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# Democracy, Neoliberalism, and School Choice: A Comparative Analysis of India and the United States

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## Abstract

India and the United States are the largest democracies in the world, and since the 1990s, both countries have implemented neoliberal economic reforms into most of their social institutions—including their education systems. Even though both countries have long-established commitments to public education as a means for socio-economic equitability for all citizens, in the wake of neoliberal reforms both countries have made significant moves to privatize education. The justification for school privatization was based on policies that redefined democracy in economic terms, and the result is a very undemocratic marginalization for the majority of students who do not have the means to participate in school choice. This article explored these issues by analyzing governmental student enrollment data, funding schemes, and media reporting on school-choice initiatives.

**Keywords:** democracy, neoliberalism, school-choice, India, United States, education

## Introduction

India and the United States appear to be different in many ways, but it is their similarities that are of concern here. India and the United States are the world's two largest democracies. They both have large and diverse populations. Even though both countries were founded on democratic political principles intended to ensure equitable rights among all citizens, the reality is that the populations within each country experience obvious socio-economic inequalities that have increased exponentially as the countries have modernized (Giroux, 2014; Gupta, 2000). This structural inequality is not a functional result of India and the United States being political democracies; rather, it is a result of each country interpreting democracy in economic terms rather than political (Labaree, 1997). *Freedom to be* has been conflated as *freedom to choose* (Hayek, 1944/2007). This pivotal shift from democracy as political freedom to democracy as economic freedom is the foundational principle of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), and the broadest similarity between India and the United States is that both countries have implemented neoliberal economic policies. These policies have infiltrated nearly every social institution—including their education systems (Boucher & Clark, 2018).

This article explores the global reach of economic neoliberal policies and their impact on the educational systems of India and the United States. The primary measure utilized was a qualitative content analysis of governmental school enrollment data for private, semi-private, and public

schools. The second measure of analysis was media reporting on education. This article is a thought piece that preliminarily examines at least two directions for more formal and expansive future studies. These include (a) qualitative content analysis of governmental education enrollment statistics and (b) ethnographic content analysis of media messages promoting specific educational forms.

School choice is a central concern in neoliberal discourse (Apple, 2005; Marcotte & Dalane, 2019), and this analysis questioned whether school choice is equitable or democratic. The decision to focus on India and the United States was precisely because of their similarities as large and diverse democracies with vast discrepancies of socio-economic equitability. Thus, one of the fundamental purposes of this study was to contemplate, on a macro level, the following overarching questions: What concepts and mechanisms within large and diverse democratic countries have the potential to lead to structural inequality? Additionally, in what ways does the increasing globalization of education impact educational norms and policies, and how might these norms and policies promote the perception rather than the reality of educational choice and agency (Herman & Chomsky, 2012; Spring, 2015)?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Theorizing Global Neoliberalism and Education***

Neoliberalism is a form of global economic imperialism, an ideological initiative to promote a so-called “economic rationalization” that centers economic liberalization and privatization on a global scale driven by powerful Western nations (Keating et al., 2013, p. 247). Vocal proponents of market solutions for education claim to be promoting democratic values of equitability and agency for all (Dixon, 2012; Kingdon, 2015; Tooley, 2018). They argued that public-private partnerships in education such as government aided, low-fee private schools in India or charter schools in the United States enhance educational equitability, specifically due to the availability and inclusion of market solutions. They supported these claims by (a) drawing theoretical inspiration from classical economic liberalism and (b) emphasizing ways public schooling fails a large majority of rural and urban students who are generally poor and unable to access quality education—public or private—and how, in their opinion, low-fee private schools and charter schools can extend equity to marginalized students.

Critics of these views have argued that neoliberalism is a thinly veiled neo-colonialism that is made possible by the proliferation of global education initiatives (Ball, 2012; Giroux, 2014; Spring, 2015). From this perspective, rather than markets being the solution to educational inequities, critics argued that the marketization of education is the *cause* of inequitable education and related life chances for students (Baltodano, 2017). Educational markets reduce and redistribute the governmental investment from no-cost and open access public schools to public-private alternatives (Ravitch, 2016).

Global neoliberalism can be understood as a clandestine extension of the economic world-system model because neoliberal policies and rhetoric pose as altruism (Samoff, 2013). Those who control the so-called global superstructure assert that their genuine interest is to help guide the developing world toward development in social, economic, and educational matters. However, dominant Western powers and concomitant inter-governmental organizations invest in developing nations

to gain future economic returns (Ball, 2012). Thus, neoliberal policy is supported by a branch of modernization theory that views education in general, and education in developing nations in particular, as an investment in human capital with a rational expectation of certain rates of return (Keating et al., 2013; Klees, 2008; Spring, 2015).

