Schooling at the Doorstep of Dystopia: On Educating for Unsustainable Futures

ROGER SAUL
University of New Brunswick

ABSTRACT: The lifespans of North American public school students are on course to intersect with emerging dystopian realities of human pain and suffering brought about by climate change and its effects. Are schools well-disposed to engage students earnestly about the worlds that scientific consensus advises us they will encounter? This essay of critique suggests that they are not. It suggests that a set of interrelated tendencies, fundamental to the philosophy and functioning of schools, precludes their doing so. It names and discusses these tendencies as the problem of overwhelming school allegiances to a self-help ethos of vacant positivity, the structural infantilization of young people as a function of school power relations, and the allegiance to short term economic imperatives and individualism over environmental sustainability and communitarianism in determinations of the meanings and purposes of education. The essay concludes that on the current course, schools are miseducating students and encouraging them on a path toward unsustainable futures.

Résumé: La durée de vie des élèves des écoles publiques nord-américaines est en croisement avec les réalités dystopiques de la douleur et de la souffrance humaines provoquées par le changement climatique et ses effets. Les écoles sont-elles bien disposées à engager sérieusement les élèves dans ce monde que le consensus scientifique nous conseille et dans lequel les jeunes feront partie? Cet essai critique suggère qu'ils ne sont pas prêts. Il existe un ensemble de tendances interdépendantes, fondamentales pour la philosophie et le fonctionnement des écoles qui les empêche de le faire. Cet essai discute ces tendances: 1) le problème des allégeances écrasantes de l'école à une éthique d'auto assistance de positivité manquante; 2) de l'infantilisation structurelle des jeunes en fonction des relations de pouvoir de l'école; 3) et de l'allégeance aux impératifs économiques à court terme; et 4) à l'individualisme par rapport à la durabilité environnementale et le communautarisme dans la détermination des buts de l'éducation.

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 54, No. 1, 2021, 19 - 38.

L'essai conclut que sur le parcours actuel, les écoles sont en train de mal instruire les élèves et de les encourager sur la voie d'un avenir insoutenable.

Introduction

Dystopian news abounds. In Cape Town, a public preoccupation for much of 2018 concerned staving off the arrival of "day zero," the moment – for a time projected to be in April of that year, then later averted – in which South Africa's largest city was to suffer a drought so significant that its 4 million residents would have to line up to receive water rations (Mahr, 2018; Onishi & Sengupta, 2018). In Nawabshah, Pakistan, a city of over 1 million people, 2018 also brought the Earth's hottest April on record, including a day in which the temperature exceeded 50 degrees Celsius (Watts & Hunt, 2018).**1** Locations in or near cities as geographically dispersed as Basra, Sydney, Madrid, and Los Angeles have all recently recorded temperatures in the high 40s, signaling the onset of a calamitous, new 'normal' across much of the world (Watts & Hunt, 2018). As I write this, forest fires covering more than one million acres burn in California, and span vast swaths of British Columbia (where over 600 were active in August 2018).**2** The black carbon emitting from these fires – instigated by issues such as prolonged heat waves, exceedingly dry vegetation, unfettered population growth, car emission excesses, and persistent home building in areas prone to fire – have darkened towns and cities, and stoked legitimate fears among many of associated respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses, not to mention a host of attendant anxieties (Arango, 2018; Mortillaro, 2018).

In the midst of this sort of climate change news, I attend an educational technology conference in my role as an education professor, a conference of the sort occurring across North America and beyond. I am sold a message of unambiguous optimism: about how new school-business partnerships will soon help prepare students for a life of steady and secure employment, about the potential of technology enhanced learning for promoting new forms of global citizenship among young people, and about the redemptive social and economic promises of education (Saul & Burkholder, 2019). In the ensuing months, I also have occasion to enter a few of my city's schools, as well as consult with colleagues doing the same, and see this same optimism consistently reproduced: on school walls I see countless posters affirming the power of positive thinking and

personal initiative (Saul, 2016a), I see pedagogical practices that emphasize the authority of individualism over communitarianism (Blackmore, 2019; Coles, 2018),3 and I see school structures deeply wedded to liberal humanist ideals of meritocracy and achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Illich, 1971).

