory’s treatment of these concepts. Interview questions pertaining to space, physical buildings, and material resources were in large part, driven by Enactment Theory.

### **Poststructuralism**

In its concern with the “relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings” (Belsey, 2002, p. 5), poststructuralism draws together the concepts of policy analysis and enactment theory through its interrogation of language, the importance of context, and the ways in which context arbitrates meaning. In its recognition that words are not the only signifiers, but so too are gestures, images and objects (Belsey, 2002), poststructuralism takes up language in the same way that policy is treated by Ball, et al. (2012). Poststructuralism has a:

commit[ment] to a critique of dominant institutions and modes of speaking,  
thinking and writing – which means it is often set against what is most

familiar and comfortable for us, asking us to see the danger or even the harm in what we take to be ‘good’ (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 4).

It thus, through the thematic analyses of policies, served as a powerful lens through which to interrogate the values of the policies that inform public alternative schools in the TDSB.

Poststructuralist works have an explicit agenda to disrupt what we think we know and how we use language by interrupting conventional notions and values that make it difficult to think otherwise. “Disruption,” Williams (2005) argues:

should not be seen as a negative word. One aspect of poststructuralism is its power to resist and work against settled truths and oppositions... It guards against the sometimes overt, sometimes hidden, violence of established values such as an established morality, an artistic canon or a fixed legal framework... (p. 4).

Poststructuralist theorizing helped to work against the supposition that solidarity economics is the ultimate solution. Rather, from the outset, it grounded the study in the understanding that solidarity economics offers possibilities for contextually and temporally-based solutions. It aided too, as a lens through which to view solidarity economics as offering different possibilities for different contexts, a concept that is fundamental to solidarity economics.

***A poststructural example of contested language: The Africentric School.***

In a paper entitled “A focusing tragedy: Public policy and the establishment of Afrocentric Education in Toronto,” Thompson & Wallner (2011) propose the reasons why Toronto’s Africentric School was finally approved after years of earlier proposals. In their discussion, they describe fissures within the “black community” when it came to agreeing on the establishment of a Black-focused school. They describe similar reservations from other members

of the public. One of these reservations included a “return to segregation” (p. 811) between the “Black community” and (presumably) the “white community”. But, as Sandra (a teacher and participant in the study) recalls, the Africentric school was “incredibly contentious” and “it went on for a long time, communities within communities taking each other on” (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020). We can see that the “Black community” is both a “unified body of individuals” (*Definition of Community*, 2022) and an ununified body. The notion of a unified Black community is a construction based on one’s positionality. For those who did not want a “return to segregation” the Black community represented a whole that was not to be disjointed. For those Black people who did not agree with the proposal for one reason, they are a part of communities onto themselves. For those who did not agree for a different reason, they are a part of a different community, and so on. The “Black community” is perhaps more aptly termed a community of communities; the construction of its meaning is dependent on one’s positionality. This would be the case of any community I would imagine, and so, the term itself leaves its interpretation wide open, depending on the reader, and the writer for that matter (Yanow, 1995).

What the Africentric school example teaches us is that even within an alternative school space, where it can be presumed that particular people gather, the term “community” is contested terrain. More broadly, it demonstrates the argument made by poststructuralism, that meaning “is differential, not referential” (Belsey, 2002, p. 10) and how its construction is dependent on context (Peters & Burbules, 2004).

## **Democracy**

There must be as many different kinds of democracy in this country as there are of Baptists, or even more... Press-agencies must keep half a hundred

assorted encomiums on democracy in standing type, like Western Union's canned messages for Mother's Day... Every time one of our first-string publicists opens his mouth, a "democracy" falls out; and every time he shuts it, he bites one in two that was trying to get out (Albert Jay Nock, 1939, p. 85; quoted in Ranney & Kendall, 1951, p 430).

There have been and continue to be many uses of the term democracy over time. In his introduction to democracy, Crick (2002) gives us four of its usages over history, in successive order and beginning with the disagreement between Plato and Aristotle on its meaning. Democracy, according to Aristotle "is simply, in the Greek, *demos* (the mob, or many) and *kratos*, meaning to rule" (p. 11). Aristotle modified Plato's view of democracy to "good government [as] a mixture of elements; the few ruling with the consent of the many" (p. 11). The second usage "is found in the Roman republic... the 17<sup>th</sup> century English and Dutch republics and the early American republic: that good government is mixed government" (p. 11). This was in keeping with Aristotle's theory, save for that greater power could be given to the state through the "democratic popular element" (p. 11) and that collectivity through the active citizenship of subjects creates good laws. The third usage of democracy can be attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau who attested that "everyone, regardless of education or property, has a right to make his or her will felt in matters of public concern" (Crick, 2002, p. 12). Lastly, Crick (2002) outlines a fourth usage of democracy, which he argues is found in many of the new constitutions in Europe and America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and "in the new west German and Japanese constitutions following the second world war" (p. 12). This he calls "modern democracy," the ideas of which can be attributed to much of the western world. Dupuis-Déri, (2010) uses case studies of France and the United States to demonstrate the ways in which political actors have



manipulated the word for political gain and suggests this history to be true in a Canadian context as well. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the word democracy was used with any positive connotation in Canada. Alphonse Desjardins was among the first to use the term positively, “declaring that the ‘democratization of workers’ savings and the fruits of their productive activities would have the most happy results” (Lamonde and Corbo, 1999: 329, author’s translation, quoted in Dupuis-Déri, 2010, p. 12). Canada itself was not identified as a democracy until the first world war, when the word was used to mobilize the population around the war effort.

If there is indeed one true definition for democracy, we as human beings, do not have it. As Meroe (2014) contends, “many authors have pointed to the protean and normative concepts of ‘democracy,’ ranging from a collection of values to which one aspires to a set of constitutionally defined political practices” (p. 486). Democracy, according to Ranney & Kendall, (1951), has become an “honorific word [and] evokes such pleasant associations in most of us that we wish to identify ourselves and our ideas with it” (p. 431). Democracy, they argue, has become conflated with “the good,” that is, if something is good, then it is democratic, and if something is democratic, then it is good.

How can one word mean so many different things to so many different people? Poststructuralism might suggest that “the answer seems to vary with the context” (Belsey, 2002, p. 7), that meanings are a matter of social convention, and can thus be challenged and even changed (Belsey, 2002). In the context of education, democracy correspondingly has variable and prescriptive concepts:

Some believe that the best way to teach democracy is through rigorous study of the workings of government, the history of democratic institutions, and the

hard-won struggles in which democratic societies have engaged to preserve and strengthen democracy. Others hope young people will go outside the classroom into the community so that academic goals can be better matched to social and community projects. Still others want schools themselves to become more democratic; these advocates point to the presumed hypocrisy of teaching about democracy in a profoundly non democratic institution like the traditional school. (Cook & Westheimer, 2006, p. 350)

In *Another Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media, and Democratic Possibilities* (2010), Hill Collins outlines the ways in which democracy must be synonymous with, and inform education. In it, she offers a means by which to conceptualize education and schools within a broader systemic framework of social inequalities, as well as offering school as a site for democratic possibility. Not unlike the Zapatista movement's use of the internet, and the BPP's use of media, she positions media as a site of public education and calls for media literacy as a part of a critical education crucial to democracy. John Dewey's (1997, 2010) critical pedagogy emphasized the importance of a philosophy of education with a foundation in democracy and of the deep understanding of these ideals.

The Educational Policies Commission of the National Educational Association in the United States has taken up John Dewey's conceptualization of democracy, stating:

It is a form of government; it is a kind of economy; it is an order of society; it is a way of life; it is all of these things together. But it is more... Democracy... is a great social faith which, in response to the yearnings and struggles of many races and peoples, has been developing through the centuries.

(Ranney & Kendall, 1951, p. 435)

The zealous exclusion of entire groups of people upon which democracy was founded (Meroe, 2014), assists with the connection between Dewey's understanding of democracy and an understanding of democracy within the context of the solidarity economy. The solidarity economy, like democracy, has also been "in response to the yearnings and struggles of many races and peoples" (Ranney & Kendall, 1951, p. 435). What we know about the solidarity economy is that it is a movement of movements – contextual and collective responses to economic and social exclusions and violence faced predominately by people of colour. Solidarity oftentimes means the struggle for democratic rights – a way of government, a means of economic engagement, the way society is ordered and a way of life. Taken together, these comprise a particular way of understanding democracy shared by Dewey and by the solidarity economy. I do not believe this definition of democracy to be the same democracy as is espoused in the policies pertaining to the establishment of alternative public schools in Toronto. As we will see, the policies elicit democracy as a form of collective decision making or as seeking community input, and not necessarily as more. The need to theorize and historicize the concept of democracy became evident near the conclusion of the study, as democracy emerged as a theme in interview data, as well as policies. This theorizing informed the findings and discussion, as well as the conclusion sections of this study.

### **Capitalism and Racial Capitalism**

Conversely, the need to theorize and historicize capitalism and racial capitalism, and have this theorizing inform this study, was evident at its inception. Specifically, aided in an understanding of the connections between capitalism, the school system, and the place of marginalized groups within it. Further, it informed my treatment of capitalism when it emerged as a theme throughout the policy documents, while also serving to inform an ongoing

understanding of capitalism as one iteration of economic practice, and thus not the only possibility for access to various forms of prosperity. Finally, an ongoing understanding of capitalism and racial capitalism is necessary for future work in the disruption of the hegemony of dominant economic and social models.

Capitalism is the taken-for-granted and the dominant economic system of the world today (Heilbroner, 2006). In the study of neoclassical economics, capitalism is rarely named. Instead, it is generally referred to as “the economy” – as if there is no need to demarcate or label it (Stanford & Biddle, 2015). Capitalism, however, was not always the dominant economic system, and since its emergence in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Fulcher, 2015), has taken several different forms which stand apart from its current neoliberal configuration. Capitalism does not look the same in western countries as it does in the east, the countries of which have their own distinct forms of capitalism (Fulcher, 2015). Thus, for the purposes of this work, capitalism will refer to the economic tendencies of western capitalism and specifically to Canadian capitalism wherever possible.

Britain is generally credited with the first capitalist production in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, though the emergence of capitalism can be traced back to Europe, where it had a long history beginning in fourteen and fifteenth centuries. Eighteenth century Britain, a time that Fulcher (2015) describes as “anarchic capitalism,” was characterized by capitalist activities left unchecked by the state, “weak labour organization, economic deregulation, a strong state, and minimal state welfare” (p. 41). What Fulcher (2015) calls “Managed Capitalism” is said to be the next stage of capitalism, emerging in the mid nineteenth century in Britain and peaking in the 1970s. This stage of capitalism was typified by an increase in size of corporate organizations through mergers and acquisitions, and the need for increased management of those organizations, made

possible by class organization, the management of class relationships by governments, and the building of the welfare state in the 1940s. “Remarketized capitalism” (Fulcher, 2015) or neoliberalism emerged with “a new orthodoxy, centered on the revival of market forces” (p. 47) in the 1980s and the government policies that created and reinforced them.

While this overview of the emergence of capitalism in Britain provides a starting place for its general understanding, there are many competing accounts of the history and mechanisms of capitalism, including from Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Lafrance & Post (2018) warn their readers against a “propensity to explain capitalism as an outgrowth of age-old and quasi-universal trading activities— the ‘commercialization model’” (p. 2). Drawing on the work of Appleby (2010), they contend that capitalism is a phenomenon of time and place and is not an inevitable outgrowth of commerce, nor is it “a predestined chapter in human history, but rather a startling departure from the norms that had prevailed for four thousand years” (Appleby, quoted in Lafrance and Post, 2018, p. 3).

Canada’s capitalist history is obdurately linked to that of Britain’s and its colonial relationship to it. What we see in the work of Jessica Evans (2018) is “that the emergence of capitalism in Canada was bound up with transformations in settler colonial social property relations following a reconfiguration of Britain’s structures of empire and that these changes were intimately connected to the production of racialized subjectivities” (p. 191). As a colony, Canada was part of a project of “systematic colonization” (Evans, 2018, p. 195). Evans (2018) also points to the need for a “shared identity” for Canada to competitively engage in the production of staples in the world market, which was “predicated on mass indigenous displacement and a patchwork of immigrants” (p. 196). Canada’s collective identity was based in the production of whiteness, “binding together diverse settlers, with unequal and politically

mediated access to land, and setting themselves apart from dispossessed indigenous peoples” (p. 196). The reserve system, created as a result of legislation passed in the 1850s, solidified the settlers’ rights to the majority of land. Subsequent legislation tied the repudiation of collective land rights to whiteness, making Indian identity criminal and “racially barbaric” (Evans, 2018, p. 206). Evans asserts, that “the racial justifications for indigenous land theft and segregation provided the institutional and ideological means to bind together a “nation” capable of pursuing capitalist agricultural development” (Evans, 2018, p. 206). Indeed, this is but one example of “capitalism’s inherently racializing capacities” (Satnam Virdee, 2019, quoted in Gerrard et al., 2022, p. 426). Another glaring example is that of the transatlantic slave trade. In other words, capitalism is inextricably linked to race and racism. This is the concept of racial capitalism, which “requires its users to recognise that capitalism is racial capitalism” (Jodi Melamed, 2015, quoted in Gerrard et al., 2022).

Gerrard et al. (2022) use the work of Cedric Robinson (2020) to bring together racial capitalism with education. As with Evans (2018) who points to the dominion over, and the exploitation and annihilation of racialized bodies, so too does Robinson (2020). Gerrard et al. (2022) extend this thinking to education, arguing that:

“‘race’, then, is a part of capitalism’s requirement for categorical social divisions that can in turn support divisions in labour to create value; divisions which require subjugation from multiple axes – including notions of ‘ability’ and ‘capacity’ which have been central to education” (p. 427).

“Ability” and “capacity” are central to both capitalist and educational projects. To capitalism, ability and capacity are complicit in the meritocratic mechanism underpinning both

neoliberalism and democracy, flowing from the idea of education as the great equalizer. That is, the idea that education provides an opportunity for anybody who works hard enough, as well as a refusal to bear witness to, or address the systemic barriers that block people of colour from what is viewed as success. The conflation of democracy with meritocracy suggests that people have choice and certain freedoms to choose success through the equalizing and logical avenue of education. The education system though, is designed to uphold and maintain a capitalist system based in white supremacy. This is done through safeguarding the current caste system by streaming students of colour. This streaming is both reinforced by and reinforces the societal structures used to perpetuate systems of inequality, which are held up by the underlying assumption that students of colour have neither the ability, nor the capacity to succeed in academic streams or programs in higher education. It is also perpetuated by systemic barriers to education (such as streaming, the inequitable allocation of resources, standardized testing and white supremacist curriculum) faced by students of colour, which continue to perpetuate ideologies of white supremacy that have served to maintain racial capitalism.

### **Neoliberalism**

Similar to capitalism, the need to theorize, historicize and understand neoliberalism was evident from the outset, and thus, neoliberal theory informed this study throughout. It aided in the thematic analyses of policy documents through a deeper understanding of the history of different government philosophies, their timelines and the associated policies from those timelines; It framed my understanding and analysis of the theme of school choice and its marketization in the context of policy language and informed the conclusions I come to construct.

The theory of neoliberalism makes the argument that “individual liberty and freedom are the paramount goals of human subjects in civilization, and that they can be achieved and protected” under particular institutional conditions that are comprised of “strong private rights, free market and free trade” (Peters & Tesar, 2018, p. 3). Such conditions are brought about by policies that limit government, deregulate the labour market, promote free trade, implement fiscal restraint and employ market liberalization. Under these conditions, individuals can prosper. According to Peters and Tesar (2018), “the political and economic theory behind neoliberal ideology is one of the main architectural and philosophical features of the educational policy paradigm in the Western world since the late 1970s and early 1980s” (p. 2).

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by the rise of neoliberalism on a global scale with Reaganomics and Thatcherism in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, and in China with the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (Peters & Tesar, 2018). In Canada, Brian Mulroney came to power in 1984, seeking to reverse the liberal policies of the Trudeau government and was highly influenced by Thatcher and Reagan in their free market-driven policies (“Brian Mulroney,” n.d.).

The World Bank, The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) play a role in the construction of global educational policies under the guise of globalization and in an effort to “perpetuate a neoliberal agenda” (Rutkowski, 2007 p. 229). Rutkowski’s (2007) discussion brings into focus, the global nature of neoliberalism and the ways in which global actors can have profound local effects on education.

In the context of education, “neoliberal theory makes the argument that human and social betterment is best achieved through individual competitive aspirations” (Carpenter et al., 2012, p.



160) and that these competitive aspirations must be realized through education. Dominant models of schooling (including private and alternative public schools) are underpinned by neoliberal values and driven by the market. Ontario governments have used an array of policies to buttress a neoliberal ideology, most notably, in the 1990s (Albo & Evans, 2019; Dei & Karumanchery, 1999).

A study done by Taylor & Mackay (2008) looked at the Edmonton District School Board and the implications of school choice policies on the construction of the educational market. The authors argue that the district indeed plays a key role in constructing the market through its regulation of the establishment of and access to alternative programs. A neoliberal discourse of market failure is attributed to the closure of schools and often related to meagre achievement results.

Web and Gulson (2015) conclude that white supremacy is the organizing component of neoliberal societies and education policy (p. 166). This becomes pertinent not only in the ways in which rights are allocated to particular bodies in particular places but also in the dictation of who makes decisions on the establishment of those places.

School choice and the marketization of education play a prominent role in neoliberalism. In her doctoral dissertation, Quirke (2007) investigates how niche schools in Toronto maintain legitimacy and situates so-called third sector schools squarely within a market framework, postulating that “consumer ethos is at play within educational institutions” (p. 122). Her work highlights the normalization of the increasingly commercial nature of public education.

Neoliberal policy is veiled by the language of choice and equity, positioning “parental choice [as] the primary market mechanism that defines and enacts much of what constitutes ideas such as ‘independent’, ‘community,’ and ‘educational equity’” (Webb and Gulson, 2015, p. 159).

For Heilbronn (2016) the privatisation of education through the establishment of academy schools in England serves as a threat to the values of democracy, community and equity put forth by Dewey (1997, 2010) as the fundamental morals of education. These morals stand in direct contrast to those of the marketplace, which, when woven into the educational ethos, change its purposes and practices.

Ellis & Yoon's (2019) study on school choice in Vancouver secondary schools makes the argument that neoliberal philosophies and policies have overtime, altered the original intentions of school choice advocates in British Columbia, which sought to provide alternative educational programming to parents and their children. Together, these studies are a subset of an overall critique of school choice as an exercise in stratification as well as the relationship between choice, school markets and neoliberalism.

