

Portrayal of Offshore Schools on Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and British Columbia Provincial Government Websites

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Seven Canadian provinces authorize offshore schools where students in other countries can study the provincial curriculum and earn a high school diploma outside of Canada. Offshore schools are a form of international school that have emerged mostly in Asia, Africa, and South America in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (Cosco, 2011; Schuetze, 2008; Wang, 2017). Unlike traditional international schools that cater to globally mobile expatriate families (Bunnell et al., 2016), offshore schools recruit domestic students to study a foreign curriculum while still residing in their home country (Schuetze, 2008; Wang, 2017). In this paper, I examine discourses on the websites of three provincial governments — British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia — that describe their offshore or international programs which teach their public curricula to non-Canadian students in other countries. I chose the provinces of British Columbia (BC), New Brunswick (NB), and Nova Scotia (NS) because they have the most substantive and growing offshore school programs and their websites provide more description and explanation compared to others. My research question is: How do provincial government websites construct and portray offshore/international schools and students? Because BC and NB use the term *offshore* school, and NS uses *international* school, this article will use offshore/international school to refer to the type of school in general, and either offshore or international when referring to the individual schools or systems particular to each province. The following paragraphs review the literature followed by an explanation of my methodology. This is followed by my two related findings from this study which are the neoliberal discourses in the rationales and the omission of Indigenous perspectives on each provincial government website. While the schools are rationalized as vehicles for immigration, international readers of these websites are not informed that these provinces are situated on Indigenous territories. The paper concludes with a discussion of these findings.

Literature Review

Some articles on Canadian offshore schools and students have been published over the past two decades, but scholarly studies have not examined how provincial governments represent their programs and initiatives to the public. Research on Canadian offshore education in China by Wang (2017) found that national interests drive policies and plans of both Canada and China. Neither side is really invested in this transnational activity to benefit the other and there are divergences among Chinese and Canadian educational aims (Wang, 2017). China aimed to open up education and increase international cooperation while Canadian provinces provide a bridge for more international students moving to Canada for higher education. In addition, employment and international experience was created for Canadian teachers. Wang's (2017) findings align with an earlier case study of three BC offshore schools by Schuetze (2008) who analyzed aspects of the structure and administration of the schools with particular attention to conflicting BC and Chinese policies and how these tensions played out in the administration and financing of the schools. Two studies by Stein (2018; 2020) critically examined the portrayal of international education through Canadian government documents at federal and provincial levels. Stein (2018) found the EduCanada initiative for branding Canadian international education marketed

Canadians' good character with abundant discourses of liberal exceptionalism that sometimes does not reflect the reality of racialized international students living in Canada. Stein (2020) also studied provincial international education policy documents, particularly *British Columbia's International Education Strategy* (British Columbia Government, 2012) and the *British Columbia Jobs Plan* (British Columbia Government, 2011) which laid the economic justifications for increasing international education initiatives. These studies revealed the strong neoliberal approach to international education (Ball, 2012) and the predominantly economic reasons for international education. The present study is situated in this field that explores international education in the age of neoliberalism.

Methodology

This study uses critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993; 2013; Scollon, 2008) to approach and analyze the textual and visual data that is available on these public webpages. By viewing them from a constructivist epistemology (Crotty, 1998), I can consider the factors behind and beyond the actual words; and include social, political, and economic contexts that also influence the discourse. A study by Fairclough (1993) who used critical discourse analysis to examine advertisements for academic appointments revealed how the marketization of British universities in the early neoliberal era affected how modern and traditional universities attracted new faculty. By reading and analyzing such texts as social practice, more information and trends can be revealed within and beyond what are commonly seen as mundane texts. The extensive framework that Scollon (2008) developed and outlined ways to analyze public discourse (webpages, news releases, public consultation transcripts) was useful in reading government discourses on the three websites in the dataset. Scollon (2008) subsequently analyzed a series of government-issued texts considering the message in the words and sentences as well as the style of the documents/webpages, such as font, typeface size, hierarchy of information, symbols, logos, and images that could be interpreted as political, economic, or scientific. Since each Canadian province portrays and rationalizes their offshore/international schools differently, I drew on Scollon's (2008) examples to help with my analysis.