Michael Apple (2005) critically exposed the neoliberal attitude toward public education policy this way, “Public (that is, state-funded) institutions such as schools are [perceived by many critics as] ‘black holes’ into which money is poured—and seemingly disappears—but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results” (p. 214). This was a shared sentiment by a majority of educational administrators and policy makers in both India and the United States. Both countries have limited public school funding at federal, state, and local levels and instead have turned to public-private partnerships to fund education (Apple, 2005; Probe Report, 1999).

### ***Privatization of Schools and School Choice: Un-Evening the Playing Field***

In both India and the United States, the proliferation of school choice is fundamentally un-evening the educational playing field (Boucher, 2018; Probe Report, 1999). As Lawrence (2005) argued, when parents take their children out of their local public schools in favor of private or charter school alternatives, they take their social capital with them. This is the reality of school choice. When public services, like schools, are abandoned by individuals who have the means to pursue school choice in the private or semi-private sector, then the public sector is put in jeopardy (DeSena & Ansalone, 2009); and further, when those same individuals demand that the public taxes they pay for public services be rebated to them as vouchers toward their particular choices, then the public services crumble (Apple, 2005; Jason, 2017; Lawrence, 2005). When both social and financial capital are invested into privatized social-service schemes, social security and equitability disappear for the most vulnerable in society (Giroux, 2014; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

In the United States, the impetus to attend private schools can be for school choice along religious affiliation (Spring, 2015), to better advance their academic and economic prospects and social standing (Khan, 2010), or even for parents to keep their kids away from poor or minority kids (Lawrence, 2005). This is clearly an act of demarcating difference among students. India is known for its emerging middle class (Fadaee, 2014), but what is not discussed as often is their burgeoning population who live in extreme poverty (Srivastava, 2013). The middle class and the elite in India argue for more government subsidies for private schooling (Boucher, 2017, 2018). In this way, their children will be more advantaged at less expenditure to themselves. However, this mindset embraces a deliberate social defunding of the public-school system and further marginalizes those who lack school choice (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

The public in both India and America are conditioned to this socio-economic and educational inequality through deliberate media messages (Hall, 2012; Herman & Chomsky, 2012). This study preliminarily investigates the presence, the framing, and the role of media messages, government reporting, and funding schemes related to education in both countries. The research questions that guided this study are: What statistical data do governmental education agencies in India and the United States report to the public regarding school types and overall student enrollments? What are the educational funding practices in each country, and how might these practices reveal underlying policy commitments to market-driven educational strategies? What are the dominant

messages in the broader cultural media domains of India and America, and to what extent might these messages reinforce governmental reporting and policy commitments for education?

## **Methods**

This article draws from data collected in a two-year critical media study and examines the following issues for India and the United States: (a) official governmental reporting of student enrollments according to school classifications, (b) educational funding schemes and policies in each country, and (c) public media coverage on the topics of school designations, market solutions for education, and school choice (Boucher, 2018). The study employed an interpretive qualitative methodology known as ethnographic content analysis (ECA) (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). ECA is a variation of qualitative content analysis with its reflexive analysis of textual and non-textual documents (Schaub et al., 2017) and ethnography where the goal “is to describe how a cultural group develops patterns of action, talking, and behavior” (Creswell, 2016, p. 264). The focus in this study—on governmental reporting of student enrollments and media messages on educational topics—is an example of ECA, as these sources provided insight into the cultural educational contexts of both countries.