## **Summary**

Chapter four described the concepts of critical pedagogy, critical policy analysis, enactment theory, post structuralism, democracy, capitalism and racial capitalism, and neoliberalism, which frame this work. Critical pedagogy offers a means by which to judiciously engage with the solidarity economy, serving as a link to concepts of power, culture and economics that are central to the solidarity economy. Specifically, I called on a Black liberatory lens through which to interrogate structures of power, addressing marginalizing discourses and bringing to bear historical and political implications in analyses of schooling.

Different meanings can be attached to policy, and thus interpreted and enacted differently by different actors, an idea argued by Ball et al. (2012), who draw heavily on the work of Foucault and his concepts of discourse and power as they relate to policy. They also draw on Fairclough who himself relies on Foucault for his conception of language and power, arguing

that “conventions and orders of discourse embody particular ideologies” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 28).

The concept of ideology is featured prominently by Fairclough (1989), as it is by Belsey (2002), in her outline of poststructuralism, where she points to consensual systems of power that are secured by ideology (p. 36). Poststructuralism offers a framework for taking up Toronto’s alternative education system as something other than “obvious” (Belsey, 2002, p. 33) and calls into question, the ideologies that make us believe it so.

Democracy, capitalism and racial capitalism, and neoliberalism, along with each of their different meanings, dominant meanings at different points in time, their relationships to education, and the ways in which they informed this study, were discussed in turn.

## **Chapter Five: Context, History, and Thematic Analyses of Alternative Schools Policy**

Premier Bill Davis' Ontario government (1971 – 1985), was Progressive Conservative (PC). Before serving as Premier, Davis served as the Minister of Education under Premier John Robarts in 1962 – 1971, during which time he increased education funding and oversaw the amalgamation of nearly 4000 school boards down to 192 (French, 2017). During this time, he also “modernized the province’s learning infrastructure” (Bradburn, 2021) through the establishment of the Education Television Service (now known as TVO), five new public universities, a community college system and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) (French, 2017).

Davis’s tenure set the stage for, and commissioned the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario (the Hall-Dennis Report), which itself catalyzed the alternative school movement in Toronto (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021; Bascia et al., 2017). However, Thompson (2021) argues, that during the post-war boom, Davis slashed health and education funding. “The Ontario Tories, Thompson continues, “are, at root, an anti-worker bloc, committed ideologically and organizationally to empowering capital over labour.” I must quote Thompson again here to make the point that Davis’ ideologies were embedded in capitalism’s agenda:

In Ontario, successive Progressive Conservative governments ruled the roost for more than 40 years. During this time, they partnered with the federal government to construct much of what’s identified as Ontario’s welfare state with a roughly similar mandate. This wasn’t because the 1943-85 Progressive Conservatives like Bill Davis had bigger hearts than today’s conservatives. Nor was it because they had a “passion for education,” healthcare, infrastructure or

the like. The welfare state was supported and developed insofar as it served the needs of capitalism at the time. When the welfare of the population and needs of capital conflicted, capital *always* won. (Thompson, 2021, emphasis in original)

Cole (2021) goes so far as to make the argument that the Hall-Dennis Report served the interests of humanists and capitalists alike, and it rings familiar here with Thompson's (2021) contention: it is possible for social welfare policies to be motivated by money.

**Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario (1968).**

In June of 1965, a committee comprised of a wide variety of people from various geographic areas in Ontario and with a range of occupations, began its work with a purpose “to set forth the aims of education for the educational system of the province and to propose means by which these aims might be achieved” (Hall & Dennis, 1968). *Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*, was published in 1968 after several public hearings, expert presentations, research studies, and school visits in Ontario and abroad. Justice E.M. Hall of Ottawa, a justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, and L.A. Dennis of Toronto, a former school principal, served as Co-chairmen of the committee. Thus, *Living and Learning* is often and aptly referred to as the Hall-Dennis report and will be referred to as such in the proceeding pages.

To some, the Hall-Dennis Report is “the most important educational document ever produced in Ontario” (W.G. Fleming. *Ontario's Educative Society, Vol.3, Schools, Pupils, and Teachers*, p. 503 quoted in Cole, 2015).

The Hall-Dennis report really grew out of the revolutionary ideas in the sixties.

It was the notion that kids were being stifled by an education system that

wasn't child-centered and that we needed to blow that up. And I think to some extent that did happen. I think that the child-centred notion, certainly in the early years – the kindergarten and primary grades – I think that is a result of the work of Hall-Dennis and that ethos. But I think it was badly understood. I don't think that what Hall-Dennis was talking about was necessarily classrooms without walls and that's what happened in a lot of schools, was all of a sudden, they were just noisy spaces and it was chaotic as opposed to being creative. And I think that that left a bad taste in people's mouths. Parents got freaked out because it wasn't school as they remembered it. (Margaret, former premier of Ontario, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

Hall-Dennis was a critical and influential report, serving as the impetus for the alternative school movement in Toronto and elsewhere in Ontario (Bascia et al., 2017). Commissioned and funded by the Ontario government, the report proposed a complete overhaul of the Ontario school system with critiques and recommendations “that had the potential for transforming the grounding philosophy of Ontario's schools” (Memon, 2006, p. 1). Its recommendations were called idealistic and utopian; urging teachers to experiment in their classrooms, calling for an end to standardized assessment and sponsoring a child-centered approach to learning.

Experimentation in the classroom, after the report came out, led to complaints about the functional literacy and workplace readiness of students, subjecting the report to derision and dismissal and “by 1980 Hall-Dennis was breathing its last” (Hennessy, 2011). Ultimately, the report was shelved, with dissent from both the left, and the right, “and perhaps most damagingly, from the institutional mainstream” (J. Cole, 2021, p.409). While many saw the report as flawed, there was also a staunch following, and the report's controversial legacy continues.

Of particular interest are the democratic ideals supported by the Hall-Dennis Report. Firstly, the process in which the report was created was democratic in nature, as a wide variety of discussion was invited by way of 112 briefs submitted by organizations and individuals with an interest in education (Hall & Dennis, 1968). The committee also visited Ontario schools as well as schools in many other countries, in order to understand the positions held by various stakeholders in education.

Democratic ideals are emphasised by the notion that in order to maintain a free and democratic society, the school system must itself be democratic. In this vein, Hall-Dennis calls for an educational system in Ontario that is community-based and cooperative in nature. To this end, it enjoins the decentralization of authority and a disbanding of hierarchies in order to make way for community-based, local, and democratic teams who would work in concert to provide decision-making capabilities in the best interest of individual children. Hall-Dennis appeals to the government to ensure the same education for people of all social classes, calling for the de-streaming of courses. Class emerged as a dominant theme, where the perpetuation of class distinctions by the education system is recognized as a barrier to a strong democratic society. It names too, the importance of social responsibility for the environment and the threats we pose to our natural resources, a significance that is often tied to democracies (Petter Gleditsch & Otto Sverdrup, 2002).

According to the report, education is an equalizer. To this end, the committee's task was to "find the structure, the organization, the curriculum, and the teachers to make this aim a reality in our schools and in our time." It calls for the removal of systemic barriers, including the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of the education system.

Hall-Dennis works hard to preserve a specific and all-encompassing notion of humanity throughout the report. In part, the preservation of humanity involves the pursuit of the truth. In its first section entitled, “The Truth Shall Make You Free,” Hall-Dennis positions “the search for truth” as the fundamental ambition of education. A possession of the means to truth it suggests, “is the key to open all doors.” It is the key to making “all men brothers, equal in dignity, if not ability,” and an opportunity to “reach a new plateau of human commitment to the common good.” In this section, truth allows for understanding, cooperation, peace and good will, and ultimately calls on Canada to “become a showplace for man’s humanity to man.” The ensuing section, entitled “The Search for Truth in a Democratic Society” elicits the common good in positing that “excellence in quality and humaneness of approach [to education] affect everyone in the society.” When taken together, the foregoing quotes are demonstrative of the ways in which Hall-Dennis positions truth and humanity as the major aims of an education which must be achieved within a democratic society and for the common good of all. Hall-Dennis’ understanding of democracy is as a form of government and collective decision-making, of equitable practices, as a commitment to the humanity of all people, and as an all-encompassing way of being for Ontario’s public education system. This is in line with Dewey’s conception.

Hall-Dennis both scrutinizes education’s role in, and concentration on creating consumer-citizens and at the same time, has a stake in capitalist ideals of conformity and obedience. For example, what might be labeled as visionary, is the report’s understanding of the role of economics in education. However, what Josh Cole (2021) points out about Hall-Dennis is that

This new, democratic system of education was associated with the highest ideals of postwar progress, liberalism, and humanism, yet its recommendations were paradoxically both profoundly radical and



fundamentally conservative. Its avant-garde research strategies and controversial 'post-literate' curricular reforms were balanced by a pedagogical approach designed to mould students into obedient citizens and productive economic actors (abstract).

There are, several examples in Hall-Dennis that point to Cole's (2021) assertion that the report calls for students to be moulded into a particular kind of capitalist. If one looks closely at Hall-Dennis, democracy, humanism, and liberalism do not free the report from its capitalist underpinnings. Firstly, education is referred to as an industry, one of the largest, in fact, "especially in Ontario." There is also much emphasis placed on a curriculum that, while humane, also "prepares them for the world of work and leisure..." It is labour, goods and services after all, that are bought and sold in the marketplace in a capitalist economy. Cole (2021) draws attention to the contradiction between democracy, humanism and liberalism and capitalism, and the seeming discomfort of Hall-Dennis with its support for "links between business and education" (p. 193). Though, it does make those links through a concession to the capitalist structure "within which all... decisions would be made...: 'curriculum *must*...give full effect to these requirements,' i.e., those resulting from the 'the growth of industry and results of the industrial revolution'" (p. 195).

Secondly, Hall-Dennis calls for a thirteen-year school period, over the course of which children work at the "identification of society's goals and the planning for their attainment." Third, Hall-Dennis emphasises a play-based curriculum for elementary-aged children, contending that "it is out of play that children develop rules of a game and a sense of order." It stipulates that "as children mature, they should be capable of planning when to do work assigned to them and also have time in which to follow personal or group interests of their own choice."

This sense of order, followed by an understanding of when to work and when to take leisure, are the trappings of capitalist production. Leisure can also be understood as a creation of capitalism, through its commercialization which saw workers pay for leisure activities through new leisure industries (Fulcher, 2015).

Finally, there is a call for competition in the curriculum in which there must be an emphasis on the “aesthetic, social and physical rewards of [recreational pursuits and physical development] rather than team engagement and spectator participation.” Competition is one of the cornerstones of consumer-capitalism. While Hall-Dennis advocates for a liberal and humane form of schooling, it is also advocating for the preparation of students for the assails of the market. The preceding examples reveal the deceptive nature of capitalism where even the best of intentions is framed within a hegemonic capitalist structure that is almost imperceptible in Hall-Dennis.

In making students aware of the customs and procedures and acquainting them with the institutions and organizations through which they flow, Hall-Dennis disseminates capitalist ideologies, which remain unspoken or perhaps, unconscious. This commentary of “keeping pace with our civilization” and recognizing a job well-performed, reinforces the notion that education has become a crucial element of economic prosperity in its contribution to the value of capital markets (Rizvi et al., 2009). Cole (2021) proposes that “a close reading of *Living and Learning* suggests it was on the cusp of Rodgers’s ‘Age of Fracture,’ hinting at some of the assumptions and practices that have come to shape the neoliberal views of our own time” (p. 221).

Noam Chomsky asked if we want “a society of free, creative, independent individuals, able to appreciate and gain from the cultural achievements of the past and add to them? Or do we want people to increase GDP?” (LWF, 2012). He concluded that it must be the former as “a

value in itself because it helps create better human beings” (LWF, 2012). Hall-Dennis certainly promotes the notion that school can aim to have “noble ideals such as the respect and understanding of all mankind, the self-realization of the individual, and a national identity;” at the same time, its focus on not kowtowing to society’s economic demands, makes invisible, the capitalist hegemony in which it is situated.

### **A General Policy for Alternative School Programs (1978)**

In 1978, there were two alternative schools in the former Toronto Board of Education, each of which was established without a policy governing its opening. The General Policy for Alternative School Programs (Shuttleworth et al., 1978) was the first formal policy of several alternative school policies governing the opening of alternative public schools and touting school choice as a pioneering alternative to mainstream education. The policy cites John Fritz, who “identified four purposes of alternative schools:”

1. They provide continuing educational opportunities for students who drop out of or prove disruptive in the regular high school
2. The serve students who for a variety of reasons find the regular high school inadequate to their needs and who are interested in exploring opportunities in alternative schools
3. They explore possibilities in developing new school procedures or plans for subsequent wider application in the system.
4. They develop alternative programs in keeping with the diverse needs of student clients and parental conceptions of the type of schooling preferred for their children.

(Shuttleworth et al., 1978, p.2)

The policy points out that the only alternatives in other school boards have been initiated “administratively, with a minimum of community involvement” (p. 3). It points too, to the lack of policies pertaining to the alternatives in education; that the policies existing at the time only concerned the “budget and purchasing procedures” (p. 3). Many of the remaining pages of the policy are devoted to a step-by-step procedure for how to start an alternative school in the TBE. In its prescriptive nature, the policy is a departure of Hall-Dennis’ idyllic vision for Ontario education. This formal procedure remains consistent between policies over time.

There are a number of themes throughout the General Policy for Alternative School Programs (Shuttleworth et al., 1978). The Toronto Board of Education as a “pioneer,” is one such theme, with other adjectives like “innovative,” “unique” and “experimental” being used to describe alternative school programs in the City of Toronto. Innovation is tied very closely to capitalism. Stanford & Biddle (2015) contend that innovation it is a fundamental component of capitalism in that companies must “constantly experiment with new technologies, new products, and new forms of organization – in order to succeed in that competition” (p. 32). Alternative schools can easily be transposed onto the foregoing excerpt, with the board as the company, and alternative schools as the new products and forms of organization. Innovation, a driving force in capitalist economies and “capitalism’s best subject” (Stanford and Biddle 2015, p. 362), is not only a sense of pride for the board, but an accomplishment, and thus works to situate it within the capitalist status quo.

The TBE describes students as “clients” and “customers” throughout the policy document. These adjectives are frequently paired with descriptions of “dissatisfaction” with the mainstream system, or its inadequacies. This language brings to bear the private consumer and capitalist framework in which the policy is situated.

Under the heading of “The Toronto Experience” the policy takes care to mention that although each alternative school is unique in its identity, that what they all have in common is a “shared responsibility for major decisions affecting the operation of the school” (p. 3). As will be seen, this democratic structure for decision-making is also a theme throughout the policies as a whole.

Systemic pressures emerged as a theme with the General Policy for Alternative School Programs (Shuttleworth et al., 1978). They fell within the “Establishment Procedures” with stipulations requiring that curriculum and programming “falls within the Ministry guidelines” (p. 5) and “under the supervision of a principal and area superintendent” (p. 6). What is striking is the stipulation that “alternative programs must adhere to the same administrative procedures as any other school” which begs the question with such prescriptions and policy stipulation to adhere to, what is alternative about alternative schools? While it may be true that curriculum and pedagogy can still be alternative while maintaining the same administrative procedures as mainstream schools, what becomes clear from the interviews is that curriculum and pedagogy are often stifled by the guidelines or by the principals and area superintendents who enforce them. One example is the repeal of the new sexual education curriculum in favor of the old 1998 curriculum, which does not allow teachers to address same-sex relationships, among other issues. This is in direct contradiction to the values, curriculum and pedagogy of one of the schools in this study. Systemic barriers plagued the same school, which was assigned a principal who did not agree with the school’s philosophy or programming. At odds with its administration, the teachers at the school found it very difficult to practice alternative programming, curriculum or pedagogy. The question of the alternativeness of alternative schools will arise again in the interview data.

Finally, material stipulations emerged in several sections of the policy text, including directions for “Location and Accommodations,” “Staffing and Enrollment,” and “Budget.”

### **Alternative Schools, A General Policy (1982)**

By 1982, there were ten elementary and nine secondary alternative public schools in the TBE. In its 36 pages, *Alternative Schools, A General Policy* (Toronto Board of Education, 1982) offers a process for forming a public alternative school and includes separate sections each for “space,” admission,” “staffing,” “establishment grants,” “curriculum and program,” “the alternative schools’ advisory council,” and the “administration of alternative schools.” At the end of the policy are appendices detailing elementary and secondary schools, a list of members of the “alternative and community program department” and instructions in regard to the secondment of a secondary school principal to an alternative school.

*Alternative Schools, A General Policy* (Toronto Board of Education, 1982) claims that the TBE has schools fitting each of Graubard's (1972) typology of alternative schools, of which there are four types:

1. The classical free school based on the Summerhill model.
2. The parent teacher cooperative elementary school populated largely by young, white, liberal middle-class families and characterized by a significant amount of parental input into the decision-making process.
3. The free high school – actually a broad category including white, working-class high schools for ‘drop outs’ and ‘push outs’, street academies for poor minority youth and small high schools for relatively radical white students of average or above means.

4. Community elementary schools controlled by dissatisfied, usually minority parent groups, and characterized by a somewhat conservative curriculum.

As a result of fitting into each of the four types of alternative schools, the policy reports that the needs of a variety of students can be met through school choice, allowing “parents and students [to] choose the type of program they believe is best for them” (Toronto Board of Education, 1982, p. 1). As a result of this ability to choose, the problems with the education process and “dissatisfied customers” (Shuttleworth et al. 1978, p. 2) can be addressed through market mechanisms and students and their parents can have their individual needs met. An ethos of individual freedom is a signpost of neoliberalism (Peters & Tesar, 2018), within which individuals can prosper.

Neoliberal theory situates school choice within a free market framework, where schools compete for “customers” and “clientele,” (Shuttleworth et al., 1978; Toronto Board of Education, 1982) “providing a wider range of options for both consumers and for learning institutions” (Peters and Tesar 2018, p. 20). Capitalist free market competition, in theory, ensures that quality schools gain quality students and “higher enrollments will generate more resources for those schools, enabling them to expand and/or improve further. Lower enrollments in schools that parents tend to avoid will lead administrators and teachers to seek to improve their programs to make them more attractive to parents” (Weiss, 1998, p. 525). This in turn, provides the options parents are looking for. In terms of the options for learning institutions pointed out by Peters and Tesar (2018), under the neoliberal logic, schools have the ability to be discerning with their clientele as well, leading to a particular kind of segregation.

