**BEING CHOSEN AND PERFORMING CHOICE:**

**YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGING IN IMAGINATIVE AND CONSTRAINED**

**SECONDARY SCHOOL PRACTICES IN VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA**


by

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**Abstract**

Over the last three decades, the political project of school choice policy, promoted by the Vancouver School District and the BC Ministry of Education, has been contentious. Many have contended that school choice further contributes to the fragmentation and associated hierarchies of the education system and of social structures in the urban context of Vancouver, a major city with rapidly rising ethnic diversity and socio-economically polarizing urban redevelopment. To shed further light on these concerns about school choice, in this study I investigate the ways in which young people, ages 11–19, positioned at various social, racial, and geographic locations and with varied social experiences, make sense of school choice policy. Here I focus particularly on the ways in which young people imagine, experience, and form certain modes of social, spatial, and racial identification and groups, as well as on the relationships between these groups under the mechanism of school choice. Between 2009 and 2010, I carried out a multi-sited ethnographic study from a critical socio-phenomenological perspective. I conducted 59 semi-structured interviews with students in transition (Grades 7, 8, and 12), observed 16 school information evenings and two secondary schools over a six-month period, and analyzed media discourses and policy texts as they pertained to broader social, urban, and political changes. I drew upon an interdisciplinary analytical framework of critical policy studies and youth studies and focused on three theoretical concepts: the imaginary, the imagination, and imaginary capital. These three concepts provide a key analytical framework for understanding the ways in which school choice complicates young people's classification struggles and distinction-making (Bourdieu, 1984) within the widely circulating dominant social, urban, and national imaginary. I

conclude that while current local policies of school choice can provide enriched alternative programs, they do so for only highly selective and competitive groups of students. Overall, my research findings point to the reality that school choice deepens existing social, spatial, and racial divisions, aggravates tensions, and ultimately worsens existing inequalities while producing new forms of social and educational stratification in the rapidly diversifying global city of Vancouver.

# Preface

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**Photographs:**

Photos in Chapter 7 were taken, with permission, from *The Vancouver Sun*.

# Table of Contents

## List of Tables

# List of Figures

## List of Photos

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# Dedication

*For Josh*

# Chapter 1: Introduction

When the BC Liberal party won the 2001 election with the biggest landslide in BC

political history (winning 77 of 79 total seats), it gained the momentum to move forward with its

"New Era" election platform, which contained a variety of neoliberal reforms, including tax

reductions, social welfare rollbacks, and privatization of the public sector, many of which were

built upon the neoliberal economic principles of Fredric Hayek and Milton Friedman (Lauder,

Brown, Dillabough, & Halsey, 2006). One year after the Liberals were elected, they amended the

School Act, introducing market reforms, including school choice policy, similar to the sweeping

market-based educational reforms that had been introduced in the US, the UK, and New Zealand

since the early 1990s (Ball, 2003; Forsey, Davies, & Walford, 2008; Hanushek, 1986; Raham,

1998). When, in 2002, for the first time in the educational history of BC, the Liberal government

introduced an open enrolment policy, which allows students to transfer to any other school where

space is available, BC's current Premier (then Education Minister) Christy Clark gave the

following rationale:

> We want to create a top-notch public education system for young people in British
>
> Columbia: a system that recognizes the importance of parental involvement and gives
>
> parents a more meaningful voice in how our schools are run, a system that *gives*
>
> *students more choice* about the school they attend and the educational program they
>
> follow, a system that provides school boards with greater financial flexibility and
>
> enables them to become more entrepreneurial and, above all, a system that's focused at
>
> every level on improving student performance. (Clark, 2002, pp. 1505, italics added)

The policy of school choice was thus hailed in the provincial education landscape as an effective

solution that would address several challenges facing the public education system, including

student performance, as Clark states above. During this period of neoliberal reforms, the

Vancouver School District quickly increased school choice by introducing multiple district-

specified alternative programs designed to attract cross-boundary[1] students at the secondary

level. The number of students who attended secondary schools outside their catchment areas

reached approximately 8,810 secondary students (i.e., 34% of the entire secondary student

population) in the 2011–2012 academic year (Vancouver School Board, 2012b).[2]

    Reflected in this shift is a policy goal to create better education through the *neoliberal*

*imaginary* of education, that is, more choice for students and their families and more competition

between young people, teachers, schools, and school districts. This shift is indeed in line with the

government reintroduction of neoclassical economic principles under the new terms of

neoliberalism or advanced neoliberalism, which have strongly influenced the reimagining of the

public sector through privatization and deregulation around the globe (Ball, 2003; Chan-

Tibergien, 2006; Gaskell, 1995; Kuehn, 2006; Shaker, 1999). This trend has been particularly

pronounced in the affluent Western countries, now often referred to as the Global North,

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[1] Under School Act section 75.1 (1), the Board of School Trustees establishes catchment boundaries for each school

in the district. Students who cross the catchment boundaries in order to attend a school outside their established

school catchment are referred to as cross-boundary students.

[2] This number appears to be an over-estimation of choice students, as it is calculated on the basis of mismatches

between student home addresses and catchment schools (M. Pearmain, personal communication, April 4, 2012).

Many students in my study told me that they either attended or planned to attend the secondary schools where most

of their elementary school classmates had enrolled. In other words, many choice students attend secondary schools

based on where their friends go.

including Canada, which has been under the policy influence of the World Bank, the

International Monetary Fund, and the OECD, as well as other international organizations that

have idealized and espoused the market principles of competition (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Indeed, a recent OECD report indicates that the number of OECD countries that allow parents to

choose any public school they wish reached 17 (out of 30 countries) in 2008 (OECD, 2010, p.

422). In Canada, where K–12 educational authority lies with provincial governments, four out of

ten provinces, including BC, Alberta, Quebec, and Manitoba, have so far adopted policies that

promote school choice and the marketization of education.[3] In BC, affecting approximately

600,000 students across BC annually, this policy's move towards inter-school choice marked a

symbolic turn away from the provincial government's century-long commitment to creating

neighbourhood-based public schools, which had been upheld in the School Act since 1872.

Despite this rapid spread of school choice around the globe and the province of BC, we

currently know little about how students experience school choice practice, whether they are

"chosen" or are "choosing," and what meanings they attribute to the concept of official school

choice policy in Vancouver, BC, Canada, although there is some research on young people's

experiences of school choice practice in other countries (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Heath, 2009;

Reay & Lucey, 2002, 2003, 2004). This is indeed troubling, given that a growing number of

school choice literature around globe raises concerns that school choice, both as practice and

policy, produces negative and harmful consequences for school-aged children and young people.

In the UK, for instance, young people from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds

who are under geographical and economic constraints find that they have no choice but to attend

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[3] Since each province has its own educational authority, the federal government of Canada cannot impose a national

policy of school choice. I will discuss these changes in detail in Chapter 3.

their often low-performing neighbourhood schools (Reay, 2007; Reay & Lucey, 2003). These studies raise some serious questions about ensuring the equality of conditions and the equity outcomes of public school choice in the UK. The pressure to raise school status in terms of student performance has contributed to the ways in which young people experience public schooling as increasingly stratified based on their "ability" to perform (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Also, recent US studies indicate that market incentives encourage schools to improve their status in the market hierarchy by targeting high-achieving students, except in a few cases of charter schools or voucher programs that specifically target marginalized students (Apple, 2004; Levin & Belfield, 2003; Swalwell & Apple, 2011; Wells, 2002, 2009). Charter schools in the three largest urban areas in the US provide limited access to students from socially, racially, and economically marginalized neighbourhoods (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009). In Canada, recent small-scale qualitative studies have found that educational choices are unequally distributed and that possible futures are unequally constructed in ways that reinforce social class hierarchies; consequently, students at low-performing schools feel stigmatized, invisible, neglected and "warehoused" (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Gaztambide-Fernandez, VanderDussen, & Cairns, 2012). Students in these studies have referred to this as the "ghetto effect" (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010).

The current body of school choice literature has thus begun to shed some important light on the insidious effects of school choice and education markets on young people's experiences of exclusion, demotion, and inequality (see the full review of literature in Chapter 2). Yet these studies have received little attention from both the research and policy communities and have scarcely been followed up in any substantive way. In part, this may be due to the dominant paradigmatic theoretical and epistemological frameworks, which tend to focus on academic

performance as the only indicator of quality education. Additionally, this trend may be due to the dominant sociological theory of "parentocracy," which has tended to focus school choice studies solely on parents (Brown, 1990). Regardless of the causes, few have studied how the students "choosing"[4] to attend schools other than those assigned to them grasp the landscape and the associated social relations and affective dimensions of school choice. We therefore know little about how students who remain at their assigned schools come to think about their school in relation to the growing pressures and competition of school choice.

All of these absences in the Canadian literature, in particular, have thus led many parents and policymakers to believe that school choice is inherently a good thing, and the market—now more commonly referred to as advanced neoliberalism (Lauder et al., 2006)—is the best solution to the problems of the failing public education system, particularly the ever-rising cost of education coupled with concerns about global competitiveness in student performance. However, given the above-mentioned critical body of research that shows the challenges of school choice facing some students and their families, we should ask to what extent school choice within the public system leads to both equal opportunity and equitable outcomes for young people in education (Gewirtz, 2001).

In addition, given the contemporary politico-economic situation, spatial rearrangements, and racial recomposition of the globalizing city of Vancouver, we should ask how the promotion of school choice policy contributes to young people's experiences of schooling. One important change to note is the rapid increase in immigration from non-European countries to Vancouver,

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[4] It is important to note that school choice is often a family decision, although who makes the final decision varies based on parents' social and racial backgrounds as well (see Taylor, 2002).

BC.[5] As a result, school populations have changed drastically with the addition of increasing numbers of racial and ethnic minority students. In 2006, 49% of Vancouver residents were reported to be foreign born; half of Vancouver residents spoke a mother tongue other than the two official languages of English and French (Statistics Canada, 2009).[6] Reflecting this diversity, only 40% of secondary school students in Vancouver were born in Canada; 34% speak Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese dialects) at home (Vancouver School Board, 2012b). Meanwhile, ethnic enclaves are growing across the city. The isolation index, which shows where immigrants are least likely to meet people from outside their own visible-minority group (Keung, 2004), is rising.

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[5] The rapid increase in immigration into the city is in part attributable to the ideal multicultural imaginary of Vancouver as a rising global city—the largest city in BC, with a population of just under 600,000, and the third largest city in Canada. For almost three decades, Vancouver has been ranked as one of the top three most liveable cities in the world by the Economist Intelligence Unit, a division of Britain's *The Economist* magazine. Although it does not yet have official endorsement, Vancouver has emerged as a strong contender for the title of global city, as it is an important strategic centre where the intercontinental economic system of finance and trade has been produced, created, and facilitated over the past few decades. Especially since Expo '86 and the recent 2010 Winter Olympics, Vancouver has received much global attention and praise for its high standard of living, excellent working conditions, safe communities (with low crime rates), and natural beauty. The promotion of Vancouver on many websites highlights the city as a place of economic opportunity, high-quality education, and harmonious multiculturalism as an official provincial policy. A Google search for keywords such as "Vancouver" and "immigration" produces many of these websites. For instance, see http://www.akcanada.com/lic_vancouver.cfm.

[6] According to Statistics Canada's demography division, visible minorities will make up the majority of the population in the Vancouver metropolitan area by 2017, a significant jump from less than 7% in 1981 (Belanger & Malenfant, 2005).

Furthermore, over the last two decades or so, Vancouver has seen growing levels of socioeconomic inequality. Between 1980 and 2000, the gap between the rich and the poor increased in Metro Vancouver, an area that includes the city of Vancouver and adjacent municipalities. The residents in the tenth income percentile saw their earnings fall by 25%, while those in the ninetieth percentile saw a rise of 5.3% (Heisz, 2006). Between 1980 and 2000, Metro Vancouver also saw the largest increase in low-income earners of all the Census Metropolitan Areas in Canada, and the increase was found to be concentrated among recent immigrants. This context of urban inequality in Vancouver has a long history and is further manifest in spatial divisions of the city itself. The West Side of the city has been, both historically and at the present moment (while increasingly diversifying), occupied by wealthier residents with white European backgrounds. In contrast, the East Side, with some notable exceptions in current gentrifying neighbourhoods, has more typically been occupied by low-income and more ethnically diverse residents.

Consequently, as my study participants note, young people imagine the West Side schools as "Caucasian schools," whereas some East Side schools are imagined to be populated by particular ethnic groups, as expressed in students' use of expressions such as "Brown school." The historically shaped and current social geographies of the city thus interact implicitly, and at times explicitly, with the local dynamics of school choice (see the full discussion of the local context in Chapter 3). It is against this background, then, that we need to question the extent to which school choice balkanizes the public school system by class and race in Vancouver, a city

being held together by a fragile multiculturalism and highly complex forms of both one-way and reverse migrations.[7]

In this dissertation, I build upon the aforementioned critical body of school choice research in order to better understand how the focus on the individual decision maker—the liberal autonomous subject unencumbered by the constraints of an integrated public school model from an earlier time—and educational choice in school systems affect young people. In particular, I explore young people's (ages 11–19) meaning-making of school choice through their lived experiences at a phenomenological and ethnographic level. I have sought to examine more precisely what young people, in contrast to parents, *negotiate* when choosing schools. Finally, I investigate how such practices of meaning-making shape young people's "horizons of possibility" for their lives and futures (Ricoeur, 1991).

## 1.1   School choice in the context of Vancouver: a focus on mini schools

I use the term "school choice" to refer to the following three most pervasive forms of choice available in Vancouver schools: open enrolment, District Specified Alternative Programs (locally referred to as mini schools), and French immersion. In 2011–2012, the portion of students who attended cross-boundary schools was 34% of the total student body in the Vancouver School District (Vancouver School Board, 2012b). The total count in the French immersion program was 1,128, while the total student count in District Alternative Programs was 2,716 in the academic year of 2012–2013 (see Table 1) (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2012).

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[7] While over 10,000 Chinese immigrants arrive in Vancouver each year, almost a third of these immigrants eventually return to their country of origin (Todd, 2011, Feb 25).

**Table 1 Student enrolment in District Specified Alternative Programs in 2012–2013**

| | |
|---|---:|
| Britannia Hockey Academy | 43 |
| Britannia Venture | 82 |
| Byng Arts Mini | 430 |
| David Thompson Odyssey | 124 |
| Gladstone Mini | 95 |
| Hamber Challenge | 193 |
| Ideal Mini | 84 |
| John Oliver Digital Immersion | 133 |
| Killarney Mini | 79 |
| King George Technology Immersion | 44 |
| Magee – SpArts | 146 |
| Point Grey Mini | 113 |
| Prince of Wales Mini | 147 |
| Templeton Mini | 117 |
| Tupper Mini | 140 |
| Vancouver Technical Flex Humanities | 90 |
| Vancouver Technical Summit | 84 |
| Windermere Leadership Mini | 134 |
| Windermere Athena Arts | 65 |
| University Transition Program | 39 |
| City School - King George | 30 |
| International Baccalaureate: Churchill | 271 |
| International Baccalaureate: Britannia | 35 |
| Trek - Prince of Wales | 112 |
| **Total** | **2,716** |

(Source: Vancouver School Board, 2013)
*Note: Gladstone's TREK program is missing in this table.

In this study, my primary focus was on District Specified Alternative Programs. Non-existent before 1970, the number of District Specified Alternative Programs was 12 in 1998, and there were 25 programs in 2013 (Pearmain, 1998; Vancouver School Board, 2013). The Vancouver School Board classifies the District Specified Alternative Programs into three different categories: 21 mini schools, schools within comprehensive urban schools; 1 academy; and 3 other specialized programs (see Vancouver School Board, 2012b). However, due to the exclusive, selective, and enriched nature of all the district alternative programs, I refer to all of

these District Specified Alternative Programs as mini schools.[8] I chose to focus on mini schools largely because of their growing dominance and competitiveness in the local landscape of school choice.

## 1.2   Research questions

It is within the radically changing global city contexts of Vancouver, which I described in the introduction, that I explore the impact of school choice policy by focusing on the experiences, meanings, and imaginations of young people whose social, racial, and spatial backgrounds differ strikingly. I examine how their varied experiences of schooling under school choice policy affect the way diverse groups of young people interpret and imagine the possibilities of their lives and, where possible, their academic and social futures in the global city. In exploring the impact of school choice on diverse groups of students, I pay particular attention to students' social, spatial, and racial meaning-making in relation to school choice policy. The following three questions guided my ethnographic study:

> (1) How do young people from diverse backgrounds conceptualize the effects of new emerging market forces in the public secondary school system, and how do such forces shape the ways in which they imagine their academic and social futures?
>
> (2) How do young people from highly diverse backgrounds experience and understand their places in different urban neighbourhoods, either through immobility or mobility, within growing inequality and ethnic racial divisions in the city of Vancouver, BC?
>
> (3) What role might race and social class play in shaping how young people conceptualize and experience schooling, peer cultures, and inclusion under the market regimes of school choice?

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[8] In fact, City School, which is one of the schools that the Board excludes from its list of mini schools, describes itself as a mini school on its school website (see http://www.cityschoolvancouver.ca/home).

## 1.3 Theoretical landscapes and key concepts

My theoretical approach to understanding young people's meaning-making of school choice draws upon the concepts of the imagination, the imaginary, and imaginary capital. First, to explore the concept of the imagination, I draw upon the field of critical youth studies that has sought to revive the part played by a phenomenological hermeneutics of interpretation (the art of interpretation) of educational and social inclusion/exclusion in order to consider choice in relation to young peoples' situated imaginations (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Norton, 2001; Ricoeur, 1978; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002; Valdes, 1991). Drawing from these theories, I argue that young people make meanings and imagine their futures through both recognition of the divisions they experience through choice as well as through the domain of affect they encounter as their constraints or mobility create a sense of the present and future. These imagined worlds of choice that young people experience are necessarily situated in their lived experiences, in particular in their material conditions and cultural contexts, and their everyday encounters with the world of choice. Their particular social, cultural, racial, and spatial locations are part of crucial matrices of experience that shape young people's interpretations of the changing imaginaries of school and place and their possible futures. These theoretical concepts thus help us understand that young people's meaning-making is not completely or solely driven by ideology or discourse; instead, it is the amalgam of social locations interfacing with real-world locations and official and unofficial choice regimes and policy discourse in a particular temporal moment (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Willis, 1981). I concur with critical youth scholars, particularly Dillabough and Kennelly (2010), who argue that young people's meanings and imaginaries of changing global cities are made and remade in

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particular classed, racialized, and spatialized local contexts which are both comparatively and differentially affected by globalization.

I also draw upon the critical policy scholarship of Rizvi and Lingard (2010) and consider that one major function of policy is to shape (but not determine) the social, cultural, national, and urban imaginary that manifests itself in people's everyday practices. While more explicitly discussed in Chapter 2, I suggest that the concept of the imaginary helps us examine how neoliberalization is not simply about shifting from social welfare approaches to market approaches at the level of governance. It also shapes how people organize themselves in the everyday sense of the world and how they interact with each other. Neoliberalism and its expansion "steer a particular formation of the subjective or phenomenological awareness of people" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 32). In doing so, neoliberalism "ontologizes the global market logic" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 32). The ideas, practices, and various reforms of neoliberalism influence the social imaginary—"the ways in which people imagine their social existence" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). This conceptual lens is particularly useful for examining policy beyond the policy discourse of neoliberalism and for beginning to examine everyday practices.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I conclude by further proposing how the idea of the imaginary can be reconceptualized as capital in order to explore the processes of social, spatial, and racial reproduction through young people's situated imaginations. I suggest that rethinking imaginary as capital enables an analysis of the imaginary in its embodied, objectified, and institutionalized manifestations. The imaginary can be analyzed as a combination of ideas, practices, ideals (both utopian and dystopian), and objects that are socially, politically, and institutionally created. In this way, the notion of the imaginary can be more analytically productive and can make social inequality and reproduction more explicit than either a singular discourse or structural approach

could on its own. The imaginary carries with it both the language of space and place but also the affective and structural dimension of experience, which is structured by histories that have come before the very idea of youth identity itself.

I combine these three theoretical views in order to create an integrative framework that helps explore how young people produce their own understandings of the social imaginary of school choice as both direct and indirect experience in a given place and time. I wish to argue that this approach does not lie in a single theoretical camp arguing for the determination of young people's conduct but rather serves as part of cultural, discursive and structural forces that operate in the interstices of individuals, time, and place. It is my hope that this framework will assist critical scholarship in extending its theoretical reach when concerned with how people respond to the dominant social imaginary of choice and their futures. I describe this framework further in Chapter 2 and argue that this approach can be fruitful for informing a study of school choice policy from the cultural vantage point of young people's experience with policy, both as a direct impact but also as something that is unfamiliar and distant.

## 1.4   Methodology and methods

For this work, I combined critical, anthropological, and interpretive approaches to better illuminate young people's meanings of school choice policy. As Ball (1994) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue, a critical policy research tradition offers an analytical and deconstructive tool set. This tool set helps examine the social, educational, and political context of education in order to understand the complex effects and consequences of policy. Yet the current tool set of the critical policy research tradition is primarily focused on discourse and thus may be insufficient for my study, which is an attempt to understand young people's meaning-making and

associated cultural and educational practices. Hence, I further drew from the anthropology of policy and interpretive policy approaches to illuminate the complex meaning-making young people expressed as I explored the impact of school choice policy on their lives. Anthropology of policy is particularly powerful in its use of an ethnographic method to delve into the cultural meanings and practices of policy (Shore & Wright, 1997). I further drew upon an interpretive policy research tradition to investigate the meanings and interpretations that youths attribute to policy and its manifestations in everyday practices and structuring processes (Ricoeur, 1991; Yanow, 2000). This combined methodological approach, which I call a *critical socio-phenomenological approach to policy studies,* provided the necessarily tools for grounding my study of policy in particular class, racial, and spatial contexts. Here, then, I contrast this approach, at least in part, by viewing policy as either disembodied or decontextualized texts or discourses outside of those who must interact with them. This approach, I would argue, can provide a different perspective on the function of a neoliberal imaginary of young people's lived experiences and meaning-making of "choice" in a rapidly changing twenty-first-century context (Appadurai, 1996).

I drew upon a multi-sited ethnographic approach to uncover how policy affects different schools, communities, and neighbourhoods locally (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). During my fieldwork, conducted between November 2009 and June 2010, I began to see ethnography as one approach for gaining close-up and personal insights into the worlds of young people as they experienced choice (Shore & Wright, 1997; Yanow, 2000).[9] During the fieldwork period, I collected qualitative data pertaining to an understanding young people's varied

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[9] Yet what distinguishes AP analysis is its emphasis on power relations, thus asking whose voices prevail, rather than a postmodernist emphasis on documenting multiple voices and narratives about a particular policy.

interpretations of school choice and their futures using interviews, observations, and document

analysis. My research activities included the following:

- Attending 16 information evenings at Vancouver mini and regular secondary schools, which are located in urban neighbourhoods with different income levels and ethnic groups, and maintaining extensive field notes

- Conducting non-participant observations at two comprehensive public secondary schools: one on the East Side (East High) and one on the West Side (West High)[10]

- Conducting 59 semi-structured interviews with students at critical times of transition: Grade 7 (the last year of elementary school), Grade 8 (the first year of secondary school), and Grade 12 (the last year of secondary school).

- Collecting and analyzing the following government documents and statistics relevant to schools and neighbourhoods (for instance, through Hansard, various policy websites and documents, and community profiles): (1) the B.C. Legislative Assembly debates pertaining to public education and its reforms between 1991 and 2006,[11] and (2) various policy documents and demographic information from VSB and BC MOE that show changes in demographics and policy changes that affect District Specified Alternative Programs (more details are provided in Chapter 3 and 4).

- Collecting media articles from *The Vancouver Sun* (1987–present) and *The Vancouver Courier* (2002–present),[12] found through Canadian Newsstand keyword searches (for terms including "Fraser Institute Report Cards," "school choice," "mini schools," "drugs," "gangs," "East Side," and "West Side" to explore the local media discourses of school choice as well as the popular public discourse of social and neighbourhood contexts of school choice. I discuss these further in Chapter 4).

Chapter 4 provides further specifics of analytic strategies and methods.

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[10] "West High" and "East High" are pseudonyms.

[11] This period included a centre-left NDP-led government (1991–2001) and a centre-right Liberal-led government (2001–2006).

[12] *The Vancouver Sun* is the major province-wide newspaper, and *The Vancouver Courier* is the major city-wide newspaper. I performed a keyword search for all the years available in the Canadian Newsstand database.

**1.5 Who and where: Grades 7, 8, and 12 at East High and West High**

At the heart of my study are the perspectives of young people from highly diverse backgrounds. I recruited 59 young people who come from a wide range of social positions and with particular ethnic, religious, and racialized historical narratives of personal and family life. I explored the geopolitical and cultural manifestation of borders and space to further investigate how young people imagined such borders and notions of space (Balibar, 1998), as well as assessing to some degree the part played by geographical mobility and its impact on young people. I investigated the differential effects of policy and assessed the question of who most benefits from these policies. My participants' residential backgrounds ranged from social housing, to mixed-income and gentrifying neighbourhoods, through to multimillion-dollar homes in highly affluent neighbourhoods. Some participants were recent immigrants, while others came from families who had long been established in Canada. Students' cultural backgrounds were also diverse and included Aboriginal, Asian, European, Middle-Eastern, and African communities. In terms of participation in school choice, some participants were enrolled at their assigned neighbourhood schools, while others were enrolled at mini schools or cross-boundary schools. Of note is that my study is not intended to simply report the multiple voices of youths without taking into consideration something about their past and present positioning in the social order of the city.

My fieldwork began with observations of young learners and their parents listening to information, asking questions, and meeting school staff and students at the 16 secondary school information evenings. There, I also recruited 11 of my 14 Grade 7 study participants, who were in their last year of elementary school. My subsequent interviews with them involved asking

about their perceptions and experiences (where applicable) of the processes of selecting, evaluating, and choosing a particular local school.

To illuminate the impact of school choice on everyday school experiences and socialization, I worked in two different secondary schools: West High, which is representative of the more general characteristics of the affluent West Side, and East High, which is more generally representative of the low-income communities but also the rapidly gentrifying neighbourhoods of the East Side. I examined the comparative spatial dynamics of the two public schools and their adjacent neighbourhoods. The two schools, while established around the same period in the early twentieth century, were imagined quite differently from the beginning. Reflecting its neighbourhood and community characteristics, which I discussed above, East High was originally imagined as a vocational school. West High, in contrast, was (and is) imagined as a school for the children of upper- and middle-class families who value university-stream liberal education. These historically and class-differentiated educational aspirations of the two schools continue today. They manifest in the strong academic reputation (and indeed the globally well-regarded status) of West High. In fact, in the Fraser Institute's Yearly School Report Card, West High has been consistently ranked as one of the top public schools in recent years in the province of British Columbia. In contrast, although East High's focus has become more diversified, which reflects the changing class characteristics of the surrounding neighbourhoods, it continues to be subject to the negative stereotypes and imaginary of inner city schools, as I discuss in Chapter 6.

Within these two large urban public neighbourhood schools, I observed the everyday practices and dynamics of two mini schools and the French immersion program at East High and one prestigious mini school at West High. My observations focused on how these different types of schools defined, practiced, and projected particular ideological and cultural norms and values

onto the school landscape. By focusing on the dynamics of these alternative programs, I have analyzed and documented the effects of choosing mini schools on the ways young people imagine their educational and social futures. In doing so, I observed the dynamics of school choice, and the role of choice within and across large urban schools that regulate and shape diverse young people's educational and social imaginations, particularly in relation to experiences of inclusion and exclusion, peer cultures, race relations, and educational futures.

My observation of students was followed by semi-structured interviews with Grade 8 and Grade 12 students. I purposely included students with diverse backgrounds as well as different school choice positions (i.e., whether they chose or not). I recruited 19 students at East High and 26 at West High. The high number at West High reflects the fact that more school choice students attend West High. Of the total number of students, 22 students were in Grade 8. I focused on Grade 8s because these students were in their first year of secondary school, and thus they were likely to have more critical views and experiences of the gap between their expectations and realities a few months after they made the transition from elementary to secondary school. I asked them to reflect retrospectively on the processes of choosing in Grade 8 and also to discuss their subsequent schooling experiences (including both challenges and possibilities associated with school choice). I also focused on Grade 12 students to examine their experiences of school choice in a summative sense, to explore what they perceived as the overall effects of school choice throughout their secondary school years, and to gather their assessments of the impact of school choice on their future directions. I thus asked them to reflect on how the process of school choice had affected their secondary school outcomes, socialization, and future plans.

Further, I drew upon a wide-ranging set of documentary information. I collected and analyzed various policy position papers, websites, and statistics pertaining to these schools that were obtained from the local school board (VSB) and the BC Ministry of Education. At the provincial level, my data included transcripts of legislative assembly debates (i.e., Hansard). This source was particularly useful as it allowed me to see the politics of school choice from the standpoint of an official public record and compare these with different perspectives about the nature and development of school policy. I also collected and analyzed major local newspapers, mainly *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Vancouver Courier*. For instance, after I conducted interviews with several students who mentioned that drugs and gangs were major concerns for them, I performed keyword searches for "drugs," "gangs," and "Vancouver secondary schools." I found several articles that addressed the problems of drugs in local secondary schools. They were assessed to contextualize and provide descriptive details to accompany the school choice narratives of young people. I provide further details of my data collection in Chapter 4.

## 1.6    Arguments and chapter outlines

In presenting the findings of this study of school choice and young people in the following seven chapters, I demonstrate the part played by school choice policy in the classification of schools and young people. I also demonstrate the role of such policies in dividing urban neighbourhoods along race and class lines and reproducing particular conceptions of urban schools and neighbourhoods. Throughout, based on my analysis of the multiple forms of data I collected, I argue that choice policies in Vancouver, BC, regulate and reproduce circulating ideas about class and race advantages. Primarily, what I wish to argue is that the theoretical ideas of the imagination, the imaginary, and imaginary capital (Anderson, 1991;

Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Kearney, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981, 1991) are critical to understanding the broader impact of school choice policy on young people's schooling experiences, social relationships, and future expectations. The significance of these concepts in studying school choice policy can be summarized as follows: When students begin to imagine new schooling options and practices, not simply a school's academic standing but also its grounding in particular cultural understandings of status, young people's senses of selfhood, identity, and future are imagined differently. As such, while students are concerned with academic as well as social futures, their interpretations of school choice are always developed along spatial lines and urban divisions (i.e., socio-geographic), along with associated ideals of "good" and/or "bad" schools and neighbourhoods. Their imagined and, at times, stereotypical interpretations of racialized neighbourhoods and associated schools also become crucial to their racial meaning-making of school choice. My study suggests the importance of understanding the dialectics between young people's imagined sense of the community and the now pervasive and global models of advanced liberal imaginaries of school choice. These dual functions interface with local histories in radically changing urban contexts.

To briefly outline the remaining chapters, in Chapter 2, I outline some of the key trends and concepts in the sociology of school choice while identifying critical research gaps. The literature review demonstrates how the field has been dominated by two main strands of structural and post-structural perspectives, leaving the theoretical and empirical landscape of the field highly polarized. As one way to integrate and expand these two robust strands of thinking, I suggest that additional importance be placed on young people's imagined social worlds of choice and the wider global imaginary of choice. I go on to discuss how an interdisciplinary approach drawn from multiple disciplines, including cultural geography, phenomenology, and youth

studies, may offer one way of moving the field of critical policy studies forward or, at the very least, open up debates about theoretical impasses that plague the sociology of education more generally.

In Chapter 3, I present contextual information to better explain the changing yet historically enduring politics, discourses, practices, and policies of school choice. Because of the colonial history of Vancouver, BC, Canadian schools have always been imagined along class and race lines that demarcate insiders and outsiders. I trace some of these local histories of schooling that are pertinent to the imagination of different ethnic, social, and racial communities through practices of school choice before the Liberal government's 2002 introduction of school choice policies. Also, I discuss the changing neoliberal reforms and politics around promoting private and independent schools, as well as alternative programs within the public system, and how these new schools and programs continue to construct and imagine schools as different communities.

In Chapter 4, I discuss my critical socio-phenomenological approach. To understand the dynamics of school choice from young people's situated and multiple perspectives, I add anthropological and interpretive approaches to a critical policy research tradition so that we can better understand young people's diverse meanings of school choice. Here, I further provide the details of my multi-sited ethnographic methods and discuss researcher positionality and research values, as well as how I grappled with issues of power and authority in the field.

In the remaining three chapters—5, 6, and 7—I provide detailed descriptions, analyses, and interpretations of the ethnographic data I collected at various school choice sites in Vancouver. In Chapter 5, I argue that young people's meanings of school choice are class-differentiated. Those who are middle class, or aspire to become middle class, hold fast to the neoliberal imaginary of education and competitive schooling models and seek out opportunities

to gain social status through such an imaginary. These students are therefore regulated into imagining themselves as neoliberal subjects by engaging in activities that shape them into learners who are competitive, self-responsible, and flexible with respect to where they are schooled. In this process, more privilege and symbolic profit are given to those who achieve neoliberal distinction. My analysis in this chapter, therefore, points out that class is not disappearing, but rather school choice policy functions as a mechanism of reconstituting the social and governmental classification of young people in the global city. In this case, class is a kind of classification system that is reconfigured under the model of school choice but continues to breed deep divisions in and across urban schools. In other words, on the surface of school choice lies a picture of liberal autonomy that represents itself in the guise of choice. Yet, as the data analyses suggest, its very function serves to undermine the visibility of class relations and simultaneously reproduces class hierarchies.

In Chapter 6, I explore how young people's practices, interpretations, and imaginations of school choice in Vancouver are related to the "global city" imaginary (Sassen, 1991, 2005). I discuss the urban imaginary of Vancouver in relation to its rising global city status as well as its historically entrenched and divided urban neighbourhoods. In particular, I point to the recurring moral anxieties surrounding gangs and failed communities in inner cities so as to understand the social and moral forces that shape the social geography of Vancouver. Within this context, I examine how young people's school choices are spatially imagined in relation to the urban geography of drugs, gangs, and poverty. Consequently, my analysis sheds light on the ways young people's spatial meanings of school choice are not only produced by but also contribute to the production and reproduction of the urban imaginary.

In the penultimate data chapter, I showcase how race, particularly racial meanings and stereotypes, factor into school choice dynamics. I first present evidence of the racialized experiences of school choice mobility. I discuss how this evidence reveals traces of an earlier colonial racial imaginary (as everyday practice rather than as discourse) and the post-colonial urban divisions that have been created as a result of this historical legacy in Vancouver. I then discuss how the education market processes and outcomes coalesce with historically shaped and contemporary moral panics around racialized ethnic minority groups. My analysis explains how school choice policy functions as a new cultural process of division, racialization, and (re)production of the dominant national imaginary of Canada. The dominant national imaginary of Canada is defined as the cultural practice of "middle-class whiteness," which continue to produce ideals of the legitimate student and "foreign others" (Said, 1994/1978). I then conclude that the market, as an advanced neoliberal policy framework, contributes to the production of racial objectification, oversimplification, and stereotyping.

In the final chapter, I elaborate on the key contributions of this study as they relate to young people's meaning-making of school choice and the larger body of school choice literature and critical educational policy studies. In addition, I revisit the concept of the imaginary and discuss how it can be reconceptualized as capital rather than habitus to illuminate the processes of social reproduction in the education market. Lastly, while highlighting the importance of including young people's perspectives in policymaking, I further discuss the importance of understanding the salience of social processes underpinning school choice in future reformulations of school choice policy.

# Chapter 2: The concept of the imagination in school choice research

This chapter has two major aims. The first aim is to provide a critical review of literature that focuses on the social, spatial, and political contexts and outcomes of school choice. The topics included in this review are the impacts of school choice on social, racial, and spatial divisions and stratifications and, further, the power of school choice policy on shaping individual conducts in alignment with the rationality of the market.[13] The second aim is to present a fresh interdisciplinary theoretical framework that conceptualizes the impact of school choice on the manner in which young people imagine their futures. In the first part, I outline some of the key trends and concepts, as well as "illuminating moments and critical impasses," that have developed in school choice research over the last 20 years, mostly in the affluent West, including Canada, the UK, the US, Australia, and New Zealand (Dillabough, 2006, p. 47).[14] I intend to provide a critical survey of current literature that identifies some key research gaps in the sociological study of the marketization of education at the primary and secondary level across the globe. I divide my discussion into two theoretical strands: structuralism and post-structuralism. I do so with the recognition that there are many overlaps between these traditions and that each approach is not easily categorized under one theoretical umbrella term. This

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[13] While there is a large body of research about the impacts of school choice policy on school efficiency, curriculum, teaching, innovation, and student/parent satisfaction (see Levin & Belfield, 2003), I will not be discussing them in this review.

[14] Because my research is an ethnographic study of school choice in an urban area in the affluent, developed nation of Canada, my literature review focuses on the phenomenon of school choice and education markets as experienced in the affluent West.

notwithstanding, a key distinction to keep in mind is that, under the umbrella term "structuralism," I discuss the role that social structures and hierarchical power relations play in the dynamics of school choice. In contrast, under the term "post-structuralism," I review critical studies that assess the power of neoliberal discourses of choice in shaping contemporary neoliberal subjectivities. In this discussion of current school choice literature, I showcase the market's impact on young people as much as possible given the very limited body of work in that area.

In the second part, I delineate my theoretical approach to a critical policy study of school choice and young people. I discuss how school choice policy can be studied afresh through an integrative framework that brings structural and post-structural traditions together. As Ball (1994) argues, a combined structural and post-structural approach can provide "nuanced interpretations of local concerns and conditions while analyzing the frameworks of possibilities and constraints given the political and economic context of education policy" (p.84). Some integrative approaches have been taken in both school choice scholarship and in the wider field of social research (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Gulson, 2004; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Peters, 2003; Reay et al., 2007), and this study is my addition to this important body of work.

In the second part of this chapter, I elaborate on how the approach I have taken can shed light on the relationship between policy as something that is tied to the past but emerges anew in socially situated young people's *imagined ideals* of their everyday school desires and their futures. Underpinning this line of thinking is my view that the practices and experiences of school choice are widely connected to the urban, national, and global imaginaries, which reflect people's sense of belonging and security in globalizing cities.

As such, through the use of three concepts, the imaginary, the imagination, and imaginary capital, I seek to forge a new way to broadly rethink the function of the education market in young people's lives. My intent is to engage with ideas of generous scholarship in moving beyond the current theoretical (and methodological) approaches that have shaped the field of school choice. I ask, in what ways could we go beyond the normalized practices of education market research to better illuminate the deep impact that school choice has on the way young people imagine their present lives and social and academic futures in the global era?

## 2.1    Literature review: sociology of school choice

The sociology of school choice is a rapidly expanding sub-field of the sociology of education (Butler, Hamnett, Ramsden, & Webber, 2007). Its key contribution has been to refocus educational research on the material outcomes and associated inequalities of education market policy, aspects that some argue have been largely neglected since the post-structural turn within the wider realm of educational and social research (Dillabough, 2006; Peters, 2003). Nevertheless, this field is not solely focused on material inequality but is further concerned with the affective and cultural dimensions of school choice.

In navigating this expanding field of school choice scholarship, I discuss the existing studies under the two theoretical umbrellas of structuralism and post-structuralism with an understanding that this division may be contentious to some, as the two approaches overlap to some extent. Nevertheless, following Gillborn and Youdell's (2009) framework, I want to suggest that the existing body of research can be divided—at least for discussion in terms of research trends—into two main categories of theory because they tend to theorize power, agency, race, and discourse differently. These distinctions have meaningful consequences for empirical

approaches to school choice policy studies. As such, within the two broad approaches of structuralism and post-structuralism, I explore the issues of class, race, gender, space, and policy. I further highlight some of the most innovative studies that draw from both structuralism and post-structuralism, especially those undertaken by critical feminist youth studies scholars, a field that has not yet, apart from a few exceptions (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; McLeod & Yates, 2006), had a substantial impact on school choice studies.

### 2.1.1    Divergence and convergence in structuralist analyses of school choice

Within traditional structuralist approaches, especially those that do not embrace neo-Marxist approaches and those that draw upon positivistic and quantitatively oriented approaches, the dominant view is to understand social categories (e.g., class, gender, race, and space) as fixed, deterministic, and essential. Within this positivistic tradition of structuralism, social groups are seen as discrete, quantifiable, and measurable categories. Nonetheless, not all structuralist researchers and theorists adhere to such assumptions. Some critical qualitative studies have argued that the notions of class, gender, and race are neither essential nor deterministic. The work of these scholars, including that of Diane Reay (Reay et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2007), troubles fixed, categorical notions of class, gender, and race, as they incorporate a post-structural emphasis on regulative rather than deterministic power relations in particular places and spaces. In other words, it is important to note the divergent assumptions that underpin empirical studies within the structuralist perspective. In the following discussion, I am attentive to these distinctions within the broad tradition of structural analysis.

Despite this important distinction within the structurally based analyses of school choice and education markets, there is consistently a *fair degree of certainty* that middle-class parents

across the globe tend to focus on their children's school success while ensuring their children's future opportunities (Alegre & Benito, 2012; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2008). The last three decades of school choice studies from around the world suggest that school choice "emerges as a major new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities" (Alegre & Benito, 2012; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995, p. 23). Together, these studies challenge some postmodern proclamations—such as the "death of class"—by showing that parents are not ahistorical, autonomous, and equal consumers of public education or education markets (Bowe, Gewirtz, & Ball, 1994).

### 2.1.1.1 Economic globalization and education reforms

The relationship between education and class has been critically illuminated by a macro-sociological perspective discerning the link between education market reforms and global economic changes forged over the past four decades. One notable contribution is Phil Brown's (1990, 1995, 2000) analyses of education marketization in relation to the broader social and economic changes that have taken place since the 1970s. As Brown (1995) delineates in great detail, new economies have established a "flexible" organization paradigm, which disrupts bureaucratic, stable employment contracts and relations with a culture of enterprise, downsizing, and restructuring. This new structure and culture of economy has produced increasingly flexible rather than bureaucratic careers. This change has also created economic insecurity and employment anxiety as parts of a new economic and social life. Brown attributes this change to the rising desires of middle-class parents to push their children towards the obtainment of post-compulsory education that can act as a kind of "insurance" against economic and social insecurity in the new flexible global economy.

Additionally, Brown (2000) observes how the culture of individual choice, as exemplified in school choice, has intensified class inequalities and conflict. He notes that the shift from the welfare state to neoliberal systems of governance and drastic cuts in public resources and infrastructure has decreased investment in public education. Instead, the shift promotes the individualistic strategy of choice to compensate for the retrenchment of the public system. Within both the political dynamics of neoliberal globalization and the Hayekian economic model of governance and society, Brown (1990, 2000) argues that the British education reforms of school choice introduced a new era of "parentocracy." This new phenomenon of parentocracy indicates the growing importance of parents' wealth and desires in shaping the educational opportunities and outcomes of their children. As such, Brown suggests that we understand the rise of the marketization and privatization of education through Fred Hirsch's (1976) idea of *positional competition*, that is, "how one stands relative to others within an implicit or explicit hierarchy" (Cited in Brown, 2000, p. 633).

Another study that has contributed significantly to this global perspective of economic change and education market is that of Amy Wells et al., focusing on the Californian context (Wells, 2002; Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Holme, 1999). In this study, Wells and her colleagues elucidate the importance of understanding the conditions of global economic developments in relation to the rise of charter schools. Charter schools are a new type of public school governed independently from local school boards. This multi-sited study strongly suggests that the current US reform effort for education marketization benefits more privileged members of society through free market policies or neoliberal tax policies. This is the result of some charter schools being located in affluent neighbourhoods that tend to have access to wealth and an extended network of parental resources. In contrast, other charter schools are in racialized neighbourhoods

with high levels of poverty and unemployment and limited access to private means (Scott &

Holme, 2002; Wells, 2002). While those charter schools offer new sites of cultural recognition

and political organizing, thus empowering historically marginalized communities and

individuals, Wells et al. (1999) conclude that the uneven realities of economic globalization and

its manifestations in public policies results in unequal resources distribution, contributing to

growing divisions within socially and economically marginalized communities as well as across

socially distinctive communities.

In Canada, the work of Alison Taylor and her colleagues (Taylor, 2006; Taylor & Krahn,

2009; Taylor & MacKay, 2008; Taylor & Woollard, 2003) has contributed significantly to our

understanding of the interface between a changing economy under the forces of economic and

cultural globalization and the neoliberal reforms of education marketization. Situated in Alberta,

the leading province of market reforms in Canada, her study shows how choice and competition

in the education sector have individualized risk and, in turn, how this policy direction has tended

to "reinforce socially structured inequalities and encourage the commodification of social

relations" (Taylor & Woollard, 2003, p. 617). Particularly, looking at the impact of neoliberal

reforms of education on vocational education, in the context of the growing demand for high

skills in a knowledge economy, Taylor (2006) observes rising polarization in the educational

pathways. Elite academic alternative programs gain more popularity among parents, and thus

schools, and attract high-achieving students, thereby increasing the advantages of those who are

already achieving well. Meanwhile, trade programs tend to be less popular and are offered

largely to students with working-class backgrounds. In globally portable curriculums, such as the

International Baccalaureate program, students gain credentials that open up more opportunities at

the global level, whereas trade-related programs tend to limit opportunities to the students'

regional areas (Taylor, 2006).

The IB program, in fact, has been increasingly noted as a way by which a transnational

ruling class might secure advantageous positions in the era of neoliberal globalization (Brown &

Lauder, 2009). While this program traditionally catered to the children of professional global

workers, today, national elites increasingly enrol their children in this program because it grants

internationally recognized and competitive credentials, meaning that those with IB credentials

are globally competitive (Brown & Lauder, 2009). As Taylor (2006) notes above, the IB

program is popular as a local alternative program to the provincial curriculum, resulting in the

cream-skimming of the brightest students from other public schools. This phenomenon has been

observed in Australia, as well, where 57 of the country's schools now offer the IB Diploma

(Doherty, Mu, & Shield, 2009). As Brown and Lauder (2009) note, the IB program not only

helps build globally desirable characters (attractive to multinational corporations) but also helps

these students obtain credentials deemed critical for success in the global economic labour

market. The IB program provides an opportunity for students to increase their capacity for

crossing national boundaries with a competitive edge (Doherty et al., 2009). Consequently,

choice programs such as the IB, which are growing across the globe as a new "gold standard" for

education, provide a secured path between elite universities and high-end segments of the global

labour market and thus contribute to the creation of a new transnational ruling class (Brown &

Lauder, 2009, p. 135).

Together, these American, British, Canadian, and Australian studies with a macro-

politico-economic perspective identify the uneven material outcomes of economic globalization

regarding the stratification and deregulation of public schools. These links between class,

education, and economy have also been observed elsewhere, such as in New Zealand (Lauder et al., 1999) and Sweden (Lindström, 1999). They inform us that school choice practice is a class strategy to obtain a positional advantage in an era of intensifying global competition and labour market pressure. Subsequently, family resources play a central role in the market structure of education and the reproduction of school inequalities. The following section discusses how this macro pattern of economy, class, and school choice operates in the micro context of choice practice.

### 2.1.1.2    Cultural sociology and middle classes in the education market

Viewing class through a socio-cultural lens, especially drawing on Bourdieu's three concepts of habitus, capital, and field, has provided a compelling focus for exploring the social and cultural dimensions of school choice at the individual level. Indeed, even in Brown's (1995) thesis, it is clear that he was concerned not only with economic capital but also with the obtainment of cultural capital that was critical to securing a middle-class position in the 1990s global economic reconfiguration. One particularly notable early study on the everyday process of the education market is Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe's 1995 study. Drawing on Bourdieu's socio-cultural approach, their study marks a radical sociological turn. Their study began as a critique of the earlier investigations of Coldron and Boulton (1991) and Echols, McPherson and Willims (1990), which reported how the market system was making schools more responsive to parents' priorities and which identified (but did not problematize) reasons, factors, and certainties for individual choice (see Gewirtz et al., 1995). Gewirtz et al. (1995) insightfully note that these studies are limited as they lack insight into the processes and the contexts of choice-making.