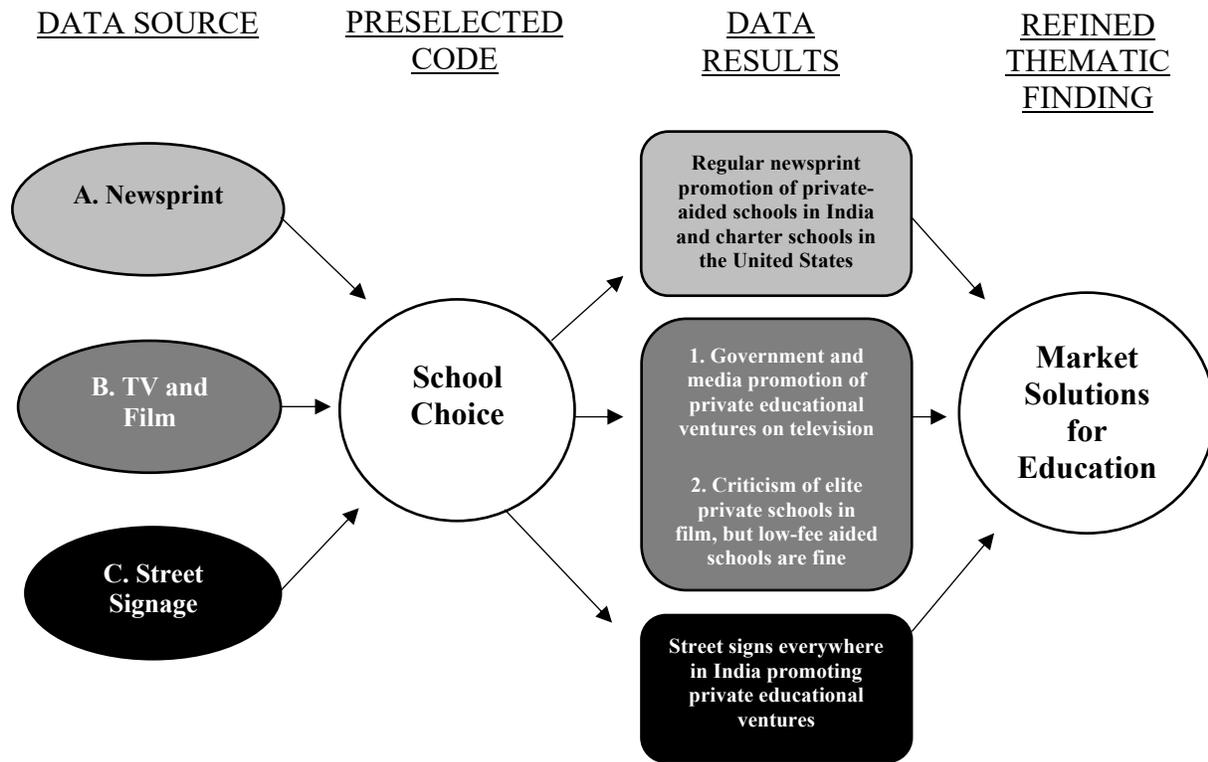
These dominant cultural messages have the potential to condition the minds and behavior of the public (Hall, 2012). The public is not always aware of the conditioning because the messages are framed in such a way that they become culturally normative and taken for granted (Miller, 2010). It is the mere presence of media messages and across media types that establishes the cultural media domain of any place, and this is what ECA as a methodology was designed to explore. Thus, in the context of this study, ECA provided a powerful lens through which to view and analyze the governmental and media promotion of educational messages (Stokes, 2012).

### *Employing ECA: Data Collection and Analysis of Media Texts*

This article drew from data gathered around the annual case of standard 12 board exam score announcements in India from 2017-2018. This exam is the most important educational assessment for students in India, as it establishes one’s potential access to quality higher education and greater life chances. As such, the event garners heightened media attention on educational matters in India and abroad (Boucher, 2018). The data sources included newsprint media, television, film, and street signage. In India, newsprint is the most consumed form of media and is on the rise in circulation (Anonymous, 2016). Television and film were consulted for similar reasons of popular consumption (Chakravarty, 2013). Lastly, street signage is everywhere in India, and during the 12 standard board exam announcement, street signage on educational topics abound. This provided copious ethnographic data to capture the important view from the street (Krase & DeSena, 2016).

Figure 1 illustrates the coding protocol and logic model utilized to discern and develop the thematic findings of this preliminary study. From these data collected and analyzed over two consecutive years, stories emerged that revealed very strong correlations among notions of democracy, market solutions for education, school privatization, and school choice in both countries, and these findings align with studies that present market solutions for education on a global scale as increasingly normative (Ball, 2012; Lee, 2018; Marcotte & Dalane, 2019).

**Figure 1.** Adapted ECA Coding Protocol and Thematic Logic Chart



Source. Altheide and Schneider, 2013

## Results

Both India and the United States have legal commitments to public schooling, but these promises for a quality, accessible, and equitable public-school system have been compromised by the gradual privatization of education along market models (Baltodano, 2017; De et al., 2011). Privatization takes many forms. The most common trend in both countries has been the expansion of private investment into public education—resulting in public-private partnerships that blur the lines of what public schooling looks like (Probe Report, 1999; Ravitch, 2016; Spring, 2015).

### *School Types in India*

In India, there are three types of schools: (a) public-government schools; (b) private-aided schools that are privately managed, but partially funded by the government; and (c) independent private schools. Both private-aided schools and fully independent private schools require that students pay school tuition fees. The Indian government is actively promoting the expansion of private and private-aided schools in all education sectors (Planning Commission Government of India [PCGI], 2013).

The impetus for private-sector actors to invest into education in India is twofold. First, owning and managing private or private-aided schools can be financially lucrative (Tierney & Sabharwal, 2017). Second, the government of India has eased licensing requirements for individuals interested in opening private-aided schools (PCGI, 2013). This strategy was suggested by the World Bank as a means to ease the financial burden that education funding bears on governments (Dreze &

Sen, 2013), and it is a plan that has been implemented in other so-called developing countries around the world such as Chile (Stromquist & Sanyal, 2013).