Segregation does not only happen by way of parents' and students' ability to choose a school, but by a school's ability to choose its patrons. The Admission Procedures section of the *Alternative Schools, A General Policy* (Toronto Board of Education, 1982) outlines in some detail, the admissions protocol for alternative schools, who reserve the right to decline enrollment to prospective students. In this way, the market dictates its customers and in doing so, schools boost their chances of success by attracting a particular kind of patron.

Graubard's (1972) typology of alternative schools has serious implications by way of school choice. Returning to his typology, we revisit an intersection of race and class in the policy's introduction, which seems to pride itself on "fitting into all four categories of Graubard's typology" (Toronto Board of Education, 1982, p. 1). (1) "the classical free school based on the Summerhill model" (Toronto Board of Education, 1982, p. 1) "was largely patronized by white families" (Sarah, personal communication, February 26, 2021); (2) the parent- teacher cooperative elementary school is characterized by "young, white, liberal middle-class families" (Toronto Board of Education, 1982, p. 1) ; (3) the free high school is broader in its scope of clients but consists largely of white youth; (4) community elementary schools, which are usually populated by "minority parent groups" (Toronto Board of Education, 1982, p. 1). What we can see here is a distinct segregation of groups delineated by race and class. What is also apparent is that three of the four typologies name white students as the dominant patrons of the public alternative school.

In "Education: A Very Short Introduction" Thomas (2013) outlines the historical and current segregation of schools within the neoliberal context arguing that schools and school systems have had an enduring inclination to separate groups from one another. Thomas (2013) notes these "facts about segregation because they are, strangely, at the



heart of both the desire for choice and the anxieties about its effects” (p. 64). Thomas notes too, that this paradox was solved by “the establishment of a new kind of artificial market, a quasi-market, within state run systems” (p. 65). While Thomas (2013) is speaking about the alternative public schools in United States and the United Kingdom, his explanation is fitting for Toronto’s alternative school system, which provides choice to its “clientele” while at the same time segregating its students by race and class.

Competition is also evoked through the Admission Procedures (Toronto Board of Education 1982, p. 7), which often require students to be interviewed and their report cards assessed (not unlike a resume). Students may be refused admission, at the discretion of school staff. The language of “applications,” “refusal of admission,” “probationary periods,” “committee recommendations,” “interviews,” and “signing of contracts” evokes a particular competitive job market discourse.

Competition, it is argued, is another bastion of capitalism. (Stanford & Biddle, 2015). The language of competition in the policy positions alternative schools within a market framework that works to attract (and reject through admission policies) particular “clientele.” The competitive nature of the language used by alternative school policies divulges its capitalist ideology.

The TBE’s pioneering work continues as a theme, this time through the use such words as “leaders,” “variety,” “uniqueness,” and “initiative.” Material needs pertaining to budget, staffing, and space are continued from the previous policy, as are the systemic barriers and pressures stipulating that admission procedures “conform to both Board and Ministry policy” (p. 8).

Democracy as a decision-making mechanism and a form of participation, continues as a theme throughout the policies. It emerges here, through the language of cooperation and mutual support, as well as through the language of collective decision-making, through “increasing parent and community involvement in public education” (p. 17), and through the intended involvement of students, parents and teachers in the governance of the school.

### **Provincial Review Report: Alternative Schools and Programs in the Public System (1986)**

With Davis’ retirement in 1985, soon came an end to the PC’s 42-year reign. The liberals were in power from 1985 – 1990, during which time the Provincial Review Report: Alternative Schools and Programs in the Public System (Doris, 1986) was produced.

The review, written by the (then) Regional Superintendent of Education, J. Doris, and published in 1986, was the first to evaluate alternative schools since SEED was established in 1968. It was written as an appraisal of the alternative schools and programs in the Ontario public education system. It sampled 29 alternative schools as well as 36 alternative programs. Its objectives included (1) “To ascertain the number, kind, and purposes of public alternative schools and programs,” (2) “Explore the organization of public alternative schools and programs in light of ministry policy...”, and (3) “To solicit...ideas concerning the overall effectiveness of education in public alternative schools [and] their suggestions for improving that effectiveness...” (p. 2).

The procedure for the review was substantial and included an enrolment audit, the observation of classroom teachers and subsequent interviews of those teachers, several interviews of other administrative staff, as well as with students, parents and community agency representatives. It also included the examination of “course calendars, timetables, pupils’ notebooks, projects, material, courses of study, etc.” (p. 3). Evident in the report were themes of, accountability, capitalism, democracy, school choice, material considerations, systemic barriers and

dissatisfaction with the mainstream system. It is interesting to note that the theme of the TBE as a pioneer does not continue with this report.

An ethos of individual accountability is evoked throughout the Provincial Review Report (Doris, 1986) which foregrounds the opportunity for students to take more “responsibility for their programs of study” (p. 10) through alternative school options. The Provincial Review Report (Doris, 1986) also emphasises the need for greater accountability in the reporting process as it pertains to student achievement.

Over the course of the review, it suggests a spirit of competition when it states that alternative public schools are “accommodating a clientele that might otherwise have been attending programs in other jurisdictions or other educational institutions” (p. 11). Here, the report insinuates that alternative schools keep students who would have left the public system, enrolled in its schools. That is, alternative schools are a means of competing against private sector and mainstream schools for students. Competition is also suggested in the report’s observation that intermediate alternatives both “attract pupils from other jurisdictions (public and private) but also...accommodate a clientele that might otherwise have attended private schools” (p. 7). This puts alternative schools in the position of both competing for students from other schools and competing to keep students within the system. Competition, as we have seen, works to situate the report within the capitalist system, as does the use of the word “clientele.”

Democratic ideals are evoked early on in the policy, with objectives that include the solicitation of ideas and suggestions from “students, teachers, parents, administrators, trustees, and representatives of community agencies” (p. 2) in regards to “the overall effectiveness of education in public alternative schools and their suggestions for improving that effectiveness” (p. 2). Democratic ideals of “equality in the decision-making process” (p. 3) were also evident in the

findings section, but only insofar as they served as an example of the kinds of alternative schools that may be present in a board. The review found small school sizes among most schools to be significant in that it promoted a sense of community and “more opportunities to share meaningfully in the total schooling process” (p. 4). According to the United Nations, this kind of meaningful participation, is among the fundamental values of democracy (United Nations, n.d.). Democratic ideals also emerged in the review of primary alternative programs, in the form of participation by parents in decision-making processes, curriculum planning and in the school operations. Such “co-operative decision making and parental participation in curriculum planning and the governance of the school” was summarized as the “underlying characteristic of these schools and programs... represent[ing] the alternative” (p. 10). In this example, democracy *is* the alternative in alternative schools. “Democratically oriented governance structures” (p. 22) in the elementary alternatives were lauded as being the most sophisticated model of governance.

School choice appears as a theme in the Provincial Review Report (Doris, 1986), couched within and connected to the use of the capitalist language we have seen throughout the policies:

...Intermediate, Intermediate-senior, Senior, and Adult Education alternatives tended to be, for the most part, essentially client alternatives; schools and programs were designed for a particular clientele: pupils age fourteen to fifteen, potential early school-leavers, advanced-level pupils, etc. Many of these *client* alternatives were also learning-style alternatives in that they stressed a certain mode of curriculum delivery to their clients... (p. 7)

The example above is demonstrative of the ways in which alternative choices are framed by the language of capitalism. In this passage and throughout the policy, “pupils”, “clients”, and “clientele” are used interchangeably, as choices alternative to the mainstream system are considered. Choice is paramount to capitalism and neoliberalism, as it serves as a driver to competition.

The term “delivery” too, implies that the curriculum is a product to be delivered, much like the exchange of goods and services in a capitalist economy, “like a bag of milk” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021). It highlights the systemic barriers faced by alternative schools, who are bound by “ministry policy, as contained in the Education Act, regulations, The Formative Years, Ontario Schools: Intermediate and Senior Divisions, and curriculum guidelines” (Doris, 1986, p. 2). What Denise is alluding to in her comment about the delivery of curriculum like milk, is that curriculum cannot be delivered or implemented because it is entirely contextual (curriculum is thus necessarily enacted, as all policies are) (Ball et al., 2012). However, for those interview participants who held administrative positions in the board, the curriculum appears to hold an important position, as a mainstay to the ways in which alternative public schools must remain similar to the conventional system. The Provincial Review Report (Doris, 1986) highlights that “technically, alternative schools and programs, and conventional schools must be similar. In the report, the reviewers found that, “in many ways, they were” (p. 3). Curriculum is necessarily connected to assessment and achievement, the absence of which, in some alternative schools in the review, were observed as “weaknesses” (p. 17). Margaret, a former Member of Provincial Parliament, Minister of Education and Premier of Ontario stresses that,

The notions around student success and student achievement are still consistent in the alternative schools as they are in mainstream. So, in a program like the [Zed] program or the [school] that it's housed in, the kids are still working to achieve mastery of the Ontario curriculum. So that's a foundational piece of any alternative school in the system. (Margaret, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

Margaret goes on to give the example of high schools, noting that:

Students are not going to be able to get an Ontario diploma unless [they] have met the expectations of the Ontario curriculum. So that whole debate calls into question the whole notion of having some sort of standardized evaluation system and as a society we have not thrown that out. We have not accepted that everyone can just have their own evaluation metrics. We have collectively, I think, accepted that there needs to be some kind of unified standard that we measure ourselves against.

(Margaret, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

According to Margaret's evaluation, the standardized assessments are a mainstay not only of the board, but of society at large.

We see again too, material considerations in the Provincial Review Report (Doris, 1986). Space and facilities, fundraising, inadequacy of material resources, and human resources are all referenced. Finally, dissatisfaction with the mainstream system is a theme in this report, as it has been with the other reports thus far. "Dissatisfaction on the part of parents and pupils with certain aspects of the schooling process" (p. 6) is cited as a reason for choosing alternative public schooling. Inadequacy of work quality in intermediate programs was also intimated as a reason

for establishing alternatives. And, dissatisfaction was expressed through the language of “accommodation,” for students whose needs are not being met.

### **The Issues Paper (1987)**

The year following the Provincial Review Report, an Issues Paper (Crisp, 1987) reviewing the concerns outlined within the 1986 review was brought forward by John Crisp who was seconded to the board to the position of Alternatives Advisor to complete a consultation process. The Issues Paper was then distributed to those who had an interest in alternative schools, including trustees, alternative public-school teachers and principals, as well as parent groups. The paper is broken down into categories which include “facilities”, “funding”, “publicity and relationship with other schools”, “board policy on alternative schools”, “accountability to board and Ministry of Education”, “Resources”, “roles of members in the school community”, “school operations”, and “staffing.” The concerns presented identified the importance of the maintenance of democracy, material considerations and systemic barriers. These are the same areas of concern identified in the Provincial Review Report: *Alternative Schools and Programs in the Public System* (Doris, 1986)

We see again too, the importance of assessment, as *The Issues Paper on Alternative Schools* (Crisp, 1987) mandates the “formal testing and other methods for student assessment” and that “teachers will maintain mark records” (p. 4). This emphasis on assessment is a systemic barrier to many alternative schools. While it is tempting to see formal assessment and grade books as obvious components of schools, many alternative schools, including Schools One and Two in this study, fought the board on the use of report cards and other conventional methods of assessment.

Meroe (2014) argues that democracy and meritocracy are often conflated and used interchangeably. “Both democracy and meritocracy speak to the potential ennobling of the person according to one’s individual ability, effort and virtue, as well as the collective liberties and protections” (p. 485). This speaks to the idea of the individual accountability of students by way of report cards and the standardized assessments that help to populate them. By promoting individual student accountability, the message of capitalism and its connection to democracy begins to emerge within the policy. Meroe (2014) says it well when she argues that “the democratic ideal of individual freedom is attached to the presumption of relatively greater agency within a capitalist marketplace” (p. 485). That is to say that individual students can succeed within a capitalist marketplace through individual efforts. The school (which in this context is a decidedly democratic institution) provides such opportunities for autonomous success through accountability programs that reward the highest achievers with monetary and social returns within a capitalist framework. Those who do not succeed are blamed for their failures. Thus, we see democracy and capitalism emerge as themes in Issues Paper.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) came to power with the election of Bob Rae, who remained in power from 1990 – 1995 (*Premiers of Ontario / The Canadian Encyclopedia*, n.d.). During Rae’s tenure, a 550-page report called *For the Love of Learning*, on reforming the Ontario education system was prepared by the Royal Commission on Learning in 1994. In it, 167 recommendations were made. These recommendations formed the basis for the structural changes brought about by the Harris government.

Mike Harris’ government came to power in 1995 and aimed to “reduce government bureaucracy and spending, cut taxes, eliminate the deficit, and rationalize government services” (Chan et al., 2007, p. 82). He termed this mandate, the “common sense revolution” (CSR) (Basu,



2004). There were only minor policy changes to the original and long-standing 1978 General Policy for Alternative School Programs, though Mike Harris managed to change the educational landscape of Ontario through his economic and political reforms. During the Harris years there was a...

...slow and steady construction of a ‘failing and inefficient education system’

[where] reason was fabricated as the rationale behind the legitimization of neoliberal agendas. The rationalization of restructuring was driven by a *perceived* need to improve the efficiency of the public sector while cutting costs and simultaneously by the need to increase educational standards, improve outcomes, and ensure accountability in order to remain globally competitive in a knowledge-based market economy. (Basu, 2004, p. 621.

Emphasis in original)

Still, the policies successive to the General Policy for Alternative School Programs (Shuttleworth et al., 1978) remained very similar.

### **Alternative Schools Policy (2007)**

It wasn’t until June of 2007 when policy was updated to reflect the Ontario Government’s ongoing support of, and commitment to alternative public schools with the 2007 “Alternative Schools” policy (P.062) (Toronto District School Board, 2007b) under the Liberal Dalton McGuinty government, which took power in 2003 and announced increased spending on education by \$1.6 billion by 2006 (Chan et al., 2007). During this time, the McGuinty government also revoked its tax credit for private school tuition, “signalling the government’s commitment to public education” (Chan, et al., 2007, p. 89).

The 2007 Alternative Schools Policy (P.062) is the first policy on alternative schools, after the amalgamation of the boards which saw the dissolution of the TBE and the creation of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The policy is much leaner in its substance, doing away with many pages of policy, in favour of concise text. The main tenets remain the same however, citing governance structures and sense of community, along with a renewed commitment to alternative schools and their unique pedagogical approaches. Policy 062 highlights themes of school choice, systemic barriers and democratic ideals. This is significantly fewer number of themes outlined than its predecessors, and the policy is itself is significantly smaller. It stipulates that the philosophy of the school be outlined and commitment to this philosophy be obtained by students and parents before enrolment, and that clear mission statements be developed. The policy makes clear that alternative schools, with all of their uniqueness, must still “operate in a way that is reasonably consistent with the operational practice of schools within the Board and in compliance with the Education Act, regulations, and Ministry of Education guidelines.” (Toronto District School Board, 2007b, p. 1). This idea of a requirement to function within particular guidelines and regulations (a concept I have termed “systemic barriers”) is one that will continue to be evident in the analyses of interview data.

### **Alternative Schools Operational Procedure (2007)**

The Alternative Schools Operational Procedure (PR.584 CUR) (Toronto District School Board, 2007a) is reference document, complimentary to the Alternative Schools Policy analysed above. The policy provides the guidelines for the “administration and establishment of alternative schools” (Toronto District School Board, 2007a, p. 1) and details a numbered series of steps for starting an alternative public school in the Toronto District School Board. The procedure for starting an alternative school is similar to the procedures outlined in the preceding

policies in that they require a summary of the governance model, a school philosophy and the requirement for a proposal which includes a letter of intent.

The procedures for starting an alternative school in this policy are more detailed than their predecessors, offering a better understanding of to whom to speak and what is needed, however it is evident that the themes of school choice, systemic barriers and democratic ideals remain the same. School choice for example, appears as its own section “Promoting Student Choice,” necessitating that the board “actively engage in initiatives that will increase the awareness of alternative schools” and outlining these initiatives. (Section 4.6, p. 2). Second, there is an emphasis on democratic processes in section 4.2, “Governance Models” that stresses collaboration between “students, parents, teachers and principals” in the “develop[ment] of mission and value statements” as well as the “importance of student and parent voices” (p. 2). Section 4.4, “Affirmation – Mission and Values” stipulates that the community come together to “review, revise and/or reaffirm their school’s philosophy and mission and values statement” (p. 2). Lastly, the theme of systemic barriers appears throughout policy via the prescriptive nature of the policy itself, which dictates how actors in the public alternative school space must implement democracy and publicize choice. The policy indicates school proposals may be “approved, referred back for further information; [or] formally rejected” at “each stage of the process” (section 4.5, (f)). As we saw with the Africentric Alternative School, and what we will see in Chapter Six, is that the process serves as a systemic barrier to particular bodies through their exclusion from the founding process. Finally, the process by which alternative schools must be proposed, stipulates that governance models “must be developed in recognition of the roles and responsibilities of the Board and its employees as ordered by legislation such as the *Education Act* and its regulations, and by the Board’s collective agreements with its employee groups”

(footnote 1, p. 2, emphasis in original). These instructions constrain the establishment of an alternative school through legislation and agreements that are also intended for mainstream schools.

### **Ontario Schools: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Policy and Program Requirements (2016)**

Kathleen Wynne's Liberal government (2013 – 2018) brings us to the most current policy regarding the establishment of alternative public schools in Ontario. The legacy of Kathleen Wynne's education policy begins with her tenure as Minister of Education under Dalton McGuinty, where she instituted full-day kindergarten and reduced class sizes (*Kathleen Wynne / The Canadian Encyclopedia*, n.d.). During her Premiership, Wynne's government introduced free tuition for students whose families made less than \$50,000 a year. Among other social spending was an increased minimum wage, the introduction of a cap-and-trade program, universal drug coverage program and a proposal for free child care (*Kathleen Wynne / The Canadian Encyclopedia*, n.d.). These programs constitute a "kind of redistribution of wealth not seen in [Ontario] since the days of Bob Rae (Crawley, 2016). She also revised the Ontario curriculum in 2015, including a democratic process to update to the 1998 sex-ed curriculum, bringing it more in line with the recommendations of health experts and UNESCO (Bialystok, 2019). Such social policies appear to run counter to the neoliberal logic of Wynne's policy which allowed for the partial privatization of Hydro One.

Over 100 pages in length, The Ontario Schools: Kindergarten to Grade 12 Policy and Program Requirements Policy "consolidates in one document the broad range of policies and programs that affect the educational experience of students in Ontario schools from Kindergarten to Grade 12" (Government of Ontario, 2016). It offers a short paragraph in reference to alternative schools, reading in full:

School boards may establish alternative schools to provide an option for some students who have educational needs that cannot be met in their existing schools, and/or to respond to needs expressed in the community.

(Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 80)

For ease of description, the above policy will be referred to as P2016. P2016 as a whole is equivocal. It offers nothing by way steps or guidance. This may be because boards are given jurisdiction over alternative schools. Nevertheless, it may be beneficial to make that clear. From my particular perspective, the lack of information in the policy is most certainly a hinderance for those looking into establishing an alternative school. Who is in charge? Where would one start? To whom would one speak? What are the “options” and for whom? This lack of information represents a barrier for those without the connections, resources or time to devote to answering these questions. This was a theme amongst many participants who spoke about entry into the alternative school space as issues of race and class. Chloe (a PhD) points to the fact that founders were highly educated, with at least one founder (presumably more) who was very well connected. She points to the privilege of time and resources of the founders. These are matters not only of class, but are necessarily connected to race, and gender and none can be unravelled from the other with their interconnections playing a central role in social and economic privilege and inequity (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). If the breadth of the policy hinders some, it may also then, aid particular people who have the connections and the knowledge of the system that would allow for a wide and privileged interpretation of the policy.

P2016 has to date, remained unchanged, perhaps because alternative school policies are left to the jurisdiction of the boards. Though the TDSB has not changed its policy since 2007 and P2016 has not changed from its current form, a moratorium has been placed on the creation of

public alternative schools in the Toronto District School Board (Kate, personal communication, March 31, 2021).

### **The Review of Alternative Schools: Research Analysis 2016-2017**

The Review of Alternative Schools: Research Analysis 2016-2017 (Brown, 2017) is the first review of Alternative Schools conducted by the Toronto District School Board. The report has five sections including: an overview of the alternative school system 2016-17; Alternative Schools in the JK to Post-Secondary Cohort Study; Consultation Sessions; Examination of Academic Literature; Suggested Areas for Discussion/Recommendation, and Next Steps. It is of interest because it represents the only report subsequent to the Provincial Review Report: Alternative Schools and Programs in the Public System (Doris, 1986), which was carried out during the 1984-1985 school year, ten years before amalgamation and more than 20 years after the provincial report. While a detailing of the changes that have occurred in the alternative public school system over its long history, and a comparative analysis of the reports are outside the purview of this study, having access to both reports offered an opportunity to identify the themes of each, from different contexts.

Themes between the two analyses remained similar. Themes from the Review of Alternative Schools: Research Analysis 2016 – 17 (Brown, 2017) included material resources, systemic barriers, human resources, communications, and democracy. Interestingly, these themes are the same themes produced by the consultation sessions employed in the development of the results of the review. Language like “clients” and “clientele” was not present, nor were the same kind of capitalist underpinnings of the other documents.

Material resources emerged as a theme in the context of lack of access “including “smaller budgets, limited courses; limited administrative support; limited special education needs

and technological support (p. 16). Systemic barriers arose in the context of access from particular neighborhoods, admission processes and school locations. Human resources came by way of noted “issues such as bumping and staffing turnover/stability” (p. 17). “Communications” is a theme we have not yet seen, though it is reminiscent of rhetoric around school choice and the requirement by some policies that alternative schools communicate to the public that they are a viable choice. Democracy emerged as a theme insofar as the review was undertaken using a “democratic” process, which assumed consultation sessions “attended by members of the general public, parents of students attending alternative schools, and TDSB teachers, among others” (p. 14).

Perhaps most notably, was the emergence of socio-economic demographics and race as themes from the research analysis. Socio-economic factors were discussed in the context of enrolment in TDSB alternative schools, access to alternative schools in terms of location and in terms of the admissions process, attendance by race and gender, achievement by race and gender, and post-secondary attendance. Immigrant status and English as a second language were also accounted for. What the analysis found was that “slightly under three quarters [of students attending elementary alternative public schools] self-identified as White” (p. 12). This general idea that the majority of alternative school students are white (at the elementary level) is echoed by the interview participants in their sentiment that alternative schools are representative of an elite enclave. It is echoed too, in Graubard’s Typology.

## **Summary**

The Wynne government, suffered a prodigious defeat at the hands of the Doug Ford Progressive Conservatives in 2018. Ford ran a populist campaign, and the comparisons to Trump’s campaign were “legion in the press” (Hennessy, 2018). Comparisons to the Harris era

were also made by The Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives before the election, anticipating a sharp right turn with a Ford government and a potentially dramatic alteration of a policy landscape that would “thrust” an otherwise progressive province into a Harris-like “dark age of austerity, deregulation and the rule by the rich” (Hennessy, 2018). Though in a series of essays edited by Albo & Evans (2019) it is argued that the governments that came after the Harris government strengthened his neoliberal policies. Specifically, Albo and Evans (2019) contend that although the Liberal government maintained the provision of fundamental change to educational policies, the record showed that Harris’ “lean education” was still determinedly at work. Neoliberalism they argue, remains firmly entrenched in Ontario’s education policies, among others.

As a queer, Black woman, I have a particular place within the social order. It must be stated that my interpretation of a capitalist and neoliberal society in which we live, cannot be neutral, as it is constitutive of my own values and experiences. I brought these experiences to bear in my reading of policies and their contexts, necessitating a particular reflexivity in Fairclough’s (1989) terms.

What we have seen over the course of the chapter is that capitalist and in later policies, neoliberal ideology, dominate the discourse around the opening of alternative public schools. Progressive conservative postwar politics allowed for the commission of the Hall-Dennis report, which in all its humanist rhetoric, still served a capitalist agenda by seeking to “tame the forces of radicalism and maintain the pre-existing socioeconomic order” (Cole, 2015, abstract). With the liberals in power beginning after the doggedly neoliberal government of Mike Harris (Bocking, 2020; Keil, 2002), their hold on power was not because they rejected the neoliberal



policies of Harris, but because they adapted to the new policy regime while at the same time touting progressive amendments (Albo & Evans, 2019).

The language of the policies dictating the opening of alternative public schools in Toronto gives away the TBE's (and by extension, the government's) capitalist "political form" (Pring, 2012, p. 73). In 1978 the TBE boasted that it had alternative schools fitting into each of Graubard's (1972) four types of alternative schools, giving parents and students the ability to choose from a wide variety of schools and address the problem of "dissatisfied customers" (Shuttleworth et al. 1978, p. 2) through the market mechanism of choice.

The policies produced by the TDSB do not share this same language, as they are greatly trimmed down and basic versions of the TBE documents. They were produced within a particular capitalist and neoliberal framework brought about by a reproduction of the status quo via the language of choice. Choice brings to bear a particular competition between alternative public schools and other choices, and between alternative public schools themselves. A hallmark of capitalism, competition – through choice, the drive to increase enrolment, and to keep attrition from the public system down – runs throughout the policies produced after Hall-Dennis and discloses their capitalist and neoliberal ideologies.

In *economics for everyone: A short guide to the economics of capitalism*, Stanford & Biddle (2015) provide a list of strategic economic objectives, the achievement of which will help people to be happier; choice is among this list. A crucial element of the policies is in part, to provide students and their parents with choice. Choice, in the context of capitalism, is inequitable. Everyone, they argue, should have a sufficient opportunity to make economic decisions that are in line with their preferences (though they point out that preferences are socially constructed). However,

there is a gigantic ideological myth that free market economies truly respect individual ‘choice.’ This is obviously wrong: the choices of billions of human beings are brutally suppressed by the economic hardship and social divisions which are a natural outcome of global capitalism. (p. 29)

They also argue that public sector services (like public schools) increase choice availability and thus, it is not free market capitalism that augments choice.

What does this say about the choice provided by the public alternative schools in the Toronto public system? It is complicated because alternative schools are a public sector service, yet the language of “clients,” “customers,” and “consumers” in the policies bring to bear the private consumer framework in which they are situated. As Stanford and Biddle (2015) argue, capitalism creates inequality, under the pretense of choice. It has already been contended that alternative schools do not provide real choice. Rather, “white, middle-class parents and students are often identified as the main beneficiaries and strategic users of school choice policies” (Gulson and Taylor Webb 2013, p. 168). Alternative schools in this sense, reinforce inequality – a bastion of capitalism – and the language of the policies betrays their underlying ideology of capitalism.

This mechanism of choice is also a mechanism of segregation, as it turns out. Graubard’s (1972) typology shows a segregation of groups, largely by race and class. It also shows that white students are the dominant patrons of a majority of the alternative school types.

The policies have an ethos of individual accountability through the call for formal assessments and language of responsibility. It also comes through a language of accountability in

the reporting process when it comes to student achievement, and the need for commitment and the mandating of formal testing.

The early policies of the TBE speak in various ways about how they have been “pioneer[s] in developing many such innovations” (Shuttleworth et al. 1978, p. 1) toward the improvement of the educational process. The policies speak to the uniqueness of the board’s policies themselves, the fact that they are “leader[s] in both the number of schools and the variety of programs” (Toronto Board of Education, 1982, p. 1), and about their initiative in innovative programming.

Language of the early policies around the pioneering and innovative work of the board can also be understood within capitalism as innovation is another cog in capitalism’s wheel (Stanford and Biddle 2015). Notwithstanding the language of innovation, the innovation of the Toronto board itself, its truly pioneering work in the alternative public-school space (Bascia et al., 2014) helped it to compete in a “quasi-market place” of public education (Thomas, 2013).

The language of students as “consumers” and “clientele” runs throughout several of the policies. This is an obvious but important point, as poststructuralism instils in us that “language and its symbolic analogues exercise the most crucial determinations in our social relations, our thought processes, and our understanding of who and what we are” (Belsey 2002, p. 5). The language of “consumers” and “clients” are analogues for the underlying capitalist system. Through the use of this language, the policies reproduce this status quo.

## **Chapter Six: Interview Analyses and Case Study**

The aim of this study is to describe the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies that control the establishment of the alternative public schools in Toronto, and to discover if and how they intersect. The second question of the study seeks to interrogate how key actors in the Toronto Alternative School space have navigated these policies. The chapter begins with an overview of general information about interviews, schools, and participants, before presenting the thematic analysis of seventeen interviews conducted over several months. The interview analyses describe themes found in interview data and explicates the formula required to open an alternative school in the TDSB by presenting how key actors in the alternative school space have successfully navigated policies informing the opening of alternative public schools in both the TBE and the TDSB. One case study of an alternative public school is then presented. This case study provides a glimpse into the circumstances under which the school was established. The illumination of this formula lends itself to answering the second question posed by this study. Pseudonyms and generalized titles are used for participants, and numeric indicators for school names, to protect the anonymity of participants. Each profile is a very general glimpse of participants and schools in order to provide an indication of the experience within the alternative public-school landscapes of TBE and the TDSB represented by participants.

### **Overview**

Interview participants represented a wide variety of positions and experiences within the long history of the Toronto Board of Education and in the Toronto District School Board. Interview participants totalled seventeen people. Three people were interviewed via email and the rest via telephone or Zoom. Among the interviewees, nine different alternative public schools

were represented, along with one private school, whose founders explored the potential for an alternative public school at the outset but ultimately decided to open a private school. All of the schools represented are still in operation today. Of the nine alternative public schools, four are elementary schools, one is a middle and secondary school, and two are high school programs that function like small schools. Five of the schools were founded after the 1998 amalgamation and four were founded as part of the TBE.

### **The Participants**

Three of the participants were parents who were involved in the establishment of a school or schools, eight were teachers who were involved with the establishment of a school or who were involved with the school within the first two years of establishment, one was a principal of an alternative school, three were current or previous board trustees (one of these was a former Premier of Ontario), one was a superintendent of the board and one was a former Coordinator of Alternative Schools. One parent was also an educational professional involved in opening the first school in the old North York board. The overlaps permitted nuanced and sometimes conflicting perspectives from interview participants, which allowed for a rich dialogue between interview data. Of the seventeen participants, eleven were women. Sixteen of the participants were white and one was of Asian descent.

Chloe is a founding parent of School Four, founded after the amalgamation of the boards. She founded School Four together with other parents and with the support of several board trustees. Chloe is highly educated and an award-winning faculty member at a distinguished university.

Denise came to Toronto from Calgary in 1977 and became a parent at School One in 1985, starting her son there at the age of four. She had been a high school activist in the late '60s

in Calgary and had been in communication with the young activists who helped to start one of the first alternative schools in Toronto. Denise was aware of the movement for alternative schools when she moved to Toronto, and through fellow artists, learned that there was an alternative school only a few blocks from the crest factory where she worked as a pattern maker. Denise is an artist, producing written and visual art and spent much time volunteering in the classroom of School One and working in the school in various capacities. Denise committed her Master's thesis to the question of whether a democratic free school belongs in the public board.

Nate is an award-winning secondary school teacher and has been teaching for over 25 years. He has experience as a teacher in both the TBE and the TDSB. Like Denise, he is also a trained visual artist. He is the founding teacher of School Three, and has based his school on giving opportunity to marginalized youth by changing the narrative from "at risk youth" to a narrative of possibility.

Sarah is considered to be the founding teacher of School One, although she began her long career with School One at the outset of the school's second year, many years before the boards amalgamated. She came to the school with ten years of experience and remained with School One until her retirement twenty-one years later.

Jacob was a founding parent of one of the first alternative elementary schools in North York. He is an accomplished academic with years of experience with alternative schools as a parent and academic. His intimate knowledge of Toronto's public alternative school landscape is unrivalled.

Like Sarah, Sandra was at her school, School Two, from year two. She can be considered to be one of its founding teachers, as she worked with Vivian to establish the School Two's marquee curriculum and has continued to develop key and award-winning curriculum and

programming. She has presented her work at conferences and worked with other schools to bring an understanding of the curriculum.

Vivian has been at School Two from its inception. She is a highly dedicated and motivated teacher who works tirelessly to uphold the core values of the school, working with the parent community, teachers and students to ensure the integrity of School Two. She is currently working towards a Master's degree in education. She and Sandra are the fuel behind innovative programming, curricula and pedagogy.

Ben is a former teacher and Toronto Board of Education School Trustee. He was a driving force behind the establishment of the School Five. He currently holds a position as the Executive Director of a large community center in Toronto and serves on a number of advisory boards.

Margaret is a former MPP, elected Toronto Board of Education Trustee and Premier of Ontario. She has held several high-ranking positions with direct effects on the Toronto District School Board. She holds two Masters degrees and is the founder of organizations that work to improve the public education system in Ontario. She was strongly opposed to the amalgamation of the school boards under the Harris Government.

As principal of its host school, Merrill was automatically assigned principle to School Six. Merrill served as principal of School Six for seven years between 1985 and 1992.

Kate is currently an elected Toronto Board of Education Trustee, working very closely in the alternative school space. She is currently serving her fifth term as trustee and has been a part of both the TBE and the TDSB as a trustee. Kate has an extensive background in the public sector as an award-winning leader in various ministries, as well as in the private sector. She is also an engaged parent in the public-school board.

Julia holds two Bachelor's degrees. She has previously held several positions with the TDSB, spanning a fourteen-year career. Four of those years were spent working closely in the public alternative space, post-amalgamation. She is now the Senior Director of an organization whose work focuses on the success of Ontario students.

Elaine and Deborah are the founders of School Seven, a private school in Toronto. They have experience working in the public sector as administrators in a mainstream school but moved to the private sector to start their own school. Their contribution to the study lies with their unsuccessful bid in trying to found an alternative public school in the TBE.

Bradley is a parent and retired teacher who founded School Eight long before the amalgamation of the boards. He continued his teaching career at the alternative public school he worked to found with a colleague. The school remains open after 40+ years.

Owen is a retired teacher who left School Nine to found School Eight with his colleague Bradley.

### **The Schools**

School One was among the first alternative public schools in Toronto. In her interview, Vivian questioned what makes an alternative school truly alternative. It can be argued that School One is truly alternative to mainstream schooling, with its free schooling model. School Two is an elementary school with grades ranging from kindergarten to grade six. It was formed after amalgamation and was among the last schools to be established in the TDSB. It has a strong emphasis on social and environmental justice, community engagement and activism. The two teachers interviewed from School Two have developed innovative programming that focuses on gender diversity and inclusion and continue to work on anti-oppression-based curriculum in their own practices. School Three is a pioneering program that functions like a small school for high



school students who have dropped out, or have been pushed out of the mainstream system. It focuses on allowing students to pursue a degree through a particular passion and weaves the curriculum through that work. It too can be called truly alternative. School Four was formed after amalgamation as an extension to School One. It too is based in the free schooling model of Summerhill. School Five is also a program that functions like a small high school. It caters to a particular and marginalized student demographic and was created before the amalgamation of the boards. School Six was established by parents who sought to be more involved with their children's schooling, circa 1980, making it among the first alternative public schools in Toronto. School Seven is a private elementary and high school for girls. It was first conceptualized as an alternative school in order to make it financially accessible to all girls interested in a feminist-based curriculum, however, initial ideas for an all-girls public school were not well-received. Schools Eight and Nine were founded pre-amalgamation, by the same passionate teachers who saw a need for a more enriched curriculum and programming than they were experiencing in the mainstream elementary system. Radical approaches to curriculum and pedagogy included full and year-round "town" simulations, which incorporated the experiential teaching of all subjects, and long bike trips over several days. Before the establishment of schools eight and nine, parents were clamouring to have their children in the classrooms of those teachers.

### **Presentation of Interview Themes**

A series of questions were asked to ascertain how people have navigated the policies regulating the opening of alternative public schools in Toronto, which outline a clear set of instructions beginning with the General Policy for Alternative School Programs. In the policies, there are particular elements needed to establish a school. They include a critical mass of students, a clear vision, philosophy and rationale, and a space to house the school. Participants

however, lent insight into items the policies did not state explicitly and which needed to be navigated. These items are organized into themes, beginning with the political climate.

### **Political climate.**

The politics of climate emerged as an element that needed to be navigated in order to found an alternative public school, both pre- and post-amalgamation. Nate spoke at length about the need for the right political mood to start a school:

Nate: I think now, the question of how to open a school, I don't think it's the climate to open a school. I don't think a school would get opened right now, to tell you the truth.

Interviewer: Can you say more about that?