Nowhere in these educational practices do I see any engagement with the very credible and increasingly plausible possibility that the lifespans of more and more of today's North American school aged students are on course to intersect with new, pervasive, dystopian realities of human pain and suffering brought about by climate change and its effects. Nor, for that matter, do I see much teaching about the fact that the specter of dystopia is already a reality for young people across vast swaths of the globe – including within North America – where some estimates suggest that up to 17% of the world's children live in poverty, and where difficult presents and imagined futures are likely to continue to dispossess some students (those most affected by long standing practices of social and school-based discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and ability) much more than others (Coles, 2018; Delpit, 2019).

My inquiries to colleagues near and far reveal much of the same. While I see, hear, and read many examples of curricula and pedagogy that emphasize engaged global citizenship and social responsibility (OECD, 2018; Toukan, 2018), and while there exists a tradition of engaging dystopian literature in schools across much of the global North (through a familiar canon of Orwell, Huxley, and others), these practices are most often motivated by what Ayers (2013) calls "creative repair," or "the capacity to imagine a better world" (p. xi). What I do not see and hear in schools is a more determined, more uncomfortable, but to my mind more earnest account of the climate change realities of the current historical moment, an account divorced from long standing imperatives to imbue the 'doing' of education with requisite fictions about positive outcomes and evolved futures.

Roy Scranton, the director of Notre Dame's Environmental Humanities Initiative, suggests that climate change realities threaten to prompt a new normal that will,

> destabilize the conditions for all human life, everywhere on earth. Normal means more fires, more category 5 hurricanes, more flooding, more drought, millions upon millions of migrants fleeing famine and civil war, more

> crop failures, more storms, more extinctions, more record-breaking heat. Normal means the increasing likelihood of civil unrest and state collapse, of widespread agricultural failure and collapsing fisheries, of millions of people dying from thirst and hunger, of new diseases, of old diseases spreading to new places and the havoc of war (https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/opinion/newnormal-climate-catastrophes.html).

Are North American schools well-disposed to engage students earnestly about the realities of the world that scientific consensus suggests they will encounter? **4** In what follows, an essay of school criticism, I suggest that they are not. I suggest that a set of interrelated tendencies, fundamental to the philosophy and functioning of schools, precludes their doing so. I name and discuss these tendencies as the problem of overwhelming school allegiances to a self-help ethos of vacant positivity, the structural infantilization of young people as a function of school power relations, and the allegiance to short term economic imperatives and individualism over environmental sustainability and communitarianism in determinations of what education is for.

To note, I am less concerned with imagining a more ideal school culture in the wake of difficult futures in what follows, which is not to say that such practices of imagining are not worthwhile. Rather, I locate this essay in a tradition of cultural criticism that seeks, through sustained inquiry into the prospective inadequacies of 'what is', to prompt others – researchers, public officials, school administrators, teachers – into considering their own projects of 'what might be'. Fundamental to this formulation is that the work of 'what might be' is never best served by a superficial rush to apply the tenets of criticism, let alone never best served through adherence to the exclusive and decontextualized vision of the critic. Educational application in response to sound criticism, criticism that succeeds in opening perceptual gaps for others, is in its best iterations conceived of as a collaborative, negotiated, distributed, and context-based practice. According to this formulation, what must come before application – before "mere activism," or action without thought (Freire, 2004, p. 65) – is a commitment to thinking critically about matters of concern (Latour, 2004). It is to these matters that this essay now turns.

Schools: Laboratories of Positivity

> Amazing things happen here…. Imagine, believe, dream…. Teachers shape tomorrow, one curious mind at a time….[5]

Schools are laboratories of manufactured positivity. During my school visits, I often take note of the ways diverse schools practice remarkable sameness in their ethical presumptions and aesthetic messaging.[6] A philosophy of optimism predominates. On school walls I see communicated a uniform language of inspiration that focuses on the promised individual rewards of hard work and personal initiative. From administrators and teachers prized within their school communities, I often hear an ideological commitment to student self-esteem building, confidence boosting, and happiness raising. And in myself, I feel, once in schools, to have entered a highly performative space whose discursive presumptions require of adults that they undertake a dispositional program of positive sentimentalizing – about infinite student potentials, unwavering teacher commitments, and the unambiguous benefits of a schooled society – as a most valued articulation of being.

Positive propagandizing in schools is indicative of broader notions about how schools, through their messaging, imagine themselves, their function within society, and what it is their students need from them. To be a student in North American public schools, just as to be a subject within the liberal democracies that house them, is to exist within a realm of policies and practices that elevate the promise of meritocracy (Au, 2016). Schools presume the potential attainabilities of perennially better and brighter futures, so long as requisite dispositions (hard work, purposeful effort, right conduct) are adopted.

