



# The Responsibilities of Historical Inheritance, in Education and Beyond

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*Editorial Comments*

## **The Responsibilities of Historical Inheritance, in Education and Beyond**

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One of the more profound effects of 60 years of neoliberal capitalism is the taken-for-grantedness with which neoliberal ontic and epistemic norms have become accepted as a permanent condition of life without historically available alternatives. That is, neoliberal capitalism’s pervasiveness as not simply an economic or even political approach, but rather as a totality that envelops existential purpose, translates to a seamless discourse of marketization, accountability, and individualism in every realm: education, healthcare, culture and entertainment, and family life. In the here and now of a globalized yet deeply unequal market, our decisions are framed according to values of relentless economic growth, personal choice, and competition. Amid such a polished and well-funded discourse, it can be easy to lose sight of other possibilities for our lives. It can feel as though entirely new solutions need to be engineered to disrupt the status quo. The remnants and recollections of other, historical ways of being and doing fade from our collective consciousness and, despairing that there is no alternative, we are compelled to traverse the structure of the present with a sense that it is not only the correct but also the sole possible mode of existence.

In her latest book, exploring how two texts from Max Weber may prove useful in addressing present-day nihilism, Wendy Brown (2023) describes our current moment as a “disorienting contemporary condition, in which philosophical, social, economic, ecological, and political coordinates for value and values are profoundly unsettled, both in knowledge practices and the world” (p. 2). She goes on to note that nihilism is intensified by