Nate: Oh, it's just about fiscal restraints, there's too many... during Covid, I have no idea what's going on right now, but there was a declining enrollment in the [school board], so you can't justify opening... like that was me saying I want to move into a store front and expand our school. It's not the political moment. Like no trustee... no one's going to line up behind that to effect 25 kids, 50 kids, when you've got these big schools that are losing kids, losing teachers, losing programming. You know what I mean? It's just not the.... the politics... I'm not sure the school board would be super supportive of an alternative school right now. Unless maybe you framed it as a mental health initiative then they might listen right now because that's the thing. (Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021)

According to Nate, there are several factors which effect the political climate, including fiscal considerations of the board, enrollment numbers in the board's mainstream schools, a pitch or

idea that fits the political climate at the time, and a trustee “on board” with the idea. Aside from the current moratorium on alternative schools, Nate also contends that it is not currently the right political climate to start an alternative public school in Toronto. He goes on:

we did since then really push to be a full school, separate school. But the TDSB has not been super into any of those ideas because the last 10 years have been all about fiscal restraint. As well as, I’d say, the culture of administration and risk management and things like that at the board is like intense, it just intensified. After amalgamation, they really wanted the one size fits all kind of thing. (Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021)

Since amalgamation in 1998, nine new alternative schools have been established. That is nine schools in twenty-four years, or .375 schools per year. Thirty schools were established before amalgamation between 1968 and 1998, or an average of one school per year for thirty years. That is more than twice the rate of schools that opened in the post-Harris era. Jacob shares a similar understanding:

...most of Toronto's alternative public schools were established when municipalities and school boards were independent entities that raised their own funds and made their own rules; before Mike Harris and his PC government took over [and] amalgamated the boroughs into the GTA... (Jacob, personal communication, 2021)

Pre-amalgamation, there was a substantial group of reform trustees who supported the establishment of alternative public schools in Toronto (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021). A 1987 agenda cover page for the old Toronto board is addressed to Marchese (Rosario), Chow (Olivia), Doiron (Joan) and Vanstone (Ann). For the most part, this was a group

of reform trustees who were part of “an equity-focused direction [which] prevailed from 1969 to 1998” (Gaskell & Levin, 2012, p. 73). In Jacob’s opinion there were two main political forces happening in the years leading up to amalgamation – “the Back-to-Basics movement initiated by the Ministry of Education and supported by most mainstream school administrators, teachers and parents and the NDP school trustees and politicians who pursued a community-based progressive education agenda” (Jacob, personal communication, 2021). Indeed, Jacob worked closely with Gordon Cressy, Pam McConnel, and Charles and Myra Novogrodsky, reformers in their own right, who worked to establish and promote alternative schools.

Schools Two and Four were among the schools who were able to navigate a post-amalgamation environment seemingly hostile to the establishment of alternative schools. School Three was also able to get a foothold in the alternative space, when few were able to. One of the prominent themes that developed from discussions about the ability to establish a school, pre- and post-amalgamation, was the importance of class and social standing for school founders.

### **Race, Class and social standing.**

A number of factors were identified by participants in the context of the class and social standing of school founders. Much of the beginning of the process of starting an alternative school in the public board is getting in touch with the right people to help with the process. Having a trustee to champion your project is among one of the first things needed. Finding that trustee involves knowing who to contact and how. Generally, knowing who to contact, and how to contact them involves having membership in a certain class and according to several participants, that is middle to upper-class people, usually with high levels of education:

Yes, the education and social standing of the founding members were important for getting [School Four] founded. There were five founders

with PhDs. As well, one of the founders was the Chair of the Alternative Education Committee. Why these things were important is not that the Board was prejudiced against others. Rather, it is people like the founders who have the knowledge, interest, energy and will to do what is required to found a school. However, one other very important ingredient in founding the school was that some of the founders did not have full-time jobs and had the time to devote to meeting the requirements of the Board in a timely manner. Had all the parents been working full-time and were unable to get time off for this project, the school could not have been founded. (Chloe, personal communication, 2021)

Of his experience with North York's first alternative school, founded in 1969, MAGU (Multi-Age Grouping Units), Jacob shared thoughts about the race, class, education and connections of MAGU's founders, of which he was one.

The key drivers behind [MAGU] were two ex-pat American profs at York....David and Millie Bakan, plus the sister of the founder of The Four Seasons hotel empire whose last name was Sharp. More importantly they were connected to two influential Board of Education Trustees - Mel Shipman and Mae Wease. You will note that they were all educated middle class Jews. The only exception was a man who was auditor general of Ontario, Ken Grons Dahl. One of North York's school Superintendents, Claude Watson, was also in favour of the project. Connections are everything in life, so this public free school was approved and located in a wing of a local elementary school that my own

kids attended. The role of educational professionals and middle-class families was central in Toronto. (Jacob, personal communication, 2021)

Working part time is generally a luxury reserved for a more privileged group of people. Margaret acknowledged this and like Jacob, also added race as a mitigating factor:

If you're a parent who's got enough time to be organized in setting up an alternative school, you're probably not low income, you're probably not struggling to get food on the table, because you actually have time to put into this other endeavour... I think it's a big problem. This was largely a downtown Toronto phenomenon, these alternative schools. And as I said, I think initially driven by middle class, upper middle class, highly educated white people. (Margaret, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

Whiteness is not only a factor in the founding of alternative schools, but in the schools themselves. When asked about whether they had diversity at School One, Sarah answered an emphatic “no!” (Sarah, personal communication, February 26, 2021) despite her efforts to attract students of colour. Vivian also intimated that there is a dearth of students of colour at her school as compared to the school they are housed in. She supposes that “families of colour probably don't gravitate to an alternative school because [they are] so white” (Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020). It would be easy to make the assumption of choice here, that is, that people of colour choose not to attend alternative schools. And perhaps that is true to some extent. What must also be examined however, are systemic reasons for the absence of people of colour in Toronto alternative schools. Hill Collins, (2010) argues that the role of schools is to “...sort people into groups, attempt to control what we think and say, attach

privilege to some and not to others, and via these activities, perpetuate social inequalities or, on the other hand, foster fairness” (p. 4). This “hidden curriculum” (see Gatto, 2003, 2017; Holt, 1996) of public education provokes questions, some of which are beyond the scope of this paper, but which nevertheless need attention. For instance, how do alternative schools perpetuate inequality? What is not beyond its scope however, are the values held in the policies that control the opening of alternative public schools. That all but one of the seventeen people interviewed are white lends itself to some plausible conclusions about the values hidden in the enactment of alternative school policies, if not the policies themselves. In his essay entitled “Race and Minority Schooling in Canada, Dealing with Questions of Equity and Access in Education” Dei (2008) speaks to the systemic failures of the education system, and of our collective responsibility. In so doing, he reminds us that “race and poverty demarcate bodies in terms of their involvement in the schooling process” (p. 214) and that the neoliberal project to marketize education exaggerates differences. Race is clearly demarcated in the alternative schools within the context of this paper, as is class, as the majority white founders/people in positions of authority, intersect with largely privileged white students in a school market that only provides choice for a privileged few. The policies that govern the founding of alternative schools in Toronto’s public system, value whiteness and the middle-class. “All this is ironic because public schools are the true meeting places of diverse bodies, a place where people hang together for a period hoping to acquire knowledge for self- and collective advancement” (Dei, 2008, p. 214).

### **Space.**

Space was also an element that needed navigating, for several reasons. Firstly, finding a space meant negotiating with unwilling principals who often did not want to share space. Bradley relays his experience of trying to find a space for his school, pre-amalgamation:

There were problems like we would be told by the board that such and such a school had so many rooms available and we could go and have a look and if we like the facilities, we could move there but by the time we got there, the principals had, essentially, hidden these spare rooms, ‘Oh no. You can't have that because there's a class in there of basket weaving on Wednesday afternoons and they have to leave all their stuff laid out’ and things like that. We went to Eglinton Public School and they gave us space there.

Grudgingly, apparently. We discovered later that every time they had a staff meeting, the staff voted to move us out. I guess we got into [our shared school] because the principal there was a little slower off the mark with that.

We went in and said, ‘Yeah. Yeah. We'll take it.’ (Bradley, personal communication, April 9, 2021)

Why principals and staff did not want to share a space is hearsay, though Vivian does lend some insight into the resentment, “suspicion and mistrust” she encountered on behalf of the staff at the host school. Part of the distaste for a host school sharing its building was on behalf of the principal, who was suddenly in charge of two schools instead of one:

And the principal, who had never governed an alternative school was also resentful because suddenly she was now the principle of two schools with two very different parent communities and she was not supportive of the core values of the school. She felt very intimidated, she felt threatened, and she put up a lot of road blocks actually, in those first few years. (Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020)



The second factor regarding space that needed navigating was that of location and transportation. If there was no space in the desired area, there could not be a school, or schools would have to be located in a different area where space was available. During times when enrollment was up in the board, and little space was available, the appetite for alternative schools was low, as this affected the political climate. When schools could be housed, they were often required to share a space located away from the desired location. This presented a barrier to students in terms of transportation because it is not provided by the board. Vivian touched on transportation as a barrier to access and the concept of choice when she acknowledged that “not all families have access to transportation in the same way” (Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Barriers to travel also include access to before and after school child care that would allow for travel to and from a school outside of the catchment area. With the following comments, Vivian also recalls the notion of choice, which she has spent much time interrogating:

What I’m coming to learn is that alternative schools are sites that reinforce privilege and that create a very privileged sense of belonging and that aren’t really choices. When you start to unpack who feels welcome in these spaces, which families choose these spaces; there’s a lot there to unpack, about whether these alternative schools are creating choices or limiting choices and reinforcing privilege. (Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020)

Finally, the language of space is a big factor. “Alternative Schools, A General Policy” (Toronto Board of Education, 1982) takes pains to outline appropriate language for the relationship between mainstream schools and the alternative schools that share their building.

For instance, the policy states that alternative schools are tasked with trying to find a “‘welcome space’ in which to be housed” (p. 1). The policy goes on to recognize that even after a space has been obtained that an alternative school is constantly at risk of being relocated, or “shunted around like unwanted tenants” (p. 5). This was the situation for School One, who was moved to a new location (Sarah, personal communication, February 26, 2021), and for School Three, whose scheduled but unwanted move was curtailed by parents (Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021). Unwanted moves disrupt the idea of a “willing” host school or a “willing” tenant; as a result, the policy suggests a “more appropriate term” for the relationship to be “shared school” or “shared facility” (p. 5). Poststructuralism reminds us of the importance of, and power contained in language. “Language, in a broad sense, is also a source of social values” (Belsey 2002, p. 2). Instead of “host school,” the submission that “shared school” be used, suggests as well, that community and collectivity are valued and that perhaps, in the desire for schools to be willing is to value a certain degree of amiability between the alternative school and the school it shares.

### **Material Resources.**

Alternative Schools, A General Policy (Toronto Board of Education, 1982) addresses alternative schools “trying to obtain necessary equipment, furniture, supplies as well as proper facilities such as washrooms or gymnasiums” (p. 1). Part of the original School Two teaching team, Sandra recalls having very few resources unless they were shared with the mainstream school. They shared a library and computers but did not have washrooms or cubbies in their kindergarten classrooms until full day kindergarten was introduced and the school was renovated – “it was a very political thing, the education system” (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020).

Margaret's recollection is similar, if more generalized. Though she does make a distinction between pre- and post-amalgamation funding, as do others. Pre-amalgamation, the Toronto Board of Education had control over its own tax base. Before 1998, "school boards would set local education property tax rates, and municipalities would collect the taxes on boards' behalf" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 9). Because funding was based on taxes, large tax bases would receive more funding. "So, the old Toronto Board of Education was the best funded board in the province because they had the tax base, they had a willing council who worked with them and they were better funded even than a board like Scarborough, so that has been an increasing challenge over the last 25 years" (Margaret, personal communication, March 24, 2021). After amalgamation in 1998, the funding formula changed to a "student focused funding formula" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 9), which determines the amount of funding received by each board. Boards cannot determine education tax rates with this new funding formula, which is largely based on a dollars per-student prescription (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021). While this formula is considered more equitable by the Ontario government, some report that reforms hit urban boards especially hard (Winton, 2019), and others still, that small schools lose out because there are not "those economies of scale" (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020). Kate thinks of it another way:

Many, many, many alternative schools say they can't function the way they were created because they're not resourced properly. And I absolutely understand that, but there's no way to resource them the way they used to be resourced because there is no funding provided [that is] different for an alternative school than there is for a regular school program." (Kate, personal communication, March 31, 2021)

With the changes to the funding model, parents and educators reported that schools were underfunded which placed new fundraising demands on parents (Winton, 2019). These demands emphasized the reproduction of “inequities between schools and communities” (Winton 2019, p. 45). Rowe & Perry (2020) investigate the ways in which funding and fundraising provided by parents is disproportionately affected by socio-economic status (SES) in Australia. In fact, they report that schools with a high SES raise four times as much as low SES schools, on average. Rowe and Perry (2020) also point to societal racial inequities that continue to “support and facilitate the academic, economic, and social gaps that are rife in society” (cited in Brown, 2020, p. 60). Brown (2020) uses Rowe and Perry’s (2020) study to critique the TDSB’s own fundraising guidelines, which “requires that the funds raised for school purposes are used to complement, not replace, public funding for education” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2012, p. 3, cited in Brown, 2020, p. 61). There are policies in place to curtail the inequities perpetuated by fundraising, however, People for Education (P4E) reported that:

In 2019, the top 10% of fundraising elementary schools raised 33 times the amount raised by the bottom 10%, with some schools reporting raising as much as \$100,000. Among fundraising secondary schools, the top 5% of schools raised as much as the bottom 82% combined, with some schools reporting raising \$220,000.

(People for Education, 2019, p. 39)

There is a dominant discourse in Ontario that fundraising is necessary to provide students with advantageous educational opportunities (Winton, 2019). Denise speaks to the issue of fundraising and the inequities it perpetuates, and I quote here at length:

Well, a couple of times in the last 20 years [fundraising] has become quite an issue. And the boards have, in the interest of equity, they have been urged to make it more difficult for schools to raise funds for their own schools. And in the end, it never goes anywhere. And my theory for why it never goes anywhere is that there's no way you can stop privileged parents from helping their kids more than everyone else's kids get helped. And so, there's no way that they could get schools in the wealthier neighborhoods to not raise \$100,000 a year for computer equipment (laughs) and stuff, you know? So, [the board] gave up on trying to pressure the more working-class schools that were able to muster maybe \$20,000 for resources for their kids, which is basically [School One's] area. But certainly, these resources should be coming from the boards. Every school should have much better resources and they should have control over their resources. (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021)

Eight of the participants interviewed spoke about fundraising as supporting large elements of their programming. For Nate, fundraising and entrepreneurship are crucial parts of his programming, without which, it wouldn't be running. He received seed funding from a foundation at the outset and continues to raise money through awards, grants, partnerships and entrepreneurship. Fundraising was not limited to post-amalgamation policy however. Owen and Bradley both recall fundraising for the substantial school trips they undertook, holding large auctions and having parents use their connections to secure supplies for their classrooms.

"Usually it meant at the end, we did have more money than the average classroom would have"

(Bradley, personal communication, April 9, 2021). Denise also recounted the importance of fundraising, reporting that fundraising was how her position at the school was paid for.

### **Human resources.**

Many of the participants interviewed mentioned the kinds of teachers they were or that were needed for alternative schools to be successful. This is also something that is mentioned in *Alternative Schools, a General Policy* (Toronto Board of Education, 1982) though it is not something that is mentioned in the most recent policy governing the opening of alternative schools in the TDSB. Nevertheless, it emerged as a theme for school founders despite the fact that it was not asked about specifically. Words like “passionate”, “gritty”, “dedicated”, “top notch”, “excellent” were used to describe the teachers needed to run a successful alternative school. Other descriptions like people “who have burned themselves out, who’ve worked like dogs to make a challenging situation work” (Ben, personal communication, March 1, 2021); teachers who “work very well in partnership with parents” (Merill, personal communication, March 9, 2021); and teachers who “think out of the box” (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020). Creativity was also valued, along with kindness and “progressive politics” (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020). Bradley and Owen spoke at length about their innovative and experiential curriculum, as did Sandra and Vivian.

What we have seen too, is that the human resources required to establish an alternative public school had a particular social class, education and connections that enabled them to navigate the policies. The human resources required to open and maintain a successful alternative school are rich and robust. They are part of enacting a policy that does not specifically state what the human resources are to look like to establish or maintain an alternative

school. Despite this, many of the participants named the human resources needed, and in so doing, helped to materialize the policy.

### **Selection Criteria for the Case Study School**

After speaking with key informants, and school founders, it became clear that the rich history of alternative schools in Toronto and early policies governing alternative schools would be beneficial in understanding the current policies in place. After having been granted access to a rich and diverse sampling of participants that had not been anticipated, I was able to address the research questions through those interviews. What I was not able to do was create other case studies, as many of the participants were not school founders and thus, could not attest to the founding of particular schools. Rather, they provided valuable and insightful information about navigating the policies in general. Thus, one school case study serves to give context and insight into the overall project and the values of a very successful and unorthodox, alternative school founded as part of the Toronto Board of Education.

### **Case Study: School One**

The international free schooling movement was most popular in the 1960s and 1970s, at which time many thousands of free schools were founded outside of the school system (Bascia et al., 2017). A free school is a democratic community and necessitates that “you work with the children’s actually very deep desire to learn and curiosity and wanting to do things” (Denise, Jan 8, 2021). According to School One’s webpage, this looks like an open and flexible schedule where children are encouraged to engage in an assortment of activities and learning opportunities. Students learn in multi-age groupings, instead of grade cohorts. A democratic education also looks like decision-making based on consensus (not compromise) and regular meetings in order to achieve this. Clubs formed by children play a large role in the definition of

the curriculum each year. The free schooling model does not prescribe or implement the curriculum, but creates curriculum in an on-going, learner-driven process, which is instead fluid.

### **School One opens its doors.**

The Foundational Document was approved by the Toronto Board of Education in the early seventies and School One opened its doors shortly after, to almost 100 students as one of Toronto's first free schools. The first year that School One was open was a "disaster" (Sarah, Feb 26, 2021) and half the students left, along with all three of the teachers that had been hired. Sarah was interviewed in a house full of parents, students and community members and was hired in School One's second year. She is referred to as School One's "foundational teacher," as she was vital to the survival of the school. Sarah remained with School One until her retirement in 1996, after over two decades with the school.