A problem arises. Can schools – so deeply wedded to this messaging, so ideologically committed to discourses and practices that support it – bear to construct themselves differently? In aspects of their functioning where we could imagine alternative constructions – through, say, the work of individual teachers and classes focused on climate change inquiry, or through curriculum inserts that give teachers license to temporarily interrupt standardized benchmarks to focus on the same – could we expect

such initiatives to truly thrive in schools? Could we expect them to achieve any sort of hegemonic status? Or, rather, is it easier to imagine initiatives of this sort being swallowed up by the broader discursive presumptions that school value, assumptions based on overriding allegiances to positivity and hope?

Never mind that educational myths of meritocracy are empirically untrue (Anyon, 2017; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Even if we were to assume that they were, or at the very least that they were necessary fictions – falsehoods the thrive because they are encoded with presumptive benefits (working hard, having hope) – could we bear to imagine what a more truthful set of signifiers about the future might look like in schools? Could we imagine signs on school walls that contained messages like "Climate Change Calamity is a Certainty," or "No Amount of Schoolwork You Do Can Change the Existential Crisis that Awaits You" or "Imagine, Believe, Dream: But Also Know that Your Parents' Generation Has Altered Your Futures in Irrevocable Ways"?

To the extent that we have trouble imagining this kind of messaging in schools, we begin to hone in on the perpetuation of a denial with respect to engaging students about the truth of their circumstance, a denial increasingly unjustifiable as the science of our current historical moment continues to mount its case (Lenton et al., 2019). Yet the delusion seems deeper still. For within such a school context, even if discussions, programming, and messaging focused on the realities of climate change were to inhabit schools en masse, it is hard to see how these could easily be reconciled within the broader ethos and functioning of schools as currently constituted, hard to see how they would not be constructed as an add-on, a set of presumptions subsumed within a discursive space antithetical to them.

In my conversations with public school teachers, with whom I have occasion to converse regularly given my work, they often disclose to me that their engagements of these misalignments – between the empty optimisms of school values and messaging on the one hand, and the sober realisms of climate change on the other – are obstructed by what feels like an irreconcilable tension. A familiar fallback I encounter from teachers is something akin to, "What other way of being is there? I'm a teacher – I must project hope to students about their futures." There might very well be a functionality to the view that schools need to project optimism and positivity about the future – toward students, who are often encouraged to center their futures as a reason for attending school;

toward teachers, who must do this encouraging; and toward other school stakeholders (parents, administrators, the public), each of whom are also implicated in the fulfilments of these narratives. To this extent, it is easy to see how engaging the realities of climate change in schools is fraught. It violates a dominant school ideology: the educational project of hope (see Freire, 2014; hooks, 2003).

Yet not problematizing uncritical notions of positivity, and not earnestly engaging contemporary climate change realities – which today may amount to the same thing – comes with a cost. If positioning themselves as conduits of positivity, teachers and educational decision makers preclude important encounters with knowledge, knowledge vital to the historical moment their students occupy, from entering the discursive space of schools. Specifically, they preclude students from engaging with information that might matter most to them in one of the very few public spaces available to them to collectively make sense of these engagements. From here, the list of subsequent preclusions is long:

- they miss the chance to support students in interrogating, negotiating, and making sense of the mediated narratives about climate change that already exist in abundance all around them (in social media, in traditional media), and so cast schools as out of touch with what is arguably the most vitally important existential issue of their lives
- they preclude the opportunity for schools to become important sites of actionable response (organizing, strategizing, planning) to climate change
- they preclude students from learning about and engaging in a broad range of additional social issues likely to come under assault as a result of climate change (societal instabilities, political instabilities) – issues that one imagines would be of particular importance to young people under such circumstances, and that schools would be well-placed to otherwise address
- they perpetuate a form of global elitism, among many North American students in particular, by positioning climate change concerns as an extravagance, as something distant and/or peripheral, a form of disregard for the fact that dystopias affect the poor and the dispossessed across the globe – including those in North America – more intensely than others

- they deny students access to the important intellectual work of considering how they might begin to imagine themselves differently, and to imagine humanity differently, in a future world that might ask us all to do so.

None of the preceding can be easily, obviously, or superficially narrativized through discourses of uncritical positivity. In which case, given all that is at stake, a school ethos devoted to climate change realism – or at the very least, devoted to the disavowal of climate change bystanderdism – seems sensible. And yet in schools, empty allegiances to positivity, neither harmless nor without consequence, get in the way of engaging climate change in the fulness of all of its possibilities and implications.