The discourses that provincial governments employ to portray and rationalize their offshore/international programs to public audiences should be analyzed to detect and compare how and why these governments engage in international education, specifically the encouragement, establishment, and success of these schools. These publicly available data serve as a window looking into the officially sanctioned constructions of offshore/international education. I wanted to analyze these websites to understand *what* each province indicates as important and not important. Canadian citizens, as well as foreign nationals, would likely view government websites as credible sources. Such readers could be potential teachers interested in teaching abroad or parents who may want to send their children to these schools. I also wanted to see how students were portrayed and how the schools were defined and rationalized. In addition, this selection includes one large province on the West coast and two small provinces on the East coast with different demographics and economies. There are three avenues to the websites under analysis: through Google searches of "[province] offshore schools", through a link on the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC, n.d.) website, or through the provincial ministries of education. Choosing websites that are most reachable helps with relevance and validity of the data sources because hard-to-reach websites may be left unread and forgotten over time.

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As I became familiar with the texts, I took notes of recurring, salient, or representative words or phrases. I then highlighted sentence formations that were indicative of the overall discourse. By applying codes, I could view similar words, phrases, and sentences side-by-side on one screen to discover similarities and differences across the data set. I compiled a list of key words and conducted direct searches and copied the whole sentence onto a worksheet for analysis where I aimed to examine how key words related to offshore education are invoked or represented on the webpages. This process was reflexive and recursive as I returned to the original data throughout the writing and revising process.

Findings

Overview of the Three Websites

The website for British Columbia offshore education uses the title “Offshore School Program” which indexes it as a unified and coherent whole program (British Columbia Government, 2023a). The link below goes to another BC webpage with a list of 35 offshore schools in eleven countries. Each school has a link to an updated annual inspection report, the name and email of the Offshore School Representative, and the website of the school. The main webpage has the sub-heading “Establish an offshore school” followed by one sentence and a link. There is also a link with some information for teachers interested in working abroad. There are links to the steps involved in establishing offshore schools on another page which provides some of the excerpts in the next section.

The Nova Scotia webpage has the title “Nova Scotia International Programs - Partners in Education” (NS Government, 2023, underlined in original) and this is hosted with the website of the Ministry of Education and Early Child Development. When clicking on the sidebar link to “International School Programs” there is a one-sentence rationale for international schools at the top with the list of accredited programs with principals’ emails and school websites below. The link along the sidebar “Who We Are” has more information, including a description of the main goals of public education, essential graduation learnings, curriculum, assessment, and the high school diploma. This curriculum description is replicable for Nova Scotia’s domestic students and does not have any specifications or adaptations for the international context.

The webpage for New Brunswick is different because it is the only province that uses a different name: Atlantic Education International, Inc (AEI) to “market and sell its education programs, services and materials internationally” (AEI, 2023). Besides arranging educational and housing needs for international students in New Brunswick’s schools, AEI licenses New Brunswick’s curriculum for offshore schools. The offshore school section has three tabs on the left side with the headings: “About Our Curriculum, License Our Curriculum, Accredited School.”

To compare discourses about offshore school definitions and rationales, I have selected the following excerpts. I bolded key verb phrases that the webpage authors consider as reasons why students would enroll in these schools; they are not bolded in the original texts.

Definitions and Rationales

These excerpts define and rationalize each provincial offshore/international program.

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“B.C.-certified offshore schools are located outside Canada and the Province of British Columbia and are authorized to offer the B.C. curriculum. The Ministry of Education and Child Care certifies, inspects and regulates offshore schools, and ensures that they meet B.C. education standards. The Offshore School Program **creates pathways that support international students** who are considering coming to B.C. to study, live and work.” (British Columbia Government, 2023b)

“AEI through its New Brunswick Offshore Schools Program **provides opportunities for students to study** the New Brunswick curriculum and to obtain an internationally recognized high school graduation diploma issued by the Province of New Brunswick.” (Atlantic Education International, 2023b)

“An international school (public or private) may be approved to offer the Nova Scotia Program, **giving their students the opportunity to graduate** with a Nova Scotia high school diploma and continue their studies at a Canadian post-secondary institution.” (Nova Scotia Government, 2023)