As "the colonel" (Denise, Jan 8, 2021), Sarah was completely occupied by School One. She had a baby at the time, whom she brought to work. Enrollment was much lower than the 65-student threshold set by the board, nevertheless, the school persisted, reporting enrollment numbers to the board as requested. As word of the school spread, School One enrolled several students "with no place else to go" (Sarah, Feb 26, 2021). Denise also mentioned that many of School One's students had no place else to go. Bascia et al. quote from the Toronto Board of Education's 1982 *Alternative schools, A General Policy*:

Alternative schools are under increasing pressures from social service agencies to take students who have difficulty or who have dropped out of regular school... because the schools tend to be small and less impersonal than regular schools, many students adapt well. On the other hand, because of their size, alternative schools face the danger of having to absorb too



many “difficult” students too quickly. (The Board of Education for the City of Toronto 1982, p. 7)

School One had its share of “difficult” students. Sarah recalls “four troubled boys” in particular. Merrill, a former principal of another alternative school in Toronto, which shared a yard with School One, recalls difficult behaviours from some of the School One children in the yard:

“It was a really old school. And so, we had the second floor but there was another alternative school on the first floor. And that alternative school had a fair number of children who had special needs and also a number of children with behavioral issues. So, when our kids were out for recess with the other kids, sometimes it caused some issues. And of course, we didn’t want to say, ‘Well, we’re going to just have our own recess.’ (Merrill, personal communication, March 9, 2021)

Sarah didn’t seem to see the issues. Though Sarah remembers “4 troubled boys”, she also seems to remember the children’s behaviour with reverence.

We often had toddlers in with their mums. And I’ve always been one who loves supervising the yard or the basement. I love to watch the kids do that. So, I would take the kids down there on a rainy day, and they would be zooming around there like rockets. And there would be a little toddler, and they always... no toddler ever got hurt, they had like radar around the kid. How they could just be so aware of that kid. Other people would come down and say like, ‘how do you stand it?’ because they were so wild. But to me, I didn’t see the wildness, I saw the amazing control.

When there was conflict, conflict resolution was achieved through “Committee,” a representative and rotating group of 5 students who heard the perspectives of the parties involved and decided on a consequence for the offending parties. Sarah also amended the weekly community meetings that had been initiated during the school’s first year and were inspired by A.S. Neill’s Summerhill<sup>3</sup>. With some 40 students, the weekly meetings proved to be too long, unruly and ultimately unsustainable. Sarah implemented short, daily meetings in their place and found an unbiased way to cycle through the children as chairs of the meetings. The meetings, or simply “Meeting,” was a vital part of the school’s democratic functioning:

All the dynamics got played out there, and approaches to problems got played out there and it was fundamentally important. So how that got shaped was really everything... It was their meeting and they chaired it, and made it work. (Parent 1980 – 1991, quoted in Bascia et al., 2017)

Students separated naturally into self-proclaimed “Bigkids” and “Littlekids”, split roughly around grade 3, “a developmental watershed” (Bascia et al., 2017, p. 16). The grade threes were among the Bigkids some years, among the Littlekids in other years and some years split the between the two.

Parents were also a fundamental part of School One. They volunteered in the school as teachers, caretakers, and mentors. Although teachers would remain employees of the board and redeployed elsewhere, parents hired and dismissed them from the school, attended daily meetings and offered advice when solicited. They played the role of carpenters and contractors when the school needed work, served

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<sup>3</sup> Summerhill was a free school in England, started in 1921 by A.S. Neill. It rose to international fame during the free schooling movement of the 1960s and 1970s and was the inspiration for many free schools in North America and beyond.

on committees and raised vital funds for the school. They advocated for the school on behalf of the teachers when the teachers had no pull with the board. Sarah called it “parent power” and recalls having little power as a board employee. In one particular situation, the superintendent of schools arranged for School One to move to a new building. The teachers protested to no avail; however, the parents held a vote amongst themselves, opposing the move, and the school remained in place.

**“Parent power.”**

There were many such stories of “parent power” (Sarah, Feb 26, 2021) relayed by interviewees and the power of parents was a recurring concept. Bradley, the cofounder of two alternative schools recalls the pressure put on principals by parents who were “agitating to get kids into [their] classes.” Parents also pressured trustees when the prospect of opening an alternative school based on the work of Bradley and his colleagues developed and the initial answer was “no.” Owen’s wife Maeve, as well as Margaret also recollect the need for parent support when opening an alternative public school in the TBE. Bradley recalls a group of about 30 parents with whom he worked to navigate the policies involved in opening the school. He remembers as well, ignoring particular policies in order to develop certain practices, and having parents agitate for the board to allow these practices to persist, because what he was doing was working.

Jacob, who once sat on the Toronto Board of Education’s Alternative and Community Programs Committee, recounts “a procedure whereby proposals for new alternative schools could be vetted and approved. The main criteria were presenting a distinctive philosophy and demonstrating parental support/demand.” Similarly,

Merrill recounts the high level of parent involvement in developing the modus operandi for the alternative school of which she would become principal. At his school, Nate relies on parents, because when they “get a parent involved, shit gets done” (Nate, March 11, 2021).

While the power of parents most often worked in School One’s favour, sometimes the influence of parent(s) was detrimental. When School One had its parent council, one particular parent was “re-elected” over and over again because nobody else wanted the job. She grew to have immense power over the parents in ways that were harmful to the school. As Sarah remembers it,

She became way too powerful. And then, we talk about social media now, but there was still the telephone then, and the gossip on the telephones was really poisonous. And she would get cohorts that would spread misinformation.

After years of damage, the school had a meeting at which they abolished the executive. In its stead, they implemented a sign-up system to create the agenda for the meeting which would be chaired by a volunteer.

### **The role of social status.**

Parent power also came by way of the class and social status of School One’s founding parents. In her 2009 master’s thesis, O’Rourke interviewed some of School One’s founding parents, stating that “the three co-founders whom [she] interviewed were definitely upper-middle class people: they were a professor and a working teacher, who is now a retired professor, and an architect.” (Denise, Jan 8, 2021). Class, she reminds me, is a means by which to exercise strategic social connections and speak a particular language. The high social standing, and

middle to high class status of founding parents was not limited to School One. All participants who reported on the establishment of alternative elementary schools, reported that social standing played a role in one's ability to successfully found a school and that most elementary schools were founded by middle-upper class parents. In terms of secondary schools, it was the general consensus that they are founded by teachers who have a certain educational milieu as well as the language necessary to navigate policy documents and to speak to those in power. This is an idea to which I will return, as it is a mainstay of the research question pertaining to how others have navigated policies to successfully found alternative public schools.

While School One was started by highly educated, upper-middle class parents, Denise conveys the importance of the participation of all classes, which is why its founders wanted a public school, situated in a working-class neighborhood. She conveys too, the importance of cross-class collaboration in sustaining the school:

With the parents who were not high class, there was a lot of counter culture people, there were a lot of just local folks who wanted their kids to go to a school that cared about them. And the folks who were not that well off, had nowhere else to go for their kids. So, they fought really hard. I think there was this kind of cross communication and collaboration that went across classes. There were mothers who were... I was a mom on social assistance for many years when I was at School One after my job disappeared. So, there were counter culture people, there were people on social assistance – I wasn't the only one; working class people, who all, through their grit and collaboration, fought for their school. (Denise, Jan 8, 2021 )

### **Getting its footing.**

In its third year, as the school got its footing, it hired Barb, to take the place of Sarah's first teaching partner, who was initially replaced by a parent when it was clear his values did not align with those of the school. Barb was fundamentally hired by the children, as the adult community by whom she was interviewed had no intention of hiring her:

When we hired her, she came in and it was the same scene as with me, it was room full of people to interview her for the job. And it just pissed her off. She said she almost walked out when she saw how many people. She thought it was totally unfair to have to face that. So, in the interview, she was quite flippant and we weren't very impressed with her. But wouldn't you know there were kids (of course) in the hall who were there because their parents were there. And after she left, they all said they loved her because they had just been hanging out with her in the hall. And they all just said 'oh, she's great' you know. And they were right. I don't think we would have hired her accept they were all saying, 'oh, she's the one.'

(Sarah, personal communication, February 26, 2021)

Throughout their time, Sarah and Barb periodically received another teacher to their staff, whom they did not ask for and did not vet. Sarah thought this was an initiative of the superintendent who tried to pass it off as a positive: "And then, wouldn't you know that this is a teacher that can't cope anywhere. So, then I'd be given a 'colleague' who I'd have to respect, who was incompetent. This happened to us 3 times." (Sarah, personal communication, February 26, 2021). In Chloe's experience at School Two, receiving a new teacher could prove to be difficult, as fit is an important aspect to maintaining the continuity and unity of the staff at the school. "Some years" she says, "we have to start all over again." Sandra made a similar argument about staff

change over: “I think an alternative school, when you get a substantial staff change has to burn itself down, philosophically, and put itself back together again based on the needs and interests of the new staff” (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020). Sarah and Barb went on to work at School One for 23 and 25 years respectively.

### **Systemic pressures and the curriculum.**

In 1995, School One discontinued its grade 7 and 8 program. Denise recalls that her son was in the last grade eight cohort:

The systemic pressures were such that teachers felt they could no longer take care of students in that age range from age four to fourteen and the parent community had become much more nervous also. So, parents were not being very supportive of the needs of adolescents. And the curriculum had become more rigid. The teachers were worried they couldn't serve the children properly. (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021)

Denise brings up some interesting concepts here which are not only germane to School One. The “systemic pressures” to which Denise is referring are “the growth of regulation and the detailed curricula” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021). These pressures are evident in many of the interviews. Denise speaks about the legislation and the curriculum of the 1970's as not being as detailed as more recent legislation and curriculum; while the “old-fashioned” school curriculum had its downfalls, it also “took fore-granted, that kids needed to colour and make things and there had to be room for that” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021).

With a more rigid curriculum, teachers were nervous that the children would not be ready for high school: “The teacher of the junior kids was being stretched from having to teach from grade 3/4 to grade 8 in partnership with the French teacher. And she was really concerned that

her kids would not be prepared.” Denise is talking about preparation for middle school and high school but she maintains that she needs to be “cagey” when she is asked about the curriculum because during the times when Denise was at School One in various capacities (a parent, a volunteer, a teacher), the curriculum was not taught as it is mandated by the province.

And just that any group of 4-year-olds, or 8-year-olds, or 10-year-olds should know the same thing at the same time is just absolutely absurd. One example I can give is that in our science curriculum (which I love, I love science, I love natural science! It’s what I do a lot of when I’m at [School One], is natural science) and the kids are crazy to know about animals when they’re young. By the time they hit about the age of 9, they’re more peer focused and they’re on to different things. But it’s quite diabolical that the science curriculum hardly lets animals in until grade 4. So, at the time when kids ask the questions kids come with, it won’t let them talk about it. And then it forces the talk at a certain age when they’re going away with it.

(Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021)

Put another way, the curriculum at School One was not taught by grade and subject, as is dictated by the Ministry of Education, but through the interests of the children, at the time they were developmentally ready. Denise must be “cagey” about curriculum because all Ontario schools (even alternative schools) must be in compliance with the Ministry of Education and the curriculum. She articulates that the curriculum of the 1970s offered more of the flexibility that allows for children in a democratic free school to learn in a gradeless environment. She recalls that as children moved through the years at School One, the facets of the curriculum could be crossed off, “but not necessarily year over year” (Denise, Jan 8, 2021). For example, Denise



suggests that the whole science curriculum can be taught through covid. According to Denise, by the time they were in grade 4, children had completed the entire natural science curriculum at School One.

Beyond the rigidity of the curriculum, systemic pressures were also seen in the way it was administrated. Denise recalls the stories she heard from teachers during her Master's degree in education, where "some of them had principals who were saying 'just close your door and teach your kids' and others had principals who would open that door to see that they're on the right page of the curriculum." The notion of systemic pressures also emerges with Bradley, who speaks about the pressures put on him and his colleagues by the area superintendent who could drop by anytime and say something like, "It's Wednesday afternoon. You should be teaching science and here exactly is the page number you should be on." It is interesting to point out that Bradley was teaching in the early 1970s before founding his alternative school, and Denise was teaching in the early 1990s and then again circa 2004. Both however, offer similar anecdotes about systemic pressures related to the implementation of curriculum.

The pressure to deliver a particular curriculum, like "delivering a bag of milk" (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021), was most notably felt around report cards and assessment, as the delivery of curriculum is directly linked to the ability to assess if its content was received and how it was implemented. The term "implemented" is used deliberately here, as it relates to enactment theory. "Delivery" implies that the curriculum remains exactly as it was intended, as it is rolled out in the classroom. This would intimate that it rolls out the same way in all classrooms; that is implemented. What Denise is alluding to is that curriculum cannot be delivered or implemented because it depends upon the children, their interests, and their developmental stages. It also depends on who is teaching and the ways in which they teach,

which are in turn dependent upon the resources available to them. Curriculum is thus necessarily enacted, as all policies are (Ball et al., 2012).

For those interview participants who held administrative positions in the board, the curriculum appears to hold an important position, linked to the conception that alternative schools must still function in a particular way within the mainstream system. Margaret, a former Member of Provincial Parliament, Minister of Education and Premier of Ontario stresses that,

The notions around student success and student achievement are still consistent in the alternative schools as they are in mainstream. So, in a program like the [Zed] program or the [school] that it's housed in, the kids are still working to achieve mastery of the Ontario curriculum. So that's a foundational piece of any alternative school in the system. (Margaret, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

Margaret goes on to give the example of high schools, noting that:

Students are not going to be able to get an Ontario diploma unless [they] have met the expectations of the Ontario curriculum. So that whole debate calls into question the whole notion of having some sort of standardized evaluation system and as a society we have not thrown that out. We have not accepted that everyone can just have their own evaluation metrics. We have collectively, I think, accepted that there needs to be some kind of unified standard that we measure ourselves against. (Margaret, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

According to Margaret's evaluation, the standardized assessments conveyed by report cards are a mainstay not only of the board, but of society at large.

### **Curriculum, report cards and standardized assessments.**

Report cards proved to be a robust topic, but not one that always had a consensus with respect to its ideas. It depended on the respondent. For teachers in the alternative public system, reporting and assessment could be safely classified as a roadblock – a barrier faced in the starting or operation of an alternative public school. Sarah recalls losing a battle with the board over report cards. School One did not agree with the formal assessment that report cards represented and its response to the mandate was to file them away after they were written. Parents could view them if they chose to do so, but “most never did” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021). School Two took a similar path, filing report cards and showing them to parents upon request. In the early days of his alternative school, that were the late seventies, Bradley recalls sending home three anecdotal report cards: one written by the student about the teachers, one written by the teacher about the student, and one written by the student about themselves.

Margaret is not the only administrator who gives credence to standardized assessment and reporting in an alternative school. For Katie, a school trustee, there are some things that cannot differ because alternative public schools are in the system; “the report card is the report card.” (Kate, personal communication, March 31, 2021). For Merrill, a former school principal, she does not recall report cards being an issue. Instead, she suggests that they were perhaps more anecdotal, “but of course, the board needed to have some policy that they had to... board policies with regard to children [and the] curriculum and with what they needed to achieve, had to be maintained” (Merill, personal communication, March 9, 2021). Merrill’s sentiment is upheld by administrators; “of course” there was a need for board policies with regard to the curriculum. This sentiment reiterates the important position held by curriculum in any school that operates within the system of the board, according to the gate keepers of the system itself. Denise

disagrees with regards to the importance of the curriculum and in fact, does not view it as central, but as an obstacle:

Well, the curriculum itself really is very, very big barrier. And the exams, the grade 3 and 6 exams. [School One] parents write notes excusing their kids from those exams so that our teachers don't teach to them. [School One] used to have a proud zero on the EQAO<sup>4</sup> and we're not worried about it. But I think it's been very difficult for other alternative schools to not see this as an abdication of responsibility when you won't let your kids be tested in grade 3 for instance. But at School One we know that grade three is when, for a lot of kids it's just starting to come together. And it's the last time that you want something that indicates to your kids they should be all in the same place. Kids have two languages. They often take a while to get them into the writing stage. But that's something that will help them all their lives but it's seen as a disadvantage in schooling. It still is, you know? Kids that have strong 3D, which often turns into strong math skills, are often rather behind in the reading and a lot of that's the young males. Not completely but there's a gender factor in that. But these are people with incredible abilities. But if they're tested for reading in grade 3, they're going to think they're not bright. So, fighting that off has been huge; it takes a lot of energy. (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021)

EQAO was implemented by Ontario public (and some private) schools in 1996 as a means by which to offer accountability to the public by testing “elementary and secondary school students’

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on EQAO, visit its webpage at <https://www.eqao.com>

achievement in reading, writing and mathematics in relation to Ontario curriculum learning expectations” in grades 3, 6 and 9 (Ontario & Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013, p. 5). It came on the heels of the 1995 election of the Harris Government’s Common Sense Revolution (Way, 2022) and its neoliberal foundation of “lower taxes [and] less government” (Thompson, 2017). According to a report published by the Education Quality and Accountability Office in 2019, School One still maintains a zero when it comes to EQAO standardized testing.

Beyond testing, Denise outlines the ways in which the curriculum is prohibitive and potentially damaging to students, and suggests that unless it is used as a guide, the rigidity of the curriculum is an instrument of oppression. Gatto (2017) teaches that curriculum is incoherent because it silos its subject matter, making it devoid of meaning and a series of “disconnected facts” (p. 3). Gatto divorces the idea of schooling from that of education in the first few pages of his book (2017), arguing that that education is about creating meaning, while schooling is about disaggregated facts and theories. Teachers, he argues, teach incoherence. This incoherence is part of a larger “hidden curriculum,” the aim of which is to create an obedient, complacent, depoliticized citizenry.

The systemic pressures for compliance seen thus far (the rigidity of the curriculum, the way it is administered, reporting and standardized assessments) are a part of this hidden curriculum which is according to Illich (2000), sold by schools as “a bundle of goods,” much like other merchandise is produced and sold:

The result of the curriculum production process looks like any other modern staple. It is a bundle of planned meanings, a package of values, a commodity whose ‘balanced appeal’ makes it marketable to a sufficiently

large number to justify the cost of production. Consumer-pupils are taught to make their desires conform to marketable values. (pg. 41)

School One's use of the curriculum as a guide as opposed to a prescription, circumvents the "delivery" of a curriculum to a "consumer-pupil" (Illich, 2000, pg. 41) or to the production of products (Ayers, 2010) and instead allows for a particular manner of learning which emphasizes process over the siloed teaching of subject matter. School One uses Ayers (2001) definition of curriculum to help explain their pedagogical practices, citing curriculum as "an ongoing engagement with the problem of determining what knowledge and experiences are most worthwhile" (Ayers, 2010, p. 85). This particular definition of curriculum moves School One away from the producer-consumer model of curriculum delivery and towards a democratic approach, where teachers work with the curriculum as a guide, checking off curricular expectations as they move through learning directed by the children's interests.