Infantilizing Assumptions of Young People

A second issue that gets in the way of climate change address is the structurally determined view of young people that schools are designed to endorse.[7] To the extent that the ideas of the last section predominate – in which positivity and optimism are central organizing principles in schools – it is worth considering how schools correspondingly infantilize students as a basic aspect of their design and functioning (Illich, 1971; Popkewitz, 2013). Infantilization – the set of meanings and practices that cast young people pejoratively, according to prevalent social constructions of childhood (as innocent, immature, corruptible, perennially becoming), and so in need of close intellectual, emotional, and physical management by the adults in their periphery (Saul, 2016b; Lesko, 2012) – informs what schools believe young people are capable of knowing (and not knowing). Infantilization is evident in all manner of school discourses and practices: in its age based grading system, in its parsing of knowledge through planned curriculum, in its temporally dependent standards and benchmarks, and in its rigid disciplinary structures and rules (Raby, 2012).

In the case of addressing dystopian climate change futures, infantilization presents an impossibility. It signals a systemic allegiance to the notion that young people are not capable of handling difficult information, signals that they are too formative to be trusted to negotiate certain kinds of information responsibly or maturely. Perhaps these concerns are not entirely without merit. After all, one can imagine young people – and young children in particular – experiencing significant social and emotional tensions

in response to an education focused on climate change realism, no matter the care and sensitivity with which it was exercised. Still, it becomes difficult to justify such a dilemma as zero-sum. The gulf between ignoring and addressing such issues is vast, too vast to build justifications around not wanting to share with young people any engagement with the existential dystopian dangers prompted by climate change, especially when positive propagandizing and pejorative infantilizing are the alternative.

Recently several graduate students I was teaching – all Canadian school teachers – shared stories of many of their students missing school to engage in public climate change protests of the sort occurring across the continent and the world with increasing frequency. In one instance, a teacher shared a story of protesting high school students who took what they thought to be all of the necessary precautions in order to appease adults about missing a partial day of school. They notified the school about their absence ahead of time, notified the media about their planned protest and its purposes, arranged for speakers to deliver addresses at a rally, got the necessary parental consents, and even notified the police so as to arrange an escort during their march. The media and segments of the surrounding community celebrated their initiative. Yet the school, needing to be convinced of its value, initially threatening the absentee students with suspensions and a 'loss of privileges'. This particular school eventually came around to the side of not sanctioning the protesting students, yet some other contributors to our class discussion suggested that students in their own schools met with no such assurances.

What does it say about schools that students have to justify these kinds of actions? What does it say about school governance that students participating in a walkout, in which their goal is to collectively exercise a public voice in response to an exceedingly urgent and vital social issue, would be threatened with sanction rather than supported or celebrated? Such a response from schools is of course not a surprise. A default school response of this type – in which an appeal to existing rules and conformities is cited as a justification for inaction – seems completely unremarkable. But why should it be? Should we not be more concerned about the normalization of a rule structure that incentivizes student inaction vis-a-vis important social issues? If stepping away from the vantage point of expected behaviours that tend to be normalized in schools, away from the well-practiced habits of conformity and acquiescence prized within them, and instead toward the swelling of scholarship

and public discourse that demands action on climate change issues, it becomes preposterous that schools would take such a stance. It becomes likewise preposterous to realize that school policies are more readily and easily equipped to sanction students for their socially responsive interests than they are equipped to justify and support them. In the example that my graduate student shared, the students were being responsive to the conditions of the wider world, conditions well informed by consensus at the highest levels of intellectual expertise (Lenton et al., 2019). Students were the ethical actors in such an instance. The school is the entity that lags behind, the entity that is morally suspect.

The fact that schools infantilize young people in such ways – so that they need to wade through a series of draconian adult consents to enact social actions they perceive as right, a right often constructed as a wrong according to school dictates – is worth considering in broader context. And here it bears noting that the meanings schools ascribe to experiences and perceptions of being young are socially constructed in ways that much scholarship and public discourse recognizes as fictitious (Lesko, 2012; Saul, 2016b). Historically, for example, we know that in North America (and beyond) the genesis of modern, universalized conceptions of childhood and adolescence came into existence through interacting processes of industrialization, legislation, commercialism, shifting popular cultural and scientific sensibilities, and the concomitant creation and expansion of modern public schooling against the backdrop of all of these (Lesko, 2012; Saul, 2016b). Modern constructions of childhood and youth therefore take form as truths only to the extent that structures like schools, which hold authority in defining experiences and perceptions of being young, hold them in place.