In addition, their study compellingly directs our attention to the relational process of choice-making, which implies culturally and socially specific meanings of parental choice in a particular social milieu. In particular, drawing from Bourdieu's concept of taste, the authors illuminate the covert coding and decoding between a parent's choice of school and a school's style of presentation, which have been similarly explored in the American context by Lopez et al. (2002). Gewirtz et al. (1995) also showed that educational selection and social class are intricately and covertly connected to the micro processes of school choice. Through a cultural system of symbols and tastes exchanged in the education economy, the middle classes are both united and separated by their homology and distinction from the "others." As such, Gewirtz et al. (1995) were able to demonstrate the link between school choice and consumer "preferences" (Brown, 1990), or what Bourdieu (1984) defines as "taste," a term that embodies social structures and relations. This finding, resonating notably with later studies done by Lopez et al. (2002) and Reay and Ball (1997), continues to illuminate the covert cultural processes of social reproduction in the development and practices of education markets.

One influential thought that has emerged from these class-focused analyses of school choice and education market research, especially in the context of Britain, is that school choice policy is deeply implicated in the ontology of a middle-class position in the practice of social reproduction. British educational sociologist Stephen Ball (2003) has contributed significantly to elucidating the sociological relationship between school choice and education markets. Ball claims, "class is about knowing how to act at these defining moments" on the basis of accumulated and everyday practices in particular social class positions (Ball, 2003, p. 7). He thus argues that school choice needs to be understood in relation to everyday class practices.

What is further notable about the reproductive capacity of the middle classes is their social network of privilege (Alegre & Benito, 2012; Ball, 2003). In order to safeguard against uncertainties and diversification, middle-class families rely considerably on their social networks, such as family and professional affiliations, which provide high-quality information about different schools and curricula (Alegre & Benito, 2012). Both Ball's (2003) and Alegre and Benito's (2012) studies therefore indicate that middle-class parents tend to have easier and faster access to the informally circulating "hot knowledge" that emerges from a reliable and direct circuit of formal and especially informal information in their privileged social network. Their advantageous position in relation to both informal and formal social networks matters to their social reproduction, especially when compared to the displacement experiences of migrant families (Byrne & De Tona, 2012).

These important insights elucidate how those in middle-class positions normalize the practices of deploying capital and advancing social positions by excluding the groups that may be seen as competing with their advantages.[15] Ball is therefore critical of the implementation of market reforms in education as being "essentially a *class strategy which has as one of its major effects the reproduction of relative social class (and ethnic) advantages and disadvantages*" (2003, p. 4, original italics). This analysis continues to be reflected in many current studies that point to the use of resources, desire, and networks by the middle class in an attempt to maintain

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[15] Ball's view is similar to the Weberian theory that the monopolization of opportunities and rewards by particular groups contributes to inequality (Turner, 2006). In other words, groups maintain power and status by organizing formal and informal systems of social closure that open and close access to certain resources based on group identification. Group membership is therefore a critical source of socio-economic advantage.

and improve their social positions through available school choices around the world (Ball, 2003; Gulson, 2011; Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007; Wells, 2009; Wu, 2011; Yoon & Gulson, 2010).

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge those who challenge the ways in which middle-class practices are normalized with respect to school choice. Middle-class families are not assumed to behave uniformly or to use the same type of class strategies to advance their interests over those of other families. Parental values, personal values, national/local ethos, and political views do affect choice behaviors among middle-class parents (Ball, 2003; Butler & van Zanten, 2007; Oría et al., 2007; Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007; Reay, 2005). A growing number of scholars have thus argued that middle-class status is not always exclusive of social and ethnic others. Drawing on post-structural insights, these scholars no longer straightforwardly conceptualize the analytical categories of class, gender, and race. While positivistic analyses of school choice continue to rely on fixed notions of identity, it should be noted that critical qualitative researchers have moved beyond what is sometimes seen as a deterministic analysis of the relationships between school choice policy and class locations. These scholars, notably Crozier et al. (2008) and Reay et al. (2008), have done so by exposing the complex interactions between cultural values, emotive processes, and discursive policy practices. This nuanced approach to structural analysis with a post-structural approach to subjectivity, performativity, and discourse provides an important foundation for framing future studies, including the work of this thesis.

In the following section, I discuss the affective and spatial dimensions of school choice as they relate to class disparity. I then review research on the racial dynamics of school choice before I move on to a discussion of post-structurally informed market research.

### 2.1.1.3    Affective and gendered dimensions of school choice

Critical gender and feminist scholars have compellingly shown how the market system and associated school choice activities are highly emotional processes, mediated by class habitus as well as gendered, racialized, and classed power relations (Byrne & De Tona, 2012; Dehli, 1996a; Hey, 1996; Reay, 1998). The importance of emotion has emerged from a long-held view that class identities are deeply embedded in one's "structures of feelings," which in turn shape the patterns of school choice participation and decision-making (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2003; Robson & Butler, 2001).

The most notable research linking emotion and school choice is Diane Reay's (2004) extensive work on emotional capital, women, and social class. Her critical insight emerges from identifying the emotional distance of individuals from formal education systems, which is often a result of those individuals attending class-biased formal schools. Reay (2004) notes that such experience is important in identifying the embodied working-class habitus, which informs the class-differentiated practice of school choice. This theory illuminates how working-class parents' own alienating experiences of formal schooling influence their practice of school choice for their children (Reay & Ball, 1997). Emotional ties and capital are therefore key to understanding the dynamics of school choice, which are underpinned by the degree of parental participation (e.g., in gathering information and deploying more private resources). While it is difficult to theorize any straightforward relationship between class, emotion, and education, Reay (2005) argues that the affective dimension of class, "a powerful dynamic between emotions, the psyche and class inequalities," is now produced and reproduced in the new marketplace of education (Bourdieu, 1999; Reay, 2005, p. 911).

Further, studies from the US, the UK, and Australia show that parents' emotional engagement with their children's schooling is a gendered process. Current research shows that mothers tend to experience a more intense emotional engagement when it comes to choosing a school in the education market, as they tend to be more heavily involved in the process (Cooper, 2007; Reay, 2004; Smith, 1989). Mothers invest more of their emotional energy into ensuring children's well-being and academic success; as such, they tend to experience an extensive range of emotions in relation to their children's schooling, such as guilt, anxiety, frustration, and empathy (Reay, 2004). Working-class mothers (especially ethnic minorities) who have negative experiences of formal schooling are further challenged when participating in their children's school choice (Cooper, 2007; Reay, 2004).

Particularly, US scholar Cooper (2007) suggests that the processes of low-income African-American mothers' school choice for their children are replete with frustration and anger at the inequities that they themselves experienced as well as the devaluation and disrespect that they think their children receive in the education system. Furthermore, the experiences of migrant mothers in Manchester, UK, reveal the gendered differences in access to, and participation in, school choice (Byrne & De Tona, 2012). Byrne and De Tona's (2012) research shows that migrant mothers tend to experience greater social isolation and cultural conflict when participating in their children's school choice and more broadly in the school system. This body of research illuminates how emotional links in the intergenerational practice of school choice are important in understanding class, gender, race, and the educational policy of choice.

Most relevant to my research interests is the compelling work generated by critical youth scholars, especially those who have shown how market processes and consequences affect young people in a multicultural and post-industrial urban context. Lucey and Reay (2002) and

Dillabough and Kennelly (2010) illustrate the emotional processes of school choice and reveal the ways in which particular schools come to be "demonized" in the minds of young children, affecting both their present and future lives. These negative consequences are the most damaging for low-income and ethnic minority immigrant and refugee youths. These young people feel chained to "demonized" schools and neighbourhoods, a feeling that contributes in hindering their formation of a constructive learning identity, which is necessary in a lifelong learning society (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999; Dillabough, Kennelly, & Wang, 2007; Lucey & Reay, 2002). In other words, in the intensifying dynamics of the education market, working-class young people who are already marginalized in the urban context experience a heightened feeling of being "demonized" and "warehoused" in their inner-city schools (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Reay & Lucey, 2003). Meanwhile, Reay and Lucey (2002) also note that middle-class children endure the burden of carrying the "beacon of excellence" and experience stress due to performance anxiety, competition, and feelings of inadequacy.

**2.1.1.4    Historically shaped and currently changing unequal spatial conditions**

The aforementioned studies of young people and their spatial meaning-making practices are particularly notable examples of another major development: a spatial turn in the school choice literature of the past decade. An increasing number of scholars have drawn from theories of human geography and critical space theories to investigate—both quantitatively and qualitatively—the importance of a range of issues, including proximity, distance, neighbourhoods, and spatial imaginary, in the dynamics of the education market (Gulson & Pedroni, 2011; Gulson & Symes, 2007; Lubienski & Dougherty, 2009; Taylor, 2002, 2009).

One important contribution has been the focus on investigating school choice dynamics in relation to historical geographies—which are stubbornly embedded in the spatial relations of urban life and schooling (André-Bechely, 2007). Andre-Bechely (2007), Lucey and Reay (2002), and Byrne and De Tona (2012) note that students in marginalized urban areas have limited access to choice because of the distances that often separate them from the affluent areas of the city. With limited means (e.g., time and transportation, which can be costly in urban centres with complicated transit systems), these individuals, who tend to be working-class and ethnic others, are unable to accomplish the forms of choice that provide them with educational opportunities and advantages (André-Bechely, 2007). In other words, school choice is entangled with historically shaped geographical "artifacts of past and present racism" (Pulido, 2000, cited in André-Bechely, 2007, p. 1361).

Further highlighting these historical and geographical patterns of classed and racialized neighbourhoods and schooling, Chris Taylor (2009) has contributed significantly to the conceptualization of geography of school choice with an investigation of the uneven local and national geographies of competition, school choice, and education markets. Through the novel concept of *competition space*, an area in which particular types of schools are in competition with each other, Taylor (2009) notes that not all schools compete in the same way or to the same extent. This insight, echoing an earlier study by Ball et al. (1995), demonstrates that similar types of schools, which target similar class and racial groups, compete against each other within particular geographic boundaries. As such, Taylor identifies the historical formation as well as the current redevelopment of urban geography (with concurrent educational provision and catchment areas) as key aspects to be taken into consideration when we try to understand the expansion of school choice and its impact on spatialized social segregation.

Some particularly notable studies showcasing the links between the education market and urban space are based in the inner cities of major urban centres, as explored in the work of Butler and Robson (2003), Gulson (2011), and Lipman (2008). In all these studies, we find that the urban housing market, urban renewal policies, and the development of the education market are closely linked, especially in the increasingly gentrified urban cores of London, Sydney, Vancouver, and Chicago. Whether intentionally or not, school choice policies provide a policy platform on which to produce and maintain an exclusive social and educational community of white middle-class families gentrifying the inner city neighbourhoods, resulting in the displacement of long-term low-income residents and people of colour (Gulson, 2011; Lipman, 2008). In this way, school choice tends to create further divisions within the increasingly multicultural, economically polarizing neighbourhoods of major urban centres. This body of work illuminates the interplay of urban renewal, education policy, and identity formation.

Further, the studies of Lubienski and his colleagues (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Lubienski & Dougherty, 2009; Lubienski et al., 2009) document different educational options across diverse, and often segregated, social and racial landscapes in the US. They note the exclusionary strategies that schools embrace in order to enhance their market positions. Subsequently, marginalized inner-city neighbourhoods are less served by the education market in the most dynamic US urban education areas, including Detroit; Washington, DC; and New Orleans. Gulosino and Lubienski (2011) further critically assess whether the competitive marketplace produces greater incentives for charter schools to improve options, especially for students in economically and racially segregated public schools. They examine the potential of competition in producing equitable educational opportunities for disadvantaged students in Detroit, one of the most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the US. What they conclude is

that charter schools, especially profit-oriented schools, avoid areas with more disadvantaged students in order to enhance their own market position. Further, Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, and Henig's (2002) study in Washington, DC, corroborates the finding that profit-oriented charter schools tend to be found in more affluent areas and avoid students with greater needs. As such, the new education structure of the market appears to be ever more closely associated with uneven urban processes.

How these changes affect young people's spatialized meaning-making of school choice has been investigated in some small-scale qualitative studies. Particularly, in the UK, Reay and Lucey (2003) note how the education market accelerates the historically differentiated values of local areas. Those who live in wealthy neighbourhoods experience profits of localization, that is, their neighbourhoods and schools are seen as good and desirable compared to other local areas (Reay & Lucey, 2003). In contrast, those living in marginalized neighbourhoods feel demonized, as their neighbourhood schools and neighbourhoods become devalued (Reay & Lucey, 2003). Further, these studies reveal that working-class children experience a feeling of being "chained to a place" (to use Bourdieu's expression) because they have little access to schools that are good but are also far away from their homes and neighbourhoods (Reay & Lucey, 2003). Also, Heath's (2009) UK study takes up an interesting intersection of space, student experience, and the education market. Her study reveals that students' experiences, both positive and negative— and the impact of those experiences on students' identities—are tied to the ways in which the education market is configured in particular locales. As such, in the regions where schools are stratified and parents are actively involved in choice, students placed in their preferred schools have positive experiences of choice, while those who fail to be placed have negative experiences of choice. Taken together, this body of research leads to the conclusion that the marketization of

education interacts closely with the spatial dynamics of urban (re)development, demographic changes in particular regions and cities, and concurrent marginalization.

### 2.1.1.5    Increasing racial and ethnic separation

The spatial dynamics of education are associated with the racially segregating processes and consequences of school choice. For instance, Lopez, Wells, and Holmes' (2002) US study and Gulson's (2011) study poignantly note how "safe" images of charter schools have racial undertones (e.g., associating violent youth gangs with youths from particular racial and ethnic minority groups). They argue that good public schools (including charter schools) tend to create not only culturally but also racially exclusive communities. Indeed, across Canada, Australia, the UK, the US, and Sweden, there is growing evidence of racialized parental school choice in socially and ethnically mixed inner cities (Butler, 2003; Gulson, 2011; Levine-Rasky, 2008; Lucey & Reay, 2002; Wells, 2009). Both overt and covert forms of school choice seem to be more frequently used by white middle-class parents who tend to work the education system in order to create social and educational advantages for their children (Ball, 2003; Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009; Crozier et al., 2008; Garcia, 2008; Johnson & Shapiro, 2003; Lopez et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2008). Especially in the UK and Canada, researchers have suggested that white middle-class parents avoid schools with a high number of immigrant minority students, as they perceive them as "bad" or even as "foreigners'" schools (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Levine-Rasky, 2008; Lucey & Reay, 2002). Even when parents choose racially mixed comprehensive schools, studies such as that of Reay et al. (2008) show that this choice tends to serve the interests of white middle-class families who wish to consume and capitalize on multiculturalism.

Nonetheless, these white middle-class patterns need to be considered in light of the previous discussion on the irreducibility of the middle classes into a single category.

In contrast, Byrne and De Tona's (2012) study of migrant families' school choice in Greater Manchester, UK, shows that migrant families tend to choose ethnically diverse schools. They suggest migrant families' choices reflect a complex set of considerations, which include avoiding overt racism while trying to ensure their children's success by enrolling them in good schools (Byrne & De Tona, 2012). They argue that migrant families' school choices are reflective of both a classed desire and a racialized process. This study echoes recent studies from Sweden. Bunar and Kallstenius' ethnography reveals deep social and racial divisions existing in the operation of school choice (Bunar, 2010a). The study points to the fact that "choice students" who travel to a popular public school, located in a socially dominant neighbourhood, do not mix well with "neighbourhood students." Further, Bunar (2010b) argues that students of immigrant and working-class backgrounds stay in their tarnished local public schools, in disadvantaged "multicultural" neighbourhoods, in order to avoid racism. Local ethnic communities and a feeling of belonging play a more important role in racial and ethnic minority students' choice of schools (Bunar, 2010b). Bunar (2010b) emphasizes the importance of social networks, cultural recognition, and multicultural ties in school choice more than the exchange values of educational commodities, social background, or transportation costs. Subsequently, Swedish schools, in the wake of neoliberal educational reforms through deregulation, privatization, and decentralization, appear to be increasingly racially and ethnically polarized as the number of ethnic immigrant students rises. Meanwhile, the effects of this shift on academic achievements and school operation costs are reported to be marginal (Lindbom, 2010; Bunar, 2010).

In the US, the number of studies that present statistical evidence of racialized school choice patterns has been growing steadily (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Cobb & Glass, 1999; Lopez et al., 2002; Sohoni & Saporito, 2009). For example, Sohoni and Saporito's (2009) study undertaken in the 22 largest school districts across the United States reveals that choosing a school other than one's assigned neighbourhood public school increases racial segregation, largely due to white flight, a phenomenon of white families leaving increasingly "diverse" (i.e., attended by social and ethnic minorities) urban neighbourhood schools. Renzulli and Evans' (2005) study further shows that white parents who choose charter schools often live in districts that have few schools serving white enclaves. Together, these studies suggest that charter schools produce greater racial isolation rather than promoting racial inclusion and diversity in districts with multiple racial groups.

Related research in the Canadian context is the work of Levine-Rasky (2008), Davies and Aurini (2011; 2008), and Yoon and Gulson (2010), all of which found that middle-class families tend to use school choice as a way to secure their children's success. In particular, Davies and Aurini (2011; 2008) suggest that middle-class parents are increasingly managing their children's lives by treating them as projects-in-the-making. Levine-Rasky (2008) further notes the reconstitutive interplay between being middle class and being white as a way of advancing social advantage through school choice practice. She finds that white Canadian middle-class parents often perceive the rise of immigrant populations in their schools and neighbourhoods as threats to their stability and the achievement status of the families in their neighbourhoods. Their strategies—disrupted by dilemma and ambivalence in some cases— include the construction of a fundamental difference between their children and immigrant children. Echoing an earlier Canadian study conducted by Dehli (1996b), Levine-Rasky's (2008)

study reveals how white privilege embodied in the occupation of a middle-class position is expressed and secured through "choice" in the face of broader social changes and changes at neighbourhood schools. Further echoing the above studies, Yoon and Gulson's (2010) study in Vancouver noted racial segregation in public school choice by investigating the connection between political power, national languages, and social exclusion in the education market. While some alternative public and private schools have been established to meet the needs of racial and ethnic minorities in Canada (Dei, 1995), to date, little empirical research has been conducted to assess the social and academic outcomes of such choice schools for minority populations. A recent study by Gulson and Webb (2012) notes that not all alternative programs are equally welcomed in the public system of choice and that alternative schools that cater to racial and ethnic minority groups are resisted by the wider public because they are perceived to pose "a threat to national identity" (p. 705). The existing research thus illuminates the fact that educational stakeholders ought to address the broader power inequalities of race and class in the temporal moment in order to understand the dynamics of school choice and its complex consequences on social and racial relations.

### 2.1.1.6    Impasses of social segregation and choice

In short, the processes of reproducing social inequality in the educational realm are complex and often covert (and culturally regulated). As such, how people understand the changing educational structure matters greatly to the construction of their own classed, gendered, and racialized selfhood (Byrne & De Tona, 2012; Dillabough, 2004). The major contribution of these structurally based analyses to date is their pointed critique of the broader social inequalities that underpin the current practice of school choice. In particular, they point to white middle-class

parents' practice of "partial inclusion" of others in the current public education system (Reay et al., 2007, p. 1054). Worth noting is the need for studies focusing on the growing structural injustices that underpin class and ethnic inequalities, as well as white middle-class insecurity (Reay et al., 2007).

Most quantitative studies to date have supported the view (which has largely been assessed qualitatively) that school choice is mainly taken up by those who have social advantages and privilege, thus increasing social inequality. Echols, McPherson, and Willms' (1990) study in Scotland; Lauder et al.'s (1999) analysis in New Zealand; Butler et al.'s (2007) study in East London; Alegre and Benito's (2012) study in Spain; and Wells' (2009) recent review of US studies show that socially privileged classes benefit more from school choice options. In particular, Butler et al.'s (2007) recent study shows that the best-performing schools attract pupils from a wide range of areas and from more affluent neighbourhoods, supporting the argument that school choice patterns are largely initiated by advantaged middle-class families. Parents with university educations and professional occupations are more likely to choose a school outside their neighbourhood—at times by deploying extreme measures, such as lying about the family's address, to secure their children's attendance at good schools (Butler et al., 2007; Echols et al., 1990; Lauder et al., 1999; Levin & Belfield, 2003). Also, in the US, extensive literature reviews by both Levin and Belfield (2003) and Wells (2009) corroborate the claim that choosing schools increases inequality, except when low-income families receive targeted assistance from educational vouchers, while segregation has educational implications in terms of the distribution of resources as well as in expectations and opportunities.

Nonetheless, not all studies support the reproductive function of school choice. Challenging the above "consensus" are Taylor (2002) and Gorard and Fitz (2006), who conclude

from their nationwide data from England and Wales that socio-economic segregation has decreased as a result of school choice. Taylor (2002) writes, "The differences between the aggregated social status of school intakes were actually less than it would have been if pupils were allocated to their nearest school" (p. 250). Lindbom's (2010) study in Sweden also suggests that school choice has reduced socio-economic segregation, which has otherwise increased since the 1990s as a result of residential segregation (p. 625). The effects of the education market on social inequality, segregation, polarization, and school differentiation remain debatable at the national level. Nonetheless, contrasting findings suggest that social and educational reproduction occurs in various localities, as evident in the many studies evaluated in this literature review. Indeed, Taylor's (2002) study also shows that while social mixing occurs in the education marketplace, especially among those in the middle class, the outlying best and worst schools' student intake continues to be highly polarized. Thus, the extent to which school choice is linked to social inequality necessitates further qualitative examinations, since measurements of the segregation index can be somewhat reductive.

Between-school analyses, for instance, may provide little insight into within-school social segregation. This is problematic given that an increasing number of choice programs (including academic streaming and tracking) occur within individual schools. Further exploration is needed as to whether students from different class and racial backgrounds mix while attending the same school. If so, to what extent, and how, is their socialization negotiated by their different class and racial positions? How do their experiences of school choice influence their social and racial imaginations?

One critical lesson to be taken from the ongoing controversy surrounding the school choice market's effects on social inequality, segregation, and polarization is that while we need

to study the macro patterns of class and school choice, we also need to pay attention to particular

local and school contexts and associated effects on young people before making generalized

conclusions about the market effects across a nation-state or, comparatively, across nations.

Arguably, then, we need both quantitative and qualitative studies in order to understand the

structural and cultural effects of school choice. For future studies, I believe that the social, racial,

and gendered contexts in which small-scale qualitative studies are conducted can provide

invaluable insight into the complex macro-social processes that continuously produce high levels

of social and ethnic segregation, which have problematic consequences for both equality and

equity in education.

## 2.1.2   School choice and post-structural theories of power and subjectivity[16]

Post-structural notions of power, especially with an emphasis on the role of discourse in

the effects and operation of novel forms of power, have had a significant impact on school

choice research and scholarship. From this vantage point, critical policy scholars have gone

beyond the notion of policy as *text* and have moved towards understanding policy as *discourse*

(see Ball, 1994). In other words, post-structural school choice scholars have highlighted the

neoliberal power of the state, as evident in the interface between market discourses, technologies

of power, and educational subjects. In the following section, I discuss studies that illuminate the

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[16] The term "subjectivity" has been used to denote the power of discourse in constituting the individual as the

subject.  However, gender and youth studies scholars, including Dillabough and Kennelly (2010) and McLeod and

Yates (2006), as well as post-structural spatial theorists (Gulson, 2011; Gulson & Symes, 2007), have used the same

concept to theorize about the powerful effects of "multiple historical and contemporary factors, including social,

schooling, and psychodynamic relations" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 38) on the formation of identity.

new discursive effects of education marketization on educational actors' subject formation. In doing so, I contrast a post-structural analysis of policy as discourse with a structural analysis of policy as text in order to showcase analytical distinctions and associated theoretical traditions. Despite the intricate connections between these two types of analysis, my discussion's purpose is to identify the distinctive nature of some of this research and the diverse directions it has taken (Ball, 1994; Gillborn & Youdell, 2009).

Drawing on Ball's (1994) analytical division of policy analysis as text and discourse, I first discuss neoliberal market policy as text. Secondly, I review a body of post-structural school choice literature that theorizes policy as discourse; that is, I explore the ways that market discourses and associated practices impinge on subjectivity: how the self is formed through the circulation of discourses as well as the normalization of judgment in educational and social processes (Foucault, 1995/1975). I examine, as Rose and Miller (1992, 2008) have noted, the ways in which market discourses, as utilized in state reforms of education, shape "the beliefs and conduct of others in desired direction by acting upon their will" and further impressing upon their choice (p. 175). My review further highlights the emerging post-structural analytic on school choice scholarship, especially in relation to race and space.

### 2.1.2.1   Policy as text: critical policy analysis of market rhetoric and ideology

The theoretical foundation underpinning the textual analysis of policy is that actors constitute and contest the views and intentions as expressed in policy texts (Ball, 1994). The critical emphasis lies on policy as text, adopted by particular actors who wish to reify certain visions of the social and educational world. By identifying the main author(s) and political parties involved in the creation of a market policy text, and the reasons it was created, this body

of critical scholarship emphasizes the social and political agency and the ideological

intentionality and interests behind education marketization reform.

Critical educational scholars sharing this perspective use empirical studies to interrogate

pro-market arguments, offering a reflexive critique of the market ideology of rational choice

makers (Ball, 1993, 2003; Bowe et al., 1994; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Lauder et al., 1999; Reay,

1996). They have contested the flawed assumptions of market theory, such as rationality, parents

as consumers, and education as a commodity. For instance, Ball (1993, 1994) and Apple (2004)

critique the flawed arguments made for markets and against public monopolies, which have been

made by various free-market thinkers including public policy scholars such as Chubb and Moe

(1990) in the US and economists Fredric Hayek and Milton Friedman.[17] Ball (1993, 1994) notes

how a market approach ignores unequal social, economic, and educational realities. Apple

(2004) identifies market-based educational reforms as a new political initiative intended by right-

wing politicians to advance their agendas and power. After reviewing the initial developments

and consequences of devolution and choice in post-industrial societies, Whitty et al. (1998)

similarly suggest that education market rhetoric is introduced to persuade the public that the

education system would work better as a market rather than as a social welfare framework. They

show how such persuasive arguments are evident in new managerial handbooks that redefine

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[17] Friedman's (1982) and Chubb and Moe's (1990) work has significantly influenced the establishment of a system

of educational choice in the frame of a market model in the US. While their construction of choice does not exhaust

the myriad of choice reforms, the basic elements of the system they have laid out make up the core elements of

many contemporary school choice reforms.  One major common thread amongst these thinkers, although Friedman

emphasizes the demand side of market reforms while Chubb and Moe emphasize the supply side, is that school

choice would work as the most efficient organizational means to raise educational and school quality for all

(Friedman, 1982; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Raham, 1998).

leadership, teacher professionalism, and school effectiveness using the language of managerialism and business (Codd, 1994; Robertson, 1996; Whitty et al., 1998). As such, these policy scholars have critiqued market rhetoric and ideology for their roles in making erroneous assumptions about human behaviours and the market system (Apple, 2001, 2004; Ball, 1993, 1994; Gaskell, 1995; Marginson, 1997; Whitty et al., 1998).

### 2.1.2.2  Policy as discourse: neoliberal subjectivity and techniques of the self

In contrast to the above theoretical view of policy as text, a considerable number of school choice scholars draw on a post-structural view of policy as discourse. From this theoretical vantage point, they theorize policy as a discourse that exerts the power to regulate those embedded in the existing matrix of choice policy by constructing certain rationalities and possibilities for thought, action, and choice (Ball, 1994; Shore & Wright, 1997). In other words, prevailing discourses conveyed in policies shape norms of conduct and thus have powerful effects on subject formation (Shore & Wright, 1997). According to this view, identity is discursively constituted by prevailing discourses that are reproduced over and over again (Gillborn & Youdell, 2009; Gulson, 2011, p. 180).

Articulating what policy as discourse achieves in relation to a student's formation, some post-structural views theorize individuals as taking up social positions that are constructed for them within policies rather than as actors and agents who are "free" to exercise their agency (Ball, 1994; McLeod & Yates, 2006). This post-structural analysis is clearly the result of the proliferation of policy studies using Foucaultian theoretical insights, which emphasize the powerful impact of discourses and the associated governing technologies of marketization on individual subjectivity. Michel Foucault's (1980, 1984, 2000) theories of power and discourse

51

have greatly influenced the critique of structuralist, totalizing examinations of educational institutions and market processes. In particular, Foucaultian governmentality scholars, such as Nikolas Rose (1996) and Barry, Osborne, and Rose (1996), have helped create powerful critiques of the concept of neoliberal governance, including the marketization of education. They argue that neoliberal governmentality—that is, the rationality of neoliberal government in achieving its social, economic, and political objectives—operates through the construction of free, active, and enterprising individuals who govern themselves and take responsibility for their successes and failures in a market society, while the responsibility of the state dwindles (Shore & Wright, 1997). This new wave of post-structural thinking about social and individual life in neoliberal societies has had a significant influence on the analysis of marketization in education.

Michael Peters' (2005) work is particularly significant in elucidating the rise of "prudentialism" in education and its production of the subject position of neoliberal individuals. Peters (2005) explains that the neoliberal market system shapes individuals as actuaries who manage and calculate risks, and in doing so they become entrepreneurial selves in a market-based society and in education. He argues that the language of choice effectively disguises the subjectification of the individual through the discourse of rational choice. Such language also constructs individuals, especially parents and learners, as responsible citizens.

These theoretical arguments have also been examined empirically across the Atlantic. Maguire (2004), for instance, critically analyzes the modern teacher, who is a successful performer if he or she is flexible, ambitious, and competitive in conformity with the policy lexicon of Britain's New Labour government. Ball (2004) elucidates how the market culture of competition leads to constant evaluation of teachers based on narrow discursive standards. New market standards are shown to construct a particular kind of teacher who shows that he or she is

adept in the economy of education by increasing his or her value-added, measurable productivity (Ball, 2004). Similarly, in the US, Webb (2006) argues that teachers' agency is seriously circumscribed by new accountability measures of performance and by peer and administrative surveillance mechanisms. The way teachers understand themselves and how they shape their own conduct is increasingly steered by neoliberal market discourses that define a good school and good teachers. These studies together suggest that the power of market discourses operates in the circulation of performance outcomes reports and league tables. The circulation of these statistics regulates the identities and actions of good teachers.

Furthermore, post-structural analysis has informed how new market discourses and practices make learners knowable while shaping them into particular subject positions. Particularly notable studies in the UK were conducted by Gillborn and Youdell (2000) and Youdell (2004), who unravel how the discourses of education market reforms impact learners' subjectivities of schooling and inclusion. They suggest that a new technique of education rationing creates discursive positions that learners can take up. For instance, they note that under the intense competition of the education market, schools tend to create a practice termed "educational triage," which classifies learners as "safe," "under-achievers," and "without hope" and positions them in particular educational standings in relation to each other (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 134). Reay and Lucey's (2000, 2002, 2003) work also demonstrates the constitutive role of choice and marketization discourses in the formation of student identity. In analyzing the discourse of excellence, Reay and Lucey (2002) argue that the production of discourse in the market context has a stronger tendency to create the opposite discourse, one that has detrimental effects on young people and their learner identities. These opposing discourses are often generated in relation to the official discourses of choice and the ideal. As such, as

Lindblad and Popkewitz (2004) argue, market discourses (including statistical reports and league tables) not only reconfigure the entire educational community but also have the effect of ordering "the moral conduct of the child" (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004, p. xxviii).

Similarly, the impact of neoliberal discursive practices on creating new subject positions has also been studied in the North American context. For instance, Stack (2006) and Vinson and Ross (2003) argue that individual learners (as well as their families and the entire population) are called upon to become prudent and responsible choosers and students largely because of the discourses circulating in the media about both international and provincial testing outcomes. Also, a recent American study by Demerath and Lynch (2008) indicates that suburban middle-class youths are equipping themselves to be competitive and self-reliant entrepreneurs in a fast-paced capitalist society. The numerical distribution and categorical classification of school outcomes shapes the identities of educational communities (Foucault, 1995/1977; Graham & Neu, 2004). Policy as discourse is therefore seen as a form of regulation that creates the human conduct of good decision-making and shapes notions of the ideal individual whom the school ultimately needs to produce in order to match external forms of regulation, such as education audit culture (e.g., school rankings, league tables). Under the performative economy of education and culture, the relationships between learners and between learners and teachers become increasingly fabricated (Webb, 2006).

### 2.1.2.3    Emerging post-structural approaches to race and space

A post-structural emphasis on the role and power of discourse in producing, for example, the regulated student and/or teacher has also offered some powerful insights into the ways in which race and space are implicated in the dynamics of education market research (Gulson,

2011; Youdell, 2004). One compelling insight is that in the processes and practices of school choice, particular racial meanings of schools and areas of the city play a critical role in shaping school choice practice. Drawing from the post-structural notion that race is not biologically or culturally fixed, racial subjectivity is theorized as being situated in particular local contexts and mediated through prevailing discourses of race (Gillborn & Youdell, 2009; Gulson, 2011). These prevailing discourses of race, it is argued, play a part in shaping school choice dynamics.

A recent study that uses such an approach is Gulson's (2011) examination of the relationship between race and school choice policy in three major urban centres in England, Australia, and Canada. This tri-national study is particularly insightful in illuminating the discursive effects of race in the contemporary moment in specific educational policies and cities. An important insight is that a dominant (i.e., white middle-class) imaginary of contemporary schooling, the city, and the nation plays a critical role in parental school and residential choice (Gulson, 2011; Hage, 2000; Yoon & Gulson, 2010). For instance, Gulson (2011) notes that to survive and to be successful within the new neoliberal workings of inner-school schooling, existing inner-city student populations (especially Aboriginal and immigrant students) are encouraged to aspire to become academically entrepreneurial or they will be considered "hopeless cases" (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 134; Gulson, 2011). As such, a post-structural approach to school choice, race, and space does not necessarily negate the major conclusions of structural explanations of school choice policy and its outcomes. Rather, post-structural analysis illuminates how school choice processes and concurrent inequalities are discursively created, enabled, and maintained.

## 2.2 A social phenomenological approach that embraces the imaginary

Missing from studies of young people in current school choice literature is an examination of the ways in which youth make meaning out of choice practices, especially how young people imagine and understand their city and school choice, particularly against the dominant landscape of neoliberalism. In this section, I seek to put forward a different consideration of the relationship between theory and young people's understandings of city and school choice policy.

### 2.2.1 School choice as imaginative practices

Through an interpretive phenomenological approach that does not reject the previous perspectives but in part builds on and embraces some of their key concepts, I explore how young people interpret and imagine school choice policy and educational change. I examine young people's different, situated, and negotiated *imaginaries* of school choice as it operates in the city. *What are the configurations and representations that young people imagine and carry with them as they navigate the city, and how do their imaginations enter into the practice of choice in their respective social and racial positions and neighbourhoods?* It is my contention that a focus on three concepts—the imaginary, the imagination, and imaginary capital—may provide a generative space from which to explore how young people respond to educational and social change in their daily lives and how their everyday actions, feelings, experiences, and practices are linked to policy (as ideology and public discourse). Such conceptual ideas may also be helpful in assessing how meanings generated in particular locales mediate young people's understanding of the changing worlds that present different possibilities, opportunities, risks, and horizons of constraint and uncertainty in an unequal society (Appadurai, 1996; Ritivoi, 2006;

Taylor, 2004). In the following section, I focus on the two key concepts of the imagination and

the imaginary in further detail and briefly discuss the new notion of "imaginary capital," which I

elaborate on more extensively in Chapter 8.

**2.2.1.1    Imagination as situated negotiation with the world**

My conception of imagination draws heavily upon the work of critical social and feminist

scholarship. By thinking through an interdisciplinary lens, I want to suggest that the idea of the

imagination is complex, rather than simply "a weakened sensorial impression," a copy of

something, someone, or someplace that is absent (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 149; Ricoeur, 1991). First,

drawing upon Paul Ricoeur's (1978) theory of imagination and the social imaginary,[18] I consider

the idea of one's *imagination* as being both a part of an active subject within a constrained space

and recognizing its embedded nature in an already existing field of collective memory. Within

this space, the experience of narrating life can be seen as an active and interpretive engagement

with the world that is relational, contested, and projective. In this sense, my conception of

imagination does not follow the prevalent Humean definition of imagination as the practice of

simply toying with, or entertaining, images. In using the term "imagination," I refer to mental,

corporal, and affective processes and to further social and cultural processes of attributing to

one's meaning making the "qualities, structures, localizations, situations, attitudes, or feelings"

that are part of the wider social imaginary (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 150). Here, imagination is a

socially and culturally understood way of "reading the reality in a new way" (Ricoeur, 1978, p.

157). Imagination thus contributes to "the projection of new possibilities of redescribing the

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[18] The social imaginary can be theorized as collective narratives consisting of "stories we tell ourselves" as well as

values, norms, and ideologies that inform our political conscious (Kearney, 2004; Ricoeur, 2008; Ritivoi, 2006).

world" (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 154). Building upon this Ricoeurian philosophy of imagination, particularly in relation to the notion of the social imaginary (see Kearney, 2004; Ricoeur, 2008), that is, "the interplay of ideals, images, ideologies and utopias informing our political conscious" (p. 75), as further discussed in the rest of this chapter, I extend my conception of imagination to include more socio-political concerns that address both young people's material and discursive worlds as well as their subjective interpretation of these worlds.

This link between the social imaginary and imagination highlights the function of imagination in creating a vision that can shape groups and communities. In particular, I emphasize Ricoeur's view of imagination in the context of social life "as a conscious act that promotes integration in, as well as transformation of, a community"—yet also as a way by which the collective values and assumptions, that is, the dominant meaning systems of the imaginary, can be challenged (Ricoeur, 2008; Ritivoi, 2006, p. 56). As a critical feminist education scholar, Bonny Norton (2001) observes that the ability to see new social possibilities for young people, especially young (language) learners, involves imagining new or different communities that can be compared to existing communities. In other words, imagination is foundational to the formation and reformation of a community (Ritivoi, 2006). What is evident in this conception of imagination is an exercise of social and political (re)alignment between the values of particular individuals and social groups (Norton, 2001). Anderson's (1991) notion of *imagined communities* is one important illustration of this practice of imagination at work at the national level.[19] These previous ideas of imagination in our social and political thinking indicate that the practice of imagination is neither strictly private nor individualistic. Instead, the concept of

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[19] Shircliffe, Dorn, and Cobb-Roberts (2006) have noted the function of schools in group and community building in the history of US education, which I further discuss in the context chapter.

imagination renders us as political and social actors and subjects who play a part in revising and reshaping social relations (that is, how we position people socially) that transcend specific times and spaces (Norton, 2001; Ritivoi, 2006).

Form here, I further emphasize the social and political conception of the imagination as *situated* by drawing upon the feminist standpoint theorists Stroetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002), particularly their idea of *situated imagination* (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Stroetzler and Yuval-Davis suggest that the function of the imagination is to involve corporal and affective processes incorporating the experience of the body, as the "experience of other bodies together with our own is the basis of imagination" (Spinoza, 1999, p.14, cited in Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 323). As such, I do not think of imagination as a transcendental, philosophical, and mental activity. Instead, I think of imagination as "shaped and conditioned (although not determined) by social positioning" (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 315). Imagination is built on situated meaning-making and lived experiences rather than being simply reflective of sensual data or empty discourses (Ricoeur, 1978; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Bodily experiences and social location in particular matter to the way people imagine new possibilities and anticipate change (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Bodily experiences are key to understanding (re)alignment and/or resistance to imagined communities or the wider social imaginary (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002).

### 2.2.1.2    The imaginary

My conception of the imaginary draws primarily from the political and critical social theories of Ricoeur (2008), Rizvi and Lingard (2010), and Taylor (2004). I consider the imaginary as being constituted by dialogical processes between practices and ideas and between

dispositions, imagination, and ideologies. In contrast to the aforementioned concept of imagination, then, the concept of the imaginary emphasizes the importance of ideology, utopia, and hegemony, and subsequently the power and influence of political ideas on individual practices, conduct, and imaginary practices (Kearney, 2004; Ricoeur, 2008; Ritivoi, 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

The social imaginary can be theorized as collective narratives consisting of "stories we tell ourselves" as well as values, norms, and ideologies that inform our political conscious, as briefly noted earlier (Kearney, 2004; Ricoeur, 2008; Ritivoi, 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The imaginary thus defines a particular era as well as the dominant values and practices of living in that era (Ritivoi, 2006). This theorization is strongly noted in Taylor's theory of the social imaginary as "the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor, 2004, p. 106).

From this perspective, policy, as the embodiment of a particular imaginary, is pertinent to this study. Policy (re)constitutes the norms and practices that are aligned with the interests of policy makers. The ideas and policies studied, expounded on, and proposed by a small number of experts and powerful groups do become part of everyday life, shaping not only our streets and schools but also our conduct (Foucault, 1984; Shore & Wright, 1997; Taylor, 2004). While the dominant imaginary is "in a constant state of flux" and is highly contested among policymakers, it nonetheless guides and steers "the common understandings that make everyday practices possible, giving them sense and legitimacy" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 34). In other words, one important function of the imaginary is to reorder society through a new governance model,

which creates a society with "coherence" and a sense of identity (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Shore & Wright, 1997).

As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) further point out, the concept of the imaginary is similar to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. They thus theorize the imaginary as being part of forming the habitus (i.e., disposition) that guides individual conduct and choices. The imaginary shapes individuals' internalized senses of possibility in both local and transnational social spaces. The imaginary offers "options for organizing their conduct" and social relations (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 34). As such, through the lens of the imaginary, young people imagine *who* can be part of a changing world and *how* they can be part of that change.

In addition to the concept of the social imaginary, I draw upon concepts such as the urban imaginary (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Soja, 1996) and the national imaginary (Anderson, 1991; Hage, 2000) in order to think spatially about how school choice is constructed within a particular local and national context. These spatialized perspectives further enrich my discussion on understanding the relationship between school choice and young people in the local context of increasing diasporas. I describe and discuss these concepts in the subsequent data chapters.

### 2.2.1.3    Dialogical relationships between the imaginary and imagination

Briefly then, the imaginary of school choice policy is an important factor that I take into consideration when theorizing young people's understandings and affective responses to school choice as situated negotiations. In this way, I explore imagination as "the product of the dialogical process" between individuals and the collective (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 316). Theorizing the dialogical relationship between imagination and the imaginary involves understanding the "negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields

of possibility" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). In theorizing the imaginary and the practice of imagination, not everyone imagines the world in the same way. Individual positions in particular social spaces, (i.e., fields) matter to those individuals' negotiations, meaning-makings, and interpretations of school choice.

From this vantage point, then, I propose that both the imaginary and the imagination are fundamental to "*why, whether* and *what* we are ready to experience, perceive and know" and thus *choose* in our social and educational worlds (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 325). Those two concepts are then critical to understanding "the way people experience the process of … making their way into a new [world]," especially in the new global era (Baas, 2010, p. 6).

Indeed, this conceptual approach has been taken up in a growing number of studies of international post-secondary education and youth experiences, such as those of Baas (2010) and Rizvi (2005). Their studies show that the imagination, in addition to the imaginary, motivates and develops young people's desires to construct, change, transform, learn, and move transnationally. Appadurai (1996), too, stresses the importance of the imagination as "a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" in the rapidly globalizing world (p. 7). This combined way of thinking about the imagination and the imaginary will thus be pertinent to an understanding of mobility and choice in the local context of Vancouver and to what role young people's imaginary worlds play in shaping their futures against changing social worlds in the era of advanced neoliberal globalization (Gulson & Pedroni, 2011; Lauder et al., 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In exploring the relationship between choice and young people's imagined worlds in this thesis, I therefore theorize that the actions of young people are akin to *situated negotiation*, thus making their school choices akin to *imaginative practices* between neoliberal ideology and new

possibilities. By a situated negotiation, I mean the way by which individuals negotiate "between the contradictions of experiences and perceptions as well as between what 'is' and what 'ought to be'" (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 327). Unevenly lived conditions and individuals' biographical histories therefore matter significantly to the process of *negotiated imaginations*. In the negotiated process of imagination, the power to imagine and transform is inextricably tied to social positions and personal histories, while "the faculty of the imagination constructs as well as transforms, challenges and supersedes both existing knowledge and social reality" (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 315).

I theorize that there is some power to the idea that people imagine representations in the world in a hierarchical web of power relationships, as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu conceptualizes human relationships as a *field* in which the hierarchical web of human relations is built upon, and reproduced by, the attainment of the particular capitals at stake. The gap "between what 'is' and what 'ought to be'" varies depending on where one is *socially* positioned in relation to others in Bourdieu's field (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 317). As such, the envisioning of "what ought to be" can differ widely depending on social position. I suggest that one's social position strongly influences (although does not determine) the degree to which one's imagination becomes aligned with the dominant social imaginary. This theory thus assumes that social and corporal processes are fundamental to any form of imagining. Any theorization of the imagination would thus be incomplete without further taking the notion of the imaginary into consideration, as the imaginary is central to the formation of a particular field. I discuss these points further in the following data chapters and conclusion chapter.

In closing, I have so far argued that studying policy through the dual lens of the imaginary and the imagination facilitates a focus on the embodiment of policy, visceral micro-

level and local experiences, activities, practices, and institutions in our daily lives, a focus that cannot be reduced to discourses and/or texts. In the following chapters, I show how this analytical approach can help enhance our understanding of how the education market becomes the site of classification struggles over notions of elite identity and of how these struggles are negotiated. I also use the lens of the imaginary and the imagination to explore the historical changes and reimagining of schools as communities in the present and history of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Canada in Chapter 3. Subsequently, in Chapter 8, I propose a new conception of imaginary capital as an integrative theory to conceptualize the dialectical relationship between imagination and the imaginary in young people's lives.

# Chapter 3: Schools as imagined communities in the local history[20]

The concept of the local public school bringing together all the children in a community was becoming a thing of the past in British Columbia. (Barman, 1991b, p. 336)

We often envision schools as communities. Some of us picture a little red schoolhouse where all the children in the neighbourhood came to learn and play together. Others have memories of a school down the road they could not attend because they were shipped off to other neighbourhoods far away. And, finally, there are those who remember a school that denied them access and made no other educational provisions. This last type of memory makes imagining schools as communities problematic. At first glance we would like to see a school as a place where children, teachers, and parents gather with a shared sense of purpose. The image of everyone working together has been an ideal. (Shircliffe et al., 2006, p. 1)

Building on Shircliffe et al.'s (2006) critical notion of schools as imagined communities, in this chapter I discuss how schools in the history of British Columbia (BC) and Vancouver have been imagined as communities by demarcating the "insiders" from the "outsiders" based on geographical boundaries, race, class, and religion. Schools as imagined communities are not monolithic. Rather, boundaries and memberships constantly shift in relation to internal divisions

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[20] I would like to thank Dr. Dillabough for permitting me to draw substantially on the research I contributed to her project on the history of choice and urban changes.

and external pressures (Shircliffe et al., 2006). Schools as communities "can push out as well as pull in people, divide as well as unite" (Shircliffe et al., 2006, p. 2). In this chapter, I explore such dialectical forces of inclusion and exclusion in the changing yet historically enduring politics, discourses, and practices of school choice and in the recent implementation of school choice *policy* in the historical and contemporary context of both British Columbia and Vancouver and in the two schools where my study took place. My focus here is on how schools have been imagined as communities, key institutions for maintaining implicitly and explicitly social, racial, and religious membership, thus maintaining the structure of social fragmentation and hierarchy (Shircliffe et al., 2006).

I first provide a historical overview of the changing imagination of schools as communities, beginning with the British colonial period of white settlement society, through to the welfare state under the principles of Keynesian economics, and then to the era of marketization under Hayekian neoliberal economics. Next, I discuss both the polarizing conditions of Vancouver as it develops into an increasingly diverse global city and the ways in which schools are imagined by a form of consumer sovereignty that tends to balkanize citizens and immigrants based on social, religious, and racial groups. Lastly, I discuss the two specific schools in my study and how they have been characterized as well as imagined in the changing local context of Vancouver.

## 3.1    The case of British Columbia's education system

Choosing the right school for one's children has always been a significant family strategy, especially for middle-class families, but it has also taken on different meanings depending on membership to particular racial and ethnic groups. This is especially true in

stratified and stratifying societies with colonial histories, as in BC and Vancouver. Various religious and ethnic groups have pursued their own distinctive educational institutions. School choice has always existed to some extent in order to maintain group membership and to maintain and reproduce middle-class positions (Bourdieu, 1998b). This section looks at how the vision of a single public education system for all has been attempted in the history of British Columbia.[21] Different groups have tried to create different educational options that support their present and future social status and wealth. This has inadvertently generated different forms of exclusion. Especially during the recent decades of rapid privatization, the *concept* of local public schools for everyone within a community is rapidly, in Barman's (1991b) words, "becoming a thing of the past" (p. 336), or perhaps some may argue that it is a fantasy that never really existed. Nonetheless, Barman's observation offers a key insight into the renewed and intensifying structural and symbolic struggles among different social and ethnic groups under the current restructuring of the education system.

