

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how political ideologies—particularly neoconservatism—can manifest as forms of systemic violence through educational policy decisions. This paper examines how governmental responses, guided by these ideologies, influenced educational equity and student participation. Drawing on data from the research project “Impediments and Enablers to Schooling of Non-/Privileged Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic – A Comparison between Germany and Canada,” (Project Funder: BMFTR, BEB-CoP- 01UP2219), which compares the social and academic participation of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, I contextualize these findings within a broader global frameworks that includes Brazil and the United States.

Neoconservative governance, characterized by market-oriented policies, populist communication—including skepticism toward scientific expertise—and resistance to collective welfare measures, can be understood as a form of structural violence when its impact on educational systems during crisis periods is considered (Hursh 2023). This violence is not enacted through direct force but emerges from potent discourses of power (Foucault 2023) that create and exacerbate educational inequalities, particularly affecting students from non-privileged backgrounds (Goudeau et al. 2021).

The contrast between neoconservative and progressive governmental responses to COVID-19 provides insight into how political ideologies shape educational outcomes. In Brazil, under Bolsonaro, and to a lesser extent in the United States under Trump, neoconservative approaches—characterized by virus skepticism and resistance to protective measures—resulted in educational disruptions that disproportionately affected vulnerable populations. These approaches represent a form of socio-political violence, as evidenced by a deliberate dismissal of scientific evidence and a disregard for educational equity (e.g., Fonseca et al. 2021).

In contrast, Canada and Germany adopted approaches that combined the implementation of regulatory measures with public education campaigns to ensure compliance with pandemic protocols (Klinge et al. 2023). Research from the BEB-CoP project reveals crucial differences in how these political strategies affected student experiences. Although previous studies on the pandemic’s consequences suggest that existing educational inequalities—particularly for children and adolescents from non-privileged families—have been exacerbated (Fischer 2020), students’ perspectives and their crisis-related school and family experiences during and after the pandemic have rarely been investigated systematically. The BEB-CoP project addresses this research gap.

The project’s comparative analysis of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in both countries demonstrates how systemic factors can either enable or inhibit social and academic participation. Through group discussions with secondary school students and interviews with school leadership at five Canadian schools and six German schools, the study identified ways in which different educational structures and priorities shaped

student experiences during the pandemic. Canada's school system is among those that, even before 2020, transformed social inequality into educational inequality to a significantly lesser degree than countries such as Germany, based on global and OECD comparisons (Schleicher 2019). This distinction renders Canada an interesting comparative framework for pandemic management. In contrast, the considerably higher level of educational inequality in Germany, which correlates with socioeconomic background, is linked to early performance-based selection processes (Dumont et al. 2014). This stands in stark contrast to Canada's unified school structure (Haeck/ Lefebvre 2020).

In Canada, an emphasis on social connection and well-being—coupled with advanced digital infrastructure—facilitated more equitable educational continuity. Although German schools also achieved relative success, they faced greater challenges due to a stronger emphasis on academic achievement over personal connection. These differences became especially evident when comparing socially disadvantaged schools. In discussions with both students and teachers, it became apparent that even among educational professionals, neoconservative attitudes might infiltrate their thinking when a heavy focus is placed on individual performance. While Canadian educators consistently emphasized collective class progress, German teachers often problematized students individually for their poor performance or even claimed that certain students lacked the necessary capacities for their respective school types. This individualized categorization, inherently tied to the separation into different school forms—a practice absent in Canada's unified school system—exerts discursive violence on students by reinforcing these classifications. The Canadian approach, by prioritizing both public health and educational continuity, demonstrates how a progressive governance model can mitigate crisis impacts through systematic support structures.

The findings of this study suggest that more progressive state responses during the pandemic are associated with improved learning outcomes. Furthermore, the research highlights that neoconservative governance can perpetrate violence through educational policy by exacerbating existing social inequalities via an inadequate crisis response that prioritizes ideological positions over evidence-based educational needs. The study also reveals that even teachers from more progressive states can inadvertently adhere to neoconservative structures by categorizing students rather than empowering them.

In summary, the intersection of neoconservatism and educational policy during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how political ideology can manifest as structural violence within educational systems. The contrast between neoconservative and progressive responses—particularly as illuminated by the comparative analysis of the BEB-CoP project—underscores the crucial role of governmental ideology in either mitigating or exacerbating educational inequalities during crises. This understanding is essential for developing more equitable and resilient educational systems capable of protecting vulnerable students in future global challenges.

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