If definitions about what it means to be young are amenable to broad historical shifts, some of them from the not so distant past (Lesko, 2012), constructions of young people in schools disproportionately lags. School models for understanding young people remain rooted in historically located allegiances to particular articulations of developmental psychology (Egan, 2005). These have helped to determine notions of being young reliant on a rigid 'ages and stages' model of growth that arguably does not remain consistent even by the changing standards of the fields through which these models were first derived (Egan, 2005). The result is a system of institutionalized ageism. Young people's emotional and intellectual maturity in North American schools is assumed based

on reductive, temporally determined notions about who they must be (Saul 2016b; Saul, 2020).8 Such an assumption creates conditions in which young people, as in the school protest example above, can become well attuned to a series of environmental concerns derived from their out-of-school education, even as schools deny them an education about the same.

In considering the issue of engaging climate change realities in schools, definitions and assumptions of young people therefore present a significant stumbling block. Climate change realities risk going unaddressed in substantive ways in schools to the extent that young people are institutionalized within a system that understands their capabilities in limited ways, and that remains inflexible in shifting these understandings (Saul, 2016c). And yet the consequence of not engaging young people on climate change in schools – the location of the dominant formative institutional experience they all share – of not inviting them to encounter and negotiate a circumstance that they will be forced to encounter as a function of being alive in this historical moment, and of therefore precluding them from forming communities of understanding that they may wish to rely on and learn from, represents a significant oversight.

In fact, in discerning what today passes for globally influential educational literature on this matter (see, for example, OECD, 2018), it seems not at all clear that education and educators are even being directed to ask the right questions about how to address climate change with young people. For this to happen, school discourses of climate change address would need to change from a focus on enacting curriculum in service of values and from within structures that educators are interested in protecting (infantilization, uncritically positive futures), to a focus on creating, with young people, curricular and educative spaces that serve a more responsive set of values. As it stands, what does seem clear in lieu of conjuring how this could arise, is that to put young people in rules base ecosystems that impinge upon their enacting leadership on this issue where they desire it, and to render schools antithetical to climate change protest rather than supportive of it, is to do students an injustice.

Assumptions About What Education is For

To the extent that public schools commit to uncritical narratives about positive futures in spite of a scientific consensus that informs

us otherwise, and to the extent that they infantilize young people by not trusting them enough to prioritize their encounters with vital information about the world and their place within it, this signals something deeper about how structures and conduits of power – its systems, its norms, its people – understand the very meanings and purposes of education.

A prior question therefore comes to the fore. Could it be that the very meanings and purposes of public school are at their core antithetical to supporting a serious program of student learning and a committed plan of social action on climate change? Where it concerns public education today, forthcoming answers are grim. In North American schools, we are in an age that prizes economic imperatives and outcomes over socially and environmentally sustainable ones, an age that values and measures individual achievements with exactitudes that belie any stated allegiances to communitarian pursuits (Saul & Burkholder, 2019). Although there's good cause to believe that it has always been so (Apple, 2004). Which is to say that perhaps schools were never designed to be otherwise, and so today are unable to maximally support climate change awareness and action because their foundational purposes support values that run counter to the kinds of discourses and practices that would support such engagements – practices like political dissent, capitalist critique, and public protest.

From where I write this, in Canada, but variously mirrored in the establishment of education systems in the United States and elsewhere, formal schooling is borne out of (and continues to bear out) imperatives to indoctrinate (Apple, 2004). In Canada, these imperatives have, for example, seen religious, nationalistic, and economic indoctrination reach primacy in their alternating intensities and focuses over time (Burke and Milewski, 2012; Gidney, 2019). Uneven, shifting, but invariably coercive to those most dispossessed, these intensities represent a history of policies and practices put forward by dominant classes in response to their perceived social concerns. None of which is to say that individual students don't make their own meanings of schooling outside of dominant dictates, or that public schools are not and have not for many represented an opportunity to encounter new knowledge, develop critical capacities, make new relationships, form new communities, or gain social ascendency (although, as per earlier, the latter is more myth than fact). Still, in public schools, the meanings students make of their experiences are always informed by the indoctrinating structures that undergird them. These are

structures designed to bring disparate young people into acquaintance with common systems of knowledge, into like tools of reasoning, into dominantly sanctioned modes of conduct and interaction, into behavioural consistencies and assimilationist ways of being, and into support of dominant hegemonic structures (be they religious, national, or economic).