### 3.1.1   Early history

The ways by which schools were characterized along class, race, and residential lines were quite pronounced in BC's early history. Separation by group membership was normalized and enacted based on racist social and educational policies during the British colonial period during the mid-19$^{th}$ and early 20$^{th}$ century, when the education system reflected fairly rigid class structures, racial hierarchies, and religious differences (Mawani, 2009). As Barman (2003b) writes,

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[21] In Canada, educational authority falls under the responsibility of the provincial government.

In the new colony as in England, education was perceived as having two prime

functions: preparation to maintain existing place within the social order, and inculcation

of denominational religious beliefs. Children from poor families were best prepared to

accept their own inevitably inferior position by being given only rudimentary literacy

training. Conversely, children in families of high status had to be extensively educated

were they to take their expected positions at the forefront of their generation. (p. 14)

Similarly, racial exclusion was evident in schools. For instance, Victoria's first "common"

school, a private venture school, saw a rise in enrolments when they agreed to exclude "the

offspring of 'colored' families" (Barman, 2003b, p. 18).[22] In this context, while the Public

Schools Act of 1872 successfully established a centralized, monolithic, non-sectarian[23]

orientation for the public education system, not all families were represented or included in the

newly created province's free common schools. While the elimination of religious observance in

state schools was carried out and brought together children from different religious groups,

including Anglicans, Catholics, Evangelicals, Jewish communities, and Spiritualists, not all BC

families were included, nor did they all participate in public schools. Elite schools for children

from politically and economically powerful families remained, and private schools continued to

serve the needs and interests of British elite immigrant families and other families who wished to

educate their children on the basis of their religious principles (Barman, 2003b). Also, most

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[22] This school closed in March 1864.

[23] Unlike those of other provinces, the BC education system was unique in removing specific religious doctrines
from the public school system by not financially supporting denominational schools.

public schools did not accept Aboriginal students. Some Aboriginal children were allowed to attend public schools, but only if they were perceived as academically interested, clean, and well behaved, and if there were no objections from white settlers in the neighbourhood (Barman, 2003a). In responding to a teacher who admitted young Aboriginal youths to her school in Hope, BC, John Jessop, the first superintendent of education, wrote, "You are doing perfectly right in admitting Indian children so long as they are not taken [by force] and conduct themselves properly…. If they are troublesome or dirty the trustees must prohibit their attendance" (quoted in Barman, 2003a, p. 44). As such, pupils were often subject to the practice of schools as racially imagined communities, where future leaders were separated from labourers (Mawani, 2009).

### 3.1.2  After World War II: massification and streaming

The period following World War II was also a time of transformation in BC education history. Schools were reimagined to reflect a period of economic prosperity[24] and expanding equality: For example, living standards rose and more women took part in education and the economy. The government operated under the Keynesian model, focusing on generating large-scale public projects, fuelling the expansion of the provincial economy. The number of students tripled (from 137,827 to 445,228) between 1947 and 1967. The proportion of students enrolled in

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[24] BC's economy was booming. In the 1950s, oil, natural gas, and hydroelectricity were discovered throughout the province. Large-scale, long-term construction projects, such as the construction of pipeline and transmission systems, as well as dams for the production of hydroelectric power, increased employment. By the 1960s, economic growth resulted from the high demand for pulp, paper, lumber, and other wood products, which expanded the forestry industry sector, and the increasing demand and rising prices for copper, silver, lead and zinc, which expanded the mining industry.

Grade 8 who were retained in Grade 11 increased to 92% in 1969 from 25% in 1921(Mussio &

Greer, 1980). During this period, the belief that secondary education should be democratically

accessible and available to every child became popular (Johnson, 1964). The focus was on

increasing equal access to education, and thus school districts were amalgamated and schools

consolidated across BC (Barman, 1991b).

Nevertheless, during this period of economic prosperity and educational equality, BC's

education system was being increasingly differentiated into three different systems. Many

Aboriginal students were educated at residential schools,[25] although band-operated schools on

reserves also became new options for Aboriginal children beginning in the 1970s (Barman,

2003). The private school system was strengthened, with increased government support and its

own organizing association. The number of private schools in Vancouver increased. Public

schools grew rapidly and became increasingly differentiated.

With the massification of secondary schooling, the secondary curriculum was streamed.

As Johnson (1964) notes, a growing concern for the development of the "superior minds to

whom society must ever look for the solution of its problems" led to the development of the

University Programme for academically minded and academically destined pupils (Campbell,

cited in Johnson, 1964, p. 185). The General Programme for vocational education, in turn, was

designed for the rest. This division was normalized by the rationale that two different subject

courses were offered for "the brighter" and "the slower students" (Johnson, 1964, p. 185). To put

this differently, these designations or classifications represented two broadly differentiated and

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[25] At least 3,000 children died while they were attending Aboriginal residential schools; the causes of the death

ranged from disease to malnutrition, accidents, and suicides {The Canadian Press, 2013`, Feb 18 #804}. Also, a few

children died while fleeing from their schools (The Canadian Press, 2013, Feb 18).

imagined communities. This division of the secondary school system made the university

program more prestigious; as a result, those from the middle classes took up university studies at

a higher rate (Johnson, 1964). These programs within the public school system then reflected

diverging communities of learners whose futures were differently imagined. This discourse of

high and low tracked schooling continues in the normalization of mini schools today, which is

further illustrated in Chapter 5.

In the private sector, the large influx of Dutch immigrants, who held firm beliefs in

government-funded religious schooling, which was the norm in the Netherlands, contributed to

the expansion of private schools (Barman, 1991a). Also, parents in Catholic schools in

Maillardville took political action that led to a greater allocation of public resources into private

schools in 1951 (Fisher & Gill, 1985). Furthermore, the Federation of Independent Schools

Association (FISA) was created in 1966, representing the collective desires of the Roman

Catholic and Anglican churches, as well as Dutch immigrant families, to increase private

education funding and establish schools in line with their beliefs and philosophies (Barman,

1991a).

In the public sector, different secondary schools in Vancouver experimented with

different curricula and instructional methods (Johnson, 1964). For instance, Prince George's

Montessori program became part of the public school system, and Highglen Elementary was

founded as a magnet school in 1985. Langley Fine Arts School, proactively conceived by a

superintendent, opened as a school of choice in the Langley suburban district in 1986 (Gaskell,

2002). In the mid-1980s, the French Immersion program began serving about 30,000 students in

47 school districts in BC. Eight BC public schools offered Montessori programs, and 13 schools

provided the International Baccalaureate program. The traditional public school movement began

after the Surrey school board approved the establishment of a traditional public school, Surrey Traditional School, in 1994 (Crawley, 1995). By 1997, two more traditional schools had been approved as alternative schools in the public education system (Kalaw, McLaren, & Rehnby, 1998).

In the early 1970s, according to a local educational historian, Rothstein (1999), the influx of liberal American immigrants and academics at the University of British Columbia (UBC) played an important role in the spread of American progressivism in BC, and more than 20 alternative schools were established. The emergence of these alternative schools exemplifies the creation of schools as differently imagined communities within the larger public education system. In fact, with rising levels of anxiety surrounding mass education, Rothstein's (1999) and Johnson's (1964) work suggests that the diversification of school types reflected the growing number of middle-class parents who wanted their children to stand out from others. As such, alternative education stressed middle-class learners' giftedness, individualism, and choice as expressions of individuality. Public schools became more attentive to the politics of middle-class parents. More diverse programs geared towards the interests of specific groups of parents became popular. Also, according to the research conducted by Kalaw, McLaren, and Rehnby (1998), alternative schools, especially traditional public schools, began to serve a social function of exclusion by creating a "refuge from the diversity" of public schools by permitting families with similar cultural values and socio-economic backgrounds to organize a public school advancing their own private interests (p. 1–2). Additionally, the increase in academically demanding and public schools with strict disciplining procedures grew along with the increasing influx of Asian immigrants whose values emphasized academic excellence, discipline, and

assessment (Mitchell, 2001).[26]  In Chapter 7, I further discuss the influence of parental demands for alternative programs.

### 3.1.3    New school communities in the era of privatization, devolution, and marketization

To what extent, then, does the current trend of marketization of education in the province of BC contribute to the reimagination of schools as different communities? Building upon the work of Barman (1991), and the reimagining of the public sector through privatization and deregulation—that is, through parental choice—around the globe, which I noted in the introduction (Ball, 2003; Chan-Tibergien, 2006; Gaskell, 1995; Kuehn, 2006; Shaker, 1999), I want to suggest that schools have become more susceptible to an imagined community of particular parent groupings that have been heavily influenced by the wider advanced neoliberal policy climate.[27]

Since the increase in funding for private schools in BC, enrolment in the private sector[28] has increased; currently, 12% of school-aged children attend private schools. The increased

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[26] While BC's population doubled from 1.6 million in 1961 to 3.2 million in 1991, the percentage with Asian heritage increased nine-fold from 40,000 to 371,000, making the Chinese ethnic group the third largest group in BC, behind the British and the Germans (Crawley, 1995). Between 1990 and 1996, on average, 10,267 immigrants arrived in Vancouver from Hong Kong each year (Mitchell, 2001).

[27] As I have already discussed the influence of neoliberal globalization in the introduction, I will not repeat that content here.

[28] In the private sector, the number of Vancouver independent schools (both primary and secondary) rose from 39 in 1991/2 to 68 in 2009/10. In 2009/10, the total number of independent school students enrolled in Vancouver (also both elementary and secondary schools) was 12,612. This represents a decline of 0.2% (112 students) from 12,724

funding of non-public schools in the late 1970s refueled the declining Catholic Church's control over education, leading to a "renaissance of Catholic education." The enrollment numbers of students in Christian schools rose.[29] The number of ethnically grouped schools (e.g., schools intended for Sikhs and Muslims) also increased (Barman, 1991a, p. 18). Schools in the private sector thus seem to be increasingly divided and imagined differently by those who occupy different class, race, and gender positions and are reflective of power relationships. Trueman's (2009) recent study of private schools on Vancouver Island further notes that there is an increasing tendency to choose private schools for reasons of ethnic preservation as well as upward social mobility. In BC, the private school sector has been and continues to be imagined as an alternative space for families with religious, ethnic, elite, and philosophical interests, functioning as exclusive communities for middle-class families to educate their children and to pursue social and economic leadership positions (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995).

This growing fragmentation of schools into different communities is further manifested in the ways in which various policy stakeholders discuss choice in the public education system. For instance, one major debate around the 2002 School Act amendment concerned "refocusing public education at the school level" to "encourage local responsibility and accountability" by encouraging public schools to "reconnect with their communities" (Clark, 2002, p. 3005). This emphasis on school communities was more than simple rhetoric, as the government created a new institutional body, School Planning Councils, in every BC school to elevate the voice of elected parents in school decision-making processes. A move towards developing programs

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in 2004/5 but is still a high number (Yan, 2010). It is especially high when compared to the overall enrolment decline of about 9% (5,418 students) in the public system from 58,967 in 2001 to 53,549 in 2012.

[29] This was an increase of 154% (from 2,471 to 6,281 over the same period).

based on parental interests and communities become more pronounced in the current provincial educational policy imaginary.

Since per-pupil funding follows students to any school they attend, an open enrolment policy encourages the formation of new communities. Some districts use school specialization as a tool to attract students from other districts by having them become part of their imagined communities while increasing their revenues. Some schools are reimagined with special programs, especially mini schools, to attract students outside their immediate neighbourhoods. The structure of schooling is, under the rhetoric of choice, being reorganized by the interests, values, and wealth of particular communities of parents. In this process, the politics of diversity of needs are being played out in providing greater legitimacy to promoting the establishment of diverse schools (Fallon & Paquette, 2008). Subsequently, in the public system, we see increased program segmentation and social and ethnic division by group belonging and membership.

This new trend of privatization and increased school choice, reflective of international trends of marketization, deregulation, and privatization, as discussed in the introduction, is then one way to imagine the creation of schools for exclusive communities. Through a brief historical overview of the ways in which schools were imagined differently by various communities, we can see the impact of diverse communities on the ways they define and redefine schools, as well as how they exercise a particular notion of choice as political freedom. This historical overview shows that schools have been key institutions for imagined communities as well as social and racial reproduction. Vancouver indeed presents an empirically notable place to explore the development of schools as imagined communities, as it is the largest urban district in BC and has undergone tremendous political, social, and racial changes.

## 3.2 Vancouver: differentiated school programs for a diverse population

In this section, I focus on how the development of district alternative programs has been imagined for different communities as the city of Vancouver has aspired to become a global city over the past three decades. The Vancouver School District has been continuously reimagined by those who live and work in the city, and further by those whose education is more valued than that of others, as I already touched upon in the previous section. In this section, I focus on the growing income inequality and racial and ethnic diversity of the past three decades and how these changes have resulted in the rise of educational and social exclusion by private schools and public school choice.

The Vancouver School Board has long been committed to promoting school choice and more broadly the devolution of the public system through entrepreneurial activities. While the province of BC adopted the policy of open enrolment in 2002, the Vancouver School Board adopted a broad framework of school choice in the early 1970s.[30] This adoption of an open boundaries policy indeed occurred around the same time as in Alberta, the most marketized provincial system of education in Canada.[31] The VSB's recent statement below echoes Clark's

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[30] Because of the decentralized nature of the Canadian education system, school boards have a considerable level of control over educational policies implemented at the district level (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2007). Nonetheless, the provincial government's current move towards promoting open enrolment has made a notable impact on increasing school choice practice in Vancouver. The increasing number of students (i.e., around 34% of the total number of secondary students) who choose programs outside their assigned neighbourhood public schools is a good indicator of this provincial policy's impact across the city.

[31] The VSB's adoption of open enrolment policy occurred after the New Democratic Party (NDP) government's amendment of the Public School Act in 1974, which relaxed centralized regulation of the education system by allowing school boards to regulate and determine the curriculum of their schools (Fisher & Gill, 1985).

earlier statement in the introduction, expressing the advanced neoliberal imaginary of education through the market system.

> Before you enrol your child, explore the available options that may suit your child's needs…. For students in K–12 there are programs such as Montessori, French immersion, Mandarin bilingual, mini-schools, fine and performing arts programs, sports academies, career programs, gifted enrichment education, and an outdoor school, to name just a few options. Our district programs are designed to provide innovative learning experiences for students both inside and outside of the classroom. (Vancouver School Board, 2012a)

The Vancouver School District opened school boundaries within the district and introduced alternative district programs that spanned opposite ends of "the educational spectrum" in the 1970s. The district established the following: (1) district-specified programs (mini schools and other enriched programs) and (2) rehabilitative alternative programs (Pearmain, 1998, p. 3).

The first mini school was established at Prince of Wales Secondary in 1973 (Rothstein, 1999). Prince of Wales Mini School was envisioned by a group of West Side parents who desired a different kind of education for their children (Rothstein, 1999). By 1998, twelve programs had been introduced as district-specified alternative programs (a.k.a. mini schools). They were academically enriched or accelerated, and thus selective, programs, admitting only those with high academic performance and motivation. According to a 1998 VSB document, the Board adopted a policy to develop at least one mini school program at every secondary school in Vancouver. In 2012–2013, the total number of mini schools is 25. Most mini schools, with some

exceptions, enrol approximately 30 students in each grade, starting in Grade 8. As shown in Table 1, the total enrolment of mini students varies from school to school.

According to the VSB's *Options* brochure, mini schools offer a wide range of differentiated educational programs that aim to meet the needs of diverse communities. Some offer accelerated learning of the provincial curriculum (enabling earlier graduation if desired) while others offer enriched learning of the provincial curriculum (by delving into the subject matter in depth, often enhanced with multidisciplinary learning), special advanced placement courses, or the International Baccalaureate program. Mini schools are mostly housed within regular public school buildings and share their facilities, and many regular and mini school students take some of their courses side by side. As such, mini schools are created mostly for those who are thought to excel and thus stand out from the standard, comprehensive secondary school curriculum offered by neighbourhood public schools. Many mini schools also have a unique focus, such as the University Transition Program,[32] fine arts, science, Montessori, gifted education, technology, sports, and so on. These secondary programs therefore appeal to a particular niche group of parents.

Notable in the brochure—which lists and describes all the choice programs in the Vancouver secondary school system—is the keyword "community," which is present in all the schools' descriptions. Each mini school's description and activities contain the idea and involvement of community in various ways. Some examples of these phrases include

- "Community involvement with leadership"
- "Work with a community of students who share their interest"
- "Community service outside the school"

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[32] The University Transition Program offers accelerated coursework that allows students to complete the secondary school curriculum within two years and apply for early admission to the University of British Columbia.

- "A student-centred community of learning"
- "A sense of community"
- "Fieldtrips in the community"
- "Build and sustain community"
- "Community combined with teacher and parental involvement"
- "Active, involved, community-minded students"
- "Learning community to support their education"

Mini schools offer more frequent and extensive fieldtrips in order to build a sense of community. While the specific meaning of the word "community" that underpins each program is unclear, the emphasis on creating community suggests a continuing struggle over the boundaries of each school's communities, as well as the meanings attributed to each school as an assumed a priori "community." Especially given the current practice of rigorous selection and elimination processes, these assumed communities are implicitly exclusive.

French Immersion programs similarly create schools that unite a particular group of parents based on learning of the second official language of Canada. In the context of the Canadian nation-state, the French language is also critical to the imagined community of a bilingual Canada or the so-called founding nations of early Canada. This imagined community is also supported by the Canadian federal government, which has increased the funding of French Immersion since the 1970s as a way to maintain English–French solidarity across the nation. As a result of the federal government's political and financial support, French Immersion's popularity as a choice option has increased among a group of English-speaking Canadian families who are largely of white European descent. As such, while the French Immersion program has grown in popularity and currently serves 45,000 children across BC, with long wait lists, most of the students are white and from middle-class families (Feldman, 2011). These options are often not chosen by immigrant families, especially those whose mother tongue is not

English. Those who were born outside Canada have to take an English proficiency test at age four to enter a French-Immersion kindergarten.

In contrast to the highly selective choice programs, the public system has also created a number of rehabilitative alternatives programs to address "the needs of young people who were not coping well in the mainstream schools" (Pearmain, 1998). As Pearmain notes, the development of such programs was part of a larger movement in North America. These separate programs were created for students who were "at risk of dropping out" (Pearmain, 1998). For instance, rehabilitative programs (e.g., Operation Step Up for juvenile offenders) were developed specifically for students who had dropped out of school or who were identified as potential dropouts. By 1996, young-parent programs or on-site daycares were reported to be available in about 40 schools across BC (British Columbia Teachers Federation, 1996; Kelly, 2000). Meanwhile, students with special needs were integrated into regular classrooms in 1989 by a ministerial order. These types of alternative programs targeting the specific needs of particular groups of youth "at risk" were implemented to be more inclusive of students with different and challenging needs. Nevertheless, some of these programs have become underfunded and, in a few cases, have dissolved in recent years (Vancouver School Board, n.d.). For instance, at East High, the number of alternative programs targeted at students in need has declined during the same period that the number of mini schools and French Immersion enrolment has increased. In other words, school funding in BC education is shifting towards prioritizing programs of choice that ensure class advantages.

District-specialized programs and rehabilitative programs are clearly imagined for different groups of students and parents. Rehabilitative programs facilitate the completion of secondary school for youths who are challenged by the regular program. Mini schools and

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French Immersion schools tend to appeal to middle-class families or educationally aspiring working-class families who already possess the national capital of English. These programs exclude recent immigrant students who have low-level English-language skills. Some mini schools exclude ESL applicants. Entrance to mini schools is highly competitive, as many more students apply than there are available places. Students are selected using extensive criteria set by both the district and each school. At some popular schools, over 500 students apply for only 30 spaces.

Since the beginning of the streaming of secondary programs, some have criticized how these programs end up serving different communities rather than bringing everyone together. While some praised the increase in gifted and enriched programs, there was criticism, and questions were raised about whether these programs would only serve middle-class West Side students. These criticisms were evident in *Vancouver Sun* articles: "Children in the centre-East corridor of have-not and inner-city schools are far less likely to have access to an enrichment teacher or gifted program" (Bula, 1988; Outdoor program eyed for east side," 1991). The articles cited the following statistics:

- Of the 240 students in the gifted program at Churchill last year, only 28 were from the East Side.
- Of the 180 at Hamber's Challenge program, fewer than 18 were from the East Side.
- Only 4 of the 109 students enrolled in the TREK program at Prince of Wales secondary school, located on the West Side, were from the East Side.
- Only about 30 of the 150 students at Prince of Wales Mini School made the East–West journey across the city each school day.
- At Point Grey Mini School, almost 40% of the 150 students were from the East Side.
- In 1991, only two of the district's eight specialized mini schools that offered enriched programs were on the East Side.

While more mini schools are now in operation across the city today, West Side schools continue

to be more sought after than East Side schools. This is particularly noticeable at mini school

information evenings. Most West Side school auditoriums fill quickly and often do not have

enough seats for all who attend their information evenings. This shows how schools are

perceived and imagined differently. Indeed, as the rising enrolment at mini schools and in the

French Immersion program indicates, interest in selective alternative education continues to rise.

Different district programs target groups of learner communities who imagine different futures.

These differentiated meanings of the future are ultimately reflective of both an inherited social

position as well as divergent and stratified societal structures.


### 3.2.1    Growing inequality and schools as imagined communities

While choice is increasing in both private and public sectors, it is neither available to all

nor imagined by all. While BC is enjoying a period of economic growth at the beginning of the

21$^{st}$ century, this growth has not benefited everyone. As in other global cities, neoliberal

globalization has largely benefited professional, technical, and managerial sectors while

impoverishing manual and service workers (Sassen, 2000, 2005; Sommers, 2003/4).[33] Between

1980 and 2000 in Metro Vancouver, those in the 10$^{th}$ income percentile saw their earnings fall by

25%, while those in the 90$^{th}$ percentile saw a rise of 5.3%. Almost half of visible minority

households (46%) lived under the poverty line in 2001, while Canadian-born visible minorities

continue to earn lower incomes than Canadian-born whites (1971–2001) (Hiebert, 2005;

[33] The share of wages, salaries, and commission in the provincial GDP declined (from 53.2% in 2000 to 50% in
2004 (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006).

Pendakur & Pendakur, 2004). In 2001, the employment rate of Aboriginal workers was at 61.8%, 17 percentage points lower than non-Aboriginals; their median earnings were $20,038, roughly $7,800 less than non-Aboriginals; and the percentage of Aboriginals earning a low income was 40.9%, 21 percentage points higher than non-Aboriginals in 2001 (Heisz, 2006). While these income differences are reflective of individual families' purchasing power, they also feed into the ways in which different families imagine their own cultural capital and therefore their potential to acquire and consume different futures and forms of education. Growing income inequality across the city indeed illuminates the growing economic and social exclusion of private schools and public school choice.

Indeed, private school choices are more available on the affluent West Side of Vancouver. About a third (34.5%) of all students attending secondary schools on the West Side were enrolled in private schools in 2009.[34] This is reflective of higher wealth, especially from the rapid accumulation of real estate profits, on the West Side of Vancouver. On the West Side, the average price of a single-family detached house jumped from under half a million dollars in 2001 to a million dollars in 2007[35]; the average rental rate of a standard condo increased by more than 100% from $1,000 in 2000 to $2,200 in 2007, while the rental rate of a house rose from $1,600 to $3,400 during the same period (Lee, Villagomez, Gurstein, Eby, & Wyly, 2008). Further, average parental income for the eight West Side public secondary schools was about $82,537

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[34] For example, I was able to approximate from the Fraser Institute report card data that 16% of all Grade 12 students in Vancouver attend private schools. This number is comparable to the figure in the VSB's report on enrolment in the private sector in Vancouver. The list excluded Fraser Academy, a private school for students with dyslexia and language-based learning disabilities.

[35] On the East Side, the price increased from $340,000 to over $600,000 (Lee et al., 2008).

compared to $43,111 for the East Side public secondary schools and $93,488 for all private schools in 2009 (Fraser Institute, 2009).Hence, it is not surprising to learn that most private schools flourish on the West Side.[36] In this urban housing market condition, those families who can no longer afford to buy homes tend to live in gentrifying neighbourhoods in central or East Vancouver, and they send their children to schools on the West Side, where they seek out their imagined middle-class communities and exercise their class advantages.

Meanwhile, enrolment has dropped across all East Side schools since 2002, while it has increased with few exceptions at West Side schools.[37] Lack of affordability in the housing market is driving working-class families out of Vancouver; as a result, the deepest dips in enrolment are in more low-income areas ("Activists question school enrolment information ", 2009, Oct 14). Also, the low enrolment at East Side schools may be related to how the children of middle-class gentrifiers are opting out of their neighbourhood public schools. Instead, they attend independent schools or mini schools across the city. Concurrently, school choice movement from the affluent West Side to the East Side neighbourhoods is seldom observed. During my field study, it was difficult to find anyone from the West Side applying to an East

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[36] All except two private schools are on the West Side or downtown. Following the establishment of the first private school in 1898, most schools opened their doors between 1922 and 1932. This period also overlapped with a period of serious economic recession, followed by the Great Depression. In recent decades, following the introduction of private school funding in 1977, six new independent schools have opened. Also, the rise of private schools on the West Side reflects the increasing wealth of the city's middle and upper-classes as a result of the housing real estate boom and in general through increasingly unequal income distribution and less progressive neoliberal taxation policies (CCPA, 2007). As for the East Side private schools, one is religious and the other, a new, elite college preparation school, offers the International Baccalaureate program.

[37] See the Vancouver School Board's reference guide, available on its website.

Side mini school and/or attending one. This has been the case in spite of the Vancouver School Board's efforts to raise and maintain enrolment on the East Side by creating comparable mini schools there. In other words, how families and students imagine their schools as communities may not be entirely dependent on academic programs but also on neighbourhood characteristics. This is evident in the declining enrolment at some East Side mini schools, which has led to calls for closures under recent budget cuts (O'Connor, Apr 23, 2010).

### 3.2.1.1  Ethnicized and racialized spatial divisions and school choice

Meanwhile, as increasing numbers of immigrants arrive and settle in ethnic neighbourhoods in Vancouver, neighbourhood public schools are becoming ethnically divided and marginalized as potentially problematic educational sites (Keung, 2004). Some schools are perceived as "Caucasian schools" while others are characterized as "Asian schools" or "brown schools," which I discuss further in Chapter 7. Statistically speaking, the *isolation index*, which measures the probability that a visible minority individual will meet only members of his or her own group in a neighbourhood, has been increasing since 1981. One particularly notable group is South Asians, who have experienced an increase on the isolation index as a result of residential segregation (Hou & Garnett, 2004). Further, ethnic demographers note an increase in *rapid replacement,* which refers to a phenomenon of population recomposition in which the rate of decline of a non-visible minority population (i.e., white) in a neighbourhood is greater than the median rate of the group's decline in all neighbourhoods and the vacancy is then filled by a visible minority. This rapid replacement phenomenon was noted in 48 out of the 55 newly formed Chinese neighbourhoods and 5 out of 12 South Asian neighbourhoods (Hou & Picot,

2004). These areas have also been identified as experiencing a high level of unemployment and low incomes (Hou & Picot, 2004).

Subsequently, neighbourhood public schools have become more ethnically and racially homogenous (see Figure 3.1). This ethnic unevenness is clearly reflected in the linguistic composition of Vancouver schools.[38] To highlight the division, I purposefully sampled the following four secondary schools in Figure 3.1 by home language (i.e., native language) in order to illustrate the different linguistic and ethnic groups in various secondary schools in the city. At School A, the largest language group (with over 30% of first-language speakers) was Punjabi, which indicates that the school is located in a visible-minority neighbourhood. School B had close to 70% native English speakers. In School C, close to 20% of the student body spoke Tagalog while over 10% spoke Vietnamese at home. At School D, more students (close to 40%) spoke Mandarin at home than any other language. This reveals that the distribution of different racial and ethnic groups across Vancouver secondary schools is strikingly uneven. In the era of the education market, public schools in "visible minority neighbourhoods"[39] are increasingly marginalized and thus avoided.

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[38] In the Vancouver School District, the population of students who speak English at home is approximately 49% (compared to the 23% of designated ESL students who have been in Canada less than five years), which has grown in the past five years by about four percentage points. This indicates that a large proportion of students come from homes where English is not spoken on a daily basis. As shown in Figure 7.1, approximately 50% of the students in the Vancouver School Board speak languages other than English at home.

[39] A visible-minority neighbourhood refers to a neighbourhood where more than 30% of the population is from one specific ethnic group. The number of visible-minority neighbourhoods in Canada's three largest metropolitan cities increased from 6 in 1981 to 254 in 2001 (Keung, 2004). Vancouver had 111 visible minority neighbourhoods in 2001 (Keung, 2004).

**Figure 3.1 Four schools from the Vancouver School District by home language**

School A
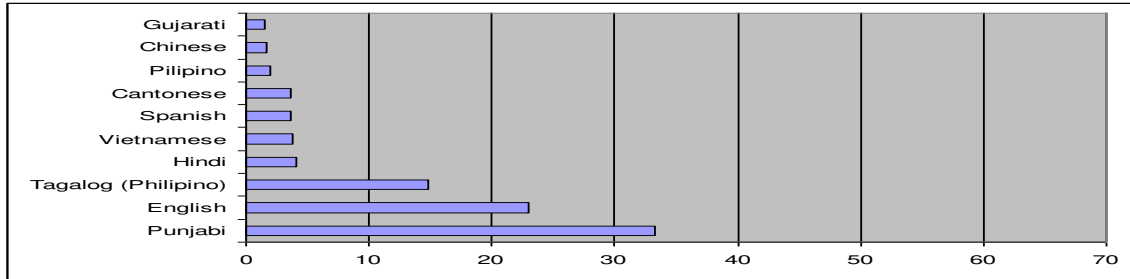


School B
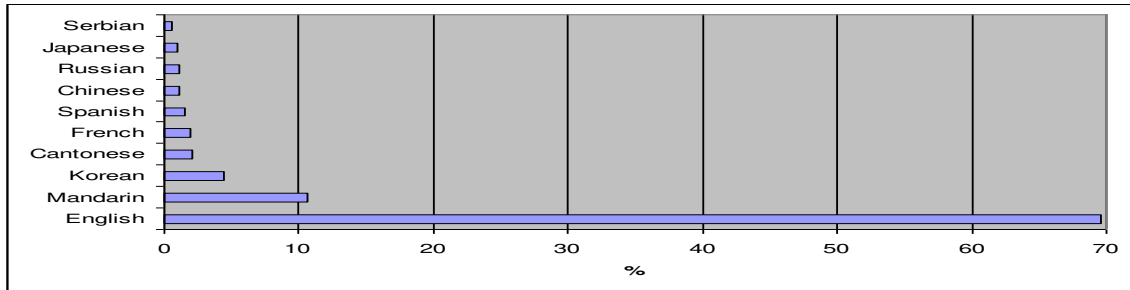


School C
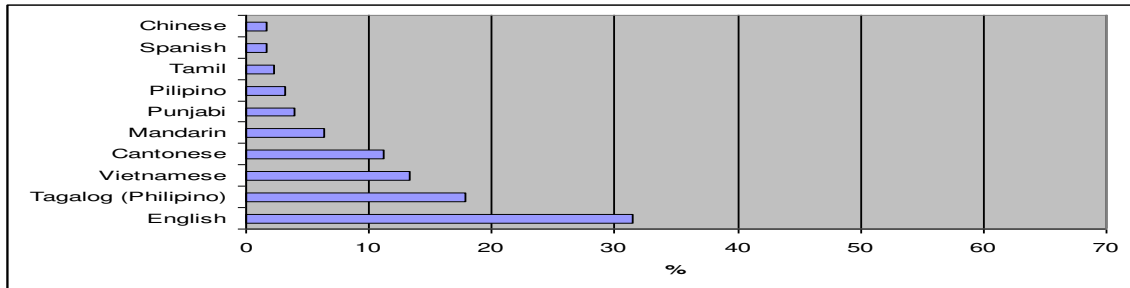


School D
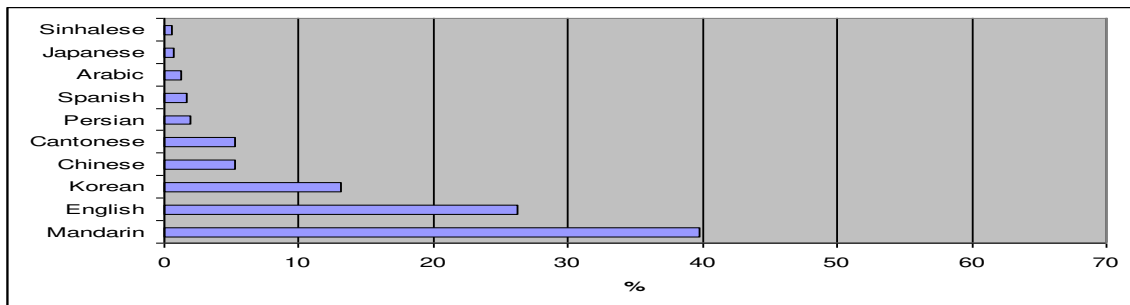


(Source: School Reports, BC Ministry of Education, 2011).

### 3.3    Schools

The two schools where my study took place are representative samples of these socially, racially, and ethnically divided neighbourhoods of Vancouver. While the West Side of Vancouver has become increasingly diversified in recent years, in the urban imaginary of Vancouver, West Side schools are imagined differently than East Side schools. In this last section of the chapter, I discuss how each school has been changed and characterized throughout its history against the backdrop of changing urban and provincial contexts.

### 3.3.1    West High

West High is a coeducational, multiethnic comprehensive school situated in the West Side of the city. It is among some of the highest performing schools in the city and province. This is noticeable in the school's yearly report (2011–2012), which shows that over a quarter of the student body made the principal's list (with a GPA above 89.5%) while about half of the study body made the honour roll (with a GPA above 85.5%). Also, the Fraser Institute's school report (i.e., league tables) has ranked West High among some of the top—as in "best"—schools in the province for the past several years. Reflective of this positive reputation, West High's enrolment grew by about 25%—from 1,086 in 2001 to 1,364 in 2009—during a period when Vancouver's overall public school enrolment dropped.

This school has been perceived as a white school because of its location in Vancouver's West Side, which is occupied by relatively wealthier immigrants and residents: professionals of British or Western European descent. In recent years, an increasing number of middle-class Asian immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China have settled in these neighbourhoods (Brunet-Jailly, 2008; Ley & Dobson, 2008). The top three career titles of residents in the

school's neighbourhoods are teacher, professor, and scientist. The neighbourhood surrounding West High is also one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the city (and the country). In 2006, the average family income in the school's catchment area ranged from $98,435 to $123,087, compared to Vancouver's median income of $47,000 (according to 2006 Canadian Census data). Recently, the West Side has received a large investment of international capital as middle-class immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan settle in the neighbourhood, which is well reflected in the sudden rise of real estate prices and the associated racial tensions and conflicts over real estate and the housing crisis (Mitchell, 2004).

The 2006 census showed a relatively homogeneous population of English-speaking Canadians (72%), but the demographics of the neighbourhood are rapidly changing. This rapid change is reflected in the school statistics. In 2010–2011, 57% of West High students spoke English at home, 23% spoke Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese dialects), 4% spoke Korean, and a minority of other students spoke languages including Japanese, French, Spanish, Tagalog, and Portuguese. As some of my West High participants noted, the school's population has become much more diverse in the last five years, although as noted in my transcripts, students on the East Side have a tendency to perceive West High as a Caucasian school.

The neighbourhood and school also benefit educationally by their geographical proximity to the University of British Columbia (UBC). With internationally known scholars (including a few notable Nobel Prize–winning academics) present on campus, UBC is globally recognized. A recent report, the 2012 Times Higher Education Reputation Rankings, lists UBC as one of the top 25 universities in the world. UBC has become a magnet for international students from

affluent families around the world, especially those from Asia.[40] As a result, West High also draws a large number of international students: 90 students in 2011, which is about 10% of the total number of international students enrolled in VSB schools (Statistics Canada, 2008a). The high number of international students at West High is indicative of its reputation in the global education market and how international students imagine this school when compared to the other 17 secondary schools in Vancouver. Conversely, the number of Aboriginal students at West High is notably quite low, fewer than ten students in 2011.

Further, I learned from informal conversations with parents that West High has been refined through the introduction of the mini school, which selectively admits high-achieving and well-supported students. In the past, the school was not considered the most desirable—it was plagued by drug problems in the 1990s—yet the school changed its reputation by opening the mini school. This radically transformed the academic and social culture by creating competition and selecting students who were academically competitive. It is this combination of high academic achievement and a "good" neighbourhood that attracts many to this school today. This was evident when I spoke to mini school applicants and students. When it came to choosing between their neighbourhood school and West High, many suggested that it was not so much the special program offered at the mini school that attracted them; they were attracted to the school's academic focus and success. It is thus likely that they would not have enrolled in a similar special program if it had been housed within an East Side school. I further elaborate on these points in my data chapters.

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[40] The two public secondary schools located at the university—one regular public secondary school on the University Endowment Lands and one mini school located within a university building and taught by UBC professors—are the city's most popular and competitive schools, drawing students both provincially and globally.

West High Mini School was established in 1999 to create a school within a school that would promote strong academic achievement as well as foster a passion for learning in a specialized alternative program. The program is designed for above-average students who are self-motivated and possess a record of high academic achievement. The academic courses (e.g., English, Social Studies, and Science) are enriched for the mini students' cohort, are offered in classrooms separate from the main school, and often require more extensive homework than regular classes. Also, these courses are designed to require students to be creative in many subject areas in order to foster academic and artistic excellence. Almost all mini students are expected to enter university after graduation, and many receive early admission. As some of my participants mentioned, mini students stand out as high-achieving students at West High, and they tend to take Advanced Placement English in their senior years.

I repeatedly noted during my fieldwork, and in informal conversations with parents, students, and school staff, that the school attracts many families from out of its catchment area mainly because parents perceive the school as being safe and as having high achievement standards. On the day of mini school interviews, held in February 2010, I met excited and anxious parents from Saskatchewan, Merritt, Coquitlam, New Westminster, Burnaby, and Richmond (field note, February 2, 2010). Some parents were quite adamant about enrolling their child at West High—either by successful entry into the mini school or by moving to the neighbourhood. In the new dynamics of the education market, the school is known as "a private school in the public system" that caters to a particular community (field note, February 2, 2010). Situated in an affluent and highly educated neighbourhood in Vancouver, West High is imagined to be an ideal Canadian school, a white middle-class school in a safe neighbourhood, although the numbers of racial and ethnic minority students are rapidly increasing.

### 3.3.2 East High

East High is a coeducational comprehensive public secondary school in East Vancouver. Although enrolment has declined over the years, this school has a slightly higher number of students than West High, approximately 1,650. The school's yearly plan (2011–2012) indicates that it serves neighbourhoods with the highest proportions of economically disadvantaged and marginalized students in the city. The school has a sizable group of Aboriginal students, and about one eighth of students are identified as having special needs. As such, the school as a whole is focused on supporting student learning. The emphasis lies on improving graduation rates (rather than honour roll rates) in the annual school plan.

During my study period, the school offered a range of programs to support students of low achievement and with special needs. Some of these programs have since moved to other schools in the city or have disappeared altogether. For instance, an alternative program that provided support to at-risk Aboriginal learners in Grades 9 and 10 who required academic and social support within a school setting was cut in 2012.

One major change over the past decade is that the school has considerably shifted its academic focus and school resources towards the needs of high-achieving students. It now offers two mini school programs and a French Immersion program. Each mini school offers an enriched and accelerated curriculum for 30 students in each grade from Grades 8 to 10. French Immersion courses are offered to students who have successfully completed early or late immersion programs at the elementary school level and wish to receive a bilingual Dogwood Certificate. Because of the wide range of choices offered to the increasingly diverse population

the school serves, some researchers[41] have proclaimed East High to be successfully reimagined as a strong and flourishing urban school that can accommodate the diverse needs and interests of an urban population.

Arguably, this shift is reflective, at least in part, of the changing demographics of East High neighbourhoods, many of which have undergone radical changes following a substantial rise in the proportion of middle-class residents, who have raised the average income and educational offerings of the area. Historically, British immigrants with backgrounds in trades, shop-keeping, shipping, and construction settled in large numbers on the East Side and in the neighbourhoods adjacent to East High at the beginning of the 20th century (Buchan, 1985). Since then, with its low-cost (though sometimes substandard) housing and close proximity to the core of Vancouver, the neighbourhood has largely served as a residence for immigrants (Jensen, 1974). Compared to the West Side, the neighbourhood has been historically more multi-ethnic: Italians, Chinese, East Indians, Portuguese, Spanish, and East Europeans have all lived there (Buchan 1985). Since the 1970s, the number of Asian immigrants, including Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino settlers, has noticeably increased.[42] Since the 1980s, the neighbourhood has seen an increase in gentrification, pushing the long-term low-income residents further away to the suburbs. Meanwhile, single-family detached dwellings and duplexes have been upgraded and more and more retail stores have opened up to meet the demands of gentrifiers rather than the neighbourhood's traditional residents (Buchan, 1985). Average household income levels

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[41] To protect the anonymity of the studied school, I have omitted the names of the researchers.

[42] The proportion of residents with Chinese as their native language has increased to 18%, Vietnamese to 4.2% (1250 persons), and Tagalog (Filipino) to 2%. In contrast, the number of Italian- and Portuguese-speaking residents has declined.

have increased at a rate similar to that of the rest of Vancouver, and the percentage of residents with professional careers and university degrees has increased more rapidly (Buchan, 1985). In fact, the rising prices of real estate and renting have made the cost of living unaffordable for many long-time neighbourhood residents (Tupechka, Martin, & Douglas, 1997).

While the school continues to serve neighbourhoods with the most economically and socially marginalized populations in the city, it has also responded to the priorities, concerns, and values of a rapidly growing number of middle-class families in gentrifying neighbourhoods (by offering the enriched academic programs of mini schools and French Immersion).[43] Nevertheless, the neighbourhood and its schools continue to be perceived—largely by middle-class families—as less academically inclined and more prone to violence and gang activity than West Side schools. The East Side continues to be a low-income area (and it has a high proportion of single parents) (City of Vancouver, 2006).[44] The widely circulating urban imaginary continues to paint East High as less academically-inclined and more violent than West Side schools. The media often portrays the city's East Side as the part of town where all the problems are concentrated—especially drug-related crime, prostitution, shootings, poverty, and gang violence (see further discussion in Chapter 6). Furthermore, recent provincial austerity measures have caused the Vancouver School District to readjust its priorities, which has resulted in the

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[43] In 2010–2011, the top five languages spoken at home by East High students were English (42%), Chinese (30%), Vietnamese (8%), Tagalog (6%), and Spanish (4%).

[44] Over the past four decades, the number of single-parent families has increased steadily in Vancouver and more rapidly in the East Side neighbourhoods. In Vancouver, the rate rose by 40% from 12.2% in 1971 to 17% in 2001, and it rose by 50%, from 17.6% to 26.4%, in the neighbourhoods adjacent to East High (City of Vancouver, 2009; City of Vancouver Planning Department, 1985).

underfunding of alternative programs for disadvantaged students, especially at East High, as

noted earlier (Vancouver School Board, n.d.). While parent fundraising may offset the decreased

public funding under neoliberal policy measures in wealthy neighbourhoods, many struggling

East Side neighbourhood schools, including East High, may not have access to this fundraising.[45]

Schooling on the East Side, including mini schools, thus continues to be high risk for middle-

class families.[46] Consequently, despite East High's efforts to support increasingly diverse inner-

city populations by diversifying its academic programs, the school continues to be somewhat

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[45] In BC, education funding has been declining; the percentage of BC's GDP spent on education fell from 3.6% in

2003–2004 to 3.3% in 2005–2006; the number of full-time educators in Canada decreased by 2% in 2009–2010 after

increasing by 5% between 2005 and 2006; and, finally, while the number of BC students in the highest-need,

highest-expenditure category has risen by 6,187 (to a total of 24,029 students) over the past decade, BC has lost 752

special education teachers over the same period (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2009, 2012). While West

Side schools have been able to make up for their lack of resources with parent fundraising, their counterparts on the

East Side have not been able to do so. In fact, in a recent panel discussion on elementary school fundraising in

Vancouver, a drastic discrepancy was noted between two public schools on the East and West Sides of the city. East

Hastings Elementary on the East Side raised about $5,000 in 2011 while Lord Kitchener Elementary on the West

Side expected to raise about $40,000 (Tremonti, 2011, September 22). As a result of this disparity, school choice

allows individual students to switch schools in order to gain access to more resources, in addition to more positive

imagery.

[46] For instance, teachers and parents at MacDonald Elementary School became increasingly concerned about

students achieving an adequate level of education. With large class sizes, many special needs children, and the risk

of young girls being recruited into the sex trade, they declared a "state of crisis" (Tupechka et al., 1997). Tupechka

et al. (1997) note that due to concentrated sex trade activity in the neighbourhood, local activists and parents at the

school tried to establish a "no-go zone" to keep sex workers, pimps, and johns away from the six-block area around

the school.

marginalized and pathologized in the urban imaginary, as the following data chapters illustrate. What is apparent in the growing number of mini schools and French Immersion programs at both East High and West High is that public schools in Vancouver are creating more exclusive educational and social communities in the face of the growing challenges of meeting the needs and interests of diverse and unequal urban populations in the aspiring global city of Vancouver.

## 3.4    Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that in BC and Vancouver, school choice has been historically used throughout its educational history as a way to imagine schools as communities, which serves not only as a familial strategy of social reproduction but also as a group strategy of building ethnically and racially envisioned communities. While I agree that parental school choice is a key strategy to "preserve or enhance a family's position into the next generation," as it is in other parts of the world, such as in the UK and the US (See Ball, 2003; Gidney & Millar, 1990, p. 26), the policy of school choice in Canada and particularly the choice practices endorsed by the BC government have functioned to regulate how learners and families view themselves in relation to the wider social order. These practices represent a particular kind of cultural governance that has reshaped and continues to recast social behaviours and cultural practices, and modes of family and youth identification, alongside the making of particular group identities (Shore & Wright, 1997). To understand the dual social function of school choice as both parental and group strategy, I have discussed the various kinds of schools as imagined communities from the early white settlement society to the current multicultural urban context of BC and Vancouver. While the social, racial, and political landscapes are vastly different today compared to those of the 19th century, my documentary analysis of historical and policy texts shows that

schools are continuously imagined as particular social communities, although the politics

surrounding school choice have changed to some extent. In the next chapter, I present my

overarching methodology and outline, in particular, what could be referred to as critical social

phenomenological policy research methodology. I then move forward to further detail my

ethnographic study methods and discuss some of the key challenges I faced in conducting this

work.

# Chapter 4: A critical socio-phenomenological approach to policy research

On my third visit to East High, during lunch break, I went up to the … floor where mini students take their classes. I wanted to say hello to the Grade 8 mini school English teacher and ask to observe her class sometime next week. There, I saw an unusually large circle of students sitting on the floor. Some were sitting on their backpacks, but most were sitting on the concrete floor. Some were eating their lunch, while many of them had their textbooks and notebooks open. They seemed to be eating and working (on some assignments) together at the same time. As I approached the classroom for mini school English, I asked one of the students sitting in the circle whether this was the classroom for Grade 8 English for mini students. She said yes and that all the students there were waiting for the class. This encounter reminded me of a group of French Immersion students I had seen eating lunch together in the hallway on the ground floor. This is really interesting…. I wonder how this is a manifestation of social separation, reflective of academic divisions. (field note, January 15, 2010)

Understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending a possibility of being…. What is important here is not the existential moment of responsibility or free choice, but rather the structure of being which underlies the problem of choice. The 'either … or' is not primary; it is derived from the structure of the thrown project. (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 57)

In order to explore the complexity of young people's experiences of school choice in relation to "the structure of being," as Ricoeur (1981, p. 57) describes above, I deploy a critical socio-phenomenological approach to policy research. This is an interdisciplinary methodological approach that combines the anthropology of policy, critical policy, and interpretive policy studies. I argue that such an approach helps illuminate young people's experiences, interpretations, and understandings of policy by examining how young people interpret and imagine their lives and futures in a prevailing and further advancing neoliberal imaginary. I argue that this combined methodological approach has the potential to assist in understanding policy as a dialectical process between policymakers and the often marginalized views and meanings of young people in a radically changing urban and educational landscape.