A good example of this was offered by Denise in her suggestion that the entire science curriculum could be taught through Covid. What she is suggesting is that through an inquiry model of teaching and learning, students whose interests were in learning about Covid could engage with every element of the science curriculum over a number of years, in an organic, yet carefully coordinated way, guided by the curriculum. In this way, the curriculum is not delivered and consumed, but instead unfolds with the child's interest and developmental readiness. The curriculum is "checked off," not in order of prescription, but rather organically as it is learned and understood in an experiential and contextualized way. This is an example of a democratic approach to teaching and learning articulated by Dewey.

## Summary

Chapter Six introduced the nine schools represented in this study and the seventeen participants interviewed, before presenting the themes found in the interview data and a case study of School One. Themes from the data included political climate, race, class and social standing, space, and material and human resources. While there is a well-documented and public process for founding an alternative public school in the TDSB, the themes presented in this chapter represent the unspoken formula required to successfully found an alternative public school in Toronto, both currently, and in the pre-amalgamation era. As the themes explicate, this formula includes the right political climate which includes a critical mass of reform trustees; a high social-economic class which necessarily intersects with race and particularly, whiteness; available space and the willingness of mainstream schools to play host to an alternative school; material resources, including funding and the ability to fundraise; a particular kind of teacher and founder.

School One has its roots in the international free schooling movement however, its founders wanted an accessible democratic free school, allowing all classes to participate, with reliable funding, and thus chose to operate within the public sector (Denise, Jan 8, 2021). The free school movement was premised on the ideas of John Dewey (Bascia et al., 2017) who advanced the notion of child-centered, inquiry-based education. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1997) implores the importance of educative experiences in school, emphasizing “the freedom of the learner” (p. 22) while at the same time, taking up the definition of freedom and the ways in which it can be realized. John Dewey’s vision for a progressive education emphasizes the importance of a philosophy of education with a foundation in democracy and of the deep understanding of these ideals.

Ben gives credit to Toronto's liberal policies and to a small group of reform trustees, for making Toronto's climate ripe for alternative schools. The release of the Hall-Dennis report was also a key component to the emergence of several alternative schools beginning in 1968 with S.E.E.D (Summer of Experience, Exploration and Discovery and later, Shared Experience, Exploration and Discovery) (Shukyn, 1973), and later, School One. Denise wrote away for a copy of the report which, along with the School One Experience and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, Article 26, continue to underpin and comprise the teaching practices and philosophy of School One. With such fertile ground for alternatives in public education, organizers recruited interested parties through left-leaning magazines, and hosted meetings at OISE. They presented a document outlining the vision, mission and values of the school, which continues to be the foundational document of the school many decades later.

The first year of School One was tumultuous, ending in an exodus of more than half of the students and all of the teachers. With the hiring of Sarah in its second year and later, Barb, things settled down and enrollment slowly increased. Parents continue to play a vital role at School One, which relies on parents and community members for particular expertise with regard to teaching interested students, as well as for the running of committees that keep the schooling operating. Decisions are made by community consensus (not compromise) and conflict resolution is employed. School One maintains that it is "alone in Ontario in still successfully fulfilling [the] vision of the Hall-Dennis Report."

While School One works to maintain its democratic beginnings, their position within the public system ensures that they are not immune to systemic pressures including the growth of regulation and detailed curricula and the administration of the curriculum. Systemic pressures were in part the reason for the demise of School One's grade 7 and 8 program; with the demand



for a particular “delivery” of a particular curriculum, teachers were not sure students would be ready for the rigour of the grade 9 curriculum once they left School One. Report cards are also among the systemic pressures faced by School One. In order to maintain its commitment to the Hall-Dennis Report (1968) stance which states that,

Related to grading is the use of formal examinations as the means of transition from grade to grade. Such arbitrary measures of achievement and the concepts of promotion and failure should be removed from the schools not to reduce standards, but to improve the quality of learning. The evaluation of pupils’ progress should be a continuous part of the learning process, not a separate periodic exercise. (p. 72)

Report cards are written because it is mandated by the province, but they are filed away. In this same vein, School One students do not write standardized tests, including the EQAO, on which they maintain a “proud zero” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021). Children are not taught by grade, but by their interests and their developmental readiness. This too is in keeping with the Hall-Dennis Report’s findings that particular innovations to the school system must be implemented, including:

The complete abolition of the graded system throughout the school... During the last fifty years, as it has become increasingly difficult to retard and eliminate pupils at an early age by failure, the graded system has become an anomaly. (Hall & Dennis, 1968, p. 72)

Yet, the graded system, as well as the standardized assessment of students remains a mainstay of society at large. Margaret 2021 reminds us that as part of the larger system of education, alternative schools have an obligation to the curriculum and to reporting its outcomes. Hern

(1996) argues that compulsory schooling has become “reified in our bizarre North American public political consciousness” (p. 1) and is part of “the explicit attempt to coerce people into accepting their appropriate place in hierarchical, industrial capitalism” (p. 1). Similarly, Gatto (2017) argues that the hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling ensures children remain obedient into their adulthood and become part of the capitalist mechanism.

School One is still susceptible to the systemic pressures of the board through standardized reporting expectations and the pressures to “cover” a very detailed curriculum yet it remains heavily influenced by the Hall-Dennis Report as well as its own foundational document. Put another way, School One’s footing remains in the free-schooling movement of the sixties and seventies. School One does not deliver curriculum “like a bag of milk” (Denise, personal communication, January 8, 2021) but rather uses it to guide student learning, checking its components off retrospectively over the course of a student’s time within its walls. According to Sarah, some of School One’s biggest successes are,

Happy kids. Really happy kids. And when we have reunions, I just think these are people I really like, these are people I would like to know. And they’re all successful in their own ways. Not in conventional ways necessarily, but they’re interesting and kind and lovely people. (Sarah, personal communication, February 26, 2021)

School One is celebrating a significant milestone this year and continues to hold prominence within the Toronto District School Board. Demand for the school is high and children are selected via lottery system as per the stipulations of the board. Those who do not get selected are placed on a waiting list which carries over into subsequent years. The teaching team

has grown from its two-teacher beginnings to several diverse people who continuously cultivate and re-evaluate the school's democratic process (Toronto District School Board, 2014).

Next, chapter Seven explores the third question of this study: can solidarity economy values and ideologies form an alternative vision of schooling in the Toronto District School Board? It begins with an overview of the current vision of public alternative schools in the TDSB as well as the current realities in the board. The chapter points to democracy as an ideology shared between the solidarity economy and policies informing the opening of alternative public schools in the TDSB and considers whether this shared ideology is a site for change within the alternative school space. It considers too, critical pedagogy as a provocation that can help us to think of schools as institutions that both reproduce existing relations of power and ideology, as well as produce, mediate and resist systems of power and dominant ideologies. Although democracy is not identified as a site for change, individual classrooms are considered as critical sites of resistance. The irony of neoliberalism and capitalism in the ability to establish alternative schools is discussed.

## **Chapter Seven: Findings and Discussion**

The aim of this study is to describe the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, to determine the values and ideologies of the policies that control the establishment of the alternative public schools in Toronto, and to discover if and how they intersect. Using the context and history, and thematic analyses presented in Chapter Five and the thematic analyses of interview data, along with the case study presented in Chapter Six, Chapter Seven explores the question: can solidarity economy values and ideologies form an alternative vision of schooling in the Toronto District School Board? It moves to an overview of the current vision of public alternative schools in the TDSB as well as the current realities. This overview serves as a starting point for thinking “otherwise” about the policies pertaining to alternative schools and the possibilities for spaces for change within them. The chapter points to democracy as an ideology shared between the solidarity economy and policies informing the opening of alternative public schools in the TDSB and considers this whether this shared ideology is a site for change within the alternative school space. It concludes however, that democracy is not enough to achieve the goals of the solidarity economy. While democracy cannot inform an alternative vision of schooling in the TDSB, there are still sites of resistance and places for change.

### **A contemporary narrative of public alternative schools in the TDSB**

The TDSB offers information regarding alternative public schools from several sources. Together these sources present a particular vision of alternative public schools in the TDSB. Here, we are reminded of Ball (1993) once again, who asserts that “the effect of policy is primarily discursive; it changes the possibilities we have for thinking ‘otherwise’” (p. 15).

Alternative public schools present a variety of options apart from mainstream public schooling. Each option gives individual students and their parents a means by which to “thrive”

in a learning environment that suits their individual learning style (*Elementary Alternatives*, n.d.). Alternative public schools each offer a different method of curriculum delivery while the curriculum itself remains consistent with mainstream public schools (Margaret, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Small class sizes are common among alternative schools as is an emphasis on community involvement and volunteerism. They demonstrate a “commitment to innovation” and experimentation through programming (*Alternative Schools Community Advisory Committee*, n.d.). They offer as well, flexible learning environments, while continuing to operate within the mandates of the Education Act and Ministry guidelines (Toronto District School Board, 2007b). Each school offers a unique philosophy and mandate, to which students and their parents must commit before enrolling (Toronto District School Board, 2007b). Alternative public schools offer “viable pathways” for students and parents seeking choice within the public system (Toronto District School Board, 2007b).

### **The reality of alternative public schools in the TDSB**

What can be gleaned over the course of this study is that the vision for alternative schools does not fit with the current reality. More than one participant questioned the “alternativeness” of alternative schools. Several participants faced systemic barriers to creating alternative spaces. Assessment and reporting structures are among these barriers, as schools are mandated to adhere to particular assessment and reporting practices which do not necessarily fit with alternative school philosophies. Nate outlined the insufficiency and inaptness of the standardized reporting system:

So, I’ll give you a perfect example. We have different reporting structures, how we report attendance. All of a sudden, the school board went to the Trillium System. And the Trillium System can’t understand

multi-matrix-y classes. Like, I've got kids studying this credit and this credit, and some are coming here; like it's too complex, right? So instead of having a tool that captures our reality, we have to get forced into the tool that can do the reporting. But then that technology ends up dictating what we do. So, all of a sudden, there are certain schedules. Like for example, a credit for a report card has to 'go final' and a student has to 'fail' it. Where we would just not post it, and not report it, or report it once the kid achieved it. So, we'd only ever show achievement, but now all of sudden there were failures because of the way the reporting system works. And no surprise, when that happened, in most of the alternative schools, there's a lot of failure, because these kids take three kicks at the can to get something done. They need tons of support, right? And I also feel bad for the students. So, they get another failing report card. How does that help them? Whereas before, we were like, 'we'll keep kicking the can until you get this, and then we'll celebrate your success.' So even something like that – our philosophy gets shaped by the technology.

(Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021)

In a similar vein, as a response to mandated report cards, Schools One and Two tried to file their report cards instead of sending them home, however parents in School Two were more interested in the grades of their children. This interest on the part of parents may speak to the ways in which formal and standardized assessment as part of schooling are taken as given and necessary. Standardized assessment practices such as the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) were also mentioned as barriers to practice, though participants who were not

teachers (principals, trustees and superintendents) saw the value and necessity of testing, to ensure accountability, adherence to policies and consistency between schools. This is ironic, given the purported “uniqueness” of every alternative school.

Similarly, curriculum was seen by non-teachers as a necessary condition of the public system to ensure consistency between schools, while some teachers who were interviewed mentioned it as among the biggest barriers to being alternative. Denise questioned the timing of when particular parts of the curriculum were mandated to be taught, and Vivian felt the need to create her own curriculum in order to address the content not covered by provincial curriculum, but pertinent to the values and philosophies of the school. Similarly, Sandra continues to teach the most current sexual education curriculum, even though it was repealed by the Ford Government, early in its tenure. Nate outlines budget cutbacks as roadblocks, as well as the pressures to

follow the protocols of the school board. There are so many times where we are sort of disadvantaged by the mainstream model of schooling that gets trickled down, or forced down. It always feels a little bit like we can’t quite fit in. (Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021)

The notion of choice was questioned more than once and barriers to choosing were outlined, comprising an assessment of alternative public schools as not being choices at all. Factors such as the location of a school and the unavailability of transportation were noted as barriers, as was the time it might take to commute and the implications for working parents. Given the current description of alternative public schools and the current realities, can the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy form an alternative vision of schooling?

### **Establishing an alternative school in the TDSB**

Over the course of this study, the formula for establishing an alternative school in the TDSB has been interpreted to be: the right political climate, the right (left-leaning) trustees, and highly educated, white founders with substantial amounts of free time. An idea for a school that befits the existing political climate is also indispensable (Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021). For example, in a political climate that was not yet ready for the Africentric Alternative School (AAS) proposal, or its Black, working-class proposers, it was several years and many high-profile advocates (both Black and white) that allowed for their proposal to be passed. AAS did not have the right recipe for a successful bid, without potent additional ingredients of influential academics and years of advocacy and lobbying work (Johnson, 2013b). The necessity of this formula has been the reality for all of the schools represented in this analysis, from the first alternative school established in 1968 to the most recent schools, established in 2009, regardless of which policies they were formed under.

### **The Provocation of Critical Pedagogy**

In traditional reproductive theories, it has been argued that schools are instructional sites that reproduce the economic and social order (Giroux, 1983). Theories of cultural reproduction, have been alternatively concerned with culture and the ways in which it is “produced, selected and legitimated” (Giroux 1983, p. 87) in schools. Critical pedagogy moves us away from theories of reproduction and instead provokes us to think of schools as political, cultural and social institutions that both reproduce existing relations of power and ideology, as well as produce, mediate and resist systems of power and dominant ideologies (Giroux, 1983). What has been seen thus far is that individual schools and classrooms can be understood as sites of resistance, however, I cannot situate alternative schools in the TDSB within a solidarity economy



vision of schooling. As we have seen, it is the social economy which can prevail within a capitalist system, to which the solidarity economy is not only ideologically opposed but fundamentally vociferates. The current structure of the TDSB and the policies that inform its alternative schools are comfortably in bed with capitalist and neoliberal ideologies.

### **Democracy for change?**

Democratic ideology is shared by both the solidarity economy and by the policies governing the opening of alternative schools, though I do not believe they share the same definition. While the definition of democracy held by the solidarity economy is in alignment to that of Dewey, the concept of democracy espoused by the policy documents pertains largely to decision-making and collective governance structures. In this austere usage, democracy cannot be enough to inform an alternative vision of schooling in the alternative public schools of Toronto because the definition connoted by the solidarity economy, and that connoted by the policies governing the opening of alternative schools, do not overlap.

Perhaps though, democratic ideology is one small space of possibility for resistance. It can be seen in the practices and values of Schools One and Four and in the radical pedagogies and practices of the teachers from Schools One, Two, Three, Eight and Nine. These are examples of pockets of struggle and resistance (hooks, 2003) that can be found in alternative public-school classrooms within traditional public-school systems. Ajay Heble, (2017) offers a similar notion about classroom practices, considering the ways in which teaching and learning can move from the classroom to becoming a means of action and social impact. He speaks to action-oriented pedagogy, thinking about the ways in which, and how education can be based in community and move away from traditional ways of teaching and learning that often leaves ideas to stagnate in theory instead of materializing into action and social change. Democracy conceptualized as a set

of decision-making practices though, is not enough to transform a school system firmly embedded in a capitalist economy. The values and ideologies of the solidarity economy necessitate the struggle and resistance against the dominant capitalist ideology

The context, history and analyses of the policies found that the policies are undergirded by capitalist and (in the policies produced after 1980) neoliberal ideologies. Nonetheless, what we have learned from the interviews, and the case study, is that the alternative public school system has, over the course of many decades and policies, allowed individual classrooms and schools to become sites of struggle and resistance against the status quo of capitalism. The system however, cannot itself be a site of struggle and resistance because capitalism and neoliberalism are maintained by the policies that govern the schools within it, and in the practices of alternative schools themselves. We are however, reminded by Gramsci (2003), that hegemony itself is never total and there are spaces for change to be found, as hooks (2003) contends in her pedagogy of hope. Giroux (1983) also points out that radical perspectives that critique mainstream schooling often “fail to acknowledge or develop an adequate view of either consciousness, resistance, or culture” (p. 59) and thus fails to see the spaces of opposition: “School and teachers” he says, “do not simply comply with the oppressive features of schooling... In some cases, both groups resist; in some cases, they modify school practices. In no sense do teachers and students uniformly function in schools as simply the passive reflection of the logic of capital” (p. 58).

School One demonstrated that the policies allow for schools who consciously resist capitalist and neoliberal ideologies through their practices and pedagogies, though these practices and pedagogies remain embedded in the larger capitalist and neoliberal context. Surprisingly, in comparing the values and ideologies of the policies with those of the solidarity economy, what

becomes clear is that along with democracy, the ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism are also what allow for pockets of struggle and resistance within the public alternative school system to emerge.

### **The Irony of Capitalism and Neoliberalism**

The policies that inform the establishment of alternative public schools in the TDSB allow for pockets of resistance to emerge, though the policies share few values or ideologies with the solidarity economy. While capitalism and neoliberalism are taken up and contested by the solidarity economy, ironically, it is these ideologies which also allow for alternative schools to emerge. This is because the policies that inform their establishment value school choice, competition, pioneering work, accountability, meritocracy and the language of consumers and clientele. These values are the requirements of capitalist and neoliberal ideologies, and it is precisely the discourse around them that allows for the establishment of alternative schools to fill these requirements. Put another way, the capitalist and neoliberal discourses contained in the policies informing the establishment of alternative public schools requires a structure that allows for these values to emerge through a system with choices. It is the positioning of alternative schools as choices that allows for competition, innovation and a language of consumerism, which are all requirements of capitalism and neoliberalism. The very systems that allow for alternative schools can also be contested by those same alternative schools.

### **An alternative vision of schooling?**

Both hooks (2003) and Hill Collins (2010) outline the practical ways in which classrooms can be democratic spaces; that is, spaces of resistance against the dominant ideological structures that schools are designed to reproduce. School One consciously and explicitly takes up the democratic teaching practices explicated by hooks and Hill Collins. It does so throughout the

whole school, in its unequivocally democratic approach to teaching and learning, centered in community and a democratic decision-making process, which is not about compromise, voting or majority rule, but consensus at all levels of the school.

Educating for the “practice of freedom” (hooks, 2003, p. 72) entails working to unlearn racism and bringing “awareness of the ways white supremacist thinking permeates our culture” (hooks, 2003, p. 70) and manipulates our thinking which can create “revolutionary subculture[s] within the educational system” (ibid. p. 70). At School Two, Vivian and Sandra have done this work both in and out of the classroom in their own practices. Together, Vivian and Sandra created a curriculum challenging the ways in which gender binaries are produced and reproduced in the media and by social constructs: “It celebrates LGBTQ2S identified folks. It's a celebration of families [and] explicitly explores issues related to homophobia [and] transphobia” (Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020). While social justice undergirds the school’s entire curriculum, this particular curriculum is given one full week, where regular programming is suspended and all children participate in this specific programming in multi-age groupings. Vivian and Sandra both view this syllabus as one of their greatest successes, to be able to “educate around gender, gender bias, gender stereotypes [and] really focus in and figure out how to do it really young” (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020).