The manifestations of these structures in the life of schools are so pervasive that they are rendered with unremarkable normalcy. In schools students encounter a context of national anthems and pledges of allegiance. They are encouraged to adhere to a set of practices that prize rising and moving at the sound of a bell; that prize rigid temporally determinative structures that dictate appropriate times for work, for meals, and for leisure; and that prize raising their hands to request various mundane permissions (to go the washroom, to walk through the halls, to speak). More so, they are taught to make themselves in relation to a set of structures that valourizes individualism over communitarianism, competition over cooperation, and rigid epistemological traditions that bypass alternative systems of knowledge that might be of interest to them (Battiste, 2013). These strategies teach young people to acquiesce to implicit and explicit structures of domination that fetishize obedience over intelligence. Today, more than ever, they are likewise supported by a series of sophisticated assessment and surveillance practices that penalize students who fail to meet their standards while rewarding their indoctrinations (Au, 2016).

For the most successfully indoctrinated, the promise is gainful employment, backed by a series of educational buzzwords intended to give questions of economy primacy (21st century learning, the global economy, the knowledge worker) (Saul & Burkholder, 2019; Coles, 2018). The notion that public schooling should fulfill a nation's economic imperatives is of course not new. What is new are the intensities that now accompany this notion, which find form in discourses and practices of global competition, consumerist ethics, standardized STEM-focused curricula, and endless assessment benchmarks (Coles, 2018).

In the small Canadian province from within which I work as an educator, a new 10 Year Education Plan – meant to guide all educational policy and practice over the next ten years – was recently released by the government. Titled "Everyone at Their Best," its very first line reads: "Education is the key to New Brunswick's economic future and social fabric" (Province of New Brunswick, 2016, p. 1). This is a statement that, without nuance,

renders economy and education inextricable. It is well-aligned with momentums in public schools across North America. These include school-business partnerships, technology enhanced learning (themselves largely corporate endeavours), an ever narrowing curriculum of subject matter amenable to monetization, and the elevation of competition (individual, social, national) (Saul & Burkholder, 2019; Coles, 2018).

If considering schooling futures against the backdrop of these contemporary movements in education, herein lies the problem: If governments today increasingly intend for schools to take their leads from corporations and private industry – whose unambiguous raison d'être is to turn profits, and who thus have a long history of favouring environmental policies, resource extraction procedures, and human labour practices in service of short term capital accumulation (measured in quarterly units and years rather than in decades and lifetimes) – is it at all plausible to count on them to consider schools as a serious site of support for climate change awareness and action (Coles, 2018)? Put differently, where would an earnest encounter with climate change realities possibly fit within current and long standing school focuses on nation and industry building? Here it seems that encountering these realities would for schools mean achieving understandings they might not at all be set up to achieve, might never have been set up to achieve, and might not want to achieve.

Encountering climate change realities in public schools would entail questioning the oversights, errors, and legitimacies of the governments and societies that house them. Done properly, this questioning would evolve into a sustained critique of government policies and practices. Could schools – designed for nation-building, buttressed with curricula that represent dominant social and political values, and committed to positioning students as subjects of capitalist accumulation and growth — withstand such a critique? Would educators be supported in engaging students toward these ends? Or would speaking earnestly about the current state of climate change potentially teach students to hold governments in contempt and so guarantee the impossibility of this ever coming to pass?

Public schools can and do talk a lot about valuing communities of practice, social responsibility, collective action, and the like – this rhetoric is easy to find if one seeks it. Yet in practice there can be no doubt they are first and foremost spaces that aim to impel students toward individualized allegiances to nation building and

capitalist outcomes (Coles, 2018). These devotions are pervasive: they exist in their competitive assessment structures of grading, ranking, sorting, promoting, and demotion; in curriculum development that prefers to parse knowledge acquisition into discreet, measurable units of production and consumption rather than holistically; in the subjugation of knowledge traditions that more resolutely emphasize notions of responsibility, reciprocity, and environmental stewardship (Battiste, 2013); and in conceiving of students primarily as individual units of scholarship and future labour rather than in terms of their communitarian and collective possibilities. On the contrary, an earnest and effective accounting of dystopian climate change realities in schools would have to do away with much of the above. It would have to invite and involve young people into practices of exerting political pressure on governments. It would have to support communitarian social action rather than competitive self-achievement. And it would have to enliven students to alternative intellectual traditions and ways of being. To the extent that it becomes hard to imagine any of the preceding as achievable in today's schools, this is the extent to which an adequate address of climate change futures within them seems unlikely.