This chapter thus puts forth this interdisciplinary approach in hopes of raising the potential to expand existing methodological frameworks of school choice policy research. Some of the existing research paradigms, while important in their own time, may limit us from fully understanding the meanings generated by young people when examining the tensions between school choice and educational and social experiences. As discussed in Chapter 2, the dominant paradigmatic theoretical and epistemological frameworks tend to overlook the complex dimensions of school choice policy in young people's lives. Existing policy studies tend to frame their objectives *for* policy, that is, to inform policymakers of whether programs should continue or be modified (Yanow, 2000). Subsequently, most attention has been paid to the performance of students—rather than to their experiences—as the government objectives of choice policy have focused mainly on academic performance. By focusing on what can be studied objectively and quantitatively, a positivistic paradigm frames the notion of choice as a rational process, which is limiting (Bowe et al., 1994). This can be partially explained by the paucity of theories

concerning the effects of educational policy on young people. Even sociological studies of school choice policy that investigate experiences of choice tend to predominantly focus upon parents, leaving out the experiential and imaginative dimensions of youth (Reay & Lucey, 2003). Similarly, critical studies utilizing the tools of discourse analysis on their own have sometimes subtle limitations, especially the inability to assess how shifting language is made sense of by young people who are differentially positioned with varying life experiences and circumstances. We are therefore left with a sometimes piecemeal approach to the wider questions of policy analysis.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In Part I, I first discuss how the *anthropology of policy* can help investigate school choice policy as an imaginary that plays a part in shaping norms, practices, experiences, and young people's everyday understandings of current "freedoms," constraints, and horizons of possibility (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Shore & Wright, 1997; Taylor, 2004). I then go on to draw upon *interpretive policy analysis* to explore young people's interpretations and imaginations of school choice (Yanow, 2000). I conclude by demonstrating how these two can be combined using a broader critical policy approach, which I present as a *critical socio-phenomenological approach* to policy analysis. In Part II, I discuss the importance of multi-sited ethnographic methods in trying to provide a richer understanding of the interface between school choice and young people. I highlight the importance of non-participant observation in addition to interviewing and documenting data. In Part III, I focus on my researcher positionality and research values, as well as how I have grappled with issues of power as well as my own biases in conducting a school-based ethnographic study of educational policy influenced by the advanced neoliberal zeitgeist (Lauder et al., 2006).

## 4.1    What is a critical, socio-phenomenological policy analysis?

My research aim is to understand the phenomenon of school choice policy from the lived everyday schooling experiences of young people with different social and racial backgrounds. In doing so, I simultaneously analyze the power of policy that underpins young people's imagined worlds of schooling, their futures, and their relationship-making in a global city. To achieve this aim, I have interwoven a critical policy tradition with interpretivist and anthropological research traditions. I first outline this combined approach, which I call a critical socio-phenomenological approach to policy studies, and then discuss how it can be an effective way to study young people and school choice policy in an aspiring global city. In this discussion, I address questions of commensurability among these different traditions.

The ontological position I have taken in the project is primarily rooted in a critical tradition that views the nature of social reality as "a constant struggle for power" (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 101). Unequal power relations are formed and reformed based on class, race, gender, and space, among other things (Lincoln et al., 2011), yet I do not see "power" as simply repressive or oppressive. Rather, following Foucault's post-structural notion of power, I also view power as both regulative and localized (Foucault, 1980, 1984, 2000). My view of power thus stems from a combination of structural and post-structural viewpoints. This abridged notion of power also supports a critical view of multiple and contesting realities/meanings, but this view can only be taken seriously when one understands that multiple realities and contested meanings about "choice," for example, can only be understood within a field of constraints and possibilities and are circumscribed by social and political conditions and the social positions of actors (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The ontological stance I have taken is therefore in line with an ontological dynamism rather than restricting myself to a narrow and

highly limited conceptual vantage point. Similar to Lincoln et al. (2011), I view different non-positivist paradigmatic traditions, especially critical theory and interpretivism, as commensurable and complementary in illuminating the complex dimensions of social reality and change. Non-positivist paradigms are founded upon a shared notion of knowledge, which is socially and culturally constructed by humans, and thus the knowers and the actors are an important part of forming and reforming social and cultural realities (Lincoln et al., 2011).What interpretive and cultural traditions add to a critical theory tradition, then, is the experiential and cultural dimensions of human understanding and knowledge formation. As such, these traditions resonate strongly with each other.

Consequently, I take an epistemological stance that combines critical, interpretive, and anthropological traditions (especially anthropology of policy), for this offers a fruitful way to understand the social and cultural worlds which are shaped and regulated by policy changes. One useful part of this combined epistemological approach is that the effects of policy can be examined simultaneously at the micro social and cultural level of young people's lived experiences while linking their micro-understandings with a wider social imaginary, macro structures of power, and the sometimes highly mobile and globalizing discourses of policy. In the following section, I discuss in detail how I draw from each tradition in a way that is not only commensurable but also complementary.

Firstly, critical theory facilitates a focused examination into the structural issues of power as well as discourses of policy (Ball, 1994; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Critical theory can guide our understanding of the unequal social world through identifying where social struggles, domination, power, and privilege are negotiated and attained (Lincoln et al., 2011). Critical theory tradition helps focus our attention to history, structure, and discourse to examine and

understand power relations (Lincoln et al., 2011; Nealon & Giroux, 2003). Yet, in my view, this tradition is unable to produce a complete understanding of the circulation and effects of power from the important socio-cultural perspectives of lived *experiences* and multiple *meanings*. I thus combine the critical paradigm with the tradition of interpretivism.

Interpretivist epistemology offers valuable insight into the importance of understanding the social world as experientially and intersubjectively constructed (Lincoln et al., 2011). My epistemological stance thus further subscribes to the concept of phenomenological knowing, which is "rooted in the belief that reality cannot be known apart from the knower and that knowing always happens in context" (Sleeter, 2000, p. 223). To know how people see their realities at a point in history and in a particular place, in this sense, is to understand how meanings are *socially experienced* and how their significance is constructed by those living in particular times and spaces in the formation of peer groups, class, and local cultures (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This kind of knowing indeed underpins the subcultural meaning-making that is built on the shared experiences of young people in their spatially differentiated class locations, which Paul Willis' (1981) study so poignantly illustrated.

In turn, anthropological epistemology allows for a focus on how young people's meanings are expressed in their cultural and educational practices. Anthropological epistemology can help us understand our world by examining cultural practices and norms. Especially in relation to policy, as Wright and Shore (1997) discuss, the power of anthropological epistemology lies in the way policy produces particular social identities, webs, and power relations by creating new cultural practices and norms (Shore & Wright, 1997). Anthropological

epistemology can thus be useful in assisting interpretive and critical traditions by shedding light on how policy maintains and creates new cultural practices (Shore & Wright, 1997).[47]

Hence, when combined with a critical tradition that emphasizes history and structure, and an interpretive tradition that emphasizes experiences and meanings, this anthropological tradition's emphasis on culture and norms can provide a powerfully layered epistemological lens (rather than having these theories compete with or contradict one another). This combined epistemology can help us more effectively study young people's experiences and imaginations of school choice reforms on an everyday socio-cultural level within the local historical and contemporary social context of Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Building upon this interdisciplinary and inter-paradigmatic epistemology, then, I call my methodological approach a *critical socio-phenomenological approach* to policy studies. In particular, I utilize an interdisciplinary approach that bridges a critical policy tradition (Ball, 1994; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), an interpretivist policy tradition (Yanow, 2000), the anthropology of policy (Shore & Wright, 1997), and the theories of other social thinkers whose work supports these three aforementioned methodological traditions.

I first draw from the work of Stephen Ball (1994) and from Rizvi and Lingard's (2010) critical policy studies approach as an umbrella framework for understanding how reforms are set within what is perceived to be possible and impossible within the political and economic contexts of education (Ball, 1994). This critical dimension enables an investigation of the workings of power and the state in connection to concerns about the contexts of current policy

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[47] What is particularly useful about this approach is that it explores the way in which policies have the power to turn "uncertain and fragile cultural resolutions and outcomes into a pervasive naturalism," which then becomes fixed as common sense and practice (Willis, 1981, p. 162).

practice, the distributional outcomes of policy, and the discursive power of educational policy (Ball, 1994). Further, because of its sensitivity to the contexts of practice and policy, this approach can be effective in helping produce a nuanced interpretation of local structures, concerns, and conditions, which are radically changing in an era of rapid globalization (Ball, 1994; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Building upon this tradition, then, I delve more closely into the lived experiences and meaning-making of young people using an interpretivist tradition.

I also draw upon the interpretivist policy work of Yanow (2000), who insightfully notes the importance of identifying multiple and conflicting interpretations of policy. She suggests that an interpretivist approach can help us understand particular policy effects and associated affective responses. She asserts that the interpretive tradition can help us study policy as a symbolic representation of power and prestige and can also reveal who is heard and who is silenced (Yanow, 2000). It also helps illuminate the question "for whom does it [a policy] have meaning?" and the different consequences of a policy for a wide range of people (Yanow, 2000, p. vii). This approach can thus direct a comparative investigation of the meanings of choice for different social groups (Yanow, 2000).

I then further link Yanow's approach to Ricoeur's (1991) phenomenological hermeneutics and Bourdieu's social theories of habitus and social space in order to stress the importance of social positionality in meaning-making, which seems to be problematically underemphasized in the interpretivist tradition and, to some extent, in the Foucaultian-based discourse approaches (Bourdieu, 2000; Valdes, 1991). According to Ricoeur, individual readers (e.g., of policy) are not simply trying to determine the author's intended meanings (by studying the policy's structure). Instead, readers engage with the other ideas, discourses, and images that the text introduces (Ricoeur, 1981). In other words, when reading, people reconstitute the

meaning of a text regardless of the intention of the writer (Ricoeur, 1981). Readers make new and situated meanings out of a text.[48] Interpretation, in other words, is linked to the ways in which individuals think about themselves while reading and interpreting policy texts.[49] Here, I take a further sociological step using Bourdieu's (2000) social phenomenology in order to suggest that multiple meanings are reflective of situated lived experiences.[50]

With Bourdieu's insight, then, I suggest that young people's interpretive and imaginative power is not simply an intellectual, mental process of disembodied interpretation. It is socially practiced, constructed, and acquired "in the course of a situated and dated social experience" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 137). Young people's meaning-making practices and their interpretive capacity thus ought to be considered here alongside Bourdieu's (2000) notion of habitus, that is, that interpretation is the function of habitus. Young people's interpretations thus generate practical knowing or an understanding of one's positioning in social space, which is socially, spatially, and racially uneven and hierarchical.

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[48] In this process, Ricoeur (1981) further argues, readers forge self-understanding, which suggests that "the constitution of the *self* is contemporaneous with the constitution of *meaning*" (p. 57).

[49] This kind of Ricoeurian approach, which Mario Valdés (1991) calls post-structural hermeneutics (where absolute knowledge is absent), can be instructive in investigating and analyzing how young people read policy (as the imaginary) in relation to their futures ("possibility of being") (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 57).

[50] As Bourdieu defines it, habitus "restores to the agent a generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power" of social reality (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 137). Young people's interpretations of "good" choice, at both the subjective and collective (peer) levels, can further inform their involvement in classification struggles. Through their interpretations, we may be able to discern the differentiated objects of classification as well as produce classifications while challenging dominant classificatory schemes and systems (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 467).

We can thus see the link between social phenomenology and critical theory. What shapes young people's meaning-making is not just the present but also the historically entrenched social and cultural context. As such, stressing the importance of history and structure, I use the critical tradition to inspect young people's engagement in appropriating and reappropriating meanings. Young people are not necessarily singular authors who can make singular claims of their own, since notions of selfhood and memory are already situated in social and historical modes of identification (Bourdieu, 1984, 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Skeggs, 1997). In exploring the historical dimension of young people's meaning-making, I thus further follow Bourdieu (2000), Baert (1998), and Dillabough's (2009) leads in theorizing social space as historical. In other words, I explore young people's interpretations and imaginations in relation to historically specific configurations of classed and racialized urban spaces.

Indeed, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) and Taylor (2004) argue that imaginaries are not simply written texts but rather habitus, consisting of everyday practices. As such, school choice imaginaries ought to be investigated not only at a meaning-making level but also at the level of cultural practices. Anthropology of policy, as illuminated by Wright and Shore (1997), can then provide a useful set of tools and approaches in this attempt to study the cultural—and, more broadly, anthropological—manifestations of policy and how policy affects and effects everyday practice.

An anthropology of policy tradition can aid a close examination of the cultural effects and meaning-making of policy by offering a lens to study how policy shapes cultural patterns and processes (Shore & Wright, 1997). It can help identify how policy creates intragroup and intergroup relations through the criteria of cultural and educational inclusion and exclusion used in policy, which is a critical dimension of the theories of the imaginary as developed by Rizvi

107

and Lingard (2010) and Taylor (2004). Anthropology of policy can help illuminate how policies give shape and colour to dominant cultural practices and discourses, which in turn shape young people's everyday cultural practices, everyday meaning-making, identity-constructions, classification struggles, and relationship-making, especially in these changing times (Mackey, 1997, 2002; Nealon & Giroux, 2003; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Shore & Wright, 1997).

In brief, it is my hope that this interdisciplinary methodology may provide the foundation for examining the complex dynamics and variegated effects of school choice on young people's interpretations and imaginations of choice based on their lived experiences of the current urban school system. In this respect, I do not see the critical, interpretivist, and anthropological traditions as incommensurable; rather, I agree with the community of scholars who find that bridging dimensions of related paradigms can provide more nuanced and refined qualitative research when these paradigms are cautiously interwoven into the analysis (Dillabough, 2009; Lather, 1991, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Lincoln et al., 2011). This cross-paradigmatic and interdisciplinary approach is a viable one for understanding the effects of policy as a complex social and cultural phenomenon. This approach can help us understand the power of school choice policy through young people's experiences in changing urban neighourhoods and cities.

This critical socio-phenomenological approach is then distinctively different from current approaches to the studies of school choice, such as the quantitative outcomes of equity and equality, and the school choice viewpoints and behavioural patterns of parents. The methodological framework I have sought to develop seeks to place more emphasis on the lived experiences and meaning-making of the processes of inclusion and exclusion that shape individual and group dispositions, expectations, and imaginations. In particular, through this approach, I have been enabled to engage in the examination of young people's interpretations of

schooling and social life in the following ways. Firstly, I have sought to collect narratives about

young people's lived experiences of school choice. Secondly, I have documented how the market

functions as a process that naturalizes differences between groups and as a practice that affects

individual identities and social actions within and between groups (Appadurai, 1996; Bourdieu,

1989; Shore & Wright, 1997). Thirdly, I have sought to compare the experiences of those whose

practices, meaning-making, and identity-construction are either aligned or not aligned with

dominant policy discourses. This approach is then well suited for examining the implicit function

of policy in young individuals' experiences and interpretations of schooling operating within

changing policy reform regimes.

## 4.2    Ethnographic methods and study participants

This multi-sited ethnographic study explores young people's (ages 11–19) meaning-

making of school choice through their cultural practices and lived experiences at a

phenomenological, interpretive, and ethnographic level. My three key research methods were

interviews with students, non-participant observations at schools, and media and policy

document analysis. In the following section, I first discuss these key methods, then provide a

more detailed account of my two study phases in two separate educational market spaces. I then

discuss the power and limits of ethnographic methods for studying policy. My fieldwork took

place between November 2009 and June 2010, and it consisted of two phases: (1) information

evening visits and interviews with Grade 7 students, and (2) two secondary school observations

and interviews with Grade 8 and Grade 12 students.[51]

### 4.2.1    Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 59 students residing across Vancouver with the following three aims: (1) to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of school choice on student lives, (2) to gain insight into the unequal and different realities that students experience, and (3) to further provide vivid descriptions from first-person perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Tierney & Dilley, 2002).[52] My interviews explored the students' lived experiences and situated interpretations and imaginations of their present and future possibilities in the city of Vancouver. The interviews lasted somewhere between 30 minutes and an hour depending on student availability and the flow of conversation. My interviews had the following three parts: background, neighbourhoods, and school choice. Appendix B provides a full description of the interview schedule.

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[51] As mentioned in Chapter 1, I focused on Grade 7s because they were in their last year of elementary school. I interviewed them to learn about their perceptions and experiences (where applicable) of the processes of selecting, evaluating, and choosing a particular local school. Also, I focused on Grade 8s because these students were in their first year of secondary school and thus they were likely to have more critical views and experiences of the gap between their expectations and realities a few months after making the transition from elementary to secondary school. Lastly, I focused on Grade 12 students to examine their experiences of school choice in a summative sense, to explore what they perceived as the overall effects of school choice throughout their secondary school years, and to gather their assessments of the impact of school choice on their future directions.

[52] An exception to this was interviews with three students who lived outside the city.

**Background:** My interviews began with a question about the students' histories of schooling. This question served as a springboard to ask follow-up questions about why they changed schools or how they experienced the changes. This then led to discussion of the current schools that they were attending and how they came to those schools. This aided me in grasping the patterns of their (and their families') choice practices, as well as their social and economic backgrounds and circumstances. These conversations also revealed students' ethnic and migration histories, which helped distinguish their class backgrounds in their countries of origin. This helped me to discern the class backgrounds of first- and second-generation immigrant youths. Following this set of questions, I asked students about their families (e.g., parents' occupations, educational backgrounds, and ethnic backgrounds), which gave me a further understanding of their social backgrounds and the changing histories of their families' social circumstances.

**Neighbourhoods and schools:** I asked students about different schools and neighbourhoods in Vancouver, how they imagined different schools, and whether they could see themselves attending particular urban schools. These questions often generated a lot of material on their deeply held assumptions about the city, the neighbourhood, and the schools. Students told me about what they knew and heard about different neighbourhoods and schools and what they imagined they were like (as in an imagined community).

**School choice:** The focal point of my interviews was the topic of school choice in Vancouver. While I did ask them about their families' backgrounds and thus the importance of family characteristics and pressure, I was mainly curious about what they had to say about school choice. As such, my conversations with students focused on their perspectives, values, and experiences of school choice in Vancouver. In the interviews, my focus was on the whys and

hows of choice. I thus asked the students whether they had participated in choosing schools (and if so, what the process was like for them); what they thought about school choice; whether they thought school choice was a good thing (for them and for everyone else) and about its impact on peer relations and friendship groupings (feeling included and/or excluded); and, finally, if they had choice in that moment, what they would do differently (as well as how they viewed their futures and the kinds of identities they saw themselves having). These interrelated questions gave the students an opportunity to express their views of school choice while also reflecting on their perceptions and experiences of school choice. This also facilitated their evaluation of major obstacles to school choice that they had experienced in the past.

I chose interviews with students as the key primary investigative method because this study is intended to illuminate what young people think and experience. In other words, simply observing students' movements from one school to another may tell us something, but it will not tell us other stories of their lived experiences. Statistical information lacks in-depth data about why young people enrol in schools outside their catchment areas. The numbers may not tell us about the individual experiences of school choice processes or about the ultimate experiences that result from choosing a school outside students' familiar residential neighbourhood areas. As Valentine's (1999) important research with children and youths shows, "children create their own social worlds and social relations, of which adults can only ever have partial or fragmented pictures" (p. 142). In order to tap into young people's social worlds and social relations, then, I chose interviews as a direct method to learn their perspectives. In the following data chapters, I show the ways in which young people are acutely aware of their social and educational worlds and are actively engaged in shaping many aspects of their schooling choices and the meaning-making of their experiences.

Clearly, there were ethical challenges involved with working with young people aged 11–19. Parents' right to, and anxiety over, access to their children had to be carefully negotiated. In this regard, I made myself visible to parents (especially those of Grade 7 students, who were between 11 and 12 years old) at information evenings so that they could see who I was and ask questions. My initial conversations with parents and their children at info evenings helped reduce the parents' potential anxiety about a researcher who was a stranger. Also, because I had the opportunity to meet both students and their parents at the same time, students' opinions about whether they wished to take part in the study were often negotiated (rather than them being persuaded to agree) on the spot (Valentine, 1999). For students in Grades 8 and 12, after gaining official access to the schools from the School Board and each participating school, I made sure that students obtained their parents' consent to take part in the study. In reflecting on this early stage of the research, my one regret is not having consent forms readily available in other languages, which would have made them more accessible for linguistic-minority parents. This may have hindered the participation of some students from these families.

After I secured access to my study participants, an additional challenge was creating an environment where effective and ethical interviews could take place with minors. For Grade 7 students, my interviews were mostly conducted in their living rooms, where their parents were often present, and they at times interrupted our conversations, except in a few homes where they allowed us to talk in a more private space with fewer interruptions. This presented some difficulties in creating a somewhat private space where I could talk to students with minimal interruptions or eavesdropping by their parents (Valentine, 1999). This spatial constraint clearly affected my interviews with some students, but I thought this was the most ethical method at the time. My interviews with Grade 8 students, whom I mostly interviewed on school grounds, were

113

also challenged by a lack of appropriate space and time. Especially at West High, I often found myself speaking to a student in the hallways or the stairwells, in addition to chatting with them in their classrooms. Also, because the students had full Monday to Friday schedules, it was challenging to find an appropriate time, especially when students did not want to give up their lunch hours for interviews.

With Grade 12 students, I gave them the option of staying near school or leaving the school grounds to meet me at places such as cafés or the public library when they had free blocks (independent study periods on weekdays). Also, one student invited me to his home after school. One thing that came up repeatedly was that some students wished to be interviewed during class time, which I gently declined, as I felt that not only would this undermine my acceptance by important administrative staff, but it would also be unethical to ask students to give up important learning time.

While I view young people as active and struggling social agents, their participation in this study was "locked in a series of interdependent and asymmetrical or relatively powerless relationships with adults within the context of the household, school and wider society" (Valentine, 1999, p. 151), which most certainly affected their research relationship with me. Because of concerns about both spoken and unspoken power relationships between myself as an adult researcher and young people under the age of 18, except one student who turned 19 during my research period, I was cognizant of giving the students the choice of where, when, and with whom they wanted to be interviewed (except during their scheduled classes). Also, I tried to respect them by giving them considerable control over what we discussed and for how long. I tuned in to the issues students brought up with me and focused on what they were trying to tell me about their experiences. I also tried not to correct what they said; instead, I asked them about

their opinions and feelings. In fact, one Grade 12 student at West High mentioned after the interview that she felt that our conversation was quite exhaustive and broad and that we had touched upon "all" the issues that were relevant to school choice.[53] In this way, I tried to work with young people who "genuinely want to be involved and be concerned about the issue and have the time and space to work out what they want to say" (Valentine, 1999, p. 151).

### 4.2.2   Non-participant observation

My non-participant, open-ended observations were carried out between January 2010 and June 2010 at two secondary schools (West High and East High, which I described in Chapter 3) and between November and December of 2009 at information evenings. I chose non-participant observation techniques in order to focus more on the comparative dynamics of choice programs and regular programs at the two schools, as well as the differences between the mini school info evenings I attended. While I was not a complete "wallflower" in any of these places, as I chatted with people occasionally, my primary focus was on actively observing the cultural, educational, and social practices of young people in their educational spaces (Cooper, Lewis, & Urquhart, 2004).

At the two schools, I compared residential locations using an ethnographic mapping technique (Schensul et al., 1999). My documentation was focused on educational and cultural activities that involved different groups of students. I sought to identify not only the ways by which educational programs separated students but also how social and cultural activities, which are often organized by students themselves, differ. At the beginning, my observation was focused

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[53] Additionally, I dressed very casually to make young people feel at ease, which may have led to a teacher's comment that I "blend in too well with students" (field note, March 26, 2010).

on the physical space of the school and classrooms and on the socialization patterns in public settings, such as hallways, classrooms, and cafeterias, based on languages spoken and racial and ethnic characteristics. Soon, as I gained more insight into the social world of regular and mini school students at each school, I closely observed student socialization and how socialization patterns were connected to distinct educational programs. Also, I observed various school events throughout my school visits, which provided information on the various interests and priorities of different student groups. I noted where people sat in classrooms and in the cafeteria, and with whom. During my observation period, I engaged in casual conversations (but not formal interviews) with teachers, students, and school staff when it seemed appropriate. While I do not think non-participant observation alone can tell us much about the dynamics and complex effects of school choice in Vancouver, when it is combined with interview data and documentary data (as seen below), it can provide invaluable information by allowing a field researcher to focus on observing everyday environments and routine behaviours without any additional responsibilities that may distract from the study itself. For my study, non-participant observation provided rich and directly observed data about different schooling options as they are currently emerging in Vancouver as well as how these different options affect the social and cultural practices and patterns of young people, which may have been difficult to analyze otherwise (Cooper et al., 2004).

### 4.2.3 Policy and media texts

The major aim of including popular media and policy texts was to contextualize young people's narratives within the historical and contemporary social and political conditions of Vancouver. During my fieldwork period, as well as shortly after it, I collected a number of media

and policy documents, government reports, media releases, throne speeches, and legislative

debates. I selected and examined relevant documents in order to gain understanding and develop

empirical knowledge relevant to my research questions (Bowen, 2009). For the purpose of

content-based policy analysis, I focused on the following texts at the district and provincial

levels. First, I looked closely at the Vancouver School Board's reports and policy discussion

papers. Here is a list of the titles of selected documents:

- Flexibility and Choice for Adolescent Learners (2007)
- Review of Alternative Programs (1998)
- Meeting the Needs of Secondary Students: District Programs (1999)
- Strategic Choice (2006)
- Secondary District Program Review (1998)
- Options Brochure (2002, 2009, 2011)
- Vancouver School Board Ready Reference (2001, 2012)

These documents offered useful information on emerging school choice discourses at the district

level, which I have presented in Chapters 1 and 3. Some of these documents were publicly

available online, while others were obtained directly from the research branch of the Vancouver

School Board. I analyzed documents mainly to help my understanding of the public imaginaries

of evolving conceptions of schooling and choice. The content analysis of these documents

underpins much of my discussion in Chapters 1 and 3, as well as parts of Chapter 5.

Further, I examined publicly available legislative debates in order to learn how the

growing school choice movement across North America affected provincial politicians' views on

issues of choice, accountability, and performance in the 1990s. This was a critical step in the

research, as the provincial government has educational authority over what policies the

Vancouver School Board implements and acts upon at the district level. Hence, at the provincial

level, I conducted a focused reading of copies of *Hansard,* the official transcripts of BC

legislative debates, to compare the views of the NDP and Liberal governments. *Hansard* records

the words of all speakers, with redundancies omitted and obvious mistakes corrected (Legislative

assembly of British Columbia, 2012). This period included a centre-left NDP-led government

(1991–2001) and a centre-right Liberal-led government (2001–2006). To study this source, I

used the electronic transcripts of the debates of the Legislative Assembly on the government

website. I selected the official transcripts between 1991 and 2006, with a focus on keywords

such as "educational choice," "accountability," and "independent schools" (see the list below).

- 1992 Legislative Session: 1st Session, 35th Parliament, Apr 14: School Act (Enrichment programs)
- 1993 Legislative Session: 2nd Session, 35th Parliament, May 17: Independent School Amendment Act (Educational choice, freedom of choice)
- 1994 Legislative Session: 3rd Session, 35th Parliament, June 13: Estimates: Ministry of Education (Gifted children)
- 1994 Legislative Session: 3rd Session, 35th Parliament, Apr 28: School Amendment Act (Accountability in education)
- 1998/99 Legislative Session: 3rd Session, 36th Parliament, Jun 8: Charter schools
- 2001 Legislative Session: 2nd Session, 37th Parliament, Jan 26: Public education flexibility and choice act; charter schools; magnet schools
- 2001 Legislative Session: 2nd Session, 37th Parliament, Aug 9: Access to education
- 2002 Legislative Session: 3rd Session, 37th Parliament, Apr 29: Education system reforms; purpose of School Amendment Act 2002

These documents were credible sources of emerging school choice policy and legislative debates

among elected politicians. They were useful in developing my understanding of the phenomenon

of school choice in the political context of BC, which has had a significant impact on the

Vancouver School Board's development of school choice programs and direction. The content

analysis of these documents underpins much of my discussion in Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 8.

Popular media articles were used to document the radically polarizing social and

educational changes and corresponding moral sentiments of the present day through widely

circulating media texts, exclusively collected from the Canadian Newsstand Index. I extensively

used two local newspapers, *The Vancouver Sun* (province-wide readership) and *The Vancouver*

*Courier* (city-wide readership). I had full access to online articles covering the period between

January 2, 1987, and the present for *The Vancouver Sun* and between September 15, 2002, and

the present for *The Vancouver Courier*. I used the keyword search function, typing in terms such

as "schools" (and also specific names of Vancouver public and private schools), "Fraser Institute

Report Cards," "school choice," "mini schools," "drugs," "gangs," "East Side," and "West Side."

A content analysis of media articles contextualizes my interview data analysis in Chapters 5, 6,

and 7.

For document analyses, and as a result of including policy and media texts to provide a

landscape of understanding of the social and political milieu and contexts in which interview

participants were situated (DeVault & McCoy, 2006), I first read through my documents and

noted keywords and key themes, which then helped me identify key documents cited earlier. I

then closely read the culled documents, identifying pertinent information by examining concepts

and themes against the central research questions, which involved a combination of thematic and

content analysis (Bowen, 2009). Taken together, these texts were drawn upon to assist me in

developing a deeper understanding of both the historical developments of school choice and the

current political landscape and conditions associated with young people's school choice.

**Fieldwork: Phase I. November – December, 2009: Grade 7 students at information**

**evenings**

In the months of November and December, 2009, I observed 11 mini schools, 2 regular

public schools, and 3 private school information evenings, which prospective families and

students attended before applying to particular schools.[54] I subsequently collected information about different mini schools and their local popularity. During these meetings, I kept extensive field notes—both descriptive (e.g., the setting, actions, and information) and interpretive (e.g., thoughts, ideas, questions and concerns). I recorded what I observed at each school: How many people were present (by counting the number of seats in the venue where information evenings were held), what information the school representatives emphasized, whether student representatives were present, and, lastly, the ways young in which students who accompanied their parents participated during the information evenings (e.g., the level of enthusiasm and the kinds of participation behaviours). These were followed by my interpretations of why some schools may have a low or high number of families present, why school representatives presented particular information, and why some schools had student representatives while others did not. During this first phase of fieldwork, I focused on learning as much as I could about Grade 7 students' key secondary school choice activities in Vancouver.

Upon arrival at each public school, I distributed participant recruitment flyers.[55] This distribution was often followed by (or sometimes was simultaneous with) conversations with families who were interested in participating in the study and with whom I then set up interview dates and places. Also, I approximated the number of attendees by estimating the size of the rooms or facilities (e.g., library, auditorium). This was one way to gauge the popularity of each school, which is hard to know from the final number of enroled mini school students, because each mini school accepts approximately 30 students (this number differs significantly across the

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[54] The total number of Vancouver public secondary schools is 18, while the total number of private secondary schools is 13.

[55] This was not allowed at private schools.

120

city). Further, I documented how each mini school differentiates itself from others by collecting additional school details that were often missing from the *Options* brochure, which lists and describes all district alternative programs (published annually by the VSB).[56] Additionally, I made observations of Grade 7 students, especially of how they took part in the information sessions, for example, by asking basic questions and/or taking notes about their participation in these evenings.

With the assent of the students and the consent of their parents, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Grade 7 students to learn about their experiences and their understandings of school choice with respect to their futures, as well as to study how they perceived various neighbourhood schools across the city. I conducted 11 interviews at students' homes following my initial meetings with their parents at information evenings. The interviews lasted about an hour (usually less than an hour). Although they came from different elementary schools, I soon realized that a majority of these students, except for three on the West Side, came from gentrifying central Vancouver neighbourhoods. This shows an important spatial characteristic of choice students in Vancouver, which I explore later in Chapter 7. Only one lived in a multiplex apartment; the rest lived in single-family detached houses. Although I tried to recruit racial and ethnic minority families during my visits to school information evenings, I was not successful in this recruitment. While some were willing to give me their contact information,

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[56] Many questions were raised during information evenings. One interesting question that came up frequently was whether students must write the school's name as their first choice in order to be considered. Depending on the school's popularity (which I could often determine based on the number of prospective families in the auditorium), the presenter would then say yes or no. From my observation, if a school was very popular, the presenter was more likely to answer yes.

when contacted, they often declined due to a lack of time and interest. As a result, my participants at this early stage of student recruitment were predominantly from white, middle-class families, except for one whose parents had both Asian and European heritage.

Subsequently, in order to ensure that I had students from different social, geographical, and racial backgrounds, I later recruited three more students from an East Side elementary school in Vancouver. All were ethnic minorities and were recruited with a help of a teacher who I came to know through a community liaison worker I met during my fieldwork at East High. My interviews with them were conducted in their school library, and each interview lasted for about half an hour. Table 2 below presents a breakdown of the Grade 7 students I interviewed by their socio-economic classes, ethnic backgrounds, and residential locations.

As shown in the last column of Table 2, 4 of the 14 Grade 7 students lived on the West Side. Those who lived in single-family detached homes and those on the West Side tended to come from dual-income families, and, in most cases, both parents were professionals, such as professors and physiotherapists. Those who lived in apartments in inner-city neighbourhoods were from single-income households, and their parents' occupations were in low-skilled service or administrative sectors, in jobs such as convenience store clerks or office secretaries. Also, four of the Grade 7 students lived in apartments, while the rest (all white Canadians) lived in single-family detached homes. Four students were from visible minority groups, one was of mixed race, and the rest were white Canadians.

**Table 2 Student profiles: class, space, race, and school choice**

| | | | Grades 8 & 12 (45 Students) | | | | | | | | Grade 7 (14 Students) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Mini | | | Cross-boundary | | | Regular | | |
| | | | East High (8) | West High (15) | Else (0) | East High (0) | West High (4) | Else (1) | East High (11) | West High (6) | |
| Working-class (23) | West Side (0) | Racial Minority | | | | | | | | | |
| | | White | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Mixed | | | | | | | | | |
| | Else-where (23) | Racial Minority (15) | Jennifer, Gretchen, Juliet, Yvonne | Eva, Leo | | | Lola | | Ted, Carrie, Angela, Maya, Tilda, Kathleen | | **Brenda, Mary, Moira** |
| | | White (4) | Jeffrey, Vivian | | | | | | Alicia, Sara | | |
| | | Mixed (4) | | | | | | Jake | Timothy, Sylvia | | |
| Middle-class (36) | West Side (15) | Racial Minority (7) | | Bob, Lilac | | | Albert | | | Adam, Hailey, Luke, Madeline | |
| | | White (7) | | Andy | | | | | | Tiffany, Veronica | **Betty, Ralph, Margaret, Patrick** |
| | | Mixed | | | | | | | | | |
| | Else-where (21) | Racial Minority (4) | Kenneth | Beverly, Amy, Susan | | | Cedric | | | | |
| | | White (15) | Helen | Owen, Sadie, Lily, Rose, Zoey, Rebecca | | | Miche-lle | | Dylan | | **Kate, Tasha, Anis, Donna, Amadeus, Nicholas** |
| | | Mixed (2) | | Beth | | | | | | | **Elliot** |

123

**Fieldwork: Phase II: January – June, 2010: Grade 8s and 12s at two schools**

During the second phase of my research, I conducted non-participant observations of Grade 8s and 12s' everyday social and educational experiences at two secondary schools: one on the West Side (West High) and one on the East Side (East High). In total, I interviewed 45 students who volunteered after I made short presentations in English classrooms over a period of about a week. My interviews focused primarily on students because my intention was to understand young people's understandings of school choice, in contrast to parents'. Also, I included a large number of students to ensure that I included students of diverse backgrounds and to learn how and what they *negotiate,* similarly and differently, when considering school choice. To achieve these research objectives, I interviewed Grade 8 students, as I wished to learn about their experiences of their schools in their first year of secondary school. I wondered how their lived experiences compared to their preconceived notions of the schools and students. I also targeted Grade 12 students in order to learn about what students perceive as the overall effects of school choice. I thus asked them to reflect on how the process and outcomes of school choice had affected their secondary school experiences, achievement, and socialization, as well as their future possibilities and plans on a local and global scale.

As presented in Table 2 above, at East High, I interviewed 19 students. Nine of nineteen students interviewed were in Grade 8. Seven were mini students and three were French Immersion students. All except one (who lived downtown) were East Side residents. Mini students and French Immersion students tended to come from families who owned single-family detached homes on the East Side. The distinctions between the two groups were visible in their racial and parental backgrounds. All three French Immersion students in my study were European Canadians and their parents were professionals. This indicates that those who choose

French Immersion have distinct social and racial backgrounds.[57] In contrast, only one of the mini students involved in my study was a European Canadian; the rest were Asian Canadians. All except one came from working-class family backgrounds. The only exception to this was one student whose parents were middle-class immigrants that worked in the financial and computing sectors.

At West High, I interviewed 26 students (see Table 2). Thirteen of the twenty-six were in Grade 8. Among the Grade 8s, six were Asian Canadians, one was of mixed race, and the rest were European Canadians. Among the Grade 12, 6 were Asian Canadians, 2 were of mixed race, one was a Middle-Eastern Canadian, and the rest were European Canadians. Among the Grade 8s, 7 were mini students, two were cross-boundary students, and the rest were students residing in the school's immediate neighbourhood. Among the Grade 12s, six were mini students, four were cross-boundary students, and the rest were students residing in the school's neighbourhood. Among the Grade 8s, six lived on the East Side, two lived outside the city of Vancouver, and the rest lived on the West Side. In contrast to East High, thus, we can see that more students come to West High as choice students. There is also a stronger presence of European Canadian students in both regular and mini programs at West High. Among the Grade 12s, 4 lived on the East Side, one lived outside the city of Vancouver, and the rest were West Side residents. There were few variations in terms of residential building types. Most students who took part in my study resided in single-family detached houses, although two of my Grade 12 participants with Asian backgrounds had to move from the West Side to central Vancouver to seek cheaper housing. In terms of occupations, European-Canadian students who lived on the West Side had parents with higher education levels and professional jobs in the city. In comparison, Asian-Canadian students

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[57] I will discuss the significance of these differences in relation to school choice in Chapter 7.

living on the West Side, although their parents had comparable levels of higher education (i.e. university degrees), tended to have only their fathers working, and, in most cases, their fathers worked in international business. This racialized pattern of parental occupations was similar for students who lived on the East Side. European-Canadian students who lived on the East Side tended to have a set of parents who had higher education levels and worked in professional jobs. Asian-Canadian students who lived on the East Side, in contrast, tended to have parents who worked in manual or low-skill service sectors. I discuss how these class and racial background differences matter to school choice experiences in Chapter 7.

I chose (and also was granted permission to enter) these two schools mainly for their characteristics representative of the two distinctive neighbourhoods of Vancouver, which are largely divided by wealth, ethnicity/race, and education level. At the end of January, I visited all the Grade 12 and Grade 8 English classrooms. I pitched my study directly to students, hoping that they would come forward to participate. I used this method because I wanted to recruit students without relying on teachers too much.[58] This strategy, however, resulted in a long wait; I conducted most of my interviews with Grade 8 and 12 students in the last three months of my fieldwork, from mid-March to mid-June of 2010.

One crucial revision I made during my study was that instead of interviewing students twice (at the beginning and end of the year), I conducted only one formal sit-down interview

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[58] I was rather concerned that teachers would select the academically best or most well-behaved students to talk to an outside researcher because they would want to ensure that their schools were portrayed in the best possible light, especially at a time of growing school competition. I was somewhat concerned about the schools' efforts to keep their images intact or to be positively portrayed.

with each student while I had the chance to talk with students at different times and locations. This was due to my later entry into the school sites than I had originally planned, but I also interviewed twice as many students as I had initially planned as a direct result of my growing understanding of the intra-school choice dynamics between the mini schools and the main schools, an understanding I had gained while conducting an ethnographic study of school choice in the city. This change in the interview data collection was thus informed by my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork. Subsequently, I interviewed close to 60 students instead of the original 30. I am not suggesting here that more is better, but given that there were two regular schools, three choice programs at East High, and one mini school (with three distinct programs within the mini school) at West High, I was compelled to talk to more students than I had initially planned. I also interviewed more students on the West Side because there were more cross-boundary students there in addition to mini school students. This revision was made first due to my late entry to schools (January instead of September) and second because as I began to interview students, I learned the importance of exploring the unspoken tensions and divisions between regular and school choice students, as well as those who lived in the catchment areas and those who lived outside them. My interviews were semi-structured and lasted somewhere between 30 minutes and one hour. Interviews were conducted in the library, cafeteria, hallways, coffee shops, and student homes.

At each school, I observed Grade 8 and 12 English classes. I chose English because every student is required to take an English class and because it is highly streamed into different levels, including ESL, communications, regular, mini school, and Advanced Placement English. This hierarchical division aided my research in recruiting participants from different social, racial, and

transnational locations. My non-participant observation further provided an opportunity to meet students from diverse backgrounds, which in some cases led to recruiting them for my study.

### 4.2.4    Possibilities and limitations of my ethnographic policy research

In addition to interviews and literature that allowed me to study the school choice phenomenon in Vancouver, conducting site-based ethnographic research turned out to be a powerful way to understand this policy phenomenon. For instance, through my immersion in the different operations of mundane everyday places, such as school cafeterias, at the two schools, I was able to comparatively observe class-differentiated patterns of student lunch cultures. At West High, students were customers at the school cafeteria, and I saw large groups of students leaving the school to purchase lunch during my fieldwork. At East High, in contrast, most students stayed at school, and some students performed food preparation and cleaning tasks. East High also offers a course on food preparation, and the students in that class were supervised when preparing and cooking meals for student customers and also helped clean up afterwards. My observations at each school provided a sociological landscape through which to compare student narratives from each school as class differentiated, although not all students at each school had the same class background. While students offered their own opinions and viewpoints on school choice and dynamics, often their opinions and stories were reflective of their backgrounds and how they were socially and spatially located. In other words, they may have had class-differentiated notions of what was normal and not normal and thus what was acceptable and not acceptable. As such, students of comparable social, spatial, and racial backgrounds tended to share similar responses, as my analysis in the data chapters shows.

More importantly, my presence in classrooms contributed to building a level of trust and personal relationships with students and teachers, which facilitated my recruitment of some key students and interview participants, as well as my rapport with them. While I conducted non-participant observation, I occasionally conversed with students and teachers. Some students shared their schoolwork, such as poetry journals, with me. I greeted them regularly when I visited their classrooms. I asked students questions about their schools and about miscellaneous topics before any of them took part in interviews. I was also able to bring up topics that had been discussed in the classroom and events that had taken place at school when I interviewed students. Our shared experiences in specific classrooms and in the broader school environment helped us build a common ground that we could both relate to and discuss, albeit briefly, during our interviews. My presence at the schools was also fruitful in helping me gain valuable opportunities to talk to teachers, staff, and students about school choice topics, as well as other interests that enlarged my understanding of the school choice phenomenon. This would not have been possible if I had conducted interviews with students only.

Nonetheless, at times, I found myself wondering what I should be taking note of. Clearly, I was not interested in simply describing everything that was unfolding in front of my eyes. This challenge was a bit overwhelming in the beginning, as I was new to the Vancouver school system and culture. I remember writing in my field notes about how that particular entry would eventually be tied to school choice policy analysis. Yet some significant patterns did emerge from being "in the field" rather than simply conducting interviews with individual students or analyzing secondary literature at the university library. As Schensul et al. (1999) articulate, ethnography offers an effective way to grasp the ways in which people are organized and prioritized. My visits to schools helped me see how people relate to each other and how special

learner identities are created by specialized alternative programs that produce social, educational, and physical boundaries, defining and regulating participation in school events and activities in ways that are often hidden to outsiders. Ethnographic observations helped me to witness the social and educational divisions and hierarchies that exist under the cloak of choice.

## 4.3    Data description and analysis

As Wolcott (1994) notes, "[e]verything has the potential to be data, but nothing *becomes* data without the intervention of a researcher" (p. 3, original italics). In this process of data identification, I learned that the very act of identifying data was informed not only by what students emphasized but also in part by the ontological stance I took and the theoretical concepts of the imaginary and the imagination that I utilized, as discussed in Chapter 2. In the following section, I discuss my two analytical strategies: (1) a narrative-based social analysis and (2) a deductive approach using theoretical concepts and previous analyses.

### 4.3.1    Narrative-based social analysis

I conducted a *narrative-based* social analysis in order to identify and understand the multiple readings and readers of policy (Yanow, 2000). Following Yanow (2000), I tried to focus on how individual narratives reveal social settings and situations and how those conditions inform the students' meaning-making of school choice. As Roe (1994), a narrative policy analyst, notes, "[s]ometimes what we are left to deal with are not the facts—that is why there is a controversy—but the different stories people tell as a way of articulating and making sense of the uncertainties and complexities that matter to them" (p.ix cited in Yanow, 2000, p. 59). The focus for me therefore was not so much about who was producing the "true" definition, effects, and

meanings of policy; rather, my focus was on interpretations and practical reasoning as young people narrated their lived experiences of policy (Yanow, 2000).

I further compared why and how different participants in my study spoke to each other; in this comparative narrative analysis, I began to identify different meaning communities and began a type of "category" analysis in a *fluid* sense. Worth noting is that I avoided fixing anyone based on their assigned "categories" as a system of disciplining. Instead, I tried to reveal the students' backgrounds as narrated by each participant, with an attention to their particular biographies (McLeod & Yates, 2006). I thus put more emphasis on narratives than on categories in an effort to understand the associated complex social processes and milieu, as I noted earlier in the class-differentiated lunch cultures between the two schools. Nonetheless, in comparing different groups of students by residence, family history, race, and ethnicity, I could not completely avoid some reductionism in my analysis. By reductionism, I mean that I attempted to conduct a socially informed analysis rather than attributing narratives to individual psychology, idiosyncrasies, and relativism. Nonetheless, I have tried to highlight how traces of social and racial conditions and imaginaries are manifested in the accounts of seemingly individual experiences. Thus, I have emphasized that individuals do have different biographical trajectories across different social and racial contexts and histories. My analysis therefore attempts to show how individuals have different interpretations and imaginations based on their lived experiences rather than simply portraying them as mindless and/or docile subjects of the dominant imaginary. Comparing different narratives was thus useful in understanding the significance of different social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds (Yanow, 2000). This stage of data analysis was then an important step in going beyond simply describing what was said to try to identify patterns and provide explanations of why some articulate one meaning while others say something different,

and how these differences reflect the speakers' social, spatial, and racial locations and situatedness (Wolcott, 1994; Yanow, 2000).

### 4.3.2    Deductive approach: theoretical concepts and previous analyses

I also used a deductive approach. This involved analyzing my data using both theoretical concepts and previous analyses and following the analytical approaches used by Berg (1995) and Wolcott (1994). I interpreted my data using key social theory concepts that seemed to become relevant after fieldwork as well as those that formed part of the initial theoretical framework that I developed in the early stage of the research (Wolcott, 1994). I used this analytic approach because I wanted to compare the trends in the data to the literature I had reviewed to further assess the novelty of findings against existing understanding and insights (Wolcott, 1994). Also, I tried not to repeat what had already been investigated in the existing international body of literature, which I describe in detail in Chapter 2. My choice to report certain themes rather than others was made based on the following two criteria. First, I considered whether particular themes and concepts were critical to an understanding of the local processes of school choice. Second, I chose themes and concepts that were under-studied and under-theorized in the field of school choice policy and thus needed further exploration.

In this process, I asked myself, had I seen this somewhere in the literature? What did researchers say about that? How did they analyze it and interpret it? The analytic process was highly reiterative rather than linear (i.e., testing a fixed hypothesis set at the beginning of my study). As noted in the introduction, my research questions remained open-ended, and my analytic process was intended to illuminate areas that were absent from the current literature of school choice. As such, my early stages of data analysis tended to expose the familiar patterns of

school choice factors; thus, iterative data analysis was essential to activating my reflexivity, sparking insights, and developing deeper connections and analyses (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This approach, I believe, has greatly helped me to gain an empirical understanding of school choice phenomenon.

### 4.3.3    Coding and analytic processes

In coding my data, I followed Sharan Merriam (1998) and Bruce Berg's (1995) suggestions and Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson's (1996) coding guidelines. I began with the identification of key ideas and themes across my interview data sets (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In assigning themes, I considered my research aims and questions. This technique was similar to Berg's notion of *open coding* techniques: "ask the data a specific and consistent set of questions" (1995, p. 186). I identified themes that seemed meaningful to the narrators (Berg, 1995). First, I coded my data descriptively using key phrases used by the interviewees, drawing upon a combination of in vivo, structural, and descriptive coding techniques (Saldana, 2009). I then went through my initial codes and grouped keywords and key phrases by subtopic and theme, which later generated major themes and concepts (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) (see Appendix A).