In each excerpt, the province (through offshore schools) creates/provides/gives opportunities/pathways to/for students (or offshore schools composed of students). Each sentence is constructed with the Canadian province as a benevolent provider of knowledge opportunities and pathways through, or because of, a curriculum product. Students are positioned as customers using an educational service, rather than students with agency engaging in their education through the curriculum. The rationales are tacitly positioned as benevolent offerings to students seeking opportunities because of discourses that position the curriculum as creating opportunities for students rather than the students who create opportunities for themselves and contribute to Canadian or world universities upon admission. Each excerpt above also uses verbs of legitimacy such as “certifies, inspects and regulates” (British Columbia Government, 2023a), “internationally recognized” (AEI, 2023), and “approved” (NS Government, 2023). Neoliberal discourses permeate all descriptions with the notion that students/families have purposely chosen their education and are young entrepreneurial elites (in the making) with personal responsibility soon to join a transnational class at global universities.

Nova Scotia and British Columbia both state that students can go to university in their provinces, but no similar sentence can be found on the AEI (New Brunswick) website. With the phrase “coming to B.C. to study, live and work,” British Columbia extends the invitation further with employment and settlement prospects. This correlates with the economic emphasis on international education in the *BC Jobs Plan* (British Columbia Government, 2011) which states that “we’ve barely begun to tap [the BC education system’s] potential to support our economic growth” (p. 14).

Omission of Indigenous Perspectives

Although curriculum updates and teacher pedagogy in each of these provinces have recently begun to take steps to include Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, (Chrona, 2014; Gibson & Case, 2019; Kerr & Parent, 2018; Treaty Education Nova Scotia, n.d.; Treaty Education Resources, n.d.; Rowinski & Sears, 2021) there is not a single sentence about Indigenous education and how offshore schools, teachers, and students can approach reconciliation and adhering to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action numbers

62 and 63 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) on any of the three websites. These calls to action call for mandatory education about residential schools, treaties, and “Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada” as well as curriculum integration and teacher education. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). International readers of the websites would not be able to learn about land acknowledgements or Canadian teachers’ responsibilities toward reconciliation. Since offshore school graduates often intend to study, reside, and settle in Canada, there is no information about what roles and responsibilities international students may have in reconciliation and decolonization. Chen (2021) writes that his transition from China to Canada as a graduate student entailed “(un)learning as a settler of colour in-the-making” (p. 15) as the advertised Canada was unlike the colonized Canada he encountered. To discuss the intersections of international and Indigenous education, these provinces should take up the call of Beck and Pidgeon (2020) who state that ethical engagement can assist in reconciling movements of internationalization and indigenization in Canadian education.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to critically analyze discourses on three provincial government websites. What is present is the assumption that Canada is benevolently extending opportunities, through offshore/international schools, to foreign students through the use of their curriculum services. BC offshore schools are rationalized as pathways to immigration, and this purpose was also written in government policy documents (British Columbia Government, 2011; 2012). Mazawi (2013) explains that through offshore schools, “the state creates a pool of *potential* (future) citizens located abroad, who effectively become an extended, nuanced, and graduated public” (p. 53). Nova Scotia also suggests immigration as a reason to study in one of their international schools. Additionally, Stein (2020) asks whose interests are being served when a curriculum developed for the public good is made available abroad. Are the publics of these provinces benefiting by extending their curricula and credentials to children in the Global South and are these benefits situated as charitable giving?

Indigenous aspects of provincial curricula are absent from the websites so it is not apparent if international viewers can learn about the colonial history of Canada. While Canada extends its cultural reach into other countries through offshore schools, Indigenous history is forgotten or omitted from the offshore/international school discourses. The *Accord on the Internationalization of Education* by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (2016) calls for more inclusive, equitable, and inclusive international education. Yet this is not apparent on government websites which may not correlate to the type of curriculum and pedagogy occurring in offshore/international schools.

With the omission of Indigenous treaty rights and traditional relationships to the land and sea on both coasts, the discourses on these three websites mean that provincial offshore/international school programs are not engaging in truth and reconciliation in Canadian education. They may also be perpetuating some benevolent colonialism in the Global South as well as extending invitations to “settler[s] of colour in-the-making” (Chen, 2021, p. 4) to enter Canada with perhaps little knowledge of their role in the colonial project.

Conclusion

This study is limited to three provinces; however, future research can compare all Canadian provincial government websites regarding international education. Additionally, offshore/international school websites from various countries can also be studied in a multilingual analysis. With these findings, these provinces can better rationalize their offshore/international programs to contribute to more principled and equitable international education.

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