Conclusion

On the current course, schools are educating their students, or, more aptly, miseducating them, on a path toward unsustainable futures. Schools can construct new programs, enact additional curriculum, change pedagogical focuses, and engage in myriad other initiatives in support of climate change education, but in the absence of subsuming these initiatives under renewed definitions about the meanings and purpose of education – at a distance from uncritical positivity, and affirming of young people's lived experiences – these are doomed. This sounds pessimistic. But why should it be otherwise? On the current course, empty optimism is untenable and unethical. The notion that everything will be fine, that students futures will be uncritically positive, has been and continues to be the dominant philosophical ideology in schools. North American public schools are wedded to values that miseducate students about their futures. Science, scholarship, media, and public discourses increasingly inform us otherwise. Schools would be wise to pay attention.

References

Andreoni, M., & Hauser, C. (2019, August 21). Fires in Amazon rain forest have surged this year. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/21/world/americas/amazon-rainforest.html

Anyon, J. (2017). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. In A. Darder, R.D. Torres, & M.P. Baltodano (Eds.), The critical pedagogy reader (2nd ed) (pp. 135-153). New York: Routledge.

Apple, M. (2004). Ideology and Curriculum (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Arango, T. (2018, August 20). Behind most wildfires, a person and a spark: 'We bring fire with us.' New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/us/california-wildfires-human-causes-arson.html

Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. Educational Policy, 30(1), 39-62.

Ayers, W. (2013). Foreword: Dystopia and education. In J.A. Heybach & E.C. Sheffield (Eds.), Dystopia and education: Insights into theory, practice and policy in an age of utopia-gone-wrong (pp. xi-xvi). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Battiste, M. (2013). Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the learning spirit. Vancouver: Purich Publishing.

Blackmore, J. (2019). Feminism and neo/liberalism: Contesting education's possibilities. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 40(2), 176-190.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.P. (1990). Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life. New York: Basic Books.

Burke, S.Z., & Milewski, P. (Eds.). (2012). Schooling in Transition: Readings in Canadian history of education. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Coles, G. (2018). Miseducating for the Global Economy: How corporate power damages education and subverts students' futures. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Delpit, L. (Ed.). (2019). Teaching When the World is On Fire. New York: The New Press.

Dennis, B., & Freedman, A. (2019, August 5). Here's how the hottest month in recorded history unfolded around the world. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2019/08/05/heres-how-hottest-month-recorded-history-unfolded-around-globe/

Egan, T. (2005). Students' development in theory and practice: The doubtful role of research. Harvard Educational Review, 75(1): 25-41.

Freire, P. (2004). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York:Continuum.

Freire, P. (2014). Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Bloomsbury. (Original work published in 1994).

Gereluk, D., Martin, C., Maxwell, B., & Norris, T. (2016). Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian education. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Gidney, C. (2019). Captive Audience: How corporations invaded our schools. Toronto: Between the Lines.

hooks, b. (2003). Teaching Community: A pedagogy of hope. New York: Routledge.

Illich, I. (1971). Deschooling Society. New York: Harper and Row.

Jordans, F. (2019, November 28). 'Generation Greta': Angry youths put heat on climate talks. Associated Press. https ://www.ctvnews.ca/sci-tech/generation-greta-angry-youths-put-heat-on-climate-talks-1.4706195

Latour, B. (2004). Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. Critical Inquiry, 30, 225-248.

Lenton, T.M., Rockström, J., Gaffney, O., Rahmstorf, S., Richardson, K., Steffen, W., & Schellnhuber, H.J. (2019). Climate tipping points – too risky to bet against. Nature, 575, 592-595.

Lesko, N. (2012). Act Your Age: A cultural construction of adolescence (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Mahr, K. (2018, May 4). How Cape Town was saved from running out of water. The Guardian.https://www.theguardian.com /world/2018/may/04/back-from-the-brink-how-cape-town-cracked-its-water-crisis

Mortillaro, N. (2018, August 17). Smoke from raging B.C. fires seen from space by NASA satellite. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/bc-fires-satellite-1.4789298

OECD (2018). Preparing our youth for an inclusive and sustainable world: The OECD PISA global competence framework.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Paris: OECD. https://www.oecd.org/education/Global-competency-for-an-inclusive-world.pdf

Onishi, N., & Sengupta, S. (2018, January 30). Dangerously low on water, Cape Town now faces 'Day Zero'. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/30/world/africa/cape-town-day-zero.html.