My analysis was an iterative process that involved moving back and forth between what participants said and my own readings of the current political, social, and spatial contexts (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004) in which I was situated as the researcher.[59] I read through policy documents before my interviews and non-participant observations at the Vancouver schools in order to understand the dominant as well as contested political contexts that are, in part, captured in Chapter 3. In other words, young people's narratives were analyzed in the context of particular

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[59] I did not conduct a critical discourse analysis of the policy or media texts themselves.

political and social events and changes as captured in policy and media documents. I further

referenced media texts during and after I conducted interviews with students as they discussed

changing urban spaces and schools.[60] In this reiterative process, I formulated emergent themes in

relation to a recursive reading of the theoretical concepts that held the most poignancy for this

body of findings and attempted to generate new ideas and concepts through the process of

analysing data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Saldana, 2009; Sipe & Ghiso, 2004).

## 4.4    Conclusion

This chapter summarizes my qualitative methodological approach to understanding the

school choice policy phenomenon within a broadly phenomenological perspective. In conducting

an ethnographic study of school choice policy, my major methodological challenge was to

capture and articulate how particular events and actions I observed during my research indicated

and began to shed further light on the broader impact of the neoliberal educational policy of

school choice. My aim in this chapter has been to show how an everyday practice, such as

having lunch with one group or displaying different homework for mini students and regular

students on the chalkboard, can be drawn upon to better understand the changing politics of

neoliberalism in education. Further, using an interdisciplinary methodological approach, I argued

for the importance of anthropological insights in understanding the cultural effects of

marketization in creating new social boundaries, initiating a new economy of affectively charged

friendship groups and peer relations, and constructing particular forms of youth identities that

were, in many cases, further signs of class and race differentiation.

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[60] In future studies, I will use the same codes and themes to analyze the interviews, field notes, and document data
together. I think this will help produce a richer and fuller triangulation of the data sets.

It is my hope that the interdisciplinary framework used for my study may offer new directions in the study of school choice and other educational reforms. The current focus on parental choice and/or on student academic performance, as discussed extensively in my literature review, is deeply embedded in the cultural and political values and norms of critical policy studies, but it often fails to capture youth perspectives. Despite increasing "student first" rhetoric in policy documents and in BC Legislative Assembly debates, young people are often irrelevant to choice policy debates. This is a reflection of the entrenched modernist deficit view of youth in the social and political arena. Children and youth are predominantly conceived as being free from social and political concerns, and it is understood that they should not feel responsible for democratic participation or decision-making (Lansdown, 1995). Furthermore, within the frame of the modern education system, childhood is often imagined as confined to the life of the classroom rather than connected to public and social spheres (Franklin, 1995), particularly policy.

These hegemonic notions of children, youth, and childhood partly account for why young people's perspectives are mostly absent from the process of policymaking and policy research, including school choice. In this normative culture within society and research, current literature often falls short of providing a deeper understanding of the complexities and perplexities of choice experienced by young people. The methodological approach I developed in this work allowed me to undertake a study that can document student experience directly and chart how young people's cultures and their understandings of their social positions in the present and future world are deeply connected to the ways in which they perceive and experience school choice policy. In the following three data chapters, I showcase how this research study has illuminated the wide impact of school choice on young people's interpretations of themselves,

others, and their neighbourhoods, as well as their imagined worlds of friendship and schooling

and their possibilities in the current reordering of the public education system in Vancouver.

# Chapter 5: Class distinction, the global imaginary, and symbolic domination

Students here [at West High] care, care more about school work. They are really rich and stuff.… Everyone in the West Side is super tall.… I learn more stuff here than if I went to Walnut High.… I want to go to universities in the US because there are more possibilities there. (Eva, Grade 8, mini, West High)

The image, the imagined, [and] the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*…. The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility…. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31, original italics)

This chapter focuses on the lived experiences of young people that inform both their meaning-making of school choice and their subsequent imagination of their futures in the increasingly unequal multicultural city of Vancouver. Currently, and as I noted in my literature review, it is problematic that there are few, if any, phenomenological studies of young people's lived experiences of changing forms of educational choice policy and schooling. In an effort to fill this gap, this chapter explores the complexities of market processes as they affect the lived experiences of young people. I ask, what do young people from diverse backgrounds tell us

about the effects of new emerging market forces in the public secondary school system, and how do these accounts affect the way they imagine and understand their academic and social futures? I explore the following four themes: (1) the meanings young people attribute to school choice; (2) the impact school choice (especially the choice of mini schools) has had on young people's schooling experiences; (3) how school choice has affected the ways in which young people think about their relational positions to others; and (4) how young people perceive the importance of school choice in ensuring their success. At the centre of this chapter is a critical analysis of the effects of public school choice on the ways in which youths from diverse social classes and racial and ethnic backgrounds experience their schooling and imagine their futures. I explore these themes comparatively, drawing upon student accounts at East High and West High.

In particular, I explore how school choice policy helps students obtain "class distinction" through the acquisition of particular types of cultural and symbolic capital that facilitates the attainment of higher-class positions in an aspiring global city (Bourdieu, 1984, 1998b, 2006/1986). I focus specifically on class in this chapter in order to foreground its force on the local dynamics of school choice policy when examining how school choice, as an education market force, rearranges the classifications of individuals across the city, adding different values to students, regardless of their level of participation in school choice. The analytic primacy of class in this chapter is not colour blind; in fact, the following analysis is interwoven with a focus on the race and ethnic backgrounds of student participants. As mentioned earlier, in Vancouver, a majority of middle-class families have European-Canadian backgrounds, and a large number of working-class families are racial and ethnic minorities, although there is a growing influx of middle-class Asian immigrants. This approach further recognizes that racial and ethnic minorities have varying class backgrounds and are engaged in a class struggle in the increasingly

polarized city of Vancouver.[61] Against this changing local context, I examine how young

people's relationships to school choice vary even as everyone is affected by the new educational

arrangement of choice. My analysis demonstrates how the varied school choice participation of

young people reflects and reproduces the class imaginary[62] and its associated global imaginary[63]

in the neoliberal global city of Vancouver.

## 5.1    "I want to go to university, not college": the formation of elite identity

In this section, I discuss how school choice practice is perceived and practiced across

classes as a means of academic distinction-making. Youths from both working- and middle-class

families participate in school choice as a critical strategy to gain an advantage in university

admissions. In this sense, current school choice practice can be considered an extension of earlier

forms of academic streaming and tracking in Vancouver secondary schools. One key distinction

to be aware of is the subtle (yet potentially far-reaching) differences between how local youths

and transnationally located youths perceive the benefits of choosing schools, especially mini

schools, in Vancouver. Transnational middle-class immigrant youths tend to perceive school

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[61] I place greater analytic emphasis on race and ethnicity in the historical and present local context of Vancouver and

Canada in Chapter 7.

[62] The class imaginary refers to the social imaginary that is associated with specific groups of classes. This term

refers to the norms around different behaviors and practices of classes, which may shape individual expectations and

imaginations (Reay, 2007).

[63] The global imaginary refers to one's perspectives on his or her positions and future successes on the global stage,

which inform and reflect local and present practices (Appadurai, 1996; Baas, 2010). Also, the global imaginary

refers to one's sense of belonging and positioning in different parts of the globe (Rizvi, 2005).

choice in the city as a step towards reaching the top universities worldwide, a viewpoint that puts additional pressure on ensuring their success in school choice. I discuss these differences in this chapter, but I first focus on young people raised in Vancouver.

The narratives of young people who have participated in school choice in Vancouver show that they were actively involved in the school choice process. They state that they deployed particular symbolic strategies that helped maintain and construct their academic distinction as somehow being "smarter" or "more able" than those who neither participated in school choice nor were successful at gaining admission into their schools of choice. For both middle-class youths and working-class youths with middle-class aspirations, school choice has become a critical way to signal, as well as produce, desirable distinctions as learner-performers under the current neoliberal restructuring of education in Vancouver. This is a common theme for all the students who participated in school choice, regardless of their class, racial, ethnic, and immigration backgrounds, residential locations, or school grade levels. In the following section, I present a representative sample of particular narratives that highlight the theme of the ways in which school choice goes about reaffirming, displaying, and maintaining academic smartness.

For instance, Grade 7 students from different class, geographical, and racial backgrounds perceived school choice as "just for smart kids." Mary is a Grade 7 student at a primary school on the East Side. She comes from a working-class immigrant family and told me that she had applied for a mini school because she perceived that mini students are academically smart.

Ee-Seul: Why did you apply [to a mini school]?

Mary: Expectations, my dad and stuff. My dad said, 'It's okay if you don't get in, but you

should try' … just to see what level I am. I don't know. I wanted to get in, but I also

didn't want to because I want to do other stuff, too….

Ee-Seul: So how did your dad react when you didn't get in?

Mary: He said, 'Well, at least you made it to the waiting list. That's still pretty good.' …

I know one girl who got into East High Mini, and she was smart; she always got good

marks. Maybe because she did good on the test and stuff….

Ee-Seul: What do you think choosing a high school means? Why do you think people

want to choose?

Mary: I don't really know for sure, but every year here, we take a test to see how much

students learn here compared to [a West Side school] who is really high on the list. I

think that's why. Some parents think that students are doing really well there, so let's just

put our kids in that school and be smarter and go to university and stuff.

(Grade 7, East Vancouver resident)

Similarly, Kate, a Grade 7 student from a middle-class family, stated how her acceptance at a mini school would indicate that she is a smart person. It would also allow her to go to a school that is more conducive to individualized learning, where she would receive more attention than at a regular public school.

Kate: I thought I'd apply to those schools because I saw potential for me. I had to write

papers—that was interesting. I learned about how to write a paper about myself.… Less

people [in mini schools], [and teachers are] more focused on you, you get more attention,

you learn better at a school like that.… I mean, they [my friends and others] probably see me as a smarter kind of person since I am going to a mini school.

(Grade 7, Central Vancouver resident)

While the two narratives above are both from girls, these responses were not necessarily gender differentiated. Amadeus, a Grade 7 boy from a middle-class family in the gentrifying neighbourhood of central Vancouver, expressed a similar sentiment.

Ee-Seul: How do you feel about getting into a mini school?

Amadeus: I feel really good. I made an accomplishment. I actually made it into mini school…. It's a great accomplishment that I tried out. I find I am very confident. I did a good job. I feel good and I feel successful….

Ee-Seul: What do you think the mini school will help you achieve?

Amadeus: If I do well in mini school, I will get a good place in university.... In general, I just want to go to university.

(Grade 7, Central Vancouver resident)

A dominant theme that emerged from many Grade 7 students' narratives was that participating in school choice means being an academically smart student. Subsequently, admission to a mini school is likely to show that students are high achievers and will likely successfully reach university. This association between mini schools and future success persists in the higher grades.

Andy, a regular Grade 8 student at West High, further notes the importance of end-of-term letter grades on entering mini schools. He comes from a middle-class family and lives on the West Side; when I interviewed him, he was attempting to enter the mini school for Grade 9.[64]

> Andy: I think I became more understanding of how important marks are.
>
> Ee-Seul: How important?
>
> Andy: In elementary school, it was just a number. Who cares? But I realized that *this number marks your future*. To get into mini, you have to have this number….
>
> (Grade 8, regular, West High, italics added)

During my fieldwork, it was interesting to note that mini students continued to work hard to maintain their academic distinction even after they had been accepted into mini schools. For instance, I often observed mini students doing homework together. When I observed a mini English class, almost all the students raised their hands to answer the teacher's questions, which is in stark contrast to the case in regular classes (field note, March 3, 2010). When I asked the English teacher about how enthusiastic the students were, she affirmed that the mini students were different; they worked harder to achieve more than other students at the school (field note, March 3, 2010).

Both Amy (a Grade 12 mini student from a middle-class family who emigrated from Hong Kong) and Jennifer (a Grade 8 mini student at East High from a working-class Asian-

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[64] Most students enter mini schools in Grade 8 but in some cases, when mini students drop out at the end of Grade 8, some schools invite their students to apply for Grade 9.

Canadian family) articulated how their learning attitudes have changed because of other students at school.

> Amy: In Grade 8, all your classes were only with mini students. The only difference is that the average is so much higher. 'Cause to get into the mini school, you have to. You get more keen students…. I ask more of myself. When I was in Grade 8 in [mini school] classes … people who were around me … were so keen and eager to work. They were smart, too. So they gave me a lot of pressure that I have to … work hard…. I am not like the top of my grade or anything. Academically, I try hard…. After I got in [to mini] … this was so much better. If you had a choice between Harvard and UBC, which one would you choose?
>
> (Grade 12, mini, West High)

Likewise, Jennifer, a Grade 8 mini student at East High from a working-class family, noted how the pressure to work hard during her first year of secondary school was intense.

> Jennifer: Because my cousin told me that it [the mini school] was good for university. You get higher education. I like challenge. So, yeah, you get medals and you get credit for it, too.
>
> Ee-Seul: What are they good for?
>
> Jennifer: Physical exercise, and credit for the future! I went to the mini info night. My parents were there. They said, 'Jennifer, go to this one. It's good. Good for your future, future, future.'… I was really, really excited but was nervous at the same time. I didn't

know if I could keep the grades up to the [mini school] standards—B average in [mini school] subjects, which are advanced. I am working harder. *You feel the need to outdo yourself constantly. [The mini school] is very competitive because everyone is smart. You want to outdo other people, but also outdo yourself....* Out of mini school, there is more drama. I have regular friends, too, and they tell me all this drama, but the mini school is a sort of bubble. When you go in the bubble, there is less drama…. 'Cause you know friends gossip about each other, but the minis have a lot of classes together so they are more tight.… *Even at lunch, we discuss homework.*

(Grade 8, mini, East High, italics added)

In other words, mini students are more focused on grades, and school choice policy has created more pressure to work hard to perform better than regular students. Good grades are then clearly linked to how students experience their schooling under school choice policy and how school choice, particularly the choice of mini schools, shapes their schooling experiences. As Jennifer and Amy noted above, echoing other mini students I interviewed, they felt added pressure to perform and compete under the cohort model of mini schools (Yoon, 2011). While the cohort learning model can help create a learning community, what is clear from these two narratives is that the model also generates peer rivalry and pressures that shape certain types of academic competency, conduct, behaviour, and competition, which fit with the middle-class imaginary of education and success. The current choice model generates greater pressure to perform academically (i.e., getting good marks) because the grades produce students' academic distinctiveness.

With the Grade 12 students, one thing I observed about the minis' distinction making pattern is that the differences between mini students and regular students had slightly subsided, especially at West High, where a majority of students go on to university or college. This is partly because more students take Grade 12 electives in diverse subjects, and high-achieving, university-applying regular students often take advanced placement courses alongside mini students in subjects such as English. Nonetheless, choice students continue to maintain their focus on producing the academic distinction of smartness. As noted by Owen and Yvonne, Grade 12 mini students at West High and East High, respectively, mini schools are geared towards producing students who will remain academically smart and studious.

> Owen: The regular kids were slightly less academic. Minis are really academically focused…. They do what they have to do to get an A kind of thing. They would do their work, they are passionate about it, but they certainly do also, going for marks and grades, focus on school.
>
> (Grade 12, mini, West High)

> Yvonne: It [mini school] pushes them to work a lot harder…. They must be smarter. They must be like this. There is a kind of mold…. The child [in a mini school] lives up to that or they want to be like that. The world thinks I am smart. Actually I am. I must fit into this program.
>
> (Grade 12, mini, East High)

146

Throughout all grades, then, students in mini schools (and outside, as I discuss below) tend to see that mini schools are about, above all, creating academic distinction through good grades. This impression exists even though the Vancouver School Board emphasizes how mini schools focus on adding alternative education to comprehensive public school programs (Vancouver School Board, 2010, 2012a, 2012b). It does not seek to report how other schools that do not have mini schools are affected, of course, so we do not actually witness in real time the inequality being created. It is, in many ways, hidden through a language of meritocracy and excellence. For example, good grades carry weighty symbolic meaning for mini students who seek and indeed struggle to obtain academic distinctions that set them apart from regular students. Alice, who stopped attending a mini school after the first year, notes the high academic pressure that the mini programs place on students:

> Alice: It was in December when I first started speaking, okay, if this was really the best choice. Some days I loved it. Some other days I was like, this is so much work. Oh my god. What am I doing? So, I was always wondering, what if I went to East High with my friends? Or what if I did French or something else? You know … I really enjoyed the experience of it, but it wasn't something I wanted to continue doing for the next five years or however long. It was just too much. I've talked to people who were in the IB program, and they were always tired. They have no, hardly any social time, right?"
> Ee-Seul: Did a lot of people drop out of the mini school at [Birch High] after the first year?
> Alice: Two others, excluding myself. They were not coming back for the next year.
>
> (Grade 8, regular, East High)

Similarly, Jennifer, introduced above, states that the mini school has presented her with time management challenges, and the work causes her to feel tired and overwhelmed.

> Jennifer: [The mini school] is very competitive because everyone is smart. You want to outdo other people, but also outdo yourself.…
>
> Ee-Seul: When do you feel that this [mini school] is too much?
>
> Jennifer: When I have other activities outside the school, they pile up. Then you have to prioritize everything. I want to go sleep and not do anything for a little while.… I work harder than I did before.… My parents think I need to work harder. Push; go, go.… Also teachers put more pressure on mini students. You are minis, so you should behave like this … quiet, polite, put your hand up for everything.
>
> (Grade 8, mini, East High)

These student struggles are reflective of the consequences of striving for an increasingly competitive post-secondary education, which is a must-have form of capital for those who aspire to achieve or maintain middle-class positions and lifestyles.

Here, then, I argue that Bourdieu's (1984, 1998b, 2006/1986) theory of class, distinction, and education helps explain how class advantage shapes the reorganization of distinction in a particular field and ensures the social reproductive function of school choice as it operates in Vancouver. Mini students' academic performance and habits signal their class positions and aspirations, which are further recognized in the localized class hierarchy. Enabled by the current choice system in Vancouver, mini students "distinguish themselves by the distinctions they

148

make" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6). In Chapter 7, I further discuss how these distinctions are then further conflated with particular racial "traits" in a city struggling with racial tensions and high levels of border anxiety (See Balibar, 1998; Rumford, 2006, 2008). Worth noting is that through this hierarchical cohort model of learning and separated classroom practices, mini school practices contribute to the formation of a habitus—"the inherited, experienced and lived sense of cultural milieu and capital, forging the unconscious unity of a class" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 80)—in the globalizing city of Vancouver.

## 5.2    The global imaginary: becoming global elites through school choice

One notable distinction of youths from transnational[65] middle-class families, especially those with high educational values and capital, is that their futures are much more globally rather than locally oriented. They also come across as more ambitious than their more locally and nationally bounded counterparts. School choice in Vancouver is a key strategy for these middle-class immigrant families and their children to become global elites by attending some of the highest-performing schools in British Columbia. The following narratives show how choice students from middle-class immigrant backgrounds who are racial and ethnic minorities within the nation of Canada consider their local school choice participation a necessary form of preparation to ensure their success on the global stage. In other words, transnational, middle-class families and young people have globally broader future outlooks than their local

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[65] By transnational, I mean that individuals acquire and utilize various forms of capital (including education) in different parts of the world in order to maintain and advance their social positions in particular local contexts (Waters, 2006).

counterparts.[66] As I explore in the next section, these emerging elites have moved through the structures of class advantage and are beginning to view themselves as mobile capital.

Eva, who I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is a good example of an East Side youth who travelled to West High with the aspiration of attending university in the US. While Eva wishes to go abroad, her dreams are also reflective of her parents' desires, especially her mother's strong desire for social mobility in the global era. Eva's mother used to work with computers in China before immigrating to Canada, but she now works as a housekeeper in a downtown hotel, which is clearly an experience of occupational, economic, and social demotion. Eva believes that her educational success is quite important to her parents as well. She wishes to go to the US, where she can be even more successful. She in fact notes how she was the only student who came to West High from her elementary school on the East Side, and that her participation in school choice illustrates her strong desire to go abroad and attend a globally competitive university.

Beth, a Grade 8 student from a middle-class family in the gentrifying East Side, also articulates similar global ambitions. Her father has a graduate degree from a "world-class" university outside his home country. She aspires to do the same and leave her home country of Canada to go somewhere more globally prestigious. She believes that mini school will take her one step closer to that dream.

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[66] The global outlooks of transnational, middle-class young people may be influenced by their family connections in two countries, but they may also be connected to the ambivalent sense of belonging and disorientation that they experience in Canada, which will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

Beth: 'Cause West High is really well known, I went onto this website. I forgot which school was the first, but West High[67] was the second in the whole Vancouver, the Greater Vancouver area, [showing] which school is the highest in quality and stuff like that. West High was the top, quite far in the top. I saw that, and when you think about university, I don't really want to go to college. I want to go to university. I probably would go out of Canada. There are a couple I really liked, a couple in the States, and in London…. You have a better chance of getting into university 'cause of the mini school, right?"

(Grade 8, mini, West High)

Similarly, Beverly, a Grade 8 mini student at West High, states that a mini school can offer a brighter academic future at world-renowned universities.

Beverly: They [my parents] say do higher, enriched stuff [i.e. mini schools]. They want me to do enriched stuff, extra and stuff. They tell me do what I want to do, but also work hard. We always talk about our futures and stuff. And we talk about how we can improve and stuff, like what universities are looking for, and they do want me to go to university and I want to go, too. I am thinking about universities in the States, like Stanford, Harvard, and just more of those doctor and lawyer type of universities…. I see myself as a really hard-working student…. Sometimes I don't do very well, but I try, try to change from that, learn from mistakes.

Ee-Seul: What do you have to do to stay an A student?

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[67] In the last few years, the top-ranked school in Vancouver has been a private school. West High has been ranked as one of the "best" schools within the public system.

Beverly: … Do what you need to do and do it properly kind of, 'cause I have dance every day till really late, almost every day, so I have to be really good with time management.

Ee-Seul: Is that [dance] something you want to do in the future?

Beverly: I am not quite sure but it's gonna look good on my resume, and it's good to have skills. Everybody has sports and stuff, and so that [dance] can maintain posture and flexibility. And performance on stage can build confidence and stuff.

(Grade 8, mini, West High)


Beverly, the daughter of middle-class immigrant parents from Hong Kong who came to Canada in search of "world-class" education, has high ambitions to study at an Ivy League university in the United States. Beverly is aware that taking private dance lessons will make her stand out both physically (i.e., posture) and symbolically (i.e., dance as a symbol of high-class culture) when applying to colleges. Her parents' focus, as well as her own focus, on grades and certain behaviours is indicative of success in today's competitive elite education admissions.

Like many middle-class, Asian immigrant parents I met, Beverly's parents possess high educational capital. Her mother was born in Hong Kong and has a master's degree from the US; she assists her husband with his small business and dedicates most of her energy and time as a stay-at-home mother to ensure that Beverly and her sister are academically successful. They moved to Canada[68] largely to ensure that their children would receive the best "world-class" education. While Beverly's parents may have limited linguistic and Canadian cultural capital, they wish to ensure their daughter's success in the global field of higher education by drawing on

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[68] In 1993–1994, almost 16,000 immigrants arrived in Vancouver from Hong Kong (Waters, 2006).

their abundant globally recognized economic and cultural capital. These accounts, then, echo Ong's (1999) earlier study, which describes the significance of a "Western university degree," especially in an Asian context. Migration to Canada enables Hong Kong middle-class families and their children to accumulate a more valuable form of cultural capital in a Canadian (i.e., Western) university degree, which is likely to result in advancing their class positions, especially when they return to Hong Kong. Waters' (2006) research into the relationship between educational choice, class, and international mobility amongst Hong Kong migrants in Vancouver indeed reports that when Hong Kong migrants, after attaining post-secondary education in Vancouver, return to their country of origin, they secure lucrative jobs in the sectors of marketing, insurance, human resources, and public relations.

In casual conversations with a few parents, during school interviews at West High, some parents told me that Vancouver schools are good places to build their children's resumes so they can apply to Ivy League schools in the US (field note, February 2, 2010). Reflective of these sentiments, the students I encountered at West High had a high level of global aspiration for their educational futures and achievement. Students studying at West High are proud to be in the "top" echelon of local schools, especially those in the mini schools. Students who come to West High as mini students often imagine that world-class universities are within their reach. As Lola, a West High Grade 12 cross-boundary student, from a low-income, immigrant family, notes, West High has been connected to Harvard in the local educational landscape.


Lola: Good things are associated with West High, like Harvard.

(Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High)

While this high level of global aspirations and ambition was prevalent among those in the earlier grades, it had become a reality for some Grade 12 students at West High. One of my Grade 12 study participants, Sandra, was in fact accepted into a top US university during my study period. Originally from South Korea, Sandra's family immigrated to Canada for education. She also came to West High Mini by choice in order to be admitted to a globally competitive university. Examples of students like Sandra appear to fuel the dreams of those in lower grades, who imagine attending top universities someday.

It is interesting to note how local school choice policy binds together the current practices of global mobility and local educational choice, what some globalization theorists refer to as "glocal." Business-class immigrant families, from which many of the middle-class immigrant learners in this study come, seemed to have few spatial attachments to their neighbourhoods, as the parents did not attend local schools. They had little personal history in their neighbourhoods and few social networks. Consequently, these families were "freer," "more liquid," and "disembedded" from their local communities and could thus move to popular schools in any neighbourhood (Bauman, 1998). In other words, not only was choice changing how young people, especially mini students at West High, began to imagine their futures and their elite capital, so too did the very neighbourhoods in which these schools were located. As increasing numbers of immigrants arrive and settle in ethnic neighbourhoods in Vancouver—the number of Chinese immigrants, especially from mainland China, is approximately 10,000 a year—the neighbourhood public schools (see Figure 3.1) are ethnically divided and therefore imagined as potentially problematic and fragmented, rather than as inclusive educational sites (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006; Keung, 2004; Todd, Feb 25, 2011).

The ambitions and imaginations described above clearly reflect, in part, the visions of mini schools. As I learned during my information evening visits, most school choice options expand the provincial curriculum, have a global focus, and try to build into their programs the idea of carrying global status (field note, November 20, 2009). During my fieldwork at information evenings, I often heard comments about how the provincial curriculum has been "watered down," is "mediocre," or fails to offer students a "globally competitive edge" (field note, December 1, 2009). Hence, many Vancouver choice programs emphasize their global connections and competitiveness. One of these programs is the International Baccalaureate, which is challenging and grants globally recognized credentials in addition to provincial credentials. Many of those who graduate from mini schools attend Canadian universities, but because of the IB program's international recognition, it often attracts those who aspire to study abroad, similar to those studied by Doherty, Mu, and Shield (2009) in Australia.

In fact, Margaret and Ralph, the only two Grade 7 students I studied who attended private schools at the time of their interviews, had considered attending IB mini schools (at public schools) even though they were not at all interested in attending regular public schools. Also, other mini programs, such as Vancouver's University Transition program, often publicize their graduates' successes and achievements (such as leadership positions and business success) on the global scene.[69] The Vancouver School District news section often includes success stories of exemplary students who achieve global acclaim.

Furthermore, the high level of global aspirations at West High was evident in mini school field trips, which, during my study period, were planned for London and Paris. The plan for these trips included visits to world-renowned museums, concert halls, and historical buildings such as

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[69] See: http://www.vsb.bc.ca/district-news/vsbubc-transition-program-hones-brilliant-minds.

cathedrals. The students who go on these trips, and also those who see the posters around their schools, are more likely to imagine these places and perhaps consider going there someday. In this globally high-achieving school climate, West High students tended to imagine their future possibilities in global economic and educational landscapes. Student phenomenology (i.e., meaning-making based on lived experiences) is "never simply the intuitive possession of a subject" or an individual learner but rather is mediated through "signs and symbols of our intersubjective existence" that constitute our educational institutions, programs, and extra-curricular activities, which reflect the values and ideals of culture and society (Kearney, 2004, p. 42; Ricoeur, 1967).

In this regard, that of a school culture that imbues students with global ambitions, East High and West High notably differ. While East High's mini school has a global connection through its internationally recognized awards program, it was rare for East High students to make direct links to top universities around the world. Reflective largely of their families' social backgrounds and low-income immigrant status, East High students, even those who were considered academically smart (e.g., mini students), rarely discussed attending any universities outside Canada or even any outside the Metro Vancouver area.[70] In fact, at the time of this study, many had received early admission to a local university in central Metro Vancouver, and they expressed their interest in accepting the offer rather than waiting for admission to the highly ranked, research-intensive university on the West Side of Vancouver. The top Canadian (that is, outside BC), US, and UK universities were notably absent from their imagined futures.

This contrast becomes more interesting when examining the immigration patterns and narratives of West High and East High students. Many East Side students do come from families

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[70] Metro Vancouver includes the city of Vancouver and 21 of the municipalities surrounding the city.

with global migratory experiences; their immigration backgrounds thus may have exposed them to a broader view of the world. For instance, Yvonne is a Grade 12 East High Mini student whose parents traveled from China to Venezuela, then to Canada. Yet her family's migration was motivated by a search for manual work (i.e., farming). Her parents are fluent in both English and Spanish, yet they currently work in the manual sector at minimum-wage jobs. Yvonne, like many others at East High, did not mention the names of any universities outside Canada as potential institutions to apply to. One exception was Kathleen, who came to East High when she was in Grade 12, and whose mother has a PhD. This comparison demonstrates the importance of paying attention to family class differences in addition to immigration histories in order to understand the global imaginary. While middle- and upper-middle-class families imagine their futures by travelling to another country in an effort to see their children move forward, working-class families move to earn a living. In this sense, choice is reorganizing the neighbourhood and individual understandings of potentially elite or non-elite identities. We thus witness social reproduction at both a local and a global level.

In fact, Kathleen pointed this out to me quite explicitly during our interview. After she transferred to East High in Grade 12 from an elite secondary school at the US university where her mother received her PhD, she noted how East High students were "less ambitious" about university, and stated,

> Kathleen: Yesterday, I actually talked to some of the friends from back home. They seem so—oh, yeah, I am going to go to university here. We've applied to this, this, this, that. I am just like, hmm, have I changed? You mirror what your environment is. So it

might be because not many people here are motivated to do stuff [i.e., applying to

university] around here. I am not really motivated.

<div align="right">(Grade 12, regular, East High)</div>

Further, she noted that her current economic challenges prevented her from focusing solely on school work. Because her mother was unemployed, she had to earn money (i.e., by working part-time for 20 hours per week) to help out financially. Their move to a low-income Vancouver neighbourhood was indicative of their financial situation.

When I visited Grade 12 English classrooms with counsellors at East High and West High, I made a note of how the West High counsellor emphasized the deadlines for early admission at UBC, which often accepts exceptionally high-achieving students. The counsellor encouraged students to apply early and to make sure that they met the deadline. In contrast, the East High counsellor did not mention early admission, although she did mention that university and college admission deadlines were approaching. Furthermore, when we went to the low-level English class, she did not mention university or college admissions at all (field note, January 26, 2010).

A majority of East High students whom I interviewed came from families with a history of labour-related migration (as opposed to business-class immigrants with cosmopolitan aspirations and imaginaries). As such, their families were not engaged with the global elite or with professional groups but were instead employed by local businesses, primarily in the manual labour or service sectors. Students at East High seldom brought up the names of top world universities, such as Harvard or Stanford, during our interviews. Also, at East High, I noted that

the mini school took students on local or domestic field trips and/or camping excursions rather than making overseas trips.

To reflect the comparatively different presence of global ambitions in these two local secondary schools, I use the term "global imaginary" to describe the ways young people from diverse backgrounds imagine different parts of the globe and more importantly how young people relate to each other, how they "fit together with others," and where they fit on a global scale (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Taylor, 2004, p. 23; Appadurai, 1996). Clearly, a pattern for middle-class, immigrant young people who participate in school choice is that they aspire to become global elites. Their future horizons are therefore broad in scope. The different levels of aspiration further seem to be influenced by socio-economic class. This finding also echoes others' research on a globalized and rapidly globalizing society (Rizvi, 2005). My study thus sheds some light on how imagined and real education market practices facilitated class formation in a particular local context, which is further substantiated in the next section.

### 5.3    Streaming: symbolic domination

In this section, I further highlight the role that school choice plays in generating a sense of demotion for those outside the mini schools, thus producing "symbolic domination" (Bourdieu, 1998a). Under school choice policy, those who experience a relative devaluation of their abilities and achievements *adopt* the institutional and dominant view of themselves as "mediocre" or "low achieving" (Bourdieu, 1998a). I focus on the meanings, experiences, and effects of school choice on schooling and relationships from resident students' (i.e., those who enrol in their assigned neighbourhood schools) perspectives. By resident students, I am referring to those who are not enrolled in highly selective programs of choice. This is not a homogenous

group but is instead made up of many groups of students who have a varied range of participation in school choice, from those who did not participate at all to those who made it onto the waiting list but were not successful at admission.

First, I focus on those who identify as members of socially marginalized groups. In contrast to the previously mentioned choice students with middle-class resources, cultural capital, and aspirations, who envisioned an expanded horizon of global possibilities in their participation in school choice, those who come from socio-economically marginalized backgrounds appear to experience what Dillabough and Kennelly (2010) call "caged resentment" (p. 6). While mini students enjoy the consumption of the global imaginary and global tourism as cultural goods (e.g., global field trips) and become the beneficiaries of neoliberal globalization, these opportunities are often unavailable and/or beyond the reach of those who remain in regular programs, and these students often experience a relative demotion in new educational streaming under the rhetoric of choice. I discuss the processes and experiences of symbolic domination in the choice system in the following section.

For East Side students, social and spatial comforts and a sense of belonging are important school choice criteria. This indicates that their bodily knowledge and responses to each school and neighbourhood emerge from deep "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1961) that are experienced and accumulated as a result of living in a particular local context with a particular history for a certain period of time (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Nayak, 2003; Williams, 1961). A sense of belonging, that is, "identifying with that place" as a result and process of "making sense of place," is critical to young people's school choice (Leach, 2005, p. 308). The narratives of many of the resident students whom I interviewed at East High were similar to the one offered by Timothy, an East High Grade 12 regular student who lived in social housing with

his single mother. For Timothy and many others, school choice appears to present a certain kind of risk that students do not want to take, rather than a symbol of success.[71]

> Timothy: When it came time to pick the high school, it was almost, in my mind, it was not a big decision, but it was something I wanted to get over with … which was the closest or seemed more comfortable … go with friends, and resume someplace I have some foundations…. When I had a chance to pick a high school with my friend … for me, it was a comfort feeling…. When I'm out of my comfort zone, I feel really vulnerable.
>
> Ee-Seul: What do you mean by your comfort zone?
>
> Timothy: It's about being within a radius of something I know, a distance from people I know, and things I bond with, and where I still feel safe.
>
> (Grade 12, regular, East High)

Similarly, Tilda, an East High Grade 12 student from a working-class immigrant family, noted the importance of comfort as well:

> Tilda: The West Side is more higher status and richer. Everything there, um, more intelligent. They are pretty much better at everything. I am not sure about it but that's what I heard.
>
> Ee-Seul: Have you thought about going to a school on the West Side?

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[71] Those at West High also feel that choosing a school on the East Side is risky, but for different reasons. I discuss this in the next chapter.

161

Tilda: No, because I am comfortable being here. I want to be in a place where, I think because I grew up here so long, I am used to it…. I am just comfortable.

<div align="right">(Grade 12, regular, East High)</div>

Ted, a Grade 8 student, similarly notes how his decision to remain in his assigned regular public secondary school had to do with being with friends in addition to other factors and constraints, such as distance. This was particularly evident in the remarks he made about why he would not consider any options other than attending a regular neighbourhood public school.

Ee-Seul: Can you see yourself going to a school on the West Side?

Ted: No. It's far away. I have to take public transit. It will take about a good 40 minutes. It's really complicated. And I will miss my old friends.

<div align="right">(Grade 8, regular, East High)</div>

These students, like many other resident students, suggested that the schools they ended up attending were ones where they felt comfortable, where they had friends, and where they had some social and spatial foundations, whether real or imagined. They felt secure in these areas. For these young people, their choice activities were quite informal, implicit, and tacit when compared to those who went through the formal system of school choice selection (e.g., attending information evenings, taking notes, asking questions, and meeting prospective teachers and schoolmates). These differences in approach reflect the symbolic elements of their inherited forms of practical reasoning as a regulative function of their class advantages or limitations as relates back to family life or habitus, as Bourdieu (1992) notes. In many cases, it seemed as

though students who stayed at their neighbourhood schools or attended feeder secondary schools were trying to achieve an important sense of "foundation" and "roots" that would provide the kind of protection that comes with group membership (Cohen, 1999; Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010). Perhaps there is also a degree of insecurity and fear associated with living in a place that, even if it is demonized in particular ways, remains in its most immediate sense a knowable place—a place where students will be not misrecognized. As Bourdieu (1999) and Skeggs (2004) argue, "being out of place" is a case of misrecognition, where appearing to be from "somewhere else" creates a class conflict and heightened insecurities.

The importance of comfort is not necessarily restricted to low-income youths. Comfort is also important for middle-class resident students: the West High regular students who live in the neighbourhoods surrounding West High. They expressed a similar sense of comfort about staying near where they grew up and especially about being safe. As such, some were not even willing to attend another West Side school. Madeline is a Grade 8 student at West High, and she points out that both physical and social distance kept her from choosing a non-neighbourhood school, especially a school on the East Side.

Ee-Seul: Did you think about any other secondary schools?

Madeline: No … not really. I like a big high school, and Willow High is actually bigger than West High, but it's far away and I didn't know anyone. So there is no point….

Ee-Seul: Can you see yourself going to an East Side school, like East High?

Madeline: Not really…. It's just too far away … and, at an East Side school, I actually have to say I would not feel safe.

Ee-Seul: Why is that?

Madeline: It's because it's East Side…. There is a lot of drugs there. Apparently, there is

a lot of drugs at Willow High, too.

(Grade 8, regular, West High)

While there are some challenges associated with the search for social belonging for those who

live on the West Side[72], the notable difference between the East Side and West Side youths

seemed to be that the West Side youths could stay in their neighbourhoods and feel "proud" of

the status they carried by attending their neighbourhood schools.

Resident students do not explicitly say that they are excluded from school choice. Quite

on the contrary, many reply that their choice was reflective of their values regarding friendship

and a sense of spatial belonging. A number of students, similar to those cited below, expressed

that school choice policy tends to comparatively devalue and hence demote them in the current

education structure. They experience a sense of alienation and social separation resulting from

choice programs that operate as a form of academic separation. In other words, they do not see

school choice as promoting alternative learning styles and focus. Instead, many see school choice

as providing academic and social *privileges* to those who enrol in specialized programs, which

results in the relative demotion of students in regular or rehabilitative programs.

Negative and devaluating experiences of schooling, as narrated below, indicate that the

current school choice system generates unique and localized forms of symbolic domination as a

result of choice as it seeks to artificially define active choosers as high achievers while those who

are in the regular program are identified as passive subjects, "underachievers" or "hopeless

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[72] This is especially the case for students from immigrant families (e.g., Bob, Hailey, Tiffany). I discuss this issue in

Chapter 7.

cases" to use Gillborn and Youdell's wording (2000, p. 134). Coming from a working-class, Aboriginal and white mixed-race family background, Timothy notes that the labelling and grouping practice of the mini students as smart learners has made him feel relatively invisible, marginalized, and thus devalued.

> Timothy: They have mini school for those kids that … pick up things a little faster. They are the top of the class kind of kids. I was never one of those kids. I was always referred to as—they referred to me as not so much top of the class…. Back then I hated that. I hated that they look at you. They try to make themselves look better than you because they did this and they did that
>
> (Grade 12, alternative program, East High).

Those who are placed in regular programs or negatively perceived alternative programs are relatively demoted for their lack of symbolic capital, which is abundant among students who go to choice schools, go on field trips abroad, and thus equip themselves with more cultural capital that advances their positions in the global city and economy.

Likewise, Maya, a Grade 8 student in an alternative program,[73] who comes from a working-class family of Chinese immigrants, indicates how her experiences with mini students have been socially intimidating. She notes that she was being negatively perceived by others because of her placement in an alternative program clearly designed to accommodate her learning but which has lower status than regular and mini programs.

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[73] This alternative program is offered to a small number of students who struggle academically during Grade 7, and are recommended for the program by their teachers.

Maya: In my gym, there are a ton of them [mini students]. They can be really mean.

Ee-Seul: What do you mean?

Maya: In the beginning, when you don't know anyone, just you, all scared, they were really intimidating. They are all smart. They are always on the [same] floor, all their classes on the [same] floor except for Art and Gym and Skill thing….When I tell people that I am in the [alternative] program, they think I am dumber.

(Grade 8, alternative program, East High).

Here, we can sense a new type of fear and apprehension that develops within students based on the type of academic programs they are enrolled in and their perceived sense of academic superiority or inferiority.

Additionally, Jake, a Grade 12 student from a working-class, mixed Aboriginal and European-Canadian family, perceives a new kind of superiority displayed by mini school students. He identifies how academic divisions and streaming creates tension between mini and regular students.

Jake: There is sometimes friction [between regulars and minis]. People rub off against each other. A lot of minis think they are better. I don't know why that is.… They are exactly the same except that their parents can dish out more money.

(Grade 12, Birch High[74])

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[74] Jake is a former West High student. Birch High is a pseudonym.

During the interview, Jake went on to say how mini schools create symbolic divisions between those who belong and those who do not, creating social boundaries between those who are friends and not friends.

The feeling that regular and mini students receive different treatment is similarly expressed by middle-class white Canadian youths who believe they are subjected to differential treatment. Michelle, a cross-boundary West High Grade 12 student, notes how she feels bitter about the hierarchy between mini and regular schools. This experience over her five years of secondary schooling has been emotionally detrimental and academically discouraging.

> Michelle: Things that they do in the mini school English are more advanced. Their assignments and stuff are more, like, dynamic. They do things that really make you think and stuff. I wish my English class got to do cool stuff like that. Sometimes, I feel that people think they [mini school students] are smarter, so they put more to them. They expect more from them. Well, I could do that if they expect more from me and the rest of regular kids…. The general consensus of the main school is that the mini school gets more funding, get to do more this, get to go to more field trips. Sort of like, why we don't get that kind of feeling. I think there is a bitter resentment to it, on the whole, from the regular kids to the mini school kids. I think it's more of negative thing.
>
> (Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High)

The remarks from resident and regular students from different class positions therefore reveal that being in the regular secondary school is academically demoting because more opportunities are given to mini students. Confronted with this experience, young people

167

understand the long-term consequences of stratified schools for their socio-economic futures in a neoliberal society. This form of classifying that the system has created ultimately functions as a form of wider social divisions, and young people must carry the burden of these divisions. This burden is reflected and embodied in their accounts of being perceived as less able, less wealthy, less worthy, and ultimately less important to the wider society as a whole.

The new type of streaming under school choice policy also has a direct consequence for the ways by which young people imagine and negotiate their learner identities and future directions. Albert, a regular West High Grade 8 student from a lower-middle-class Asian immigrant family, was only in his first year of secondary school when I interviewed him, yet he already seemed to think of himself as a particular type of learner, set on a certain educational pathway with particular social consequences. He classified himself relationally and oppositionally to mini school students, with comments that echoed Paul Willis' (1981) study of English working-class youths.

> Albert: I am not smart and not hard-working enough to be in mini school…. Mini school people are hard-working, do not care so much about socializing, but care about academic skills and marks. …
>
> Ee-Seul: What do you want to do after graduating?
>
> Albert: They [my parents] want me to work hard and go to university, so I have more choices … just not UBC. I am not good enough to get into UBC.
>
> Ee-Seul: Why is that?
>
> Albert: I am just not that smart. I don't work that hard. I am lazy. I don't study hard enough to get really good marks on the test to get into UBC.

It is striking to note how this Grade 8 student can carry with him such firm ideas about his skills, his style, and to which university he can apply. Yet young people's perceptions of the widely permeating effects of school choice affect more than simply their academic futures. Most resident students I interviewed recognized how their regular Dogwood (BC high school diplomas) would be undervalued in relation to the mini school diplomas. Indeed, they were concerned about how the social and economic consequences of having a devalued high school education might affect their futures.

Lola, a cross-boundary West High Grade 12 student from a working-class, immigrant family on the East Side, notes how her credentials seemed to be less valued, and she would thus have fewer scholarship opportunities in her future.

Ee-Seul: What do you think about mini programs?

Lola: People should definitely go for it because it looks good on your academic record. If you graduate from the regular school, you can write so much about it. For scholarships and applications, I regret not applying to mini schools. There is me and people from mini schools. They can say so much about mini schools. It looks a lot better…. I wish I did.

(Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High)

Likewise, coming from a working-class mixed-race background and living in social housing with a single mother on welfare, Sylvia noted that mini school status is likely to have economic benefits in the future.

Sylvia: Well, I suppose if you go to mini school, and it's meant for really high-grade people, if you are trying to get a job or go to school [university], they are going to see mini school. They are going to think higher of you, just that much higher of you.

(Grade 12, regular, East High)

During the interview, Sylvia also mentioned how she noted that mini students often go on fieldtrips. Had she known this, she would have applied to a mini school. This further shows how school choice is often not very well understood by young people, leaving them wondering why they are not given the same kind of learning and schooling opportunities as mini students. Students like Sylvia feel that their regular education is not as good as what choice students get in the public system, and ultimately, they would be further disadvantaged in the job market.

From these narratives, we can catch a glimpse of how the exchange-value model of the education market excludes and devalues certain young people while adding value to those who strategically take up middle-class positions in current societal and educational structures (Skeggs, 2004). School structures, processes, and activities create and regulate certain learner and social identities. Unfortunately, school choice contributes to the very making of the "low-achieving" learner category, which is placed upon students from underprivileged backgrounds as a direct but invisible consequence of producing the "high-achieving" learner category (i.e., mini students). In this neoliberal era of state retrenchment, school choice, as a highly classed educational ideal and practice, adds to ongoing local processes of class formation.

**5.4    Conclusion**

So far, my analysis has focused on the power of school choice policy as a central educational reform in creating academic distinctions between classes of racially and ethnically diverse students and their neighbourhoods. Most of those who participate in school choice, regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, view choice as a tool for gaining a competitive edge and preparing for university. Some of these students, especially those from middle-class immigrant families (who are racial and ethnic minorities within the Canadian state), view mini school options as preparing them to become global elites.

By contrast, those who enrol at their assigned neighbourhood public schools experience a sense of relative demotion and a further element of symbolic domination, a marginalization and "invisibilization" of groups through "a denial of public, visible existence" and/or by producing "negatively marked differences" (Bourdieu, 1998a, pp. 118-119). Clearly, then, there are class dynamics among racial and ethnic minorities with different immigration histories in the global city, which are further discussed in Chapter 7. What I have tried to show in this chapter is that public school choice is a contemporary process that undermines the reality that differences are part of the real world and are deserving of egalitarian forms of acknowledgement within the public school context. Some young people paradoxically have little or no choice—that is, they are not "free to choose"—yet embody the class imaginary, which includes dispositions and practices that distinguish groups of students from one another in the neoliberal global city. School choice then further functions as a reproductive mechanism for creating a different understanding of what neighbourhoods are and have been and how young people ought to navigate them.

In particular, school choice in Vancouver has had at least two different and polarizing consequences for students. On one hand, resident student narratives indicate that even under the school choice policy regime, schools are important social spaces where students want to have a sense of comfort and self-protection through class and social membership, and this class-based (and race- and ethnicity-based) socialization tendency is consistent with earlier and current accounts of youth socio-cultural practice and school choice (Bunar, 2010b; Cohen, 1999; Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Nayak, 2003; Willis, 1981). For resident students, academically oriented self-improvement is not a priority, and school is not narrowly defined as a centre for knowledge acquisition (Forsey, 2008). Further, their narratives highlight the *destiny effect* of new educational structures by showing how they dampen regular students' sense of self-worth, work habits, and future aspirations (Bourdieu, 1998a). In this context, Vancouver's young people are acutely aware of "invidious hierarchical geographies of schooling" and where they are positioned in a global city (Reay, 2007, p. 1194).

