

Choice - The formula for inequality

IPE/BC Occasional Paper #8

November 8, 2022



Bárbara Silva

Choice- The Formula for Inequality

By Bárbara Silva

For as long as almost anyone can remember, humans have had a penchant for simple solutions. Sometimes that drive to make things simpler has resulted in amazing technological advances, and other times over-simplification has been used to try to solve more complex issues.

For decades, the right wing Neo-liberal movement has oversimplified solutions to problems like the housing crisis, wage inequality, and food insecurity by championing, and moralizing choice.

Solution to the housing crisis? Simple - just choose to stop buying that daily coffee and save up! Want to be healthier? Easy - choose healthier foods. Stuck in a low paying job? Choose better employment!

The message on repeat is that good people, hard working people, make the *right* choices to own homes, to be healthy and have job security. It has been a successful message for those who righteously believe they have simply made the “right choices” in life.

Since Milton Friedman's simple market based solutions, right-wing neoliberal movements have found a simple equation for the general public, after all, who doesn't love simple math?

For decades, the right has campaigned on an easy, and virtuous formula for success in life:

CHOICE = FREEDOM

Freedom, as a personal right, has seen a resurgence in the current lexicon of societies around the globe. Freedom to travel, to not vaccinate or wear a mask, to choose health care, or education are all topics that have been circulating at deafening volume over the past few years. The notion that choice is synonymous with freedom is both deliberate and calculated in its simplicity.

Public education has not gone unscathed by this messaging; in fact, “parent choice” in education has been a priority for American Conservatives since the era of desegregation.

However, this oversimplified equation Choice = Freedom doesn't balance. The left side does not equal the right side no matter how often it is repeated. In all reality, isn't an equation at all - and those who do not have choice can confirm, it is actually an inequality.

CHOICE < FREEDOM

Choice is less than freedom. Significantly so.

Choice may play a role in personal freedom, but it is an insignificant parameter.

Choice = Freedom is actually an inequality, both mathematically and socially.

Choice is not equal in magnitude to freedom in the same way that one is not equal to five hundred.

How can we properly balance this equation? We must acknowledge that an entire parameter is missing. The equation that should be at the forefront of all public policy should be:

CHOICE + UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY = FREEDOM

Where ACCESSIBILITY is >>>> CHOICE

Indeed, accessibility is a far greater parameter than choice in the quest for freedom. Imagine no barriers to excellent high quality health care, public transit, public and post secondary education? Imagine not having to choose a school because the public system is so well funded that all children have access to high quality inclusive curriculum?

Freedom comes when you don't have to line up overnight to get your child into the "right" preschool. Freedom comes with not having to sacrifice or working two jobs to access education for your children.

There is actually MORE freedom for people when they are not burdened by having to make choices around basic human rights.

Again, ACCESSIBILITY > CHOICE

So why has choice been so highly valued? And why does it permeate every aspect of our culture?

Even in the private sector choice has seeped into practices that once were free of controversy. Almost weekly we hear stories of airline passengers asked and refusing to give up seats so families can sit together. Fingers and voices quickly raised to proclaim, "I paid to choose my seat, so people should have to do the same for their kids." Almost instantly it becomes a battle ground for individual rights, and the morality of being a good and responsible parent. Few consider that the airlines have a responsibility to seat minors with caregivers. Few consider their role in creating an environment that pits passengers against one another instead of the common good. Is it not in everyone's interest that a child be seated with their caregiver? It used to be this way. For decades, the norm was little to no choice in seating. It was a given that you were seated with the people you booked with. Now, there's "choice" (for a fee) and you're expected to pay it to ensure a minor is seated with their parents. It's not feasible for a 4-year-old to sit by themselves for a flight, yet the dialogue now is about personal responsibility, and no

pressure exists for the system to accommodate, as we know they can because they once did. That we have all come to accept this has enabled corporations to commodify all aspects of flying, from seats to carry-on luggage fees to water and snacks.

These same economists and policy makers want to treat education in the same way, as a commodity. They believe education should be marketed like airline seats, cheese or shoes, and should be subject to competition. The inherent problem is that in the same way not everyone can afford to buy stilton cheese or Air Jordans, not every family can afford the cost of private education. For many families, no amount of sacrifice, or saving will provide that option, and yet their children are equally deserving of a high quality, accessible education.

The simple math associated with Choice = Freedom promotes that good ole conservative bootstrap ideology and reinforces a sense of morality. “ I deserve it, I made the *right* choices, which is why I have a house, my kids are in private schools, I choose to prioritize my health.” The ability to make choices has become a righteous position, and those able to make them are often oblivious to the fact that for too many, choice is a privilege. Not everyone has the same choices, and choice is all too often a function of social and economic privilege.

The result of the proliferation of school choice is that some schools are now places where students are segregated along lines of ability, religion, and socio-economic status. This siloing of students runs contrary to the premise of public education and prioritizes individual preferences over collective benefits. As one parent recently stated:

“Public schools are one of the only places where kids learn that not everyone shares their personal experiences, and that there are kids who are both better off and worse off than they are, kids with different belief systems or family structures. There is value to this experience for all of society, and I think government’s job should be to make funding choices that support the greater social good over the preferences of certain individuals.” *Albertaviews*, [Individualism Run Amok](#)¹

Where choice is prioritized, public schools are less and less places where children from all walks of life can learn and grow across socioeconomic, cultural, and religious differences. Schools become places of homogeneity. Schools are no longer seen as places or opportunities to overcome social differences, but through choice, are now ways to replicate and reinforce social inequities. This kind of segregation does not support social democracy at large. And unfortunately, all this choice is happening using public funds.