### ***School Types in the United States***

School types in the United States are very similar to those in India. They include public schools, charter schools, and independent private schools. Public schools at the elementary and secondary levels are generally free, as they are funded by federal and state governments. Charter schools became popular in the 1990s, and these schools are funded by tax dollars. They manage enrollment through lotteries and other gatekeeping measures such as test scores (Jason, 2017; Malkus, 2016; Marcotte & Dalane, 2019). While proponents of charter schools—such as Secretary of Education Betty DeVos—have suggested that these schools are quality alternatives to failing open-access public schools (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2019), critics have emphasized that charter schools function as private schools due to their selective enrollment policies and, thus, promote structural social inequality (Apple, 2005; Lawrence, 2005). In the United States, substantial tuition fees are usually only required in independent private schools. This practice limits access to these schools for students who come from low-income families (DeSena & Ansalone, 2009; Lawrence, 2005).

The majority of students in both countries attend open-access public schools, but private and private-aided schools in India and private and charter schools in the United States have many proponents and growing enrollments (Jain et al., 2014; Malkus, 2016). The following data were drawn from educational reports from the Government of India Ministry of Human Resource Development, India's 12<sup>th</sup> five-year plan, the USDOE, and media data on educational topics collected in India and the United States during 2017-2018. These data represent enrollment statistics for K-12 students.

### ***Creative Data Reporting in Support of Market Solutions for Education: India***

According to recent student enrollment data reported by India's school districts and compiled by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, 25% of K-12 schools are private, and 40% of all K-12 students are enrolled in private schools. The statistical projections forecast that by 2022, private schools will grow to 60% of all student enrollments (Jain et al., 2014; PCGI, 2013). Proponents for school privatization have argued that India's public schools are a failure, and instead of further supporting public schools, they suggest that India should focus their efforts on public-private partnerships via low-fee, private-aided schools (Kingdon, 2017; Tooley, 2018).

However, the narrative is different if one flips the statistics. Then the clear story is that 75% of India's schools are public, and 60% of all student enrollments are in public schools. The bulk of these students are from the rural and poor areas of India, and they are the least likely to be able to afford even nominal private school tuition (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). Public school proponents have argued that India needs to renew its commitment to constitutionally protected public schooling for *all* Indian students (De et al., 2011; Probe Report, 1999). If the Indian government stopped encouraging private-sector investment into education, reversed their investment strategy into primarily private-aided schools, and put more financial resources in government-run public schools, then the most vulnerable students would have access to more quality education and, thus, greater agency in society (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

### *Right to Education Act (RTE) in India & the Modi-Government Tactics*

The reasons the Indian government is promoting market solutions or public-private solutions for education include: (a) to have both private interests and the general public share in the overwhelming cost of education (Probe Report, 1999), and (b) to comply with the 2009 RTE constitutional amendment that guarantees all students from the ages of 6-14 a quality and accessible education (PCGI, 2013). However, there is an additional stipulation in the RTE stating that students should receive this education free of charge. This problematizes the government's proposed solutions to support private-aided schools who charge fees as a requirement for enrollment.

An example of this tactical government support can be discerned from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's monthly national address in May of 2018—just days after the much-anticipated national standard board exam result announcements. Modi took the opportunity of the speech and the heightened societal attention toward exam scores and education to anecdotally praise the efforts of a poor tea stall owner from the Delhi slums who ran and largely funded a low-fee, private-aided school for poor slum kids (Mohanty, 2018, p. 4). The full story served to promote private-aided schools, to disparage government-administered public schools, and to cleverly skirt the constitutional obligation to provide an open access, quality, and free education to all of India's students.

### *Funding RTE: Funding Educational Access or Funding School Choice?*

While Prime Minister Modi's direct praise and support for market solutions for education is apparent in the above-mentioned media story, the Indian government also structurally supports market solutions for education through another key stipulation in the 2009 RTE. That stipulation mandates that all private schools officially recognized by the government and private-aided schools receiving governmental subsidies, must reserve 25% of their enrollments for students in low-income families and students from historically recognized scheduled castes and tribes (PCGI, 2013). The tuition for these students is required to be provided by the state and federal governments (Tierney & Sabharwal, 2017).