Popkewitz, T. (2013). The sociology of education as the history of the present: Fabrication, difference and abjection. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 34(3), 439-456.

Province of New Brunswick. (2016). 10-year education plan: Everyone at their best. Fredericton, New Brunswick. https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/ed/pdf/K12/EveryoneAtTheirBest.pdf

Raby, R. (2012). School Rules: Obedience, discipline, and elusive democracy. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Saul, R. (2020). Temporality and inequity: How dominant cultures of time promote injustices in schools. Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 42(1), 49-69.

Saul, R. (2016a). Teaching Duquan Weems: Fallacies of the hero-teacher construct as seen in The Wire. In M. Readman (Ed.), Teaching and learning on screen: Mediated pedagogies (pp. 11-25). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Saul, R. (2016b). Adolescence and clocktime: Two modern concepts intertwined, revisited, reconsidered. Global Studies of Childhood, 6(2), 234-245.

Saul, R. (2016c). Education and the mediated subject: What today's teachers need most from researchers of youth and media. Journal of Children and Media, 10(2), 156-163.

Saul, R. & Burkholder, C. (2019). Schooling futures in tension: On competing discourses at a technology education summit. Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, 16(3), 299-320.

Scranton, R. (2021, January 25). I've said goodbye to 'normal.' You should, too. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/opinion/new-normal-climate-catastrophes.html

Toukan, E.V. (2018). Educating citizens of 'the global': Mapping textual constructs of UNESCO's global citizenship education 2012-2015. Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 13(1), 51-64.

Watts, J., & Hunt, E. (2018, August 13). Halfway to boiling: the city at 50c. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com /cities /2018/aug/13/halfway-boiling-city-50c?CMP=fb_gu

Yelland, N., & Saltmarsh, S. (2011). Editorial. Global Studies of Childhood 1(1), 1-3.

---

1 In the time since I first wrote these words, July 2019 became the most recent month to earn the designation of 'hottest on record' (Dennis and Freedman, 2019).

2 As of August 2019, stories of the burning Amazon rainforest now populate the news (Andreoni & Hauser, 2019)

3 With regard to pedagogical practices that emphasize the authority of individualism over communitarianism, the relationship between education and neo-liberalism in the recent past has been well-documented (Blackmore, 2021). Many works of educational critique now point to a circumstance in which governments, industry, and at times the public increasingly tend toward conceiving of students as individual units of human capital (in competition with each other over scarce resources and future jobs). They likewise conceive of them through lenses that favour market logics of advancement and achievement, and through assumptions that students enjoy meritocratic and egalitarian freedoms absent their material realities (see Coles, 2018). It goes without saying that in schools these understandings are ported onto existing hierarchies: age-based promotional systems, endless achievement markers, grading, testing, and a series of behaviorist rewards and punishments (Raby, 2012). All of which bears asking where committed communitarian visions might fit among these.

4 Realities, it should be noted, that young people are by many accounts already and increasingly paying attention to in their out-of-school lives (Jordans, 2019).

5 These and like messages – mirrored in countless North American public schools – are derived from the walls of a school one of my colleagues visited recently (C. Burkholder, personal communication, December 10, 2018).

6 I have occasion to visit schools as part of my work as a university professor in a Canadian Faculty of Education.

7 Note the use of the word determined rather than over-determined, which is meant to call attention to the fact that although school structures favour particular conceptual and behavioural dispositions toward young people (detailed in the remainder of this section), adherence to these dispositions is not totalizing or absolute. Teachers and students exercise individual freedoms, ever constrained, from within and in relation to these structures (Gereluk et al., 2016, p. 226).

8 If seeking to deconstruct predominant notions of childhood, we need not only look to history. Contemporary geography and

sociality reveals much of the same – we can look to places around the globe, as well as to the varied experiences within these places, to perceive that perceptions of childhood and youth vary widely depending on context (Yelland & Saltmarsh, 2011).

Author and Affiliation
Dr. Roger Saul
Associate Professor, Faculty of Education
University of New Brunswick
Email: roger.saul@unb.ca - Phone: 506-443-3903