On the other hand, school choice expands the educational choices of high-achieving students and works to secure their futures. In doing so, Vancouver school choice dynamics and consequences are interwoven with local and global forces of change. Currently available choices provide academically successful youths with more opportunities and experiences that bring them one step closer to realizing their global ambitions. Successful young people in the local education market develop and come to embody the global (cosmopolitan) imaginary, which Rizvi (2005) finds is already present for many international students who study abroad for higher education, specifically for Asian students at Australian post-secondary institutions. In my study, too, globally mobile families tended to benefit from their existing cultural and economic capital and were able to further expand them in the local education market (Sassen, 2000; Waters,

2006). Choosing a secondary school has become a symbolic way for students to envision their

educational and social futures in the global city and beyond, which is reflective of their class-

differentiated aspirations for a cosmopolitan identity (Rizvi, 2005). Subsequently, their

meanings, experiences, and outcomes of school choice then reflect a continuation of what

Bourdieu (1998) theorizes as a class struggle in the global era, which clearly has further racial

and ethnic dimensions, as discussed in Chapter 7.

While many different forces may account for this apparent consequence of predominantly

class-divided schooling in the local education market, I argue that it is largely because of, or is

justified by, the neoliberal global imaginary as it operates locally in the highly classed economy

of a city in the affluent West.[75] This imaginary is produced and maintained by the neoliberal

politico-economic framework that draws upon the dynamics of global economic pressure and

competition (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). I do wish to emphasize the unmistakable character of this

competition, for it cannot be eliminated through studies of the language of policy alone. Rather,

this economy-focused framework has clearly rationalized the reduction of state, social, and

educational provisions in order to enhance international competitiveness through fiscal

responsibility (Ruddick, 2003). Class distinction is made and remade through a symbolic

recognition of taste and through economic capital (i.e., the high fees incurred by choice families).

The dual logic of consumption and competition underpinning today's public school choice

further reduces the public space of education and socially just egalitarian learning models. The

market system creates a "privatized" place of learning sheltered from those who are considered

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[75] As mentioned in Chapter 3, the average parental income for the eight West Side public secondary schools was

about $82,537, compared to $43,111 for the East Side public secondary schools, and $93,488 for all private schools

in 2009.

to be "the others," who are often excluded from these programs. This is reflective of the current era of neoliberal globalization and is especially notable in a city with growing inequality and a polarizing job market (which consists of high-paying professional jobs or dead-end service jobs) and their associated social fragmentations and exclusions (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Sassen, 2000).

In the next chapter, I turn to the importance of space and place in an effort to think more broadly about the ways in which young people's lives and classification struggles are enmeshed in the larger "spatial phenomenologies of meaning" circulating in an increasingly globalizing city (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010). I ask the following related questions: Are there any spatial differences in the ways in which mini schools within the city are perceived by young people, and how does the historically divided geography of the city, as depicted in the context chapter, play into and contribute to the dynamics of the education market?

# Chapter 6: The urban imaginary, moral panic, and young people's school cartographies of security

Beth: I remember putting my status [on Facebook] as 'East Side is too cool for West Side.' Oh, that started a lot…. All the people on the West Side: 'No, East Side is so weird looking. It's so poor. Nothing to do there. It's really so horrible there. So dirty. So many gangsters, so many drugs, so many hookers, right?' Well, technically, Westside has all that, too. You don't see it as much, I guess…. So people ask you, 'Where do you live?' [If you say,] 'I live in West Side.' people automatically think you are rich, and if you say, 'I live in East Side.,' they think you are the poorest person in the world, right?'

(Grade 8, mini, West High)

Alongside and in dialectical relation with the "real" built city exists what may be called the "urban imaginary": a coherent, historically based ensemble of representations…. And to the extent that cities are divided along lines of class, race, ethnicity, and gender, in any given city at any given time, there will be a number of urban imaginaries coexisting and competing against each other for dominance. (Greenberg, 2000, p. 228)

In the previous chapter, I showcased young people's multiple perceptions and unequal experiences of school choice. I highlighted the market as a novel site of classification struggles, the production of distinction, and various forms of symbolic domination in the aspiring global

175

city of Vancouver. Although parental class positions do not necessarily determine the reproduction of class structure through school choice participation, the outcomes of school choice (the distinction-making of young people) have reproductive, polarizing, and divisive effects. In the new educational hierarchy created by mini and regular schools, those who have access to choice programs reaffirm their class privilege. In contrast, those excluded from the education market, particularly youths attending stigmatized inner-city neighbourhood schools, are often demoted and excluded from the possibilities of globalization. Their disadvantaged backgrounds and neighbourhoods continue to circumscribe their opportunities and access to school choice.

In this chapter, I examine young people's understandings of school choice. More specifically, I examine their meaning-makings in relation to widely circulating urban imaginaries that are generated (and regenerated) in times of moral panic regarding particular neighbourhoods and schools. This chapter therefore seeks to respond to the second research question of this project: How do young people imagine schools in different neighbourhoods with growing inequality and increasing ethnic enclaves?[76] In other words, how does the local spatial context and the associated urban imaginary—particularly perceptions of which neighbourhoods are good, safe, and moral and which are bad, dangerous, and immoral—matter to the ways youths experience, imagine, and organize their schooling around the city?

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[76] As noted in the context chapter, the number of ethnic neighbourhoods, defined as an area in which more than 30% of the population is from a particular ethnic group, increased from 6 in 1981 to 254 in 2001 (Keung, 2004), and these ethnic divisions are noticeable in the disproportionate distribution of students from different ethnic groups in Vancouver schools (see Figure 3.1).

Here, I draw extensively upon interview data with students, but I also discuss some of the media articles and policy documents that I use to contextualize student narratives. In particular, I explore the ways in which the school choice imaginary[77] is connected to the spatial histories and conditions of school geographies, classed urban neighbourhoods, and recurring moral panics surrounding youth gangs in racially and ethnically marginalized neighbourhoods. I compare students' urban imaginaries to their residential locations. More specifically, I compare the different as well as shared urban imaginaries constructed by students who reside on the West Side with those who live elsewhere (including the East Side, as well as outside of Vancouver). In doing so, I analyze how urban imaginaries matter to, and fundamentally impact upon, students' school choice imaginaries.

I draw on critical spatial approaches to school choice, youth studies, and urban studies to analyze my data. Specifically, I draw on Lucey and Reay's (2002) work in considering the importance of social and urban imaginaries as they relate to young people's meaning-making of school choice. In their London, UK, study, Lucey and Reay (2002) insightfully note,

> Children constructed complex cartographies of schools based on an imbrication of
>
> official and unofficial knowledges, objective and subjective information, rumour and

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[77] The school choice imaginary refers to the dominant public perceptions of urban schools in the city of Vancouver. The imaginary includes school rankings, media images, and rumors and stories that circulate along the grapevine. The imaginary shapes one's notion of where one does or does not belong. Like the urban imaginary, it can be contended by different groups of people as well as by one's lived experiences; thus, there may exist multiple school choice imaginaries.

gossip, individual, familial and group experience, all of which went towards the

construction of internal and external realities. (p. 255)

As Ball's (2003) study of the education market in the UK further explains, youths learn about

different schools, opportunities, and neighbourhoods through their family and social networks.

Building upon these earlier studies of school choice, I suggest that the urban imaginary is a

critical dimension of the social imaginary, and it is thus critical that young people's experiences

of school choice are examined in relation to the lived and imagined geographies of the city, or

what Soja (1996) calls a Thirdspace[78] of the city.

An important addition to the above critical spatial approach is my theorization that the

urban imaginary is imagined and reimagined through the lens of the public's recurring anxiety

over incidents and issues that appear to threaten the dominant moral fabric of the society or

community. I refer to this anxiety as "moral panic."[79] Moral panic, when operating as social

and/or collective anxiety, produces certain characterizations of urban neighbourhoods and their

residents, especially characterizing gang youths as "folk devils" who undermine the moral

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[78] Soja's concept of Thirdspace refers to a "lived space of radical openness and unlimited scope, where all histories

and geographies, all times and places are immanently presented and represented, a strategic place of power and

domination, empowerment and resistance" (Soja, 1996, p. 311). As such, Soja theorizes urban spaces to be

gendered, structured, and racialized rather than as empirically measurable material spaces or ideational constructs of

space (Allen, 1999). Thirdspace refers to "the realm where ideological struggles over spaces and spatialities occurs

in ways that have interactive consequences for both real space and imagined space" (Allen, 1999, p. 258).

[79] A more recent variation of this term is "moral anxiety." Both terms ultimately stem back to work in the 1970s on

apparently "dangerous subcultures" (Dillabough & Oliver, 2013). For my analysis, I focus on the term "moral

panic," following Cohen's (2002/1972) work.

standard of a society. Moral panic also creates a practical sense of where individuals belong and do not belong (Cohen, 2002/1972). Based on my ethnographic data, in this chapter, I show how moral panic plays a role in the reconstitution of spatial tensions, inequality, and divisions and further influences the urban patterns of school choice in Vancouver.

## 6.1 Urban dangers, young people's cartographies of safety and fear, and the moral function of mini schools

In addition to the official recognition of good schools and students, based on academic performance as noted in the previous chapter, the urban imaginary of danger, drugs, violence, and gangs is deeply terrifying to many teens and thus affects how they construct school cartographies. This is partly because Vancouver, like many major urban centres in North America, has become a city with a growing crime level allegedly connected to the global trade of drugs and internationally known gangs. Especially since the early 1980s, drugs have been closely associated with violent crime, such as stabbings and shootings (Stuntz, 1998). More recently, many brazen drug-related shootings have been reported as being part of a larger global drug problem (e.g., there were 50 gang-related shootings reported between January and April 2009) and have been connected to drug wars elsewhere, especially in Mexico and Central America. This emphasizes Vancouver's growing global connections, even in drug trafficking (Rodgers, 2009; Skelton, 2010). During the study period, especially leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympics, the media portrayed Vancouver, especially the East Side, as a gangland battlefield (Rodgers, 2009). Within this urban imaginary, the language of drugs is frequently used by my study participants to describe "bad" schools in Vancouver.

Many students expressed their fears and fantasies regarding drugs and drug-associated social groups (i.e., gangs), neighbourhoods, and schools. All students in my study, in fact, seemed challenged by the danger that drugs pose to young lives. Some, especially those who resided in marginalized neighbourhoods, tried to reclassify, albeit symbolically, their stigmatized neighbourhoods and schools, which I discuss in the last section of this chapter. Others, especially those from middle-class families, seemed to prefer relocating to "clean" schools, resembling the school choice patterns of British middle-class families and children (Lucey & Reay, 2002; Reay, 2007). They avoid demonized schools associated with drugs by opting into mini schools in affluent neighbourhoods.

Albert, a Grade 8 regular West High student, positioned each school based on his perceptions of dangers, drugs, and associated poverty and avoided the tarnished schools by using his parents' economic capital.

> Albert: Of course, every school is going to have good and bad students. But there is a
> really good balance here [at West High].
>
> Ee-Seul: When you say good students, what do you mean by that?
>
> Albert: People who don't bully, get good grades, don't peer pressure, trustful.
>
> Ee-Seul: Who do you think are bad students?
>
> Albert: People who bully and peer pressure ... negative peer-pressure, do drugs, drugs are
> cool….
>
> Ee-Seul: Did you have any problem coming to this school?

Albert: I don't live in the catchment area. I had to get a house in the catchment area,

'cause I really liked this school. I really wanted to go to this school. I absolutely did not

want to go to Willow High [his neighbourhood school].

Ee-Seul: Because of?

Albert: Because of druggies…. If I went to Willow High, I would be peer pressured into

doing drugs. I don't want to do drugs. …

Ee-Seul: Have you ever been approached by drug dealers?

Albert: No, but I know a lot of people who went into drugs. They are now hanging out

with the wrong group.

(Grade 8, regular, West High)


Similarly, Juliet, a Grade 12 East High mini student from a working-class Asian-

Canadian family, notes that drug problems make people perceive some schools as bad.


Juliet: West High is a really good school. I heard Birch High is really a bad school

because of a lot of drug dealing.

(Grade 12, mini, East High)


Drugs are an important criterion among young people when perceiving which schools are good

or bad in contemporary Vancouver. What students hear about different schools and their

associated drug problems, in addition to the academic rankings of different schools, shapes their

cartographies of schools (Lucey & Reay, 2002).

One particularly notable pattern is that West Side residents' fantasies of East Side schools are fraught with the fear of violence and drugs, as seen in Cedric and Albert's accounts of school choice below:

Albert: Drugs, basically. I am not saying that everybody at the East Side does drugs, but there is more.

Ee-Seul: Do you know anything about East High? What do you know about it?

Albert: It's on the East Side. There are lots of drugs there.

Ee-Seul: Drugs, is that what you are really concerned about [in secondary school choice]?

Albert: 'Cause, yeah, 'cause I don't want to do drugs…. If I am in the neighbourhood with a lot of drugs, I would probably get peer pressured into doing drugs.

Ee-Seul: You said that there are drugs here, too, right?

Albert: A little bit. It's not that bad.

Ee-Seul: You think you will be okay.

Albert: Yeah. My friends stay away from drugs.

(Grade 8, regular, West High)

Similarly, Cedric, a Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High regular student, said the following:

Cedric: For me, even I was pressured by my parents to go to Chestnut High [pseudonym for a high school located in central Vancouver] since I live close to it. I thought West High was a good school, academically. It's always been West High for me. I still think it's a good school…. West High is really good …because Westside schools tend to be

182

better…. I feel safe here. I think teachers care more here. They go out of their way to help you.

Ee-Seul: When you say it's safe here, what does that mean to you?

Cedric: Well, you hear lots of stories about Eastside schools. I hear stories, like physical things, fighting, and even drugs.

(Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High)

Students, especially residents of the West Side, seemed to have dystopian imaginaries of, and thus objections to attending, East Side schools. Neither Cedric nor Albert knew any students who actually attended East Side schools, yet they both strongly asserted their apprehensions about attending East Side schools. They and others with similar narratives (clearly stronger for those who live on the West Side) stated that their rejection of Eastside schools stemmed from dominant forms of stigmatization, which play into and help shape local urban imaginaries of place. Here, we can see how urban spaces are strategic places of power and domination (i.e., Thirdspace) rather than rationally divided simple grids of geography (Soja, 1996). Those who live closer to desirable neighbourhoods reap the profits of their desired localities while those who live in pathologized neighbourhoods tend to experience *positional suffering*[80] due to living in a neighbourhood with an undesirable school, even while living in the same city, as I discuss further later (Bourdieu, 1999; Reay & Lucey, 2003).

---

[80] Positional suffering refers to the bearing of distress and pain resulting from occupying a particular social position (Bourdieu, 1999). In particular, those who are in marginalized and deprived social positions experience not only "the 'real' suffering of material poverty" but also the mental distress of feeling their relatively low standing in social space (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 4).

Similarly, Rose, a Grade 8 mini student at West High, told me that she spends about 30–45 minutes each way commuting from her home to West High. On her route to school, she passed about 12 secondary schools, each with a highly competitive mini school. Nonetheless, she said she was not interested in attending any of those schools because of their problems with drugs and violence.

Ee-Seul: How do you get to West High every day?

Rose: I take the Skytrain and a bus, and it takes about 30–45 minutes.

Ee-Seul: Have you thought about applying to any of the mini schools that are closer to your home?

Rose: What I heard was that some of those schools [on the East Side] have drug problems and violence problems. So, I don't know, but West High Mini seemed to be a better choice.

(Grade 8, mini, West High)

These narratives clearly reveal that students are drawing from the dominant urban imaginary circulating in the wider public arena. The narratives also reflect how the East Side is negatively portrayed in the mainstream media. For instance, in a recent newspaper article covering an East Side building evacuation (Lee, 2011), the readers are informed of the building and neighbourhood's history, in the context of associated problems on the East Side, while the main focus of the newspaper article is on the city's order to evacuate one building due to its substandard adherence to fire safety standards. The building is portrayed as a crime hub where drugs and sex are traded. The tenants are portrayed as suffering from substance abuse issues. The

article presents a timeline of the police presence required to keep "order" and "[to roust] alleged drug dealers" (Lee, 2011). The same article further describes a recent shooting incident in which a young male was shot and wounded after an exchange of gunfire inside a suite. The building, with broken, bullet-punctured, taped and boarded-up windows, is described to be an imminent danger to the tenants, who are ordered to leave the building and live in a city-provided shelter (Lee, 2011). This local media discourse, the portrayal of the city's East Side as the part of town where all the "problems" are apparently concentrated, tends to regenerate the negative imagery of the East Side, reflective of the historical local division. Prior to, during (and after) the prohibition era in North America, the Downtown Eastside was seen as a place where illegal alcohol was served and immorality was bred because of its concentration of illegal drinking bars and prostitution. While the prohibition period was short-lived in Vancouver, from 1917 to 1920, its effects on moral regulation are enduring in current legal framework and treatment mechanisms, especially in Downtown Eastside (Graham, 2007).[81]

Surrounded by these media stories and historical memories, which negatively portray the East Side as a problematic area, young people's narratives about their fears of drugs seem to reflect the dominant cultural and class biases that surround the use of drugs in low-income neighbourhoods. Drug use is negatively perceived because it reflects the moral failure of less

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[81] The production, selling, and buying of drugs for the purpose of leisure is currently a criminal offence in Canada. At the end of 2010, the federal government launched a national campaign, DrugsNot4ME, encouraging young people to turn their backs on drugs. Noteworthy is what was apparent in the past (the short-lived prohibition era, the criminalization of alcohol) and what is clear in the present (the criminalization of drugs): the classifying function of moral images and registers.

affluent classes and racialized minorities (Stuntz, 1998).[82] As such, most students told me they wanted to avoid schools that have drug problems. Amy, a Grade 12 West High mini student, articulates this point well.

> Amy: If I say I go to Willow High [pseudonym], they won't say, oh, that's a bad school. They won't say that. But they might get a different idea. They are judging early on. They are not supposed to, but it's really common…. It's known as an East Side school in the West Side.
>
> Ee-Seul: Why is that?
>
> Amy: It's drugs. A lot of drugs. It's a lot of like, bloodiness. Party. Huge. That kind of lifestyle. It's that kind of school…. Even with my own friends, I found Willow High really shaped them…. When you go to Willow High … they don't teach you academic stuff anymore. They teach you stuff for different lifestyles…. It [West High] is a better

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[82] Stuntz (1998) points out that low-income drug users are more likely, under the current legal framework, to be caught and punished for their wrongdoings, which makes it appear that drug problems are more common with the lower class than the middle or upper classes. He argues that low-income drug users appear to suffer more severely from addiction because they have fewer resources to deal with the consequences. They are likely to be caught neglecting jobs and families and engaged in theft or robbery and violence. In contrast, Stuntz (1998) argues that those with high incomes are able to deal privately with various drug-related problems and issues using their own resources and without being subject to public scrutiny or legal enforcement. Further, he notes that the current legal and enforcement systems target the sellers who tend to operate in low-income neighbourhoods and who tend to come from families in difficult economic situations. In fact, Canada's new national campaign promises to be "tough on the dealers of drugs, but compassionate to their victims, with a focus on prevention and treatment" (Kingsentinel, 2011).

alternative because … the quality of students here is better, not for marks or anything like

that. [My mom,] she's not that type of mom who pushes academically….West High is a

really clean school, compared to Willow High.

Ee-Seul: You mean physically clean or drug-wise?

Amy: Yeah, yeah, that kind of stuff [drugs]. Students aren't so slutty or messed up.

That's not the culture at West High. At West High, everyone is pretty friendly.… I think

my mom knew that in high school, people get influenced a lot by who's around them, so

she didn't want to put me in that environment in [her neighbourhood]…. Maybe also

because West High, rich people live around here, so maybe better standard or culture.

(Grade 12, mini, West High)


As Amy points out, Willow High, despite its West Side location, is seen as having an

"underclass" culture largely because the school is known to have drug "problems" and is thus to

be avoided. While Willow High is located within a West Side neighbourhood, its student body is

made up of relatively lower-income families. Although this school neighbourhood has undergone

radical gentrification since the 1980s, followed by a real estate boom in the 1990s, when the

price of condominiums and houses quadrupled, there are still many multiplexes and rental

apartments surrounding the school. Due to these low-income characteristics, Willow High is

perceived as a less desirable school than West High, or any other schools on the West Side.

Nonetheless, worth recalling is that West High is not drug free, as Albert remarked in an

earlier quotation, yet somehow drug usage at West High is deemed "acceptable." This

contradictory perception of which neighbourhoods are good and clean or bad and druggy, and

why this may be so, echoes the conversations I had with some West High students. As Jason, a

regular Grade 12 West High ethnic minority student, who was born in Canada and grew up on the West Side, noted, the use of drugs is somewhat accepted and common for "the party kids" at West High (field note, March 4, 2010). In other words, while drugs are feared, there is also the sense that their use is less problematic at middle- or upper-middle-class house parties. As a result, the leisure use of drugs, which is perceived as "occasional and responsible" by the middle- and upper-middle class youths on the West Side, is considered less problematic, despite some youths who become addicted and receive recovery treatment. As such, drug use does not function to undermine the image of West High, and its reputation remains intact, while schools with low-income families and a history of "working-class culture," especially on the East Side, are defamed for their association with drugs. The news media, I believe, play a major role in casting stigmas upon major areas of the city.

Indeed, drugs are a part of urban young people's everyday experiences, and some know where marijuana is traded and smoked. During my fieldwork, one student mapped out the school yard for me, noting where different groups hang out; she also mentioned where weed smokers hang out (field note, May 20, 2010). Indeed, according to Art Steinman, the coordinator of the SACY (School-Age Children and Youth substance abuse prevention) program, there is probably no drug-free secondary school in Vancouver: "[The drug and alcohol problem] cuts across all schools" (Four Pillars News, 2007). This of course does not mean that every student in Vancouver is engaged in drug use. According to the latest statistics from the 2008 McCreay Centre Society's survey of 30,000 BC youth, the overall percentage of youths who have tried marijuana is 30% (approximately 9,000 students), and the typical age for the first trial is between 13 and 14 (Fayerman, 2009, April 15). The trend of marijuana consumption is on the rise, up from 22% in 2003 (Buxton, 2007). As such, what is evident in this study is that many young

people fear drug problems and associated urban dangers and subsequently wish to avoid the

schools known to have drug problems.

In this context, then, it is important to note that some mini schools were introduced as a

way to change the "drug culture" of the main school by providing programs that captured

students' interests and passions (field note, February 7, 2010). West High was in fact

transformed in the early 2000s from a druggy school to a top public school by creating and

attracting high-achieving and "well-behaved" mini students (field note, May 17, 2010). In my

brief chat with the former West High principal, who had proposed and implemented the mini

program, I learned that the mini school at West High set new standards for conduct, habits,

activities, student culture, and learner communities. The principal's view was that mini schools

have the power to change regular public schools and their cultures. When I spoke with Ms. Fuller

(pseudonym), a West High English teacher, she mentioned that in the 1970s and 1980s, West

High was not as academically focused, and it had drug problems. Since the mini program was

introduced, the school has become one of the top schools, according to the annual Fraser

Institute's Report Cards (field note, March 23, 2010). Mini schools are then, in part, employed to

refocus students on academics and compel them to live up to the standards of newly imagined

selective educational communities. Furthermore, as Ms. Fuller noted, the school's growing

reputation as good, safe, and high-achieving, since the mini school was introduced, has

contributed to the attraction of international students from affluent families from many countries,

especially China.

In this light, we can see how some mini schools are seen as safer options in a city with a

rising level of drug-related crimes (Rodgers, 2009; Vancouver Police Department, 2008). As

beacons of the public education system, mini schools perform a new moral function of regulating

good student conduct as well as endorsing particular educational value structures that ultimately lead to greater symbolic capital for both the school and the students. This kind of moral regulation fulfills a market function by creating the kind of competition that choice policy endorses. Morality, class, and the markets, in other words, cannot be separated. Arguably, then, school choice through mini schools further satisfies a moral function in an advanced neoliberal schooling model. By asking each community and school to introduce programs that regulate student behaviour (both academic and social), neoliberal educational authorities ensure high performance with less "deviance" (i.e., drug abuse). This is noted in the mini school *Options* brochure, which states that successful applicants ought to exhibit good learning behaviour and "passion" while also possessing a high level of motivation for learning (Vancouver School Board, 2010). Motivation is not easy to show or measure, yet willingness to focus on academic achievement, as laid out by mini school programs, is highly regarded in the selection process (field note, November 12, 2009). Mini schools thus present their communities as being particularly safe, responsible, and liberal and promote the sense that they offer safer learning environments than do mainstream schools. In this era of neoliberalization, I see this new regulative function of school choice as a vital element of our understanding of the way "micro-moral relations among persons are conceptualized and administered" (Rose, 1996, p. 331). This hidden moral function of school choice seems to be particularly pertinent to public anxiety over the city's growing problems of drug trafficking and gangs, as further discussed below. It also points to the ways in which the manipulation of a public school structure, rather than focusing solely on the market investment of private schools, can reproduce class conflict in new ways that may appear, on the surface, highly progressive.

## 6.2    Moral panic: the fear of gangs in urban schools

According to the Vancouver Police Department's (VPD) (2008) 2008–2012 Strategic Plan, gang violence is becoming increasingly severe and is growing in the areas of drug-trafficking, turf wars, grow-rip robberies (i.e., stealing from grow-ops), drug smuggling, extortions, and kidnappings. As such, the VPD (2008) has made curbing gang violence its major organizational priority. Yet, as noted earlier, gang violence escalated in 2009, as the local media demonstrated with its headlines, including "Six shootings in six days in growing gang violence" (CTV, 2009). When discussing the topic of school choice, many young participants often brought to my attention the different kinds of urban moral panic[83] related to local "folk devils," especially youth gangs (particularly drug dealers and users), and their moral failures when discussing pathologized urban areas and schools. The persistence of stereotypes, and thus the pathologizing of particular urban neighbourhoods with negative images, as Cohen (2002/1972) notes, constitutes urban moral panic. As Ricoeur further notes, incidents of deadly violence, which cause moral panic, result in the "existential crisis of community" (1991, p. 484). While community efforts to rebuild tarnished neighbourhood schools exist, tragic incidents of gang-related violence and death lead to the disintegration of a community and its school as a hub of community. In this section, I focus on gang "folk devils" and the potential they have in shaping urban imaginaries and school choice imaginaries by constructing and maintaining the public imagination of "bad" schools.

One particularly notable pattern among participants is that a large number of youths living in central Vancouver neighbourhoods in detached homes with their middle-class parents

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[83] According to Cohen (2002/1972), moral panic consists of intensely anxious "public" responses to morally threatening events, people, and areas within the specific boundaries of communities, cities, and nations.

tend to opt out of their neighbourhood schools. Many of these students seem to live around

Maple High. In fact, a majority of the Grade 7 students I interviewed live in this neighbourhood.

At the time of the interviews, I thought this was simply a coincidence, yet when I interviewed

cross-boundary and mini students at West High, I also noted that quite a few of them came from

this neighbourhood as well. When I interviewed Lola, a Grade 12 cross-boundary student at

West High, I discovered a reason for the spatial pattern.


> Lola: In the previous year, Maple High did not have a really good reputation. Crimes and
>
> stuff … and I never really knew anyone that was involved. They [my parents] didn't
>
> think it was really a good learning environment.… I have an older sister. She graduated
>
> from Maple High, and she turned out okay. I don't know what my parents were thinking,
>
> but probably because of recent events.
>
> Ee-Seul: Can you tell me about the recent events?
>
> Lola: At Maple High, five years ago … someone got killed. Yes, that whole incident.
>
> [That was] recent, when I was in Grade 8 but when my sister was in—which was a long
>
> time ago. I don't think it was that bad. I think it has gotten somewhat better.
>
> (Grade 12, Cross-boundary, West High)


As first introduced in Chapter 5, Lola is a Grade 12 student who moved across catchment area

boundaries to attend West High. The decision to move was made largely by her parents, but it

was also greatly facilitated by school choice policy because her cross-boundary acceptance was

aided by her older sister's attendance at West High's mini school.[84] Yet her mobility is more intriguing when viewed in light of the incident that took place at her catchment area school. With the rising moral panic around the incident at Maple High, Lola's parents did not believe that the school was good enough for their two younger daughters, although their eldest daughter had graduated from Maple High and went on to university.

Today, this pattern of exodus is continuing. The school's enrolment has gone down from 1,505 in 2001 to 1,367 in 2012. The declining enrolment, especially in contrast to the rising enrolment at West High (from 1,086 in 2001 to 1,354 in 2012), indicates that an increasing number of families with the means and opportunity to exit the catchment school have abandoned Maple High, looking for safer schools elsewhere, and have chosen schools outside their neighbourhoods. The death of the young teen clearly shook the ethical core of the community. This often occurs during times of moral panic, causing a long-lasting decrease in the sense of connection between neighbourhood residents and the school. This sense of disconnection is especially notable amongst school-aged youths in the neighbourhood.

Kate, a Grade 7 student from a white middle-class family, grew up in the neighbourhood surrounding Maple High, but she knows little about the school. In fact, I could see the school from the front porch of her house when I visited for an interview. It was striking to note that she has few connections to the neighbourhood where she grew up or her catchment secondary school, which is located only a block away. This detachment of young children from their local neighbourhood schools seems to be more common among students in the neoliberal era.

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[84] She recalls that this transfer was really difficult, as the receiving school was not enthusiastic about enrolling her, although her sister went to the mini school there. She notes that unless one lies about her address, simple cross-boundary school choice is difficult in Vancouver.

Ee-Seul: What do you think about Maple High?

Kate: I haven't heard much about it. There was this kid who got killed there. But it is so nice for the school to build a garden just for that child. Sometimes, me and my friend walk around there. It seems like it's a nice school. Of course, it's big.

Ee-Seul: Do you know anyone who goes there?

Kate: No, I don't think so.

(Grade 7, Central Vancouver resident)

As Kate recognizes, the efforts to rebuild the community around the school are evident in the construction of a memorial garden for the victim of the incident, but this event has also deterred some parents from sending their children to a place that is perceived as a "gang" school. Partly as a result of this violent incident, Kate and her family are active choosers, which may not be solely linked to questions of class but also to concerns of urban security.[85] For instance, she went to a non-neighbourhood primary school of her parents' choice.[86] Also, instead of attending her neighbourhood school, she intends to go to a mini school. When I asked her which schools interested her, Maple High was never mentioned.

Maple High has received blame for not ensuring students' safety and for not teaching proper moral conduct. In the mid-2000s, a young Asian male was attacked and killed at the

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[85] Residents use strategies to keep threats and potential disruption away while residing in cities with dangerous crimes on daily basis.

[86] Most of Kate's primary school friends also chose their schools, and they live all over the city of Vancouver rather than in one particular neighbourhood.

school by a group of youths, identified by the local media as "thugs." The local newspaper report shows some evidence of moral panic and rising urban security fears surrounding the school and youth, especially working-class, immigrant ESL youth involved in gang activities in low-income inner-city neighbourhoods. For instance, the report reminds readers of the last reported violent incident at Maple High, in 1999, when a student was beaten with pipes and stabbed three times by seven teens outside the school.[87] Further, when the then-principal of Maple High was interviewed about the death, she said it "was a huge shock to our school community. It was the source of great grieving and introspection: How can we work with our community to keep our students safe and to reach out as a school and connect with the community?"[88]

Following this incident, the school became even more unpopular, tarnished, and demonized than before. As noted above, some families abandoned their neighbourhood school.[89] Moral panic and rising security fears about the incident, regardless of the actual educational resources and outcomes of the school, had a direct impact on school choice. School choice, regardless of its policy intentions and goals, inadvertently facilitated the demonization of

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[87] Reference omitted to preserve anonymity.

[88] Reference omitted to preserve anonymity.

[89] The death of the young man shook the whole community, causing residents to question their moral and ethical foundations. The legal responses from the Crown and BC Supreme Court Justice indeed denounced the violence for shaking the community to its core, and one of the perpetrators received a longer than anticipated jail term. Since then, the community response has been an immense effort to reestablish itself, its "identity," and especially the neighbourhood school where the incident took place as a safe place for learning and socialization.

**Photo 6.1 Students attend a memorial assembly at Maple High Secondary in honour of slain student**



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this school and negatively affected conceptions of an already pathologized neighbourhood. This impact is especially heightened once a neighbourhood is deemed dangerous following critical incidents such as gang-related deaths. Clearly, one can witness a moral reordering of choice as it links indirectly to both race and class.

Young people's imaginaries of secondary schools are intimately related to their fear of gangs, which are often associated with drug dealing and violence in Vancouver. Whether a particular secondary school is seen as desirable or undesirable depends a great deal on the presence of a particular type of folk devil; at the moment, youth gangs, many of which operate as organized crime syndicates (e.g., MS-13), are at the top of the list. In BC, the top four gangs

include the Red Scorpions, the United Nations, the Independent Soldiers, and the Hells Angels (Bellett, December 29, 2011). In 2002, the number of youth gangs was estimated at 102 and the number of young gang members at 1,027 (Public Safety Canada, 2007). In recent years, the ubiquity of street drugs seems to have heightened the street gang problem, although, as Young's (1993) study of the history of street gangs in Vancouver reveals, streets gangs have been perceived as a problem throughout the post-war era.

However, the presence of and associated problems with crack cocaine are perceived to be more concentrated on the East Side. As Gordon's (2000) study of gangs in Vancouver found, social and economic marginality is a "causal" determiner of membership in gangs, groups that are also largely responsible for drug trade in the city. The contemporary focus on "Asian" gangs in comparison to the historically named white working-class local gangs, such as the Alma Dukes, Riley Park, Clark Park, or other gangs associated with Chinatown in the past, may reflect Asians' contemporary racialized marginality. Of the four youth gang groups mentioned, only one is historically from the West Side. These urban imaginaries and impressions endure in the ways in which East Side neighbourhoods are still perceived as morally and socially pathological. The historical presence of gangs, the current media reports, and the intense law enforcement on the East Side all compound to reproduce highly classed images of problematic and pathologized East Side neighbourhoods and their residents. Media photos such as the one below, with the headline "Eastside shooting ends with tragic suicide," can produce dangerous imagery of Vancouver's East Side. The heavily armed police patrolling the streets, accompanied by a tank-like armoured vehicle often only seen in war zones, are also capable of elevating families and young people's anxiety around escalating gang wars in the city, especially on the East Side.

**Photo 6.2 Eastside shooting ends with tragic suicide[90]**



©Ric Ernst/Vancouver Sun, reprinted with permission

Young people's fears of certain East Side neighbourhoods and schools draw from these wider

urban imaginaries, which contain both the histories of inspiration and hopes and destruction,

crime, and conflict (Huyssen, 2008). The low status and lack of popularity of the East Side mini

schools has more to do with the pathologized imaginaries of the surrounding neighbourhoods

than the schools themselves. Clearly, mass media plays a powerful and highly dominant role in

generating stereotypical representations of young people and places (for instance, censuring folk

devils for their moral failures) that are highly classed, gendered, and racialized (Aitken &

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[90] See http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2011/09/27/eastside-shooting-ends-with-tragic-suicide.

Marchant, 2003; Kelly, 2006).[91] Hence, few students I interviewed had come to East High as choice students. Among the 30 mini students, I found only one student who was from outside the East Side.

Kenneth, a Grade 8, East High mini student, was the only student who came to East High mini from outside the neighbourhood. He is the eldest child in his family, with middle-class parents who emigrated from Hong Kong, and seems to have invested a great deal in choosing a secondary school that would be right for him. He visited schools and went to information evenings. He had a fairly good knowledge of different schools across the city. It is thus informative to hear that when looking at the academic aspects of schools, he tried to narrow them down based on his own interests, but when looking at the overall social climate of schools, he made sure not to choose schools that were considered "bad" or in any way morally culpable. We can witness the formation of a phenomenology of moralizing fears as it plays into school choice practice:

Ee-Seul: Do you think most Grade 7 students think about choosing high schools or do they simply want to go to neighbourhood schools?

Kenneth: … The more intelligent class, they consider it, but most of them are too lazy. Yeah, I heard many reasons. Most of them are because they are too lazy. Most elementary students when they go to Grade 7, they say they're tired of elementary and rush into high school. So, they just go to high school. They don't really care where they go. …

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[91] In doing so, media also "virtually [denies] the possibility" of obtaining perspectives on the underlying social contexts of moral panic (Cohen, 2002/1972, p. 149).

Ee-Seul: What are some schools that you'd like to avoid?

Kenneth: Oak High. I read the news often. They say Oak High is considered a gang school. Well, Fir High is also considered a bad school. People in Fir High lit their lockers on fire. I read it on the news.

Ee-Seul: So you don't want to go there?

Kenneth: No. I don't.

(Grade 8, mini, East High)

Similarly, Tasha, a Grade 7 student who was keen to get into a mini school, described why she is not interested in going to her neighbourhood school. Despite its convenient location only a few blocks from her house, it is seen as a "bad" school, again another meaning-making system that plays into choice on moral anxieties about neighbourhood divisions.

Tasha: Oak High is straight down, so that's good, but…

Ee-Seul: Why not Oak High?

Tasha: Well, it has a technological focus I don't really like. So that was a definite con. Another one was just the feel of the school. How the principal said [at the information evening] it's a better school now and everything, but I still don't [believe it]. 'Cause he's forceful about it, I think it's because he is trying to get everybody to believe it's a better school…. A lot of people in my school—it kind of has … a label as a bad school. A person last year who lived across from it [Oak High] doesn't go to the school anymore. He talks about how a lot of times, he saw vandalism and stuff going on.

(Grade 7, Central Vancouver resident)

Lola also adds the following:

Ee-Seul: What schools are considered good schools and what schools are considered bad schools in Vancouver?

Lola: Anything west of Cypress High … [good]. If you say any schools on [the Eastside], you don't get very good responses.

Ee-Seul: What are particularly bad schools that people tell you to avoid?

Lola: In Vancouver? I'd say it's Oak High.

Ee-Seul: Why is that?

Lola: It's just the whole area beside [ ].[92] And there are a lot of bad things about it.… A lot of gangs. That's what I hear.

(Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High)

Also, after I interviewed Bob, a Grade 12 West High mini student from a middle-class Taiwanese-Canadian family, I learned how the fear of schools associated with gangs and danger tends to target schools located in low-income and ethnically marginalized neighbourhoods, neighbourhoods that have a large number of racial and ethnic minority students who are economically marginalized in Vancouver.

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[92] In order to preserve the anonymity of the schools mentioned, I have omitted specific names of institutions or buildings.

Bob: [My parents] wouldn't want me to go to a school, like, in the Downtown Eastside environment. It's too druggy, rustic…. Oak High … the school's really old. When you look at the grad pictures, everybody has brown skin.

Ee-Seul: How does that make you feel? Is that a kind of school that you can go to?

Bob: Because that school's so old, I don't really want to go to that school. It's kind of scary.

(Grade 12, mini, West High)

Brenda, a Grade 7 student who lives in an inner city neighbourhood with a high number of low-income residents, also noted why she thinks her catchment school is not the best place for her, as Birch High also has a high number of Aboriginal students.

Ee-Seul: Do you think all the schools in Vancouver are equally good?

Brenda: Some of them, kind of a lot of bad people go there, but most of them are good.

Ee-Seul: Which schools don't you want to go to?

Brenda: Birch High.

Ee-Seul: What do you hear about Birch High?

Brenda: Lots of people don't care about anything. They just get away with everything. There is a lot of police going into that school because of bad things there.

(Grade 7, East Vancouver resident)

In identifying what constitutes a "bad" school, all of the above students used the analytical gaze of moral anxiety when addressing the presence of youth violence, crime, vandalism, and gangs at

specific local schools, while these same schools tended to have high numbers of low-income and ethnic minority students. This is precisely what Cohen (2002/1972) notes about how individuals begin to use socially and politically constructed analytical frameworks of moral panic (who is bad and what is bad) in judging and interpreting their social worlds (Garland, 2008). Like Kenneth's comments above show, students do not become aware of schools simply through how well students at a school perform on the Foundation Skills Assessment exams, the province-wide examination of Grade 4 and 7 students, or the particular educational programs of mini schools. Students' imagined understandings of secondary schools are critically connected to the wider urban context and moral panic around violence and gangs.

Here, we can witness a growing tension in urban neighbourhoods with respect to the imagined "folk devils" of a divided Canadian city, especially low-income immigrant youths. The schools in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of low-income minority immigrants are being excluded from the processes of school choice not only for their low ranking in the league tables but also for the very marginality and pathologization of their neighbourhoods. Indeed, the degree of fear and avoidance felt by West Side youths when considering East Side schools resembles the spatial practices of youths in post-conflict cities, like Berlin or Jerusalem (Pullan & Gwiazda, 2011; University of Cambridge, 2012). Urban divisions and changes in Vancouver are an important backdrop to school choice dynamics. In this light of current urban conflict and violence, school choice may not be the "best" way to address "problems of achievement," as policy makers have argued (see Chapters 1 and 3).

### 6.3    Young people's competing urban imaginaries of the East Side

As noted above, most students in my study acknowledged, with degrees of difference, that East Side schools are negatively stereotyped in Vancouver. In particular, those who lived on the West Side seemed to know little about East Side schools or anyone attending the schools there; nonetheless, most students interviewed told me about negative perceptions and stereotypes of East Side schools that they had heard about over the years. When I interviewed the students residing on the East Side, they were well aware of the negative image of their neighbourhoods, but many disagreed with the stereotypical image of the East Side and in fact did feel safe there. In this section, I argue that despite these different urban imaginaries of the East Side, negative East Side stereotypes continue to influence the ways students imagine different schools and the resulting choices students make. The impact of these stereotypes is clearly evident in the dwindling enrolment numbers at East Side schools and demonstrates the power of the dominant urban imaginary in school choice practice.

Coming from a middle-class white Canadian family and attending the mini school at East High (her catchment area school), Helen has a good understanding of how her school is negatively perceived.

> Helen: My parents don't expect much of me. As long as I don't end up in the gutter.
>
> Ee-Seul: Gutter? What do you mean?
>
> Helen: Downtown [Eastside] Vancouver…. When people think and hear about East High, their first response, reaction, is that East High is a kind of rebel school—all murderers, drug addicts, thieves, and crooks…. *East High is like the Downtown Eastside*. Mostly because a lot of stuff that happens around East High or to East High has nothing to do

with East High. We've been broken into, or vandalized. A few people got stabbed and

shot around the school's neighbourhood streets.

<div align="right">(Grade 12, mini, East High, Italics Added)</div>

Helen's use of the expression "the gutter" effectively captures how life on the East Side and the

perception of East High are often captured in the mainstream media. Further, her metaphor

poignantly captures the deep fears many young people have of the East Side. The image of the

gutter, the channel of garbage, dirt, and waste water at the side of major streets, shows how the

East Side is locally imagined as a metaphorical landscape of wastage and garbage. Thus, as

someone who grew up on the East Side, Helen understands that her school and neighbourhood

are negatively perceived. This perhaps explains why I did not see any West Side residents

attending East High mini schools.

The students who live on the East Side often identify how these negative perceptions of

their neighbourhoods circulate elsewhere, but they do not feel their neighbourhoods are

dangerous, or they have learned street skills that assist them in navigating this danger. Alicia, a

regular Grade 8 East High student, notes that she is aware of how non-East Side residents

negatively perceive her neighbourhood, but she does not necessarily feel that her neighbourhood

is dangerous.

Ee-Seul: What do you think about your neighbourhood?

Alicia: I like it. I used to play hockey on the North Shore and I always get 'awws.' They

think it's [the East Side] terrible, but actually, I really enjoy it, my neighbourhood…. I

<div align="right">205</div>

think it's the people, right? There is such a cool vibe. My friends are here. They are really neat people.

Ee-Seul: What do you think people on the North Shore think about East Van?

Alicia: Pretty stupid sometimes. You know, obviously, there are some parts that are, you know, pretty rough, but that's only one section, right? But they over-generalize it…. That's a shame, though.

Ee-Seul: Do you feel always safe in your neighbourhood?

Alicia: I don't feel unsafe. I grew up here. I've been here for so long. My roots, home, and friends are here. Even downtown, I will walk around with my friends. It's fine. We dealt with it with our whole life. So, we kind of know what to do.… Obviously, we are not going to walk around downtown at nine o'clock at night, but you know, just normal, everyday kind of things. We are not stupid.

(Grade 8, regular, East High)

While Alicia indicated that the negative perception of East Side neighbourhoods is over-generalized, she did not completely deny it. Instead, she suggested that she takes some precautions in her neighbourhoods and is thus vigilant in her practice of street smarts.

Similarly, Beth, a Grade 8 West High mini student from a middle-class family in a gentrifying neighbourhood on the East Side, noted the dominant urban imaginary that portrays the West Side as affluent and the East Side as "poor." In making this observation, she noted the tension that exists between East Side students and West Side students.

206

Beth: I remember putting my status [on Facebook] as 'East Side is too cool for West Side.' Oh, that started a lot…. All the people on the West Side: 'No, East Side is so weird looking. It's so poor. Nothing to do there. It's really so horrible there. So dirty. So many gangsters, so many drugs, so many hookers, right? [I responded,] 'Well, technically, West Side has all that, too.' You don't see it as much, I guess…. So people ask you, 'Where do you live?' [If you say,] 'I live in West Side,' people automatically think you are rich, and if you say, 'I live in East Side,' they think you are the poorest person in the world, right? … There is drugs [on the West Side]. There is probably more drugs, 'cause on the West Side, people who have money, they want drugs, smoke pot. They have money. They can buy drugs.

Ee-Seul: Is it easy for you to say that you are from the East Side?

Beth: No, it's actually not that easy to say because there are people here [West High] that actually have quite a lot of money. And if I say I live on the East Side, they are like, really? It's almost as if they look down on you because you live on the East Side.

(Grade 8, mini, West High)

Beth's narrative reveals a particular ambivalence about her neighbourhood and thus her neighbourhood school. Her feeling of ambivalence is particularly noticeable when she tries to protect herself by not talking about where she lives, although she comes from a professional middle-class family that owns a detached house in a gentrifying neighbourhood in central Vancouver. This kind of ambivalence has been noted in other related studies of young people's experiences of neighbourhood and place (Wright, 1997).

While the youths above present multiple and contradictory imaginaries that emerge from their lived experiences of different parts of the city, as Greenberg (2000) and Soja (1996) have thoroughly noted, they are also subject to and internalize the dominant imaginary that exists in different areas of a city. While they have differentiated imaginaries of the East Side, which clearly coexist and compete against the dominant imaginary, they also acknowledge their relatively marginalized position in inserting their viewpoints into the dominant urban imaginary. This is particularly notable as Beth describes how the problems of drugs, gangsters, contamination, and prostitution are more negatively associated with the low-income neighbourhoods on the East Side than on the affluent West Side.[93]

While East Side students have more intimate knowledge of their East Side neighbourhoods and feel comfortable there, negative perceptions of East Side neighbourhoods and schools affect those who live on the East Side, and some do leave for West Side schools. Beth, mentioned above, is a good example of this case. Likewise, Lily, a Grade 8 West High mini student from a middle-class European-Canadian family residing in gentrifying central Vancouver, states clearly that she is not interested in any mini schools on the East Side.

> Lily: No. No, I just don't like the atmosphere of the school.… I am just not very fond of schools on the East Side. *They need to get some West Side atmosphere.*
>
> Ee-Seul: How is it different?

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[93] This view further echoes the double moral standards in the way drug usage is perceived as immoral in low-income neighbourhoods while it is accepted as a leisure activity of the middle classes, who know how to be responsible (Stuntz, 1998).

Lily: Okay, I hate saying this. I live on the East Side [in a gentrified neighbourhood], and it's safe, but when you go to school, *people are not very friendly or inviting*. They are kind of scary and they just look at you. At this school [West High], there are a lot of friendly faces. In general, I feel safe on the East Side, but not in the schools…. I've actually never been to any schools, but I see people walking to school. I know this sounds weird. I am attracted to what I see. When I see the schools [on the East Side], even the way they look, it's not inviting. I am not gonna go there.

(Grade 8, mini, West High, italics added)

Lily's rejection of East Side schools, as an East Side resident, echoes the narratives of some of the other students I interviewed, especially those who did not feel that they belonged in their East Side neighbourhoods for one reason or another. For instance, Owen, a Grade 12 West High mini student, noted how his neighbourhood feels foreign to him because of the many and indeed growing ethnic minority shops and restaurants.

Consequently, the Vancouver School Board's (1998) internal document shows that the Board should establish similar kinds of district-specialized alternative programs (i.e., mini schools) on both the East and West Sides in order to prevent the phenomenon of the "flight to the west": bright East Side students going to West Side schools. This effort has indeed resulted in the retention of high-achieving students with middle-class aspirations and backgrounds (especially in gentrifying areas) by East Side schools. Nonetheless, the students who I interviewed, like Lily, noted that East Side schools are not very attractive. In particular, when I asked Lily whether she would have gone to East High's mini school if it was exactly same as the one at West High, she showed little enthusiasm for the idea.