Much like in the United States, funding for education in India is the responsibility of individual states with only modest direct funding from the federal government as a total percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), currently at 2.7%. Thus, the educational funding, and concomitant student outcomes, correspond with the economic condition of each state. The states with wealthier, smaller, and more homogenous populations, such as Tamil Nadu or Goa in the South and Southwest of India, have better educational outcomes than do poorer, larger, and more diverse populations in states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, or Rajasthan in the North (Kundu et al., 2016). However, these three more populous northern states alone, with a combined population of 470 million, have spent a greater amount on education at the state level than have most southern states in recent years. For example, while Bihar, one of India's most populous and poorest states spent 17.7 % of their total state budget on education in 2016, Tamil Nadu in the south, with 80 million people, spent only 13.4%, and Goa, with a population of 1.5 million, spent only 8.3% (Kundu et al., 2016).

These educational spending statistics must be contextualized to make sense. Following the 2009 RTE, spending on education across states dramatically increased to address the new constitutional mandate, but in more recent years, there have been drops in educational spending in nearly every Indian state. This spending reduction corresponds with the rise in private-aided schools, and in the last decade the central and state governments have only partially subsidized private-aided schools (Kundu, et al., 2016). Specifically, the larger salaries and pensions that teachers receive in government schools are not required or offered to teachers in private and private-aided schools (A. Das, personal communication, June 15, 2018). Thus, as government schools are increasingly replaced by market-model alternatives, the funding required by the state is reduced. However, in large and populous states with a large rural population, government schools remain the school types most available to students—particularly those from poor families. For this reason, overall state spending remains higher in more populous states with larger rural populations, even if the student outcomes remain poor (Kingdon, 2005, 2017; Srivastava & Noronha, 2014).

This disparity between spending and outcomes can be partially explained by the all-time low spending on school infrastructure in government schools—even if teacher salaries and pensions remain high in schools where teacher absenteeism and other forms of neglect and corruption are rampant (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Kingdon, 2015). Government schools, particularly in poor and rural areas, often lack books, desks, toilet facilities, and sometimes even running water (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Kingdon & Pal, 2014). For these reasons, critics of government schools felt justified to promote market solutions for education. They have argued that the forces of market competition will increase school quality—a similar argument made by supporters of for-profit charter schools in the United States (Lee, 2018). In 2016, the average annual per-student expenditure across India was Rs. 12,712 (i.e., roughly \$182 per child), and proponents for school choice have suggested that this number can be further reduced as private-aided schools become more ubiquitous (Kundu et al., 2016). One can discern that the federal and state governments have a vested interest in promoting market educational solutions to reduce the burden of the cost of open-access and fully subsidized government education.

### *RTE, Student Outcomes, and Real-Life Implications*

What impact does market solutions for education have on real-life outcomes for poor students? This is the central question for people who view education as a vital social service to promote access, agency, and social justice to all students regardless of their socio-economic status (De et al., 2011). People with this view are outraged that more investments are not being allocated for open-access government schools (De, et al., 2011; Probe report, 1999; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). They argue that low-fee private schools are out of the reach of the majority of poor and rural Indian students, and that if the government fully funded free and open-access government schools, then the country could actually and successfully comply with the 2009 RTE (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

However, proponents for school-choice see the 2009 RTE as not going far enough to support what they view as quality alternatives to a failing public school system in India (Dixon, 2012; Kingdon, 2017, 2015; Tooley, 2018). These proponents of market solutions for education claim that low-fee private schools outperform government schools in standard test scores, and thus, are proven to be better (Kingdon & Pal, 2014). This is regularly reported in the media—particularly in the weeks following standard board exam results (Boucher, 2018).

For example, on May 30, 2018, immediately following the board exam results, the widely circulated *Daily News and Analysis* ran the following headline, Central Board of Secondary Education (CSBE): In Delhi region, government schools drop pass percentage (Iftikar, 2018). This headline implies that students in government schools are not prepared for the rigors of standard board exams, but this belies the full picture of government school student outcomes. In 2018, students did marginally drop to a lower board exam pass percentage than in 2017. However, they compared favorably with their private school counterparts in 2018. Also, students from government schools who took the CBSE standard board exam in 2017 passed at a significantly higher percentage than students from private schools that year (92.44% compared to 78.1% for private school students). These details were not reported in the headline, and this omission misleads the reading public on the quality of government schools.

From this example one can see that school-choice advocates have an ally in India's cultural media domain where media outlets support school-choice measures (Boucher, 2018; Chakravarty, 2013). This media support of marketized education initiatives has the impact of swaying public support to their cause (Herman & Chomsky, 2012). This support, along with creative governmental reporting on educational enrollment data, has resulted in reduced funding for quality government schools, and the losers in this scenario are poor students who cannot afford even low-fee private schools. Additionally, the educational outcomes of students in certain government schools are on par with their private-school counterparts, and this suggests that government schools are not as broken as some claim. To echo the now-famous perspective of Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) speaking to this very issue in the American educational context, India does not have a significant achievement gap; rather, they have an educational debt to their students and to their public government school system.