A recent report by the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives revealed that [492 million public dollars is used to subsidize private education in British Columbia](#).² That’s almost

¹ Blasetti, Carolyn, *Individualism Run Amok, Vouchers mean the end of public education*, *Albertaviews*, September 1, 2020

² Hemmingway, Alex, *BC Private Schools to Collect \$491 million in public funding this year*, *CCPA Policy Note*, September 21, 2022

a billion dollars every two years. All while volunteer parent councils across the province run bottle drives and sell chocolates to raise money for books and furniture for their public schools.

Choice proponents will argue that choice encourages competition amongst schools.

But why should any child have to compete to have access to a high quality barrier free education? Knowledge is not a finite quantity, there isn't just so much of it to go around. Knowledge and information are infinite and must be accessible to all children. It is after all, a universal human right as declared by [the United Nations](#).³

Secondly, diverting access to resources and diluting the public system is not competition. In fact, publicly funding private schools tips the scales in favour of the already privileged. True competition, if it even has a place in education, only comes when the playing fields are leveled.

Finally, the concept of public funding the choice to leave the public system and attend private schools is a type of voucher. The effects of vouchers are well documented in the US and even libertarians and neoliberals are recognizing the failure of vouchers to meet their original intention. Choice was never about competition, or elevating public education, it has always been used as a guise for privilege and segregation.

“The hope of school choice was that the worst-off kids could be given the same opportunities as those born with silver spoons in their mouths. But if what parents are most interested in is keeping their children away from those kids (at least in large numbers), that hope cannot be fulfilled. Improving the quality of instruction can make everyone better off; peer group, on the other hand, is a zero-sum game, where every child who improves their peer group must be counterbalanced by one who is pushed out.” Bloomberg, [We Libertarians Were Really Wrong About School Vouchers](#).⁴

It is imperative that families across BC not follow the oversimplified slogan around educational choice, and not fall for any kind of voucher system that allows public dollars to leave the public system.

“Vouchers are dangerous to American education. They promise an all-too-simple solution to tough problems like unequal access to high-quality schools, segregation and even school safety.” The Hechinger Report, [After two decades of studying voucher programs, I'm now firmly opposed to them](#).⁵

The good news is there is no need to continue to pursue prioritizing individual choice. We can correct the inequality by reintroducing the more valuable and important parameter of UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY.

³ United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

⁴ McArdle, Megan, *We Libertarians Were Really Wrong About School Vouchers. And now we're starting to figure out why*, Bloomberg, October 23, 2017

⁵ Cowen, Joshua, *After two decades of studying school voucher programs, I'm firmly opposed to them. Here's why public money should not be funding private tuition*, Hechinger Report, July 20, 2022

Universal accessibility is the missing constant. Providing all students equitable access to high quality public education, and all to all public services for that matter, is entirely possible. Countries like Finland achieve high quality public education that includes teaching several languages as base curriculum and has the [highest ranking high school completion rate in the world](#).⁶ Countries like [Germany, Finland and Austria](#)⁷ provide free post-secondary education to ANY applicant, irrespective of country of origin. [Luxembourg](#)⁸ is one of several jurisdictions that have implemented free universal public transportation.

Choice = Freedom has been an easy, simple, and appealing solution for society, and it has gone entirely unopposed, if not championed by progressives over the past 5 decades. It pits individuals against one another and absolves governments and systems of their role in promoting equity.

It's time for progressives to recognize the flaw in the idea that CHOICE = FREEDOM. Time to take a red pen to this equation and correct it accordingly.

No one needs a specialized STEM school, or private tutor to recognize the far greater impact on freedom is universal accessibility. We can and must correct the inaccurate equation pushed by conservatives for decades, so that ACCESSIBILITY can be reintroduced into the equation, leveling the playing field for children across the province.

We can envision a public system where accessibility for those in the margins, those with disabilities, children of colour, children living in poverty isn't a choice, but an inalienable right. When we build a system around those students instead of those able to choose, we will create a truly universal, equitable and accessible public education system.

BC children deserve nothing less, and we will need every penny to achieve this. But we will have to collectively demand it from our government. It's time to stop funding private schools, it's time to recognize that choice promotes inequality and reintroduce accessibility as the key parameter towards greater social freedom.

Bárbara Silva is a public education advocate, organizer, activist, and IPE/BC Fellow. She is most passionate about building support for an equitable and accessible public education system and creating awareness about the proliferation of privatization across Canada. Bárbara co-founded the citizen-run public education advocacy organization, Support Our Students Alberta and is an experienced speaker and presenter around public education issues.

⁶ Leverage Edu, *Finland Education System*, June 7, 2022

⁷ Chang, Jenny, *The state of education in countries that offer free college*, Finances Online, November 6, 2022

⁸ Lo, Andrea, *Luxemburg makes all transportation free*, CNN Travel, March 1, 2020