209

My field notes from information evenings across the schools indeed indicate that the number of attendees at East Side mini schools is consistently lower than at mini schools on the West Side. Many other West High mini students from outside the neighbourhood expressed similar sentiments. Further, comments like the ones Lily makes about East Side schools are not uncommon among the students I interviewed at West High. In other words, while the Board has made an organizational effort to create comparable mini school programs across the city, especially in gentrifying areas, many families still prefer West Side schools. In order to understand the spatial patterns and dynamics of school choice in the district of Vancouver, it is critical that we understand that spatial knowledge and meanings produced in relation to the urban imaginary.[94] While some of the historically classed moral regulations and spatial divisions have changed, the accounts heard so far from students' school choice imaginaries suggest that the marketization of education reinscribes historically produced divisions in the city. Indeed, the heavier volume of "school choice traffic" from the East Side to the West Side every morning illustrates the reproduction of spatialized inequality.

Briefly then, young people often list the primary reasons for not attending East Side schools, even elite mini schools, as drugs and drug-related gang and violence problems, which are constructed and constituted by highly *classed* urban imageries and the production of pathologized urban spaces. As such, many youths view ending up in the poorest part of the city and becoming drug addicts to be the worst possible outcome that can happen to them. Furthermore, the effects of social class relations in the historical context of the city are evident in the deep ambivalence that youths (both working and middle class) in stigmatized areas feel

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[94] In the next chapter, I further discuss the ways in which the gentrification of the inner city, especially on the East Side of Vancouver, plays out in racially and ethnically diversifying neighbourhoods.

towards their objectified neighbourhoods and in the efforts that some make to reclassify their neighbourhoods against the dominant urban imaginary (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010). These deep-seated fears, fantasies, and desires about neighbourhoods and the schools within them are produced not only by individuals but also by the legal and state systems—with the supposed intent of creating "order" and "peace." In this sense, the current function of the educational policy of school choice is deeply troubling. Because of the neoliberal logic of privatization and exclusion that underpins school choice, it is likely that choice will further contribute to the marginalization of schools in pathologized neighbourhoods, areas that are formed in the context of historical class relations, conflict, and domination.

## 6.4    Conclusion

Young people's accounts and the media texts analyzed in this chapter show that the issue of the urban imaginary, and the associated moral panic, is integral to young people's construction of school cartographies of security and safety, although t his has received little attention in the scholarly literature. An examination of urban imaginaries and moral panic is vital to understanding the spatial patterns and urban dynamics of school choice policy in Vancouver. Young people's imagined social and affective maps of secondary schools in the urban landscape, based on dominant moral codes of good/bad, safe/dangerous, and successful/failed, provide additional insights into the marketization of public education. Indeed, the city's history and the ways in which choice operates are indeed market forces, but the very history of class and racial conflicts is often submerged under a different narrative of morality that often elides the history of neighbourhood divisions and its role in the reorganization of school choice practices.

In particular, my analysis in this chapter has highlighted the classed and racialized production of pathologized urban spaces that underpin young people's urban imaginaries and associated school choice imaginaries. I have shown how local spatial patterns are reflective of a double moral standard, especially about drug use. Young people's narratives show how similar actions and behaviours are condemned when associated with certain socioeconomic classes but not with others, which I see as a long-held manifestation of class inequality and conflict (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2003; Stuntz, 1998). While the use of drugs on the West Side is perceived as a middle-class leisure activity with few associated problems, the use of drugs on the East Side is seen as problematic—and indeed is associated with gang activity. Those in low-income racially and ethnically marginalized neighbourhoods are pathologized more than those in affluent neighbourhoods, especially with regard to drugs and gangs (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2003).

Through the application of a theoretical lens, which combines the urban imaginary and the concept of moral panic, I argue that urban space matters significantly to how young people, not only their parents, consider different schools and is dependent on which neighbourhood they are located in. Specifically, the effects of social class relations in the historical context of the city are poignantly evident in the deep ambivalence that youths (both working and middle class) quoted in this chapter express. Further, spatial marginalization and stigmatization are clearly evident in the ways some youths, especially on the East Side, feel towards their objectified neighbourhoods, their neighbourhood schools, and the daily struggle of reclassifying their neighbourhoods against the dominant urban imaginary (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010).

In brief, while urban imaginaries have not been part of any official school evaluations, such as league tables produced yearly by the Fraser Institute, they are clearly integral to young teens' accounts and constructions of "complex cartographies of schools," built upon what Lucey

and Reay call "the problem of the real" in the construction of realities and in learners' associated

constructions of school cartographies (2002, p. 255). As such, urban imaginaries matter to the

ways young people conceive of and practice school choice, which allow some to dream while

constraining others' *possibilities of being* in their particular local educational and urban spaces.

As a consequence, these others experience *positional suffering* (Bourdieu, 1999; Dillabough &

Kennelly, 2010; Ricoeur, 1981).

　　While my discussion here is not an attempt to suggest that all young people accept

stereotypes uncritically and judge schools accordingly, I nonetheless concur with Dillabough and

Kennelly (2010) that "city spaces are … emblematic of precisely the forms of classification

which are seen to operate most substantially in moral fields of social practice associated with

wider social class relations" (p. 138) and that young people's spatial meanings draw upon the

widely circulating public discourse and imaginary.

　　In the next chapter, I further examine the ways in which current school choice policy in

Vancouver inadvertently contributes to the disintegration of increasingly diversifying

neighbourhoods and public schools. In the face of dangers of brazen violence in the city, schools

that are associated with illicit drugs and gang violence are negatively perceived and further

marginalized by their moral failures and further tend to be associated with particular ethnic

groups or racial groups, as I have alluded to in this chapter. As such, while community efforts to

rebuild tarnished neighbourhood schools do exist, tragic incidences of gang-related violence and

death result in the disintegration of the community and its school as a gathering place of racially

and ethnically diversifying communities. In the next chapter, I ask, how do race and ethnicity

factor into how young people imagine different schools during the processes and experiences of

school choice?

# Chapter 7: The national imaginary of Canada and racial and ethnic classification struggles in the lived experiences of school choice

Lola: I had these impressions of West High when I was in Grade 8…. I was really worried that I was going to be a very special loser at the school. I am from the East Side, and this is the West Side. There are a lot of smart people, really well-rounded people, really strong people. I didn't think I'd really fit in. All these rich people. I will never be friends with them … people with cliques. The different ethnic groups band together, speak different languages.…

Ee-Seul: What made you feel uncomfortable about West High?

Lola: There weren't many—well, there are a lot of Asians—but not that many. I guess I feel attached to Asian culture except I don't even speak Chinese. That doesn't really help, but I felt that *white people are very superior*.

Ee-Seul: Superior? What do you mean?

Lola: They act in a superior way. Their attitudes, and just the impressions they give out.

(Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High, italics added)

Thomas Walkom's review of nine recently published books about Canadian issues of identity begins by declaring that 'Canada is in crisis' (Walkom 1995).… Both Neil Bissoondath's *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994), and Richard Gwyn's *Nationalism Without Walls* proclaim that multiculturalism weakens national identity. Gwyn argues that if Canada continues to laud the cultures of others—meanwhile discarding the British Canadian symbols that have historically defined the

nation—the nation is in danger, because if the core element of Canada is obliterated,

there may be nothing left (Simpson 1995). Although there is in reality no imminent risk

of this 'obliteration' occurring, the sense of impending 'crisis' gives these arguments for

the defence of 'core culture' (and one might say the obliteration of multiculturalism) a

sense of urgent necessity and increasing legitimacy. (Mackey, 2002, p. 153)

As I have argued up to now and as clarified in the previous two chapters, school choice

practices create racial and ethnic differentiation at the social level. The increasing number of

Asian-Canadian students at West High reflects both the increasing Asian population on the West

Side and the high level of mobility among Asian-Canadian families who seek out top-performing

schools.[95] Also, heightened moral anxiety over gangs and drugs tends to be concentrated in

inner-city secondary schools that enrol a high number of low-income youth, often referred to as

"brown" East Asian youths. This last data chapter delves into the implicitly and explicitly

discussed racial and ethnic dimensions of school choice by examining young people's situated

imaginations and lived experiences of school choice policy in Vancouver.

This chapter focuses on the salience of race and ethnicity, distinctive concepts that are

nonetheless inseparable from class dynamics (as discussed in Chapter 5). I agree with Leonardo

(2012) and other critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995) that race relations

should be examined in the context of power differences that stem from unequal access to and

possession of dominant forms of capital; the expressions of racism and racial tensions may vary

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[95] This local trend is evident across the province of BC as well, as discussed in the context section of Chapter 3.

by time and place and thus need a closer look.[96] My focus on race and ethnicity in this chapter pays closer attention to the significance of historical, as well as current, racial and ethnic tensions and imaginaries within the racialized national imaginary of Canada, as noted above by Mackey (2002), which are also reflected in the formal education system (Harper, 1997; St. Denis, 2011). I suggest that this approach is particularly important in Vancouver because of its shift from colonial immigration policies to multicultural policies in the 20th century,[97] a shift that has resulted in a substantial rise of racial and ethnic minorities.[98] In the following analysis, then, I emphasize the importance of the cultural complexity of race rather than the simple binary idea of race as an easily divisible biological category.[99] Skin color alone no longer constitutes difference in contemporary Vancouver. Race is a changing cultural construct of inherited social capital that

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[96] Class, race, and ethnicity are closely interlinked, and together they generate objectively discernible and subjectively experienced racial and ethnic relations. My analytic stance, as evident in this dissertation, is that a critical analysis of class, race, and ethnicity benefits from an approach that foregrounds one while backgrounding the others rather than an intersectional analysis which may under-analyze the complex dimensions of class, race, and ethnicity.

[97] In other words, the 20th century in Vancouver started with deep racial tensions and divisions but ended with an appeal to multiculturalism following an influx of immigrants and refugees from non-European countries.

[98] Racial and ethnic minorities will indeed make up the majority of the population in the Vancouver metropolitan area by 2017, up from less than 7% in 1981 (Belanger & Malenfant, 2005).

[99] Another notable difference between race and ethnicity is the more general use of the term "race," as race is more observable and has a history of division, while the term "ethnicity" is more specific to cultural and linguistic groups, which have symbolic power in young people's social experiences. Hence, while I pay attention to the racial characteristics of young people, I also examine young people's identification with particular racial as well as ethnic groups and how their racial and ethnic classification in the processes of school choice is connected to the dominant racialized national imaginary of Canada as well as to young people's localized racial imaginaries.

reinforces class hierarchy in multiracial countries (Balibar, 1991; Hage, 2000; Reay et al., 2007).

I also argue that young people's ethnic identifications are much more fluid. Young people's

ethnic identifications, rather than their racial categories, appear to be more meaningful to their

senses of belonging and thus shape their social experiences of school choice. Here, then, I

explore the idea that while one may identify and be identified as a racial minority, one may also

identify on a cultural level with the ethnic majority.[100] This complexity in highly varied modes of

identification has further implications for students' experiences of school choice policy in a city

that remains haunted by its geographical place in a post-colonial history.

Hence, drawing upon the work of Hage (2000), Said (1994/1978), and Mawani (2009), I

explore the interactions between school choice and the imaginaries of Otherness, defined as

racial and/or ethnic minority groups. In doing so, I analyze how school choice plays a part in the

reproduction of nationally and locally dominant norms, practices, and policies, which shape

relationships among different racial and ethnic groups, which I refer to as *the racialized national*

*imaginary* of Canada.[101] In this analysis, I further explore the ways in which young people

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[100] Indeed, since 9/11, anxiety and moral panic about "foreigners," as constructed in relation to the national

imaginary of Canada, have heightened the discussion of "Canadianness," historically identified as either British or

French. Such anxiety resides at the centre of locally experienced racial and ethnic classification struggles and

associated tensions. Although Canada has striven in recent decades to become a nation of multiple ethnic groups, the

dominant contemporary racialized national imaginary, as further noted by Bannerji (2000), continues to be

ethnically white and British.

[101] By racialization, I mean that "people's bodies are inscribed with symbolic meaning and, on this basis, people are

assigned social places" (Kobayashi & Johnson, 2007, p. 4). Also, by racialization, I point to how schools and

neighbourhoods are inscribed with certain meanings by race and, further, are positioned differently in social

hierarchy.

experience what Balibar (1998) refers to as "border anxiety," the very practice of bordering, and what Ahmed (2007) calls "losing one's place" in multiethnic schools and cities.[102] This exploration helps shed light on the final research question in this study: How do race and ethnicity, together with class, factor into the ways young people imagine different schools during the processes and experiences of school choice?

The fundamental argument I seek to make is that race and ethnicity, as complex dimensions of individuals' identities and relation-making, influence the ways young people *imagine* and *experience* school choice policy in Vancouver. These modes of identification with particular racial or ethnic groups, as part of understanding choice practice, fall within the matrix of a wider colonial imaginary that sought to classify ethnic and racial groups within nation-building hierarchies. I hope to show how choice policy reproduces much of this earlier struggle to classify, albeit in new ways.

## 7.1    The racialization of mini programs and their social and cultural effects on young people in urban space

Race and ethnicity are strongly implicit in discussing academic achievement and the urban imaginary associated with urban schools, as previously addressed. Schools that are perceived as good, clean, and friendly are implied to be those in middle-class, and largely white, neighbourhoods. Schools that are identified as dangerous due to gang- and drug-related violence

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[102] Border anxiety is a term that denotes a growing sense of anxiety and fear that urban dwellers experience in multicultural and multiethnic metropolitan cities, especially in the European context (Balibar, 1998; Rumford, 2006, 2008).

are often schools that many low-income racial and ethnic minority students attend. As Jeffrey, a Grade 12 East High mini student who moved to the East Side when he was in Grade 9, notes,

> Jeffrey: Other high schools have more white people. When you go to school [East High], it's 70% Asians. It's maybe an East and West Side kind of thing.
>
> Ee-Seul: What do you know about that?
>
> Jeffrey: I didn't really have any conceptions of that when I came here. I knew there was a bad side of Vancouver—where the gangs and drugs and that kind of stuff. Oh no, we don't live in that side. My friends would ask me if I lived in the bad side. Oh no, we don't live in the bad side. Wait a second, I live in the East Side. Which side is the bad side? It's the East Side. Hmm.
>
> (Grade12, mini, East High)

In other words, "bad" neighbourhoods and schools are associated with large low-income and racial and ethnic minority populations. As noted in the context chapter, this local racialized geography is reminiscent of colonial history and immigration policies (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923), which tended to discriminate against Asian migrants. Against this backdrop, I focus on how young students in my study explicitly brought up issues of race and ethnicity when discussing their perceptions and experiences of school choice. One notable and striking theme is that mini school programs are being, or have been, racialized. While mini school programs are seen as institutional spaces for academic distinction making, as discussed in Chapter 5, mini programs in the public system have also had a noticeable impact on racialization as well as racial and ethnic relations.

At both of my school field sites, certain racial groups were overrepresented in choice programs compared to regular programs.[103] At West High, where the majority of the student population is of European heritage, more Asian-Canadian students were enrolled in the mini school programs. At East High, where a majority of the student population has Asian heritage, the French Immersion program enrols a disproportionately high number of students with European heritage. East High mini schools also enrol a high number of Asian-Canadian[104] students. These distinctive racial patterns have impacted on the ways in which young people consider school choice options.

The difference in racial composition between regular and district choice programs is significant to my study participants. For instance, mini schools are imagined as weighty spaces for particular racial and ethnic groupings, largely for model minority students (Lee, 2009). Since class markers are less visible than racial differences, students often remarked on how mini students are from particular racial and ethnic minority groups, using terms such as "Asian" rather than "middle-class Asian." Further, the characterization of choice programs as racialized spaces has led to the characterization and essentialization of mini students as racialized "hard-working, smart students." Mini schools are thus imagined as spaces where certain racial groups have particular "natural" qualities, such as smartness, and we can witness the spatial landscape of the model minority emerging.

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[103] Ethnic differences are harder to directly observe than racial differences.

[104] While "Asian" is a broad term, which includes many ethnic groups and nation-states, in my study, students often used this term to classify each other, although I have spoken to students from different countries of origin in Asia, including China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, and so on.

At West High, many study participants came to the school from outside its catchment area and were Asian Canadian. Out of 12 study participants enrolled at the mini school, 8 came from established Asian immigrant families. As noted earlier, the immigrant families in my study had varying class backgrounds.[105] As discussed previously, since West High is known as a good school, Asian families, especially middle-class and globally aspiring families, seek out this school to enrol their children. Noteworthy is that the school is also imagined as good to some Asian families because it enrols a sizable population of middle-class students of European heritage. Bob, a Grade 12 West High mini student, indeed comments on how Richmond, a suburb of Vancouver, has "too many Chinese people." While he is from Taiwan, for him, a neighbourhood with "too many" racial and ethnic minority students does not qualify as a place that offers a good education. In other words, the presence of racial minority groups can be quantified as "too many" in the national space of Canada, which is imagined to be predominantly white (Hage, 2000). This may indicate that the racialized national imaginary of Canada dictates that a good Canadian school should have a majority of white students.

With the rise of "Asian" students at the West High mini school, resident students have begun to characterize and essentialize Asian students as different. Andy, a Grade 8 regular

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[105] While some families have been able to maintain and position themselves as middle class through their ownership of small businesses or through involvement in lucrative international trade, others work in minimum-wage (i.e., below "living wage" in Vancouver) manual or service sector positions. As such, the influx of high-achieving Asian students to West High is in part reflective of racialized class-based spatial inequality across the city. As of May 1, 2011, BC's minimum wage was $8.75 per hour, although the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives calculates that an hourly wage for a family with two young children and two wage earners should be $18.17 for each adult in order to cover the actual costs of raising a family in Vancouver (CCPA, May 4, 2010).

student from a middle-class European-Canadian family, remarks that he mainly associates mini students with "Asianness," that is, as being "book smart" and "too academic."

> Andy: A lot of mini students are smarter. How can I say this without being derogatory to Asian people?
>
> Ee-Seul: Do you see many Asian students in the mini school?
>
> Andy: There are a lot, and they are incredibly smart and whatnot…. Most of them get straight As and hang out with their [Asian] groups. That group of people are more in mini than regular. There are some in normal [regular] school, like two to three.
>
> Ee-Seul: How are they different?
>
> Andy: During class, they are way too serious. They will not socialize. They are like, 'I finished all my work, and there is nothing to do.'
>
> (Grade 8, regular, West High)

While being cautious in this interview with his remarks regarding this particular racial and ethnic minority group, Andy's racialized pattern recognition is reflective of the racial differences between the regular school and choice programs. His remark reflects how the different educational programs are imagined to be divided. In other words, the different program enrolment, which emphasizes certain habits and activities, makes it possible to attribute particular characteristics to those who belong to the program. Here, we can see that Andy conflates the racial category of Asian with academic smartness, an essentialization that contrasts strikingly with how Asian migrants were once characterized in BC history as only fit for manual work (Mawani, 2009). This new essentialization of Asianness needs to be considered in relation

to the discussion in Chapter 5, that is, that mini students are perceived as smarter and hard-working. Since mini schools emphasize hard work and being smart, and considering that more Asian-Canadian students are attending mini schools, the new educational programs become a source for the essentialization and naturalization of "Asian" youths, especially in the context of these two Vancouver secondary schools (Hall, 2000).

During my interviews with Asian-Canadian students, some of them noted how their educational practices are different, focusing mainly on getting good grades. Bob (Grade 12, mini, West High) and Leo (Grade 8, mini, West High) told me that their academic practices are always about staying "ahead of the pack." They took advanced core subjects, such as English and Math, through private tutoring and finished the coursework a year ahead of their peers. As a result, they found that school was an easy place for them, and they were ahead of their peers when it came to applying to mini schools or university. Consequently, when these students and their parents looked into which secondary schools they considered desirable, West High was quite attractive. Clearly, middle-class Asian families are trying to gain higher cultural capital that can help advance their children's futures in their new country. Meanwhile, their educational practices, as noted by Bob and Leo and other mini students, further contribute to generating contemporary racial and ethnic differences to "Asianness" (in contrast to "whiteness"), which becomes fixed through the choice program of mini schools and mini students, as discussed above.

Additionally, West High's specialized program[106] tends to appeal to middle-class Asian families, as mentioned by both Aurora and Beth. As I observed on interview days, a large number of Asian-Canadian families waited with their children. As such, in part, the notion of the West High mini school as an Asian school has developed over the years as an increasing number

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[106] For the purpose of anonymity, the specificity of the West High mini school's specialization is omitted.

of (aspiring) middle-class Asian families have come to West High for its academic reputation and for its desirable neighbourhood characteristics, which fit the dominant national imaginary of Canada as an affluent, white, middle-class nation. In these multi-layered dynamics of school choice, Asian Canadians continue to be paradoxically produced and imagined as "significantly different from the majority, 'them' rather than 'us'" (Hall, 2000, p. 100). This division further manifests in racially and ethnically separated socialization patterns, which I observed during my fieldwork. I discuss this division further in the next section.

## 7.2    Racialized socialization and border anxiety

In this section, I focus extensively on the lived experiences of racial and ethnic minority students and their experiences of being "out of place" on the West Side compared to Caucasian Canadians who crossed their school boundaries. I analyze their experiences in relation to the racialized national imaginary of Canada—that is, the determination of who is an insider and who is an outsider. I discuss how this pattern is not necessarily shaped only by skin colour but also by the differences of imagined spatial and cultural belonging.

Many students described their racially and ethnically differentiated social experiences of choosing a school outside their home neighbourhoods. These patterns were particularly notable amongst Grade 12 students at West High.[107] Experiences of social exclusion are at first felt, to varying degrees, by all students who cross boundaries. Nonetheless, subsequent social experiences in the years that follow seem to differ by racial and ethnic backgrounds. The experiences of racial and ethnic minority students especially differ from white Canadian students' experiences of gradual social inclusion, as articulated by Elia, Michelle, and Owen.

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[107] As I noted earlier, East High had few West Side students.

These students experienced social exclusion in the beginning but eventually found social intimacy in the later grades with those who lived in the neighbourhood. By Grade 12, they felt at ease and well integrated with non-mini (regular) students who lived nearby.

In particular, a self-identified lack of whiteness, which can be seen as both racial and ethnic distinctiveness in a contemporary urban Canadian context, challenges racial and ethnic minority youths who travel across neighbourhood boundaries to attend affluent neighbourhood schools with a strong middle- and upper-class European-Canadian presence. Racial and ethnic minority students described experiences of feeling out of place and being strangers at West High, which they perceive as a "Caucasian school" because of its relatively high number of Caucasian students compared to other parts of Vancouver and also because of its location in a largely white European-Canadian neighbourhood (Ahmed, 2000; Tuori & Peltonen, 2007).

In particular, the account of school choice experience given by Jake (a Grade 12 student of Aboriginal descent at West High) indicates that attending a school outside his First Nations community contributed to his experiences of racism and his sense of being othered. Having moved to the centre of the city from a Vancouver suburb when he was in Grade 9, Jake is the child of a mixed-race couple: a university-educated mother of Aboriginal descent, who stays at home, and an immigrant father from Western Europe who works in the manual sector.

> Jake: When we moved to the city, my mom said, 'We need to find you a good school.' I said that I'd like to go to Birch High, and she said, 'You can't do that.' I said, 'Why?' She said, 'Because there are too many native people there.' She doesn't want people to know that she is native. She dyes her hair blond.… She said, 'You can't go there because people will find out that we are native.' … My mom said, 'Why don't you go to West

High?' I said, 'Okay.' So I was like, I kind of like Birch High better, but sure, I will go to West High.

Ee-Seul: So you went to the mini school?

Jake: No. I didn't actually go to the mini school because you have to pay money for that. She said that she didn't want to pay any money for that.…

Ee-Seul: How did you get into West High?

Jake: Not sure. I just applied as an out of catchment. And this was a few years ago when West High had only 1,200 people. The school now has 1500…. They said, 'We are going to take you in because your grades in Grade 8 are high.' … The longer I was there, the more racist people seemed to get. First, I didn't tell people that I was native. Slowly, people kind of caught on and people started. There was this one person in my Grade 10 year who decided to follow me home … followed me to tutors', harassed me, yelled out things at me. It was really strange. I remember talking to my cousin, 'What do I do about this?' Because I never dealt with this before…. He said, 'You have two choices. You either beat him up or ignore him.' The school didn't do anything. I said, 'You know, he's doing this,' and the school said, 'We can't help you because it was not on school grounds.' I was like, 'Excuse me. He goes to your school. He did this on school grounds, too.' I just left him alone. Because I didn't react to it, he left, graduated from the school. That's how it got stopped.

(Grade 12, regular, Birch High)


While Jake and his parents chose West High for its good academic reputation and its location in a largely white middle-class neighbourhood, which resonates with the ideal national imaginary

of Canada, the commentary above suggests that it was difficult for Jake to experience a sense of belonging at West High, which only a few Aboriginal students attended,[108] especially because of the racism that he encountered there. While his mother attempted to disguise her racial identity in a city where Aboriginality is largely stigmatized, Jake could not escape the racism to which marginalized racial groups are still subjected. Although his good grades made him attractive to the school, current school choice policy provided a different venue for education, and he was accepted as a cross-boundary student, Jake's lack of whiteness made him a racial and ethnic other. In Grade 12, Jake switched from West High to Birch High. This racial and ethnic order in a Canadian city cannot be overlooked when attempting to understand the lived experiences of cross-boundary school choice policy. What Jake experienced and deeply felt is what Nayak (2011) refers to as the visceral, affective dimensions of social exclusion, and he ended up switching schools in Grade 12. In his experience, then, we can witness traces of colonialism and the historical presence of a racialized national imaginary of Canada, which continues to shape choice and simultaneously reproduces earlier forms of social and racial exclusion for those who are seen as racial and ethnic Others (Gregory, 2004).

Similarly, Amy is a self-identified Asian Canadian who came to Canada before she began her formal schooling. She is a Grade 12 West High mini student who commutes from a suburb. Over her five years of secondary education, she noted that she was not able to make close friends with students she identified as middle-class white Canadians, who lived close to the school's West Side neighbourhood.

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[108] Reference omitted to preserve anonymity.

Ee-Seul: Do you have a sense of community anywhere? Here at this school or home community?

Amy: I think school is a community itself, but I think it's really segregated. These are the West Side kids.… Because I am in the mini school, my friends are not West Side kids. They are from all over greater Vancouver. I am more friends with those people. I am not so much friends with the people who live right at that house near [the school].

<div align="right">(Grade 12, mini, West High)</div>

Amy, too, like other racial and ethnic minority students, experienced social exclusion as a racial other. In fact, she said that she developed more friendships with people who bus to and from West High, as they spend a considerable time on the bus commuting and often go out for bubble tea, a popular social activity among young Asian Canadians. Also, Leo, a Grade 8 mini student at West High, mentioned that he spends about two hours commuting to school every day. Thus, little time is left for after-school socialization or participating in clubs, which might be opportunities for him to get to know students who live nearby and are in the regular school program. Attending a cross-boundary school makes it challenging for traveling students to socialize with students who live within their school's catchment.

Similarly, when I interviewed Rose, a racial and ethnic minority Grade 8 mini student who was thinking about going back to her neighbourhood school in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, where all her close "Chinese friends" attend her catchment school, she said that not being able to make close friends in her first year was one major reason for her plan to leave the West High mini school.

Also, in my conversation with Lola, another racial and ethnic minority Grade 12 student at West High who had similar experiences of social exclusion, I gained insight into West High's elevated symbolic position in the national imaginary of Canada. This elevated position is largely due to the school's high proportion of students from white British and European ethnic backgrounds, groups that dominate the Canadian economy, culture, and urban, regional, and national politics.

> Lola: I had these impressions of West High when I was in Grade 8…. I was really worried that I am going to be a very special loser in the school. I am from East Side, and this is West Side. There are a lot of smart people, really well-rounded people, really strong people. I didn't think I'd really fit in. All these rich people. I will never be friends with them … people with cliques. The different ethnic groups band together, speak different languages. …
>
> Ee-Seul: What made you feel uncomfortable about West High?
>
> Lola: There weren't many—well, there are a lot of Asians—but not that many. I guess I feel attached to Asian culture except I don't even speak Chinese. That doesn't really help, but I felt that *white people are very superior*.
>
> Ee-Seul: Superior? What do you mean?
>
> Lola: They act superiorly. Their attitude, and just the impressions they give out.
>
> (Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High, italics added)

Reminiscent of how Ahmed (2007) theorizes the disorientating experiences of minorities in post-colonial society, Lola's lived experiences of feeling lost, feeling inferior, and having a sense of

nausea is shared by those cited above, the marked minoritized bodies who enrol in predominantly white schools in the post-colonial city of Vancouver.

Lola's race- and ethnicity-based ambivalence and her own internalized racial hierarchy made her initially hesitant about coming to West High. Even after enrolling at the school, she experienced disorientation and hierarchy. While Lola was born in Canada, she feels her racial and ethnic Otherness and a sense of being different from those of European ancestry. Such a preconceived sense of social and racial disorientation and nausea may partly explain the social distance between whites and others, which is one type of border anxiety that exists in a global city (Balibar, 1998; Rumford, 2006). In fact, during my fieldwork at West High, three students brought their friends to interviews. All three were female Asian-Canadian students who brought their female Asian-Canadian friends. This further shows that student socialization tends to be racially and ethnically oriented as well as gendered.

Lola's identification with being Asian in a multiracial school and city validates my own observations of ethnic minority students who tend to socialize with those of similar ethnic backgrounds. I frequently observed Asian youths walking down the hall or having lunch together by their lockers or in the school cafeteria with other Asian students—some speaking their mother tongues, languages I could not understand. Also, when I first met Adam and Jason, who are both racial and ethnic minority students at West High, they were sitting with another male ethnic minority student by the library. Similarly, when I was in a Creative Writing class, three white male Grade 12 students all sat together. In other words, a certain kind of border (e.g., cultural, linguistic, and social borders) seems to have been erected within urban schools and felt amongst those who choose schools outside their more familiar and comfortable neighbourhood boundaries. Furthermore, in one English class, I was able to observe how the classroom was

230

racially and ethnically divided. The room had two rows of desks and chairs. In the back row, all the Asian students sat on the right side and all the white students on the left side. In the front row, there was one Asian student, but he had grown up in Vancouver and socialized mostly with white youths (field note, April 12, 2010).[109] In some ways, everyday socialization seems to be linguistically, ethnically, and racially divided, although this does not mean that students socialize exclusively with their own ethnic or racial groups.

In this sense, it is important to note the popular activities of racial jokes—which may contain racial stereotyping, anxiety, and moral panic—that are part of students' everyday experiences. Juliet, for example, commented on racial joke-making as an everyday practice, and she pointed out that this practice reflects the distance and more importantly the tension that exists between groups. This everyday racial humour-making and the circulation of racial jokes in popular media have deep roots in racially divided local history.

> Juliet: High school. It's [racist humour] a bit more 'cause some people in high school
> think it's funnier if you make racist jokes. Yeah, and they then make racist jokes and
> people laugh. Oh, they think, 'I'm cool.' … Sometimes people are okay with it.

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[109] In colloquial speech, those who look Asian in their physical features but European in their cultural values and activities are sometimes called "bananas." Ethnicity can thus be theorized as cultural capital, which means what individuals become enculturated. Compared to race, ethnicity is more difficult to directly observe. In other words, determining one's self-identified ethnicity can be more difficult than determining race. Race is often more objectively discernible, although the identification of one's race can still be challenging and complex (Kivisto & Croll, 2008).

Sometimes, I have friends who are Caucasians, and they make fun of themselves. So, I guess it's okay when it's like that.

(Grade 12, mini, East High)

This form of "laughing it off" is not simply reflective of individual students (Goldberg, 2009; Mawani, 2009). The cultural activity of racial joke-making is also a manifestation of contemporary border and cross-racial anxieties and is a strategy for coping with such anxieties or seeking recognition. While a majority of mobile students, regardless of their race and ethnicity, experience social difficulties, their challenges differ according to their racial and ethnic backgrounds. In particular, racial and ethnic minority young people continue to experience Otherness in their everyday socialization, and thus those who are racially and ethnically marginalized continue to struggle with cross-racial anxieties when they try to gain a sense of belonging and recognition in the dynamics of the education market.

Subsequently, racial and ethnic minority students tend to form strong communities of their own, which further produce racially divided socialization. As Tiffany, a Grade 12 Caucasian-Canadian regular student at West High observed, particular ethnic communities within the school, such as Koreans, are very cliquey, and it appears to her that they have a very strong community. As such, in classrooms, students sit in groups divided by ethnicity and more precisely by their differentiated forms of identification with whiteness. I observed that Asian immigrants who speak English as an additional language often sat together and rarely mixed with

white Canadian youths.[110] If there was an Asian-looking student who spent time with white youths, that person tended to be someone who identified as a European Canadian.

This type of culturally and ethnically divided racial grouping was particularly notable in evening extracurricular social, cultural, and club activities, where ethnic minority students from outside the neighbourhood were largely absent from events (field note, April 9, 2010). Amy and Lola told me that while these events have great potential to bring people together, they are not easy for students who live outside the catchment area to attend.

While many things may explain young people's racialized socialization patterns, these patterns—especially the tendency of the racial and ethnic minority students at West High to remain close together and form cliques—may be heightened under the current school choice policy, as it uproots students from their neighbourhood communities in the racialized city of Vancouver. The micro-level social divisions in classrooms and school spaces may further reflect this racialized urban geography, although it is rapidly changing. This spatial separation is a result of the local colonial history, which set Asians and European Canadians as distinctive groups who were spatially separated and divided (Mawani, 2009). The social division is reflective of the compounded effect of school choice practices, in which more Asian students come to West High as cross-boundary mini students. The social division is also reflective of the urban geography, in which Asian and European Canadians live in somewhat separated areas of the city.

The racially and ethnically segregated patterns of socialization, and the internalized sense of racial and ethnic hierarchy among young people, at times expressed in everyday joke-making, should be understood in the context of the city's colonial history, as well as the current national

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[110] When I met a Grade 12 student from Vietnam at East High, she told me that she and the other five Vietnamese-speaking students, all from different grades, got together every lunch hour.

233

imaginary of Canada. According to Anderson (1987), colonial settlers of Chinese origin, regardless of how long they had lived in the region, were perceived "primarily through the nexus of a racial category that [defined] them as pre-eminently 'Chinese' or 'Oriental'" (p. i). In the current national imaginary, the categorization of Asians continues to construct Canadians with Asian racial and ethnic backgrounds as "the opposite of those born in Canada." It is a categorization that puts all those who look Asian into a single category of *foreigners* who threaten "white" European-Canadian traditions and domination (Yu, 2010). As such, the everyday use of the categorical terms "Chinese," "Asian," or "Canadian-born Chinese" is a nationalistic practice that symbolically sets these people apart from white youths and thus positions them lower in the field of whiteness (a composite of cultural, linguistic, and social practices and capital) (Hage, 2000). The racially different experience of school choice, evident in my study, can be the best understood by thinking about "how colonialism shapes the grammar and the lived experience of racialized subjects" today (Tuori & Peltonen, 2007, p. 258). Racial and ethnic minority students' participation in school choice policy takes place in this field of contemporary whiteness, which positions individuals according to their composites of pertinent cultural capital, which includes both race and ethnicity. In this light, then, the racialization of mini schools and the racialized patterns of socialization are a complex effect of school choice policy, as well as the racial and spatial history of Vancouver and Canada. In the next section, I further discuss how ethnicity, culture, and geography further mediate the ways in which youths classify themselves and exercise school choice. I focus in particular on how a racial minority student who self-identifies and is socially recognized as a member of the ethnic majority navigates school choice dynamics.

**7.3    The ethnic and cultural complexities of social exclusion and inclusion**

The cultural dimension of race, a category that overlaps with ethnicity, in a particular neighbourhood is critical to further understanding the complex racial and ethnic dynamics of school choice. Cedric is a Grade 12 student who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong with his family when he was a toddler. After their arrival, they lived on the West Side, sharing a house with Cedric's cousins. His mom stayed at home while his dad worked in the tiling industry. They recently moved to central Vancouver because they could not afford to buy a house on the West Side. However, because he grew up on the West Side with white European children, Cedric feels a greater sense of belonging with them than with recent Asian immigrants or Asians in general. Hence, despite his Asian origins, he feels more at home with the social and cultural practices of white Canadians and thus identifies himself ethnically as Canadian. He is a racial minority, but he identifies culturally and ethnically as white European Canadian. His ethnic identification with white European Canadians thus affected his secondary school choice. Cedric did not want to attend Chestnut High because of its large number of "Asian students."

> Cedric: There are a lot more Asians [at Chestnut High—his catchment area school], but I'd probably *fit in* more with Caucasians. I grew up with them since I was three years old. So, even right now, I still hang out with mostly Caucasian friends.… It's just the way because I grew up with them.
>
> (Grade 12, cross-boundary, West High, italics added)

Cedric's account shows the complexities of his racial and ethnic identity, which is not defined by his heritage or skin color. His notion of racial and ethnic identity seems to adhere to culturally

constructed notions and practices of race. Cedric's perceptions of different groups reflect the broader racial and cultural imaginary that divides who is perceived as white/an insider and who is not white/an outsider. Cedric's perception of West High as a good school is thus in line with the dominant urban and national imaginary that delineates who and what is good and desirable. It is indeed difficult to separate the way he perceives his school from his sense of cultural and ethnic belonging to the school. In other words, while he may be racially identified as a minority student, his cultural values and linguistic practices fit more closely with ethnically white Canadians. His ethnic identification is closely interwoven with his biographical social and cultural history and practices in the urban neighbourhood where he grew up. While race continues to serve as an important way to understand social inclusion and exclusion, race as a simple biological category cannot fully capture the complex ethnic, social, and cultural worlds young people experience in a rapidly changing city. Further, as a result of wider ethnic and racial tensions in the city, students who cross boundaries and borders may struggle with a racial imaginary and ethnic school mapping that continues to divide and classify people based on their group identities.

As Bourdieu (1999) would argue, what we are witnessing is a kind of identity distinction that people embody as a spatialized experience and that is *embodied* in the form of habitus acquired through the inheritance of particular forms of capital. Whiteness is the historical projection that is embodied in the practices and orientations of how individuals identify with particular racial and/or ethnic groups, and it is here that we can begin to witness race as a cultural performance in a local context that is substantially affected by wider global changes (Ahmed, 2004b; Hage, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). As such, how choice produces particular programs that associate certain races and ethnic groups with certain languages and distinctive

characteristics will have decisive effects on racial and ethnic identity-making and relation-making in the present and future Vancouver.

**7.4    Racial divisions and consequences of choice programs at East High in gentrifying neighbourhoods of Vancouver**

As discussed in Chapter 3, East High serves a very diverse group of families and students, and over the last two decades, the school has developed alternative programs that serve high-achieving students. In this urban context of diversity and inequality, I observed that students were also racially and ethnically divided in their micro social interactions as well as in their enrolment in specific educational programs. While the mini schools were spatialized as places for Asians with high levels of academic achievement, French Immersion was perceived as a Caucasian program that offers linguistic and cultural distinctions. These different racial characterizations of the two choice programs clearly reflect their different natures, but they are also underpinned by the national imaginary of Canada embodied in the linguistic capital of French as a second language.

Sylvia, a Grade 12 regular student who has a Chinese-Canadian mother and a European-Canadian father, noted how both race and ethnicity are socially significant at East High's daily life.

> Sylvia: I am part Chinese and part white. People ask me, 'Are you First Nations? Are you French?' I am Chinese. 'Are you joking? No way.' I just don't look Chinese—I want to be more Chinese. They never get that. They think I am First Nations. It's really irritating—more at East High…. There are a lot of Chinese people. They stick to Chinese

people. [I would be] a lot more accepted if I looked Chinese. I really think so—I really do.

In this socio-racial context, then, racially and ethnically differentiated socialization was quite visible. During my visits to East High, especially during lunchtime, I often came across a group of French Immersion students with European heritage in one section of the school's hallway while groups of students with Asian heritage socialized elsewhere (field note, March 5, 2010). Juliet, a Grade 12 student (from a working-class immigrant family) with insider knowledge of the mini school, notes how her school's mini program is (and has been) racialized. She refers to this space as "Asianized" and thus separates Asians from Canadians with European backgrounds.

> Juliet: [The regular students] also have the whole racial thing. 'Oh my god, you guys are basically all Asians. Asians are naturally smart.' We did have a few Caucasian people in our class. We actually loved them…. [Mini school] is not really about race, I believe, because everyone had to take test to get in. …
>
> Ee-Seul: Of the 32 [in the mini school], how many Caucasians were in the group?
>
> Juliet: We had one and a half. 'Cause one was—she was half white and half Asian.

Juliet, whose parents immigrated to Canada from China and who now work in the manual labour sector, is acutely aware of her school's racialized and especially its Asianized character. While she does not feel that she is stigmatized for attending a mini school (since it is a high-status

program within the education system because all the mini students attain at least the bronze level of the Duke of Edinburgh Award), and she knows that the admission criteria do not include race, she does feel that racial stereotyping and segregation exist at her school based on the formal division of academic programs and the informal circulation of racist jokes. Similarly, Gretchen, a Grade 8 East High mini student, asserts that one West Side mini school's students are "super nerdy and Asian."

This was further echoed by Dylan, a Grade 12 Canadian student at East High who felt that he could not go to the mini school largely because he did not see himself fitting in because of racial and ethnic differences. Dylan and his middle-class parents, who have European racial backgrounds, were all born in Canada. He also has an older brother who is academically high-achieving and is pursuing a doctorate at a prestigious university abroad. Although his mother encouraged him to apply for a mini school, the main reason Dylan did not want to go to a mini school—despite their educational prestige as discussed in Chapter 5—was because of the predominant presence of Asian students.

> Dylan: This [East High] used to be a bad school. People get into fights all the time, right? But then again, the Asian influence really changed everything. Now it's quieter, a lot quieter. …
> Ee-Seul: Did you think about applying to any mini schools? Did it come up?
> Dylan: The mini programs? My mom wanted me to go to a mini school, but the reason I didn't go to that was because I went onto the East High internet site, and looking at the pictures, and just a bunch of Asian kids with glasses, working. Just that kind of stuff. I didn't really want to go there. I am just going to be a regular kid, going to high school. …

Ee-Seul: What do you think about mini students?

Dylan: Probably smarter. All the 'smart Asian kids,' we call them. All the mini school

kids.

<div align="right">(Grade 12, regular, East High)</div>

While Dylan credits the influx of Asian students for the improvement to his school, he does not see himself as socially or educationally compatible with Asians and thus declines the idea of attending a mini school. In his perception of mini schools as places dominated by Asians, it is notable that Dylan, and to some extent, Andy at West High (as shown in his remarks above), perceive certain "parameters and possibilities of whiteness" within which they construct their selfhood and future (Nayak, 2003; Mawani, 2009, p. 51; Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010). The characterization of mini schools as having Asian students rather than just smart students produces certain racial and ethnic differences with which Dylan and his group of friends do not identify or feel they belong. In this particular local case, white students of European heritage do not aspire to attend mini schools with a high population of Asians, as they may see "Asians" and "Caucasians" as occupying different social spaces.

What is particularly notable about the associations that the students above made about smartness and being Asian is their biological characterization, as indicated by their perception of Asians as being "naturally smart." In other words, a type of biological difference is accentuated, one that emphasizes physical and genetic distinctions. The high enrolment of a particular racial group at an academically high-achieving school seems, paradoxically, to have the effect of strengthening racial stereotyping and even resonates with an older version of eugenics that embraces new patterns of race relations.

In this new process of racialization and ethnicization, state examination and league tables are a critical part of the process of the education market. Regardless of the original purpose of district-wide testing for mini schools admission, the Vancouver School Board's use of this testing in order to facilitate the process of school choice further attributes studiousness to high-performing ethnic groups of Asian students, especially those at mini schools. As such, the technology of state examination produces not only class-based learner differences but also contributes to the homogenization of particular racial and ethnic groups, which further reproduces racial hierarchies in the education system (Gillborn, 2010). Groups are racialized and further ethnicized by the "cool [idioms] of number" that rank schools in the market system (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 123, cited in Mawani, 2009; Hacking, 2004).

What is perhaps even more interesting about the link between choice programs and race is that choice programs tend to produce particular racial distinctions and thus identities. In my interview with Dylan, his use of the pronoun "we" (in "all the 'smart Asian kids,' we call them") reveals that he is referring not only to his own racial classification of mini schools but also to that of his peer group of "East Side white boys." He and those like him see mini schools as a space beyond their racial parameters of identity. Dylan's remarks cited earlier provide a keen insight into how choice programs shape particular racial and ethnic identities and relationships. The formation of Dylan's perception of Asians—who they are and what they are like, and how this might related to the formation of his identity—is a direct consequence of his participation in a choice program in the earlier grades. His essentialization of Asian students emerged from his personal experiences while attending a Mandarin Immersion elementary school located in central Vancouver, which has been operating since 1996.

Dylan: I went to Mandarin Immersion for two years. My mom made me go for Grade 4

and 5. I just moved back to my old elementary school 'cause I didn't like it.

Ee-Seul: What did you not like about it?

Dylan: I don't know. I am active, right? At lunch, all the Asian kids played chess and

stayed inside. I wanted to go play soccer or something. I just didn't like it. I didn't fit in.

There were 533 kids and 6 white boys. But it wasn't even that. Just didn't fit in.

(Grade 12, regular, East High)


As such, his reluctance to apply to a mini school because of the predominant presence of

Asians, especially glasses-wearing, geeky-looking students, is not a shallow image-induced form

of stereotyping or a discursively formed opinion. It emerged as a result of his previous

experience of choice—that of attending another school outside his neighbourhood where he was

enrolled in a Mandarin language program. His impression of Asians was formed in the ethnically

concentrated choice program of Mandarin Immersion, which mainly serves the growing interests

and needs of middle-class Chinese-Canadian families. The images of "Asian" youths on the mini

school webpage thus reminded him of his days at the Mandarin Immersion school and, more

importantly, how he felt about his relationship to the predominantly Asian students in that

school. Additionally, of particular note about Dylan is his family's racial positionality in the

history of racial relations in Vancouver and Canada. Dylan's mother was born and raised on

Vancouver's East Side and went to East High. She has clearly observed radical racial changes in

neighbourhoods across the province. She currently has a job in immigration, and, as such, she

advised Dylan to learn Mandarin. Thus, his enrolment in the Mandarin program was to some

extent economically motivated as a method of obtaining language skills that will become useful

later in the job market, given the growing number of Chinese immigrants in Canada. Yet, reflecting vestiges of a colonial past as well as the national imaginary of the racial dichotomy between Asians and European Canadians, the racial distance between the two groups continues. Racialized patterns of socialization in school are somewhat consistent with this history and present reality.

This is further reflective of a broadly circulating moral panic about the increasing Asian population in the national imaginary of Canada. While many perceive the growing presence of Asian students in Canadian schools as positive (as Dylan notes), there has also been a sense of moral panic about the increase of "Asian" students (See my context chapter, Findlay & Kohler, 2010; Poy, 1999). Since the 1970s, "Asian" students have been perceived as educational overachievers and thus as leaving few university spaces for white students. Also, in the city of Vancouver and its adjacent cities, known as Metro Vancouver, a sense of opposition exists against increasing ethnic heritage immersion language programs in the school system, reflective of micro-level white nationalism. This new racial and further ethnic change has contributed to new cross-racial anxiety and border anxiety, which has now moved from the physical borders of a country to its local neighbourhoods and communities, as the global city grows rapidly with a high rate of immigration (Balibar, 1991; Hage, 2000; Rumford, 2006; Yu, 2010).

Contemporary moral panic around ethnic minorities also appears to reflect these vestiges of colonial tensions in which immigrants are "welcomed" and their successes are "celebrated" insofar as they benefit white prosperity and success (Hage, 2000; Reay et al., 2007). As local scholars such as Mawani (2009) and Yu (2010) note, the current cross-racial anxiety and antagonism regarding the predominance of white Canadians resonates strikingly with the dual objectives of colonialism. The dual objectives in the colonial period were to allow the influx of

Asian immigrants as necessary for capitalist accumulation and the successful expansion of the empire, yet the immigrants had to be controlled and quarterized in order to maintain the desired "racial purity" of British colonies. As such, the construction of the Canadian nation as descending from Europe continues to be present especially in the elite-education mini schools. Despite a large participation by (often racially segregated) ethnic minority students, the mini programs, as listed in Table 1, do not focus on any ethnic minority education or curriculum but rather rest on the foundations of conventional Western European education. In other words, the mini schools' reputations come largely from those "model minority" students who have adapted to the norms of white Canadian culture and language. In this sense, it is important to note that while the mini schools' curricula are based largely on white Canadian culture and language, the fact that ethnic minority students are now largely responsible for (or at least associated with) the high-achieving reputation of the program also generates a sense of anxiety and, furthermore, racial exclusion. While immigrant youth success (as model minorities) in the schools is celebrated, moral panic continues with the racist discourses that their success should not undermine the success of white students and nationhood, as identified by Yu (2010) in the recent dispute over *Maclean's* magazine (Lee, 2009).