### ***Creative Data Reporting in Support of Market Solution for Education: United States***

Like India, the dominant narrative emanating from mass-media reporting in the United States is that public schools are a failure, students are not achieving to the minimum standards, and teachers and parents in public schools are largely to blame (Ravitch, 2016). A solution to this problem is also promoted through mass media, conveying the message that charter and private schools are viable alternatives to failing public schools (Jason, 2017; Radke, 2017). Further, government reporting on enrollments further confuses the debate. According to the USDOE (2018), only 10% of student enrollments are in private schools, and the majority of those are in religiously affiliated schools. Thus, 90% of all United States student enrollments are in public schools (USDOE, 2018). But this belies the complexity of school privatization and school choice initiatives in American schools.

In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton promoted public school choice measures that resulted in all but eight U.S. states passing pro charter school legislation (Jason, 2017). From 2004 to 2014, the number of students enrolled in charter schools increased by more than two million—more than 200% (USDOE, 2018). The USDOE classifies charter schools the same as public schools in their statistics for overall student enrollment percentages, and in doing so they inflate the actual public-school enrollments. Ravitch (2016) suggests the likelihood that this decision was a conscious effort to conceal school inequality in the United States. Private and private-aided schools in India and private and charter schools in the United States are not equitable for all students, as all students do not have access to these schools. Even if they did have equal access, there is no reliable data to

suggest that their educational and real-life chances would be better. Lee (2018) suggested variance in state charter regulations, administration type, profit motive, and admissions policies as potential reasons for the lack of reliable data.

### *Charter School Varieties and Funding Schemes*

As in India, funding for education in the United States is provided by individual states. For example, the federal government allocated 3.6% of total GDP to education in 2017, and this allocation is less than the average by participating Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (World Bank, 2019). Thus, they provide only about 10% of the required educational funding for K-12 education, and states cover the remaining 90% (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018). Given this context and the burden of educational funding needs, states vigorously compete for federal aid dollars, and the standard is typically measured by student outcomes on standardized exams—rewarding states, districts, and schools with the highest student marks (Ravitch, 2016).

This standard for federal funding was established following the *No Child Left Behind* initiative of the Bush administration (Ravitch, 2016). In this and similar policies, high-performing schools were rewarded with increased funding, and lower-performing schools received reduced funding. It is in this context that charter-school alternatives have become increasingly popular. States have experimented with these school options in the effort to raise student performance on standard exams in the competition for increased federal funding, and more recently in the effort to reduce their funding obligations—approximately \$12,000/per student as a national average in the United States (NCES, 2018).

State charter school policies are administered by the individual states, and thus vary significantly from state to state. This makes it difficult to find consistent data on the overall role that charter schools play as educational alternatives to open-access public schools (Jason, 2017; Lee, 2018; Marcotte & Dalane, 2019). The most controversial change in the charter-school scene has been the recent approval of for-profit charter schools in many states, often operated and administered as Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) (Lee, 2018).

EMOs often obtain charter contracts across multiple states, buying out existing charter school contracts, in the explicit quest for financial profit (Jason, 2017; Lee, 2018; Radke, 2017). Prior to profit-driven charter ventures, charter schools were funded by state tax dollars, but they had broad autonomy to manage their school their way—so long as student achievement scores on standard tests remained high (Jason, 2017). The advent and approval of for-profit charter schools have changed the scene to comply with actual economic market solutions more fully for education where EMO investors accept state dollars to run schools as entrepreneurial ventures (Lee, 2018). In some states, for-profit charter schools receive fewer dollars per student than public schools or traditional charter schools, but these EMOs speculate that as they expand to administer more schools, that their profits will increase (Center for Education Reform, 2019). Like India, charter-school proponents in the United States have allies in both governmental reporting of charter schools as public schools as well as favorable and selective reporting by the media (Giroux, 2014; Ravitch, 2016). The result is a carefully encoded promotion of school-choice and market solutions for education as a better alternative to traditional public schooling (Hall, 2012).

### *Neoliberal Media Propaganda for School Choice*

Just as governmental educational reporting misleads the public in India and the United States, so too do the countless media stories that praise school choice over and above open-access public schools. A few examples from both contexts will demonstrate this point.

#### *Media for School Choice in India*

Propaganda for school privatization in India comes through many sources, including government statistics, sponsored academic reports and articles, and newsprint reporting. The previous section provided examples of high-profile media promotion of market solutions for education. The World Bank has sponsored research that advocates public-private schooling ventures in India (e.g., Kingdon, 2005; Kingdon & Pal, 2014), and the Cato Institute has sponsored and published research advocating for private schooling for India's poor (e.g., Dixon, 2012; Tooley & Dixon, 2005). These articles influence education policy makers in India and have had an impact on school privatization policies (Boucher, 2017).