In her own practice, Sandra is working on “racial justice and white supremacy understanding in education” (Sandra, personal communication, December 9, 2020) and the ways in which it can be addressed in a school full of white, female educators. Vivian has thought deeply about the reproduction of inequalities in the school, which serves “predominately white, middle class, progressive and political” (Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020) families. For example, she asks, “how do you create a curriculum around issues like anti-Black

racism without further othering or excluding those few students that identify as racialized or Black?” Vivian has also been thinking about the ways in which the school itself is alternative. In response to this question, she has been hosting online meetings “to engage the community in thinking about the core values of [the school]”:

What are our hopes and goals? And what are the different ways that we can all work together to meet those goals? Because if we are not working towards creating an alternative then what we are in fact doing is just reproducing this privileged, elitist, inequitable school and I don’t want to be part of that. I don’t want to be a part of school that is just reinforcing privilege. I want to be a part of school that is actively disrupting privilege and thinking about how to be truly alternative.

(Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020)

This yearning to disrupt privilege constitutes what hooks (2003) might call a “subculture of resistance” (p. 48), where work is being done to actively disrupt dominant cultural ideologies reproduced by the hidden curriculum. This subculture of resistance represents a space for hope and resistance to an alternative system that in some respects, is not alternative at all:

...and there are a few public alternative schools that I can name in the city that don’t have a clear vision and what they are is like little private schools that are receiving public funding. They have smaller class sizes, they have access to more resources...but it’s problematic, so I think that I’m feeling a little disillusioned with the idea of alternative schools. One of the reasons why I came to [School Two] was because I wanted to see how alternative

you actually can be working within a system. And what I've learned is there are some possibilities, but there's a lot more work to do.

(Vivian, personal communication, December 8, 2020)

Nate has a similar understanding of alternative schools. He speaks about the ways in which alternative schooling is weakened by board structures, which have to a certain extent, shaped what alternative schools have done. Like Vivian, Nate does not “see a lot of radical action happening at any [alternative] schools. ...when I talk to my colleagues, a lot of them are running small big school classrooms. I don't know what's necessarily alternative about it” (Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021). While he questions the alternativeness of alternative schools, unlike Vivian, Nate also feels as though alternative schools are something to be celebrated; that they bring an important element of choice that skirts the issues of equity brought about by private schooling. In a different train of thought, Nate offers alternative schools not as choice, but as a critique of mainstream schools:

I know on record we're supposed to frame ourselves as 'choice' whereas I'm like, 'no, we're a critique.' So that's a thing there, that's a thing that's wrapped up in all of this. Are we just a series of choices for the clients or consumers, or are we critiques of really important issues in education or pedagogy?

(Nate, personal communication, March 11, 2021)

Here, Nate reminds us of the capitalist ideologies underpinning the public school system through his use of capitalist language. He also suggests alternative schools are critiques of the mainstream system while Vivian suggests that perhaps they are elite enclaves of the same system. There is tension between differing conceptualizations of alternative schools. The same

alternative public system that houses radical and democratic schools and classrooms also houses schools that do little to resist the prevailing system. Nevertheless, alternative schools were viewed by many participants as being choices for only a small group characterized by privileges which allow them to choose. Hence, while the notion held by some participants that Toronto alternative schools are “elite enclaves” may trouble existing understandings and conceptions of their purposes and functions, it also serves as a call for a revaluation of the goals and functions of TDSB alternative public schools.

We see educators grappling with critically important questions around “radical pedagogy” (Giroux, 1983) and teaching for freedom (hooks, 2003). This tension offers an opportunity to scrutinize personal classroom practices and the ways they may reproduce or resist dominant ideologies. It is individual schools and classrooms that become sites of struggle and resistance. These sites can contend with the dominant and insidious discourse, language and ideology of capitalism and neoliberalism and the policies that uphold them through individual acts of resistance, which disrupt “an ‘airtight’ notion of domination” (Giroux, 1983, p. 59) posed by radical perspectives of schooling and the hidden curriculum.

Scrutiny of the system and of personal pedagogical practices is happening in some of the alternative classrooms and schools in the TDSB. Critical pedagogy gives us a multidimensional view of the public system, in which resistance and struggle against dominant ideologies is happening within those same ideological constructs. Through individual schools and classroom practices of critical resistance, alternative schools offer a space of possibility but cannot be informed by the ideologies and values of the solidarity economy; because, while there is some overlap between the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies governing the opening of alternative schools in Toronto, the fundamental and deciphering

ideology of the solidarity economy is the struggle and resistance against capitalism, which the alternative public school system has historically and continued to work within.

### **Summary**

Over the course the chapter, I discussed the contemporary narrative as well as some of the realities of public alternative schools in the Toronto District School Board in order to set the context to answer the third question of this study: can the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy form an alternative vision of schooling? I offered a comparison between the values and ideologies of the policies informing the establishment of alternative public schools with those of the solidarity economy, determining that democratic ideology is shared by both but that their definitions of democracy are not shared. I used critical pedagogy to ground the ideas and practices of hope and resistance in the classroom but argued that the alternative public school system cannot be situated within a solidarity economy vision of schooling, though there are pockets of resistance in individual schools and classrooms that can prevail within the very capitalist and neoliberal system to which they are ideologically opposed. In the concluding chapter, I discuss these results and their implications, make recommendations, and propose future research.



## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion and Recommendations**

The aim of this study was to describe the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy, and those of the policies that control the establishment of the alternative public schools in Toronto, and to discover if and how they intersect. The following three research questions guided the methodology of this study: (1) What values and ideologies are held in the policies that control the establishment of alternative public schools in Toronto? (2) How have others navigated these policies to successfully found alternative public schools? And, (3) Can the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy inform an alternative vision of public schooling in Toronto? In this concluding chapter, I review the study before discussing implications of the findings. I offer an interpretation of the results of the study, make recommendations and propose future research, before making concluding comments.

### **Review of the Study**

Founders and other key actors in the alternative public-school space in Toronto have navigated its policies successfully with the presence of a number of very particular features. These features remained the same over time despite the changing policies and policy contexts. First, there were particularly liberal political climates; second, there was a critical mass of supportive trustees; third, there were declining enrollment levels; and lastly, school founders were white and highly educated, with a high socio-economic status.

There are several values and ideologies held in the policies that inform the opening of alternative public schools in Toronto. The main values of the policies were determined to be humanism and liberalism, choice, competition, education, creating productive economic actors, accountability, community involvement and volunteerism, pioneering work and maintenance of

the status quo. The ideologies underpinning the policies are capitalism, democracy, and in later policies, neoliberalism.

The values of the solidarity economy are mutual aid, self-help, cooperation, education (as a means of empowerment), ethical economic decision-making, environment, social well-being and participation, explicit ethic of care, and sustainable economic livelihoods. The ideologies underpinning the solidarity economy are struggle and resistance, (against capitalism) and democracy.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

The multi-faceted qualitative research design for this study was chosen to address three connecting research questions. Contextual, historical and thematic analyses of policies were employed to determine what values and ideologies are held in the policies that inform the opening of alternative public schools in Toronto. Thematic analyses of the transcripts from one-on-one, semi-structured interviews of key actors in the Toronto alternative school space were conducted in order to determine how others have navigated the policies informing the establishment of alternative schools to successfully found alternative public schools. A brief case study of School One was presented, and short case studies of solidarity economy organizations were used to determine the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy and draw a connection between it, and public education.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Question One: The values and Ideologies in the policy texts.**

The ideologies held in the policy texts were not surprising. Neoliberalism for instance, features heavily in the literature review, as does the marketization of education and school choice, which make an easy transition over to a consideration of capitalism. And, because we

live in what we understand to be a democratic society, it is no surprise that democracy serves as an ideological underpinning in documents tasked with outlining a certain freedom and choice in the democratic right to public schooling.

The main values of the policies dovetail nicely with a particularly “schizophrenic,” “Canadian” identity whose values according to Lipset (1990) “are law-abiding [accountability], deferential toward authority [maintenance of the status quo], cautious, prudent [creating productive economic actors], elitist, moralistic, tolerant (of ethnic differences) [humanism and liberalism], cool, unemotional and solemn” (p. 40). While not all of the values have a similar counterpart, the values that remain (choice, competition, community involvement and volunteerism, and pioneering work) have their place in the rhetoric of the Ontario government and its policies (past and present). For example, Community involvement and volunteerism is a formal policy of the Ontario Government’s Ministry of Education and Training, which stipulates that Ontario high school students complete 40 hours of “community involvement activities” (Ministry of Education, 2012) in order to graduate. Choice and competition are again, underpinned by capitalist and neoliberal ideologies, respectively. Competition is also directly tied to the rhetoric of innovation or “pioneering work,” where “innovation is the key to competitiveness, productivity, economic growth, creating good jobs, and overall making life better for all Canadians” (Canada & Innovation, 2019). And, the policies engendering pioneering work have a long history in Ontario. In the context of this study, the first innovation in Ontario’s public school system was the first alternative public school, SEED (Summer of Experience, Exploration and Discovery), which was founded by the TBE in 1968 as a summer program for students who could not find summer employment, during Pierre Trudeau Era. It was a novel approach to high school education (Shukyn, 1973). In 2008 the McGuinty Government invested

in “Research and Innovation to create jobs” as part of “Ontario’s Innovation Agenda” (Government of Ontario, 2008). In 2017, the Ontario Centres for Excellence celebrated “150 years of innovation” in Ontario (Ontario Centre of Innovation, 2017). And, in 2021, the Ontario Government announced an investment of \$48 million to “help put Ontario at the forefront of innovation” (Government of Ontario, 2021).

**Question two: how key actors navigated the policies.**

In regard to question two – how key actors have navigated these policies – I was not startled to learn that the general demographic of school founders and other key actors is white, highly educated, with a high socio-economic status and connections to supportive trustees, because “life is all about connections” (Jacob, personal communication, 2021). More than networks though, we live within a system of systemic and insidious racism that champions meritocracy without the recognition of systemic barriers. For example, Black students make up 11% of the student population in the TDSB but represent 34% of the suspension rates in 2017/2018 (Appia, 2022). Black students have the highest representation of students in special education classes (Toronto District School Board, n.d.). In 2013, Black students were three times more likely to be suspended from school than their white peers (James & Turner, 2017). These are only a handful of statistics to demonstrate the systemic racism that pervades our public school system and why the general (white) demographic of alternative school founders is not surprising.

**Question three: can the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy inform an alternative vision of schooling?**

The values and ideologies of the solidarity economy cannot inform an alternative vision of schooling in Toronto as a whole, though individual schools and classroom practices can offer spaces of critical struggle and resistance. Like the Gibson-Graham (2006) example of

second-wave feminism, and like Miller (2010) suggests of the Solidarity Economy – that it is a “movement of movements” (p. 1) – perhaps so too can be Toronto alternative schools, as sites of possibility, through ground up, grassroots resistances in individual classrooms.

In my eternal optimism, I was surprised that the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy cannot inform an alternative vision of public schooling in Toronto. Change, it would seem, must come classroom by classroom, as bottom up, grassroots initiatives instead of system wide reform. System-wide reform will take time, though as we have seen with so many grassroots initiatives, transformation is possible.

### **Exclusions and violence in the school system**

Scholarship on the solidarity economy teaches us that Black people and other marginalized groups have long been organizing and engaged in movements against racial injustices. They have done so to combat the injuries and vehemence that have served to exclude them from full and dignified social and economic participation, here in Canada, and abroad. Equal and equitable access to education cannot be omitted from the discourse of violent and exclusionary practices perpetrated against people of colour.

Statistics show that exclusions and violence against children of colour are happening in our school systems through practices and policies that stream Black students into applied level courses at the high school level, making it more difficult to access higher education; and through disproportionate numbers of suspensions, expulsions and dropout rates of Black students. There is a gulf between policies championing democratic ideals and alternatives in public education, and the statistics showing the damages experienced by Black children in the Toronto public school system. While sites of struggle and resistance in TDSB alternative public school classrooms do not achieve the goals of the solidarity economy, there are possibilities for

individual sites of resistance and struggle against systemic violence and injustice in the alternative public school system.

### **Contributions of the study**

Understanding the values of the policies pertaining to the establishment of alternative public schools adds to an existing but small cannon of literature about the TDSB and the establishment of its alternative schools. It contributes to greater understanding of how alternative schools get established, by whom, and who benefits. Such understandings offer a new way of thinking about the ways in which children of colour are systemically excluded from, or subjugated by alternative public schooling. Understanding democracy as a tentative intersection between the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy and those of the policies informing the establishment of alternative public schools, adds to the fields of Education and Social Economics, separately, and in a novel interplay. Separately, the field of Education has a means by which to consider how to address systemic racism and its consequences for students of colour. Social economics will benefit from potential entry points into the struggle and resistance against the injuries perpetrated against students marginalized in and by the public education system.

### **Recommendations**

The process for establishing an alternative school appears simple enough on paper. What is unwritten are the politics and networking involved in navigating the process which (intentionally or unintentionally) excludes people of colour. The TDSB must revise the process for the establishment of alternative public schools, to make it more accessible and less politically driven, so that we can move beyond white, middle-class, highly educated founders, and alternative schools as elite enclaves.

Future research would benefit from a study of the systemic barriers in the policies that inform the establishment of alternative public schools. It should also include an analysis of the demographics of the trustees who vote for and against particular proposals, and the ways in which those demographics shape the outcome of which proposals get passed. Future research would also benefit in noting the demographics of people involved in founding alternative public schools in Toronto. This would aid in ascertaining a clearer picture of the role of privilege in the founding of public alternative schools as well as the impact of choice. Two questions in this regard might be: (1) do the demographics of the founders impact the demographics of the students? and, (2) do the demographics of the founders dictate whether a school will be founded at all? Higham's (2014) study found that successful school proposers in England were those with particular and shared economic and social capital which allowed them to navigate the system. Those without economic and social capital were unsuccessful in their school proposals. Taylor and MacKay's (2008) conclusion of their case studies of three alternative public schools in Edmonton, Alberta is similar in that it was seemingly who was doing the proposing, rather than the proposal itself, that dictated whether a school proposal was passed. This brings us back to a connection I suggested between Webb and Gulson's (2015) notion of white supremacy and the ways in which who gets to establish alternative schools is dictated by 'market forces' and policies. I offered that policies and market forces were analogues for the government's desire for particular schools and particular students. This proposed connection would benefit from further scrutiny.

Curriculum is something that also needs to be examined as a means of resistance through the values and ideologies of the Solidarity Economy. As it stands, participants found curriculum to be a barrier to the work being done in alternative schools. Some of the teachers were actively

resisting province-mandated curriculum by creating their own, or teaching banned content.

Research examining the curriculum as means by which to resist within a system that allows for such pockets of resistance to exist would benefit us all.

Hill Collins (2010) suggests that part of the resistance taking place in small pockets, is bringing classroom knowledge out of the classroom, and outside knowledge into the classroom, in order to make schooling a part of everyday life and validate different kinds of knowledges. I echo this suggestion for our TDSB alternative public-school classrooms, as they are already showing their ability to think otherwise. To this suggestion, I add two concrete recommendations for practice. First, a social economy curriculum must be developed and engaged with across Toronto alternative school elementary and high school classrooms. Such a curriculum must go beyond “financial literacy” which assumes capitalism as its foundation, to an introduction to concepts and practices which decenter capitalist economic practices and instead focus on economic and social systems (with which many students may already be familiar). This focus on a diversity of economic systems would necessitate a disruption of the Eurocentric lens through which much of the capitalist economy (past and present) is conceptualized and taught. I have purposely explicated a social economy curriculum, as opposed to one focused on the solidarity economy (though I have made great efforts to distinguish them and distance myself from the former) because it is my belief that a solidarity economy curriculum would be too radical, too much of a departure from our mainstream commitment to capitalism, to gain any traction in the current system as it stands.

Second, establishing a formal coalition among alternative schools and their actors, would facilitate connections between individual classrooms as spaces of resistance, as well as work to create networks from these individualized and often siloed spaces. It would facilitate in the



sharing of and access to ideas, knowledge and resources, which have been crucial to many social and solidarity economy movements.

### **Final thoughts**

This work has endeavored to bridge the fields of Education Curriculum, Pedagogy and Policy Studies, and Social/Solidarity Economics in an effort to interrogate if the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy can inform change in the current Toronto system of alternative public schooling.

What has not been taken up in any detail, but implied in many ways, is the role of teachers and community members, orchestrating resistance in their classrooms. The suggestion by Hill Collins above, for example, must be brought about by teachers in classrooms, and community members in neighbourhoods, in our everyday practices. What must be stated explicitly, and emphatically is that it cannot be children who resist capitalist and neoliberal ideologies in the classroom. It must be us.

[T]he view that the schools can build a new society is akin to the ideas that the world will be redeemed by children or that the children will somehow save us adults. I believe that both those ideas are incorrect. We cannot give our children the responsibility for redeeming the world we either messed up or at least witnessed being destroyed... I don't believe a new social order can be built through the schools. I do believe that schools will be an essential part of a new order that is built through the cooperative effort of all of us: teachers, miners, factory workers, professionals – all the people who believe in the social and moral imperative of struggling toward a new order. Thus, I find that the crucial question should not be, "Do the schools have the power to change

society?” so much as, “what small power can we use in working with others to change society?” and if we do begin to change society what will be the role of us as teachers in building a lasting new order? (Kohl, 1980, p. 60).

It is difficult to imagine what change to the existing public school system might look like, let alone an alternative to the system itself. There has been a great deal of thinking along these lines. Freire (1985, 2000), Illich (2000), and Dewey, (1997, 2010); Hall and Dennis (1968) (among others) each offered us a conception of education that was (and remains) a radical departure from the school system as they knew it. hooks (2003), Giroux (1983, 1997, 2020), Freire (1985, 2000), and Hill Collins (2010) (among others) each offer hope and make various appeals for change. hooks' (2003) notion of a gap, where spaces in seemingly closed systems can be found and used to create change remains stirring, as she appeals for a recognition that there are indeed spaces, if small, where change can be made to seemingly closed systems. I remain optimistic that change can one day be informed by the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy in a “movement of movements,” classroom by classroom, school by school. It is these pockets of defiance which offer hope for public education in its work against systemic structures that continue to exclude and injure Black students. More work must be done to offer a new vision of alternative public schooling that is informed by the values and ideologies of the solidarity economy.

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