Historic racial classifications continue to challenge young people at the crossroads of secondary school choice. When I ran into Dylan one day in the school cafeteria, he was socializing with three other white boys. Because he identifies himself as a white kid (more precisely an East Side white kid), he does not feel very comfortable belonging to a racialized learning space, which choice programs have, to some extent, produced. Dylan's reluctance—due to the absence of white students in mini programs at East High—to attend a mini school, which in fact would allow him to accrue significant symbolic and material advantages in his present

and future, needs to be recognized as a racialized classification struggle in a particular mixed-income, traditionally working-class urban neighbourhood within the national imaginary of Canada. As I have shown previously, not all mini school students are Asian Canadians, but most white, middle-class mini students tend to enrol at West Side schools. Of the four Grade 7 white male students in my study, none applied to East Side mini schools.

The spatially formed and class-based race relations and differences in the current society maintain an ontological function of friend/enemy, wanted/unwanted, and, as such, they dictate criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the education market of the post-colonial city (Goldberg, 2009). The marketization of education, that is, the expansion of school choice through district programs such as mini schools, strengthens the racial categorization of individuals. The market achieves this end by objectifying individuals as a particular type and by "shaping and coloring the structure of modern being and belonging, development and dislocation, state dynamism, and social stasis" in stratified multiracial societies (Goldberg, 2009, pp. 329–330).

Young people's narratives thus tell us that school choice policy, by accentuating differences between students based on languages, cultural heritage, and educational programs, produces and maintains racial and ethnic distinctions. Various choice programs, and especially mini schools, separate students and are currently imagined as racialized and also as hierarchical spaces for young people. The lack of intimate cross-racial socialization between differently perceived racial and ethnic groups in contemporary Vancouver is in part the direct result of separate academic programs that cater implicitly to different social and racial groups. What I have shown and argued in this section so far is that racial divisions between choice programs and regular schools further affect the subsequent production of racial and ethnic identities and relationships in the multicultural city of Vancouver.

## 7.5    Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted how popular choice programs, especially mini schools, have become racialized spaces and how the dominant European national imaginary of Canada continues to classify and divide individuals and schools. Also, I identified the racialized experiences of young people's school choice mobility that reveal the current post-colonial racial imaginary, tensions, and divisions in the city of Vancouver. School choice policy caters to particular racial and ethnic tastes, which further contribute to the reinforcement of present racial objectification and stereotyping. These racially differentiated and ethnically complex social experiences of school choice and schooling reveal the fragile broader racial conditions and relationships in the local history of Vancouver and show that current school choice practices do not negate historical and contemporary racial stereotyping and ethnic fragmentation.

My analysis has hence focused on how education market processes and outcomes continue historically shaped and contemporary racial and ethnic divisions and tensions, which may have further consequences for social class formation and inequality. While mini schools have become a new public school space where selective groups of (aspiring) middle-class Asian immigrant families acquire cultural and educational recognition and capital, the current district alternative programs exclude a majority of working-class immigrant allophones whose mother tongues are neither English nor French. "Good, clean, and smart" schools are continuously identified in neighbourhoods with white middle-class European-Canadian majorities. French Immersion choice, in addition to creating academic distinction, tends to produce further racialized social difference that is linked to the possession of Canadian national imaginary as cultural capital. Accordingly, school choice policy seems to be doing little to reduce the

historically persistent social and educational distance between different racial groups; instead, it contributes to the reproduction of social and racial gaps and hierarchies (Reay et al., 2007). I conclude that Vancouver's alternative choice programs are one of the hidden ways of reproducing racialized social difference.

I concur with Goldberg (2009), who writes that race currently "operates at a different and less obvious register than it once did" (p. 334). In the rise of the market and the neoliberal state, then, it is critical to understand how different racial and ethnic groups are affected by current reforms. Young people's school choice imaginaries can thus no longer be analyzed as a simple reflection of their educational preferences and personal choices. By analyzing a broader set of class, urban, and national imaginaries, we need to understand that how young people (and their parents) negotiate in choosing schools is symbolic of their *positional struggles* to find their places in a rapidly changing and increasingly unequal world.

# Chapter  8: Rethinking and reformulating school choice policy

The new individualist market paradigm for education and training is, at best, a dangerous rhetorical illusion. Successful policy, which is genuinely aimed at raising education and training standards for all and/or empowering even the most disadvantaged young people, must be *built on a better understanding of real social processes and contexts*, in all their confusing complexity. (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1995, p.205 cited in Ball et al., 1999, pp. 195, italics added)

Many conservative choice theorists have argued that public school choice policy promises greater equality of choice by offering choice to those who would otherwise not have access to it (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Fraser Institute, 2006; Friedman, 1982; Raham, 1998). Yet, as I have attempted to show, offering choice or even enforcing constrained choice can result in more intense inequalities. These inequalities are highly varied and particular to the neighbourhoods where choice operates, yet they also stem from wider movements of policy reform around the globe, and this trans-local phenomenon is one that also manifests itself locally. School choice policy remakes the structures of stratification and therefore reproduces inequalities in the school system and beyond. Through its very function, school choice legitimizes streamed educational achievement by creating the illusion of meritocracy and choice. Corroborating an international body of critical educational reform research, my research suggests that school choice reform efforts come short of achieving educational equality and equity (Apple, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2011; Lubienski, Gordon, & Lee, 2012; Reay et al., 2008; Swalwell & Apple, 2011). In adding to this larger body of school choice literature, my study has shown that

those who operate inside the choice paradigm and those who are educated in accelerated and enriched programs acquire prestigious cultural capital that elevates their educational status and future prospects. This ultimately leads to a sense of elite identification with the wider market politics of education. In contrast, those who are placed in regular programs, and especially in rehabilitative alternative programs, feel relatively marginalized and experience various forms of symbolic domination. They come to internalize their relatively low status in the school system and subsequently lower their future aspirations (Bourdieu, 2000). The very nature of this divisive policy practice means that regular and alternative programs cannot carry the same value or currency in the hierarchy of education. Some students' public school choices therefore operate and are made real at the expense of others.

To address this inequality, I suggest that we need to have a better understanding of the real social processes and conditions that underpin educational processes and outcomes, as Hodkinson, Sparkes, Ball, Macrae, and Maquire state in the above quotation. The thesis of this concluding chapter is that school choice policy, and more broadly educational policy, ought to be built on a deeper understanding of actual and situated social processes and contexts. I argue that young people's narrative accounts and meaningful lived experiences provide us with a landscape for assessing different dimensions of choice at the micro-cultural level as well as in terms of the affective economy of school choice (i.e., feelings, emotions, and peer relations).

In this chapter, I first discuss how this study contributes to the current body of literature about the multiple and uneven realities that underpin young people's experiences and meaning-making of school choice. Second, I revisit the concept of the imaginary and discuss how it can be re-conceptualized as a kind of capital that does not eliminate the notion of a habitus but further *illuminates how interpretations of an educational and social process can activate social*

*reproduction.* The interpretive worlds of young people and their intensely situated imaginations of place and choice play a major part in processes of social reproduction, yet these young people are not simply agents of choice-making. Rather, they are actors in a social system, an inherited field of action in which they find themselves, and any reforms to this system are tied very closely to local structures and social forces. Next, I highlight the importance of including the perspectives of young people's lived experiences of policy in order that we may understand the multiple urban realties in which today's young people are educated. In this discussion, I suggest that a socio-phenomenological approach can further contribute to bridging the gap between structural and post-structural policy analysis. Lastly, I discuss a new school choice policy framework that takes social inequality, not just individual merit, into consideration when developing educational choice. I hope that my concluding thoughts in this chapter—the importance of understanding the salience of social processes underpinning school choice—will form one part of any egalitarian reformulations of school choice policy in the future.

## 8.1 Symbolic school choices: space, race, and affect

School choice is interconnected with the formation of new class, space, and race relationships in Vancouver. Ignoring this formation of power inequality minimizes the symbolic power of school choice in young people's lives. What young people articulate in the study is that school choice is a social, spatial, and racial practice. Young people also articulate how social, spatial, and national imaginaries form the basis of their struggles to classify others and their situated, highly localized imaginations. As such, school choice is not a rational choice; rather, it is a symbolic and imaginative choice, but these symbolic choices are both constraining and

mobilizing. In this section, I summarize the three major themes of my study that reveal school choice as a symbolic and imaginative choice.

### 8.1.1    Class distinction and the global imaginary

My study in large part echoes the findings of Reay et al. (2007) and Wells (2009); that is, school choice cannot undo the prevailing social inequalities that underpin schooling options and outcomes in a multiracial society. Additionally, I have shown that in Vancouver, a city with a high rate of global migration, especially an influx of migrants with high educational capital, school choice tends to reproduce social inequality at the global as well as local level. As such, I first argue the importance of understanding school choice as part of accumulating privilege and thus as another signifier of class in an emerging global city.

My data analysis first focused on how current school choice processes create hierarchical relations among individuals. I noted the importance of understanding the new cultural processes of school choice and their effects on the development of class distinctions. I detailed the outcomes of the forms of stratification produced (and internalized) by a group of learners who exercised choice and simultaneously asserted themselves as more motivated and high achieving than other potentially less "worthy" peers. My participants, both choice and neighbourhood students, were well aware of these stratified distinctions and their implications for future job and education prospects at the local and global levels. In other words, school choice processes are intricately connected to social and economic processes and conditions of job scarcity.

In this educational context, while those from working-class backgrounds are not completely left out of school choice participation, they tend to experience relative devaluation, marginalization, and exclusion. While young people from low-income families find comfort in

staying close to their neighbourhood friends, in doing so, they are excluded from the current opportunities of school choice. I used Bourdieu's (1998a) term "symbolic domination" to describe this phenomenon as it operates in the Vancouver reform model of school choice policy. I noted how the labelling practice of the education system and the state, which sorts students into different levels of learning (e.g., enrichment or acceleration under the programs of school choice, the very idea of the mini school) has a decisive effect on young people's learner identity formation (Gillborn, 2010; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). In particular, mainstream learners who become less visible, in comparison to high-achieving choice students, remain outside choice programs and face the challenges of the educational as well as social, economic, and emotional consequences as being perceived as less smart, consequences that impact their future aspirations (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 118). School choice policy in this sense seems to etch social class into the structure of student psyches (Reay, 2005). As Skeggs (2004) argues, "the working class-self was not formed through the possibilities for appropriation and propertizing; instead, its formation was the constitutive limit to those very actions" (p. 175).

In a highly globalizing city like Vancouver, school choice policy performs a key function in producing elite groups of students who reconstitute themselves through the embodiment of a new cultural capital of neoliberal global sensibilities concerned with strategic positioning within the global labour and education markets. The neoliberal reforms of school choice, as shown in my data, clearly encourage learners to become choice-makers, free consumers, and entrepreneurs in the sense that young people find programs that can "enrich" or "accelerate" their learning experiences (McLeod & Yates, 2006; O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007). As youths learn to achieve distinction as "good" learners in Vancouver, they also learn to create a globally competitive, self-

improving, and self-responsible middle class in an era of neoliberal globalization (Ball, 2004; Peters, 2005; Rizvi & Lingard, 2000; Skeggs, 2004; Walkerdine, 2003).

In this discussion, I have tried to open up a new dialogue between the emerging critical scholarship on globalization and school choice policy studies that draw mainly on cultural sociology as well as the anthropology of policy. It is my hope that this dialogue has offered a new understanding of school choice as an imaginative practice. Local distinction-making through school choice is connected to young people's (and their families') global aspirations, movements, and forms of class distinction through the application of an ideology of advanced neoliberalism. In other words, it is not simply the choice policy itself that generates a new culture but—as Rizvi and Lingard (2005; 2000, 2010) and Gulson and Pedroni (2011) have recently argued—also the global forces that redefine meanings created about local educational space and their values. The focus on international recognition in the dynamics of local school choice is a new imaginative practice reflective of globally aspiring middle- and upper-class parents who seek extra features and programs that will enable their children to develop new distinctions in the neoliberal global era (Bourdieu, 2005).

Through their access to world-class education, choice students—especially those from globally mobile, middle-class families—begin earlier than students with substantial choice constraints to imagine new aspirations that imbue into their sensibilities a kind of elitism in a globalized and globalizing world and economy. During this process, middle-class immigrant learners' global ambitions are enabled and elevated by market policy, while working-class immigrant learners are further left behind. Those who cannot afford, did not qualify for, or may show disinterest in the new alternative choice programs have limited access to the experiences and practices of those who choose their schools, such as the "capacity to aspire" in a globalizing

world (Appadurai, 2004, p. 59). Choice programs are effective for those destined to become future global leaders and for those held up as beacons of excellence. Choice programs also make Vancouver public schools competitive and highly sought-after by globally migrating elite and middle-class families who seek the best education for their children (Appadurai, 1996; Mitchell, 2004; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Waters, 2006).

It is in this dual process of educating the elite classes and the less visible classes of learners that young people in my study experience and make sense of school choice policy as a new institutional mechanism for class and racial formations in Vancouver. School choice is therefore, without a doubt, a centrepiece of reform hierarchy that is altering social structures, undermining the previously egalitarian notion of public education, and shaping new social positions among young people.

### 8.1.2 Cities, urbanism, and the moral character of global security anxieties

The salience of the urban imaginary in young people's situated imaginations of neighbourhoods and schools further shows the ways in which school choice processes are entangled with the spatial conditions and processes of the post-colonial city of Vancouver. This part of my analysis echoes Diane Reay (2007), Courtney Bell (2009), Lois André-Bechely (2007), and Kalervo Gulson's (2011) analyses of the spatial inequality of educational reproduction in the new dynamics of school choice. In doing so, my analysis goes further to link the production of an urban imaginary with the sociology of moral panic/anxiety in order to showcase the moral dimension of spatial reproduction, young people's imagined educational models, and their subsequent participation in school choice.

The spatial comparison between the East Side and West Side of Vancouver indicates that school choice imaginaries are closely linked to how young people perceive different neighbourhoods in the global city of Vancouver. As Greenberg (2000), Huyssen (2008), and Soja (2010, 1996) indicate, imaginaries emerge from one's lived experiences; thus, young people's urban imaginaries are not fixed. Yet, at the same time, a dominant imaginary of the city exists in public consciousness and influences how cities and their different parts are perceived by residents and non-residents. For local youths, "druggy schools" and "gang schools" are identified as being in particular neighbourhoods of the city, and thus the schools in those neighbourhoods often have negative reputations and tend to be avoided. This study thus highlights the influence of the historically produced urban imaginary of drugs, gangs, and dangers on school choice imaginaries, a perspective often overlooked in school choice policy debates and dialogues. Furthermore, increasing anxieties and concerns about urban security may further push middle-class families into choice programs promoted as safe and caring communities within the global city.

Using this spatial focus, I have expanded the aforementioned class analysis of school choice. As has been thoroughly articulated in the works of Soja (1996, 2010), Massey (2005), Reay (2007), and Bourdieu (1998b, 2005), the social and spatial are intricately connected in many ways. Based on these insights, my examination of choice practice has focused upon urban spatial dynamics to produce a continuous and intersecting analysis of local place and class in order to offer some understanding of the spatial dimensions of school choice.

My analysis has thus focused on highly classed urban imaginaries and on the production of pathologized urban spaces that underpin the construction of the school choice imaginary. One focal point was on contradictory perceptions of drug use. I highlighted how fears of the use of

illegal substances and their associated activities are heightened particularly with increased poverty, as they are spatialized on the East Side and in East Side schools. As such, I noted the importance of understanding Vancouver's local spatial history at the neighbourhood level of geographical scales. This can help deepen our understanding of some of the historical reasons for the presence of divided urban spaces, newly divided urban spaces, and current urban development dynamics, as none of these are outside the realm of choice policy. The continuing projection of moral failure onto East Side and low-income neighbourhoods (e.g., drug addicts and working-class gangs) seems to echo the historical attribution of heavy drinkers and single night dwellers on the East Side as a problem in the early 20$^{th}$ century (Gordon, 2000). What I have shown in this study of choice is that these urban imaginaries and impressions can endure, and parts of the East Side are still perceived as being highly immoral pathological sites. Many participants in the study reminded us of this enduring and entrenched impression of the East Side; as such, their school choice was imaginative in the sense that their choice often led them to neighbourhoods that are imagined to be "safer, cleaner, more secure, and friendlier." A historical understanding of the city—especially of those areas that are rapidly changing—can thus improve understandings of the dominant school choice imaginary.

A strong relationship exists between polarized urban neighbourhoods and school choice imaginaries in global cities. Pejorative impressions of particular local schools are associated with negative images of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The descriptive language used by young people demonstrates the ways in which working-class neighbourhoods and families have been pathologized as unclean and smelly (Stuntz, 1998). In London, Reay and Lucey (2003) have shown that the language of waste ("rubbish school") and excreta ("a shit school") is commonly used to describe schools in marginalized neighbourhoods. In Vancouver, Dillabough et al.'s

(2007) study has shown that young people feel that they are "warehoused" in these schools. As such, the images of negatively perceived schools tend to be influenced by their proximity to historically zoned industrial areas of the city, with factories and warehouses, where working-class families work at a rapidly decreasing number of manual jobs. School choice therefore serves as a reproductive function that I refer to here as a novel re-marginalization in areas and schools that are already disadvantaged and pathologized. In this intersection between the social and the spatial, then, my analysis has also sought to relate these changes to ongoing and new moral panics and has drawn on the sociology of moral panic (Cohen, 2002/1972). My socio-spatial analysis thus illuminates the local dynamics of school choice within the uneven realities of the globalizing city of Vancouver. Similar to other global cities, Vancouver consists of a hub of multi-nationally connected social networks fraught with growing divisions between hope and despair, inspiration and destruction, and wealth and poverty (Gulson, 2011; Sassen, 2005; Soja, 2010), but it is also different because of its geographical and social traces of colonialism, which also burden marginalized young people in diverse ways (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Mawani, 2009; Yu, 2010).

### 8.1.3    Racial classification and the national imaginary of Canada

Lastly, school choice is symbolic of young people's imagination and reimagination of the historically formed "us versus them" relations between racial and ethnic bodies in Canada. Young people's narratives of school choice show an emerging racialized pattern of school choice in multiracial and multiethnic Vancouver. My study confirms the findings of the growing number of school choice studies that show segregation of learners by race (Gulson, 2011; Levine-Rasky, 2008; Lubienski et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2008; Yoon, 2011). In this work, I

257

attempted to more deeply analyze the racial dimension to a deeper extent by deconstructing the power of the national imaginary of Canada, which continues to assert the imperial power of British (and to some extent French) culture and people as the core culture of Canada (Bannerji, 2000; Mackey, 2002). This racialized national imaginary of Canada affects the ways in which young people imagine and negotiate school choice, school belonging, and hierarchically perceived racial identities.

Racial classification struggles are part of school choice, as different schools and choice programs are racially imagined based on their programs or the neighbourhoods in which they are located. This has been evident historically, as I discussed in the context chapter. Similarly, current school choice is racialized, because any colonial history of a city is racialized to varying degrees, and choice programs make use of these divisions in order to increase their own cultural capital. This is particularly evident when young people imagine different choice programs. Racial compositions of particular alternative school programs affect whether or not young people apply. This especially seems to be the case when choice programs enrol a high number of distinctive racial groups with whom potential applicants cannot identify. As such, while the academic value of choice programs do matter, young people, while not acknowledging racism as part of the process, take a close look at their comfort zones in relation to which racial groups participate in particular alternative programs. In other words, it is not only class distinctions that make people feel out of place. Race—as a dimension of space—can make people feel out of place (see Nayak, 2011).

Further, in this discussion, I noted the importance of how particular choice programs become associated with certain racial group qualities. For instance, language-based choice programs (e.g., Mandarin and French Immersion) tend to divide and reclassify learners based on

their racial heritage because of the strong connections between language and race. Also, state examinations tend to play a role in objectifying and stereotyping certain groups by attributing certain educational and natural characteristics to specific racial groups. In this way, school choice policy reproduces the growing association between racial characteristics and educational programs.

I also highlighted the racialized social experiences of young people who cross their school and neighbourhood community boundaries. While young people from European backgrounds were able to overcome the challenges of socialization over their secondary school years at a school that was perceived as predominantly Caucasian, students with Asian backgrounds continued to struggle to connect to students from the school's immediate neighbourhoods. Even after spending several years at a West Side school, ethnic minority students, who are perceived as "strangers" in the West High area, continued to find it difficult to develop close friendship with students from the neighbourhood. Their bodies seemed more out of place on the West Side than the white Canadians who crossed their school boundaries.

These different and divergent racial imaginaries and experiences of school choice, which are evident in my study, can be best understood by further considering "how colonialism shapes the grammar and the lived experience of racialized subjects" today through binary imaginations of the West and the East (Said, 1994/1978; Tuori & Peltonen, 2007, p. 258). Historically constituted racial relations, meaning-making, and racial humour are deeply present in the social fabric that underpins the dynamics of school choice. Further, in a city with a high immigration rate, growing levels of border anxiety are expressed in the choice process of particular alternative educational programs (i.e., language programs) as well as in the making of particular cross-racial relationships (Balibar, 1998; Rumford, 2008).

Hence, to understand the local racial dynamics of school choice policy, I focused on the national imaginary of Canada. I was especially drawn to Hage's (2000) notion of whiteness in the context of Canada. Hage's concept of whiteness helps identify, through a complex dimension of national cultural capital, how different young people are positioned in relation to the continuation of European-dominated national imaginaries in a post-colonial nation that promotes multiculturalism. In addition, Said's (1994/1978) theory of Otherness, and Balibar's (1998) and Rumford's (2008) work on border anxiety, further explains the continuing racial tensions that exist in a post-colonial global city. While physical national borders are disappearing in an age of increasing global trade, non-physical borders reappear and become reimagined everywhere and anywhere as people try to maintain their sense of racial and ethnic boundaries (Balibar, 1991, 1998; Rumford, 2006, 2008). Balibar and Rumford use the idea of "border anxiety" as a conceptual way to capture how local residents in global cosmopolitan cities experience their neighbourhoods as unfamiliar places that cause them to feel increasingly disorientated as immigrants arrive from all over the world. In the midst of rising unfamiliarity and foreignness, exclusive ethnic communities are reimagined and reestablished to create feelings of certainty and security (Ahmed, 2000, 2004a; Bunar, 2010b; Rumford, 2008). This critical body of work on "border anxiety," the very practice of bordering, and Otherness has been helpful in revealing the ways in which the changing urban geography in cosmopolitan cities interacts with school choice imaginaries.

My analyses thus show that school choice needs to be understood in relation to these subtler processes and the presence of racial and ethnic exclusion in the newly imagined multicultural city of Vancouver. School choice may increase the overall racial and ethnic diversity of the school's student body, but it does not necessarily encourage cross-racial

socialization. Understanding how race and whiteness are factored into young people's identity-making and socialization therefore helps us to understand the emerging dynamics of school choice and the ways young people imagine their own identities and relationships with others in multicultural cities (Bunar, 2010b; Levine-Rasky, 2008; Yoon, 2011).

## 8.2 Through the lens of the imaginary as capital

In elucidating young people's situated experiences and meaning-making in an increasingly unequal city, I have used the two theoretical concepts of imaginary and imagination. I have shown that young people's various imaginaries and imaginations are mediated by their situatedness in the social, racial, and spatial structures of the city. I used the concept of the imaginary to analyze how youths construct and imagine their choices, identities, and relationships. As such, while some youths imagine and practice school choice in a way that is aligned with the neoliberal imaginary of school choice, others consider school choice to be risky, inaccessible, and not for them. In this analysis, I have attempted to show how school choice can be represented as a kind of imaginative practice. By "imaginative practice," following the ideas of Paul Ricoeur (2008), I mean that youths and their families are involved in moving beyond the traditional forms and practices of the public education system through choice, in varying degrees, while being simultaneously regulated and governed by the neoliberal imaginary that reimagines education through market mechanisms, competition, and growth without equity. In this section, I revisit the concept of the imaginary. I propose that it can be reconceptualized as capital in order to explore the process of social, spatial, and racial reproduction through young people's situated experiences and actions. Further, I argue that this concept carries some potential power to bridge dimensions of structural and post-structural policy studies.

As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggest, the concept of the social imaginary is akin to Bourdieu's notion of habitus because the idea of a social imaginary involves "a complex, unstructured and contingent mix of the empirical and the affective," and it is "a way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people, the common understandings that make everyday practices possible, giving them sense and legitimacy" (p. 34). Charles Taylor (2004) similarly views the social imaginary as the social practice of fitting into a particular society. Likewise, Hage (2000) notes that whiteness is an embodied state of spatial practice, further resembling the notion of habitus. While I certainly agree with the views of these scholars, from what I have analyzed in this dissertation thus far, I think that the notion of the imaginary can also be more analytically generative—by making social inequality and reproduction more explicit in the imaginary. If we think of the imaginary as capital, then we might consider referring to it as *imaginary capital*.

Rethinking the imaginary as capital enables an analysis of people's imagined worlds in embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states. "The imaginary" can be analyzed as a combination of ideas, practices, and objects that are socially, politically, and institutionally created. In *The Forms of Capital,* Bourdieu (2006/1986) discusses cultural capital as an embodiment that creates class distinctions over time, yet cultural capital also exists as objects and institutional certificates. By viewing the imaginary as capital, we can theorize how individuals come to embody certain imaginaries that accrue different profits and have different exchange values (See Skeggs, 1997, 2004). Viewing the imaginary as a kind of capital also allows us to examine how it is socially and culturally produced and acquired by a group of people, a city, or a nation over time. A theory of imaginary capital can help us analyze the processes of enculturation, the production of artefacts, and the rise of institutions, all of which contribute to the reproduction of a hierarchy of people with different embodied imaginaries.

By linking the concepts of field and capital together, then, we can see more clearly how social actors (e.g., young people) struggle and strategize in order to occupy particular positions by inheriting and acquiring a stock of specific imaginary capital that is pertinent to maintaining their respective positions. The imaginary works to create hierarchical positions among individuals, as Bourdieu effectively articulated in his notion of field:

In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration, or objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situations (*situs)* in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97)

In other words, the embodiment of the dominant imaginary as profitable capital can maintain, demote, or advance people's social positions. The operation of the dominant imaginary as capital was particularly clear in the following three different aspects of my study.

First, the embodiment of the neoliberal imaginary was evident in students' participation in school choice and further in their admission to their chosen schools. It was apparent in the ways that such experiences, while at times stressful, led to the acquisition of cultural and educational capital that facilitated these young people's social and academic futures. Those who identified with the global imaginary of new possibilities tended to strive towards securing academic success through school choice. Middle-class (and aspiring middle-class) choice

263

students acquire global imaginary capital by attending internationally recognized programs and receiving awards. They come to embody global sensibilities, and, additionally, they obtain awards that indicate their completion of these globally distinctive programs in the objectified state of their imaginary capital. As noted by many study participants, the attraction of these global programs is key to their participation in school choice. In other words, alternative programs of choice "[institute] an essential difference between the officially recognized, guaranteed competence" (Bourdieu, 2006/1986, p. 51). As such, choice students have résumés that show international fieldtrips as official achievements (as opposed to holidays abroad). In other words, a particular imaginary of our changing world is institutionally endorsed and certified, and those who receive this new type of education earn new imaginary capital. Yet young people's abilities to legitimize their imaginaries in dominant elite forms were socially, spatially, and racially differentiated.

Secondly, a theory of imaginary capital can help us see how and why a particular urban imaginary is endorsed by powerful institutions and groups of people. We can begin to examine connections between how certain institutions classify places as global cities and how some schools in those cities are then perceived as "good" schools and world-class institutions, allowing those who attend them to accrue symbolic capital. In turn, those who are enculturated in the ethos of the globally competitive city and educated in elite schools also come to possess higher levels and kinds of capital. Here we can see how the urban imaginary, which widely circulates in public, itself becomes a type of capital, with some who are considered to be of high value while others are considered to be of less value, importance, or significance. Consequently, students who embody the new possibilities of the global city imaginary secure more dominant positions.

Lastly, in the field of national cultural capital, one's possession, identification, and embodiment of the dominant ethnic imaginary of Canada can impact one's social position. Situated in the current struggles of the national imaginary of Canada—conflicts and tensions between the traditional white British imaginary and the new multiracial national imaginary, as Mackey (2002) notes—young people also struggle with their own racial and ethnic classifications. Those who identify and are identified as the ethnic majority (either those of British heritage or those who grew up in Canada and identify more closely with the dominant Canadian culture) seem to be in a more advantageous position to maintain and or advance their social positions compared to those who see themselves as existing outside the dominant racial and ethnic imaginary of Canada. While mini schools are racialized, they continue to offer a curriculum broadly based on the British imaginary of Canada; subsequently, mini students acquire more profitable imaginary capital, which can later be exchanged for economic and other symbolic capital.

By conceiving of the imaginary as capital, I suggest that we can better explore and analyze the reproductive social forces that underpin young people's situated imaginations and experiences of school choice. Young people's social, spatial, and racial positions in any city implicate them in existing imagined places, and they come to embody these differentiated imaginaries. Not everyone embodies the imaginary to the same extent, but rather this hinges on their inherited position in the social and cultural order of city life. Different young people have different access to particular "imaginaries"; in other words, imagined worlds are dependent upon one's social, spatial, and racial positions. Subsequently, differently positioned youths produce and embody different imaginaries through their situated imaginations. Hence, analyzing school

choice and young people through the concept of imaginary capital may help us better understand the broader social conditions and forces underpinning young people's situated imaginations.

Thinking of imaginary as capital can also help us see how access to a certain imaginary, and thus individuals' social positions, is critical to maintaining or advancing social and educational positions in a particular time and place. Further, effective alliances can be built between the idea of the social imaginary—as philosophically expressed by Paul Ricouer, Jamison and others as a process of interpreting and making sense of our immediate surroundings and their utopian and dystopian dimensions—and the work of cultural sociologists who examine how such understandings play a role in the market of exchange.

The distinction between the conception of the imaginary as capital versus habitus is a subtle one. I say the distinction is subtle because capital also exists in a state of embodiment. Theorizing imaginary as capital, thus, is compatible with the theorization of the imaginary as habitus because, as Bourdieu theorizes, capital also exists in an embodied state. Yet this analytic distinction makes a significant difference to our understanding of the complex interconnections between social positions and shifting social and cultural imaginaries. The notion of imaginary as a form of capital opens up an analytical space in which to interrogate the function of the imaginary in creating hierarchical relationships around a particular set of capitals (e.g., urban, social, and national imaginary as capital) that are desirable or profitable in a particular city or nation-state. It is a way of understanding how bordering, as a practice, is imagined and acted upon and how border practices create moral hierarchies of capital and exchange.

Conceiving of the imaginary as capital can further offer a new way by which to understand the current operations of social inequality. As this study has shown, this is especially applicable to the study of young people's lives. By theorizing imaginary as capital—the

distinctive power between "the school choice imaginary" and "school choice imaginaries"—we can understand why some young people are better positioned to be part of creating "the imaginary" while others contest it with their own imaginaries from lived experiences. Also, this study has shown the social, spatial, and racial underpinnings of who is "freed up" to engage the dominant imaginary for their own advantages. In other words, understanding the link between the imaginary and social positions can elucidate how the varied embodiments of imagined worlds and contestations are reflective of different social positions in a global city. With this understanding, we can try to dismantle the current operation of power inequalities that re-constitute social worlds every day. We need to start with how today's schooling structure (i.e., the education market) is implicated in the construction and reproduction of the imaginaries of the global city and its schools. In turn, we need to be mindful of the ways in which different levels of access to particular educational rules and opportunities change the playing field as regards more egalitarian understandings of choice. Understanding these links between the imaginary and inequality allows for new ways of thinking about social and educational justice in the global city.

I have learned that the concept of the imaginary and young people's retellings of the imaginary through the construction of their own imaginaries, which can be further referred to as "narrative imagination,"[111] lie in their potential to bridge some of the gaps between structuralism and post-structuralism. Young people's imaginations of social worlds are not only discursively constructed but also shaped by non-verbal human actions, artefacts, and reform regimes that are

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[111] Following Brockmeier's (2009) conception of narrative imagination, I use the term to refer to the constructive potential of storytelling, that is, the practices of communicating, negotiating, and creating novel meanings by constructing and telling stories. This practice is reflective of the established cultural models of storytelling but also moves beyond the routine patterns (Brockmeier, 2009).

deeply symbolic and based on meaning-making. The power of the imaginary also rests upon the very possibility to penetrate human actions, forms of motivation, minds, and affect. Discourse, cultural artefacts, and social practices are inseparable in the concept of the imaginary. This lens is thus particularly useful for a study of policy, particularly the power of school choice policy to affect the perceptions and practices of young people. My study is just an initial effort at using this concept to increase our understandings of the phenomenon of school choice.

Briefly, then, in this section, I have discussed the power of the imaginary as a type of capital, in the Bourdieuian sense, rather than as habitus, as it is currently theorized by major thinkers who have used this concept. Accordingly, I have developed the concept of *imaginary capital,* a type of capital that accrues its profit from embodying the dominant imaginary (e.g., urban, national, and global imaginary) while situated in individuals' social, spatial and racial locations in the city. It is through this broader conceptualization that we can also move beyond Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which tends to be limited to the cultural dynamics of families, and begin to think about individuals' connections to the broader society through the various narratives projected upon young people and the places they inhabit.

## 8.3    Social phenomenology and young people: a new direction for critical policy scholarship

To provide a richer and more complex understanding of the power relations that underpin the positions from which different individuals speak, critical policy scholarship should put more emphasis on the lived experiences of policy and on young people, who are the direct subjects and participants of a majority of educational policies (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Especially in the field of education, policy researchers and scholars ought to pay more attention to the perspectives of

young people in order to understand the phenomenon as well as the complex effects of educational policy. In doing so, I suggest that critical policy researchers consider social phenomenology. This philosophical tradition, as I argue later, can further bridge the structural and post-structural gap. By investigating how a particular policy is lived by differently situated individuals in various and highly unpredictable ways, a socio-phenomenological approach will help critical policy scholarship move further toward understanding the complex social world within which policy operates.

As alluded to in the previous section, critical policy scholarship would benefit greatly from conducting field research with young people to gain a deeper understanding of how policies, especially educational policies, shape, influence, and affect the everyday lives and decisions of those young people. While policymakers' engagement with youths through focus groups and town hall meetings is a good starting point, it is not enough to produce a rich understanding of how different voices are influenced and created by lived experiences. It is crucial that we explore young people's perspectives, not only in comparison to their parents' perspectives but also against their spatial and racial backgrounds, as they are social actors who negotiate their pasts, presents, and futures in specific local and national contexts.

Studying young people is necessary because, while young people's future outlooks are closely tied to their family's social backgrounds, they also imagine futures that are different from those imagined by their parents. It is thus important to view young people as individuals in the process of "becoming"—which is a life project—rather than simply "being" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 77). By "a process of becoming," I mean that young people occupy social field positions in the past, present, and future simultaneously, while their futures consist of imagined positions and places. Young people are actively involved in making key life decisions, and they imagine

becoming particular types of learners and people. Participation in, and realizations of, school choice is a prime example of the decisions in which young people are involved. In the imaginations of young people, their current positions, as well as a wide range of urban, national, and global imaginaries that affect their mobility and aspirations, matter a great deal.

Young people's narratives will thus enable us, as researchers and policymakers, to understand more broadly how young people's subjectivities are shaped by "the moral imperatives and cultural operations of states" in particular historical moments (Dillabough, 2009, p. 216). As noted above, the power of the imaginary is evident in the ways young people think about the changing world, city, and school system. The imaginary shapes their dispositions and habits, and it is a type of capital that matters to securing their positions in changing school and societal hierarchies. In this, exploring young people's experiences gives us cultural data and texts through which we can analyze the operation of the current power and hegemony of advanced neoliberalism in their everyday experiences. Studying policy with youth can also help us to produce a detailed and multi-layered analysis of the ways in which young people negotiate and struggle under new regulative regimes of educational policy.

Further, working with young people to understand the phenomenon of educational policy has the great potential to move beyond the structural and post-structural divide that exists in the current policy scholarship, which I discussed in Chapter 2. Studying the phenomenon of school choice from young people's lived experiences—which greatly inform their particular social positions—enabled me to understand the power of the imaginary to link the discursive policy realm with the wider material and cultural worlds of the imaginary as well as within a post-colonial framework.

Because of young people's unique temporal positions in the present, always looking ahead to an unknown future, we can also examine the ways by which the concept of the imaginary connects structural and post-structural worlds. While young people are closely tied to their families' social backgrounds (that is, social structures), they may also imagine their social positions to be different from those of their parents (that is, the regulative power of discourse and the imaginary). In this sense, it is not only one's current social position that plays a part but also a wide range of imaginaries that emerge to form a greater sense of a differentiated social process. Young people's unique temporal positionalities then generate an interesting vantage point from which to explore the ways in which their situated imaginations, meaning-makings, and interpretations interact with the powerful discourses of educational policy in their lives. The school choice imaginary is constructed upon a particular set of practices and discourses, but it is also underpinned by a particular material reality of urban neighbourhoods and schools.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how both structural and post-structural approaches in some ways fail to adequately study the effects, dynamics, and meanings of policy. To recap, post-structural approaches, especially those of the Foucaultian strand, have put too much emphasis on discourse and its power and, in doing so, have somewhat lost track of agency and social action, as well as how individuals in different social and cultural milieus may have different responses to dominant policy discourses. In comparison, structural approaches have tended to be overly deterministic and totalizing when it comes to understanding the relationships between policy and social groups. Thus, the emphasis on "scientific" empiricism in structural analysis has placed less emphasis on how power may operate in a more regulative, discursive, and productive (in contrast to repressive) fashion by shaping subjects through new ideals and choices. While some have attempted to bring together modern critical theories and post-structuralism (Ball, 1994), few

271

have attempted to use a socio-phenomenological approach to understand the complex effects of policy on those who have lived experiences of policy-produced phenomena.

By situating young people in their particular local material and cultural contexts, this study avoided the binary theoretical tendency to focus only on diverse voices without accounting for structural and cultural differences. I avoided selecting only one group of students and asking them to speak on behalf of all youths and offer an overarching youth perspective. Social phenomenology has also created a platform for viewing policy as discourse, as power is exercised by producing "truth," and it is unlikely that any one individual can change the dominant discourse. Simultaneously, social phenomenology helps reveal that social structures and culture matter to the ways in which individuals experience policy and thus make particular meanings of policy. Therefore, social phenomenology can help illuminate policy reforms set within the political and social context of education and thus can provide nuanced interpretations of policy that are reflective of local conditions and concerns. A socio-phenomenological approach can further highlight the different structural backgrounds of young people while also providing a critical examination of educational policy that affects school choice as an imaginative practice.

Another strength of the socio-phenomenological approach is that it can help researchers pay close attention to what study participants say about their experiences, while suspending researchers' judgments about what they should experience (Creswell, 1998). This is because the goal of social phenomenology is to understand a cultural phenomenon through the lived experiences of those who have been involved with the wider questions under examination. By exploring the meanings of everyday experiences for each individual and by asking the participants to describe their lived experiences and meanings, a researcher can better understand

272

what it is like for those who experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). By studying policy socio-phenomenologically, critical policy scholars can focus on

> the way subjects [youths] are positioned through power relations and the social or academic classifications they sustain. The voice of a category (whether a subject or a discourse) is sustained by boundaries between categories (these could be boundaries of identity or space). The stronger the insulation between categories, the more likely it is that there will be a specificity of voice. Key to this analysis is not that voice cannot change power relations, but that shifts in power relations can change 'voices.' Power relations which sustain such boundaries, therefore, establish the 'voice' of a category and any attempt to weaken the classification—that is, to reduce the insulation so as to change 'voice' (discourse) will provoke the power relationship to re-establish the relations between ... categories by restoring the insulation. (Bernstein, 1990, p. 24, as cited in Arnot & Reay, 2007, pp. 316–317)

In this way, pulling together structural and post-structural analytic approaches that reveal the power circulating in young people's production of categories and meanings can help explain more powerfully how inequality is produced and reproduced in the global city of Vancouver and in its reimagining of the school system. By investigating school choice policy socio-phenomenologically, researchers can allow the complex dynamics and multiple meanings of educational policy to be articulated by those whose lives are directly affected.

Viewed through the lens of social phenomenology, then, the current reforms of the educational market cannot simply be understood through the neo-classical economic principles

of rational choice (Friedman, 1982). Rather, these reforms should be understood as acts of *symbolic and imaginative choice*, for they embody young people's social, global, and national imaginaries and their classification struggles, which all contribute to the formation of a new class structure in the aspiring global city of Vancouver (Bourdieu, 1989).

## 8.4    Recommendations for a new school choice policy framework

In concluding my study, I advocate a new approach to school choice policy that takes into consideration the complex and uneven social conditions and inequalities within which young people are situated. In advocating this approach, I first note the key challenges of the public school system and then discuss the limits of the current policy framework. Finally, I suggest a horizontal approach to choice that emphasizes equitable redistribution and recognitive justice (Gale & Densmore, 2000).

The two key challenges facing our public school system today are diversity and equality. Vancouver has a growing number of young people and families from a wide range of cultures and countries. At the same time, the city is faced with ever-growing gaps of inequality. As I noted in the introduction, the current school choice policy framework is inadequate in meeting these challenges. Giving choice to families and young people within the current public school system has indeed led to unequal access to positive and mobilizing forms of school choice.

To be more specific, the current policy framework has failed to create an equal and diverse education system because it is underpinned by the values of individualism, wealth, instrumentalism, and meritocracy that are prevalent in the current education system. These values ignore the social conditions that underpin individual choice. For instance, the contemporary ethics of school choice are based on acting on and selecting what is best for the

individual, and, as such, they overlook the social backgrounds and circumstances that advantage or disadvantage particular individuals who have different levels of wealth and inheritance (Apple, 2004; Reay et al., 2007). This instrumental view of education further produces schools and school choice as a means to an end (e.g., post-secondary education). This instrumental view of education fosters attitudes that advance certain individuals' social positions in relation to others. Also, in the global era, this system promotes a highly strategic view of citizenship wherein more and more elite groups are given a wide reach of movement while non-elite groups suffer (Mitchell, 2003; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Lastly, the assumption of meritocracy, which Bourdieu (2006/1986) has long critiqued, continues to promote the illusion of individual ability, motivation, and talent over the realities of different social supports, cultural backgrounds, and racial biases. As long as these three key values form the basis for school choice policy, the system is unlikely to remove the social, urban, and racial structures and cultures that produce the paradox of school choice equality. As Gillborn and Youdell (2000) poignantly note, market reforms of the education system will further ration students' education resources as nation-states deal with the New Times—post-industrialization and highly advanced forms of neoliberal globalization.

We need a new approach that takes into consideration the unequal realities of social life and the conditions that shape the dynamics of school choice and its impact on young people's meaning-making and imaginations. Hence, simply recognizing the individual efforts and talents of youth and selecting them for school choice is neither sufficient nor just. Instead, in propagating more school choice or reformulating the current programs of school choice, we need to take into consideration current forms of inequalities at many different levels of analysis. As such, we need to devise programs that expand choice horizontally, not vertically. One of the

steps that the Board can take in this regard is to eliminate test- and interview-based selection, which has contributed to legitimizing school rankings, stratification, and social inequality. Instead, the Board ought to provide enriched programs for those who are interested. In doing so, the Board ought to eliminate extra fees and provide resources to those who need the most support. These steps, which combine the educational justice values of equity[112] and recognitive justice[113] (Gale & Densmore, 2000), would help the Vancouver school system move towards restoring the goals of a democratic public where everyone is value for being human rather than for what the dominant reform models assume they are "worth" (Arendt, 1998/1958) in the education market.

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[112] By equity, I mean that the education system needs to consider that students come from unequal social positions (Gale & Densmore, 2000). This lens of equity shows a deep flaw in the assumption that public school choice is open to all by virtue of being "public." Equitable choice must mean creating choices that meet the needs of students, who are differently positioned in the social hierarchy, rather than simply offering diverse academic programs under the competitive mechanism of selection.

[113] While equity tends to confine the discussion of justice to economic spheres, recognitive justice can direct our focus more toward the cultural politics of social institutions, especially schools (Gale & Densmore, 2000). Instead of asserting the dominant view of what is good and educational, the recognitive justice lens can redirect our focus toward the standpoint and thus the lived experiences of the marginalized and least advantaged (Gale & Densmore, 2000). This approach puts more emphasis on young people's emerging interests rather than on homogeneity and uniformity or on prescribing what is a "world-class" education.

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282

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## Appendices

**Appendix A - Codes**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| School Choice | Smart | *Street Smart<br>*School Smart<br>*Naturally smart<br>*Hard-working |
| | Expectation | *University – local<br>*University – global<br>*College<br>*No university |
| | School choice factors | *Academic<br>*Non-academic (Safety)<br>*Non-academic (Class)<br>*Non-academic (Race) |
| | Choice participation | *Parent decision<br>*Student decision<br>*Participation<br>*Non-participation |
| | Meanings of school choice | *Academic distinction<br>*Brighter future<br>*Racial identification<br>*Neighbourhood belonging<br>*Group selection<br>*Cohort model |
| | Experiences of schooling (under school choice) | *Intense/pressure<br>*Successful/proud<br>*Division<br>*Symbolic domination |
| | Minis | *Academic superiority<br>*Distinction by separation<br>*Better resources<br>*Higher expectations<br>*Good students<br>*Race |
| | French Immersion | *Academic distinction<br>*Socialization<br>*Race |

| | Friendship | *Formation |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | | *School choice challenges |
| | | *Importance |
| | | *Race |
| | School culture | *Regimented |
| | | *Academic pressure |
| | | *Relaxed |
| Space | Sense of community vs. displacement | *Race |
| | | *Class |
| | | *In the school |
| | | *In the neighbourhood |
| | Urban imaginary | *East Side neighbourhoods– negative/positive |
| | | *East Side schools– negative/positive |
| | | * Affluent West Side neighbourhoods |
| | | * Idealized West Side schools |
| | Moral panic | *Youth gangs |
| | | *Drugs – druggy schools and neighbourhoods |
| | | *Morality |
| | | *School culture |
| | | *Class bias |
| Race | Racial imaginary | *Different schools |
| | | *Identity |
| | | *Choice programs |
| | | *Friendship |
| | | *Stereotypes |
| | | *Joke-making |
| | | *Smart |
| | Immigration | *For education |
| | | *For better living standards |
| | | *Countries of origin |
| | | *Class history |
| | Racism | *In the school |
| | | *In the neighbourhood |
| | | *In the city |
| | | *Border anxiety |
| | | *Racial biases |

**Appendix B  - Interview schedule**

Part I: Background

**Tell me about all the schools you have attended (from kindergarten to now)**
- Which neighbourhood?
- Which country?
- Why did you attend those schools?

**Tell me about your family**
- Parents' occupations, residential history, educational backgrounds
- Immigration history: Why did your family move to Canada?

Part II: Vancouver neighbourhoods, schools & identity/classification struggle

**Why school choice?**
- Is the school you are attending (or applying to) now the catchment area school?
- If not, why did you choose to come to this school? (special program?)
    o Neighbourhoods?
    o Neighbourhood schools?
- Do you think your attendance at this school says something about you? How so?

**Processes/experiences of school choice**
- If exercised choice: Tell me about the processes
- Which schools did you apply to? Why? (West/East/private)
- Was there any change in the ways you thought about yourself after the choice process (such as interviews, exam, acceptance/no call back)?
- What's it like to be in a special program in contrast to a regular program?
- Was there any change in the ways you (or family, friends, teachers) thought about your future before and after choice?
- How do you feel about (not) having to choose a high school?
- How do you think it will/would affect your peer relationships?

Part III: School choice objectives

- Why do you think people are so concerned about choosing the right high school?
- If you could choose any school you wanted, where would it be? Why?