Additionally, the Indian public is inundated by news stories that disparage the quality of public schools and praise the merits of private schools. The article headlines and opinion editorials run titles such as *Many of India's Poor Turn to Private Schools* (Bajaj & Yardley, 2011), *India Opens a Door to Private Education* (Shaw, 2012), or *Indian schools are failing their students* (Kingdon, 2015). These commonplace articles from India's top-circulating papers function as neoliberal propaganda and serve to both normalize public sentiment against government schooling and to promote marketized education (Oza, 2012).

#### *Bollywood Chimes In: When Neoliberal Critique Actually Supports School Choice*

Another example of this support can be found in the mega-hit Bollywood film *Hindi Medium* that was released in May of 2017 to correspond with the national announcement of the standard 12 board exam results (Vijan & Choudhary, 2017). The film was overtly critical of elite, private, English-medium schools in India, and it specifically criticized the 2009 RTE that instituted a lottery system to give students from marginalized families the opportunity to attend elite schools. However, the message left by the film is that low-fee, Hindi medium schools—which are generally private-aided schools—are good alternatives to the hype and esteem that Indian society generally holds for elite, private schools. Although the movie correctly critiques certain aspects of market solutions for education, it serves as a major advertisement for low-fee private schools.

The social impact of this film and its primary advocacy for low-fee, private-aided schools should not be underestimated, as this was the eighth highest grossing film in Bollywood history. While the message in the film of resistance to elite private schools was clear, actual media messages that report on real-life outcomes and acts of resistance were difficult to find in the data. However, one news story did stand out in the data for 2017.

#### *Marginalized Reporting of Active Resistance to School Choice*

Stories that demonstrate resistance toward school privatization are reported, but they are rare. For example, on June 6, 2017 the *Times of India* printed an article with the following title: "Private is passé, Gujarat villagers go old school" (Kaushik, 2017, p. 9). This article told the story of an entire

village that left the government-aided private schools in favor of the free government school where, they argued, the education was both free and of better quality. This story was marginalized to page nine of the paper. The fact that the story was printed at all amidst a cultural and media norm of educational privatization promotion is remarkable, and it is important that there are instances where citizens demand the free and quality public education that is guaranteed in their constitution.

### *Media for School Choice in the United States: Reporting as Creative Deceit*

Media propaganda can also manifest as an omission or manipulation of information. For example, in the United States charter schools are advertised as an alternative to regular public schools, but charters are privately managed and set their own admission requirements. Thus, they function as sorting institutions that promote select students and marginalize others. Charter schools are technically public schools because they receive public funding, but functionally they are private schools (Lawrence, 2005).

An example of this can be found in an article published in the *Las Vegas Weekly* on the topic of charter schools (Radke, 2017). The title *Hometown Hero Andre Agassi's Educational Efforts Have Quietly Expanded Far Beyond Las Vegas* engages a form of propaganda described as "creative deceit" in an effort to sway public opinion in favor of charter schools (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006, p. 9). Most readers of *Las Vegas Weekly* know that Agassi was formerly a famous tennis star whose hometown is Las Vegas; thus, he is contextually described and known as a hometown hero. However, there is also an implication that his educational efforts in and beyond Las Vegas are heroic or positive, and this is the moment of creative deceit. The article praises Agassi and his Las Vegas charter school for helping the most vulnerable students to attain a quality education, and throughout the article there are pictures of Agassi with famous celebrities, such as Carlos Santana, who donated guitars to Agassi's charter school.

The title and images of this particular article have the potential to sway the casual reader who does not take the time to critically read the full article or research the impact of charter schools on public education in Las Vegas. The deceit is further perpetuated by the omission of the structural policies of charter schools as public-private partnerships that have the potential to further marginalize students in the public-school sector (Apple, 2005). Thus, this is a one-sided article that propagandizes the so-called merits of charter schools. Only toward the end of the article do we learn that Agassi sold his charter school to Democracy Prep, a mega-Educational Management Organization that invests in and manages charter schools across the country as for-profit ventures. With this omitted insight, the story becomes more complex than the headline suggests, and it demonstrates the influential role of media propaganda in shaping public opinion on education policy.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

### ***Conclusions***

The results presented in the preceding sections reveal ways in which the respective departments of education in India and the United States manipulate school enrollment data and classification of school types. India inflates their private school enrollment by tallying private-aided schools in the

percentage of overall private enrollments. The USDOE does exactly the opposite. They tally charter schools as public schools, thereby inflating public school enrollments and concealing governmental support for school choice (Lee, 2018). This manipulation of data is further perpetuated in dominant media reports and messages in both countries, and this leads to the following paradox and to the social importance of this research. Namely, while both India and the United States have constitutional commitments to free, open access, and quality public education for all students as an inclusion of their purported freedoms in their respective democracies, both nations have also increasingly promoted market-driven initiatives to provide this so-called educational equity—initiatives that, in reality, establish structural educational inequity. The result is the diverting of much needed funding from quality public education to public-private educational schemes, and this leaves low income students—those who typically cannot access school choice—with the very real prospect of limited life outcomes as a result (Klees, 2017; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

India legally recognized this educational inequity with their 2009 RTE constitutional amendment. However, even if one favorably considers the RTE affirmative-action stipulation that requires private and private-aided schools to reserve 25% of their seats for poor and historically marginalized students at the government's expense, the reality is that government officials who oversee this scheme are largely susceptible to bribes where the seats go to students who can pay tuition fees, rather than being reserved for students in real need (Tierney & Sabharwal, 2017). Many low-fee private schools rely on the receipt of full tuition fees for all of their seats in order to make a profit (which is their goal as entrepreneurs), and thus, they falsely report their compliance to the RTE reserved seat law. A common result, then, is that the government saves money and saves face by (a) not subsidizing tuition for reserved seats, (b) by reducing the need to operate as many fully open access and free government schools, and (c) by appearing to support the affirmative action mandate within the RTE without actually needing to fully enforce the policy. Even more broadly, this scheme allows the government, through constitutional amendment, to structurally provide legal sanction, if not outright advocacy, for market solutions for education (Boucher, 2018; Srivastava & Noronha, 2014).

As the results revealed, charter schools are increasingly popular in the United States, and they are advertised to the public as efficient and quality alternatives to traditional public schools. But charter school promotion and advertisements almost never reveal the whole story. The headlines praise charter schools as efficient and of high quality, and the advertisements and advocacy articles are so frequent that the public can easily internalize these messages as authentic without knowing what is at stake (Krase, 2012; Miller, 2010). These narratives often omit the fact that many charter schools are for-profit ventures that operate with public funds. Worse yet, charter schools are not always open access (Apple, 2005; Lee, 2018). Some have selective admissions criteria that serve as gatekeepers to admit or reject select students. So, just as India's RTE looks on the surface to promote educational equity, so too do charter schools in the United States. But beneath the surface of school reporting and the ubiquitous media messages in favor of public-private partnerships for education, there is clear and structural educational inequity in the world's two largest democracies.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

To return to one of the meta-questions from the opening of this article: Is there something inherent in large and diverse democratic countries that somehow leads to inequality? This question is too

abstract and broad to address in the context of this article. However, it is still a question worth contemplation. If the scope is narrowed and reframed in the context of educational (in)equity, then there is evidence in the preliminary results presented here, that India and the United States purport to value free, quality, and open-access education for all students as an inherent right. But at the same time, their educational reporting and funding strategies, along with their respective cultural media domains, clearly promote market solutions where education becomes a commodity to purchase—a matter of choice. Turning to the market to fund and administer the social service of education undermines educational equity and allows only those with socio-economic means to benefit. This is the democratic conundrum. If democracy is about freedom, then is this freedom a matter of choice or one of equitable access? The data results and concomitant findings from this preliminary research suggest that in India and America commitments to educational equity and access are giving way to the market forces of school choice.

### ***Practical Implications***

Individuals need to better scrutinize and critically analyze the statistical reporting and media messages related to education that they encounter as part of their broader media domain. If persuasive and dominant messages that promote education as a mere market commodity go unchecked, then these agendas have the very real potential to become socially normative (Hall, 2012; Herman & Chomsky, 2012; Miller, 2010). One glaring practical implication is that educational policy will continue to be guided by dominant market mechanisms if the public does not take the time to consider the broader implications for all students—for those with, as well as those without, the means to consume school choice.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

It is important to acknowledge that the results, findings, and discussion presented in this article are not necessarily generalizable beyond the scope of this study (Creswell, 2016). While the aim of quantitative research is often the generalizability of results, qualitative research does not normally aspire to such goals and seeks data saturation instead. As qualitative research, the focus in this study was on differing forms of media that potentially serve to condition or persuade the public to a favorable, or at least normative, perception of school choice, public-private partnerships, and other market solutions for education. The results presented in this article support the assertion that India and the United States both have turned to market solutions to provide and fund education. But this should be understood as a preliminary study.

To better address the macro and micro research questions posed in this article, a longitudinal study is recommended. By collecting media data around a bounded case for two consecutive years, it was possible in this study to gather and analyze a large amount of evidence to support the findings. However, as political climates change, policies change. The media follows this change, and for this reason, a longitudinal media study of five consecutive years is planned. This extension will overlap political elections and administrations in India and the United States, and these political changes will certainly impact and reveal further entanglements with the preliminary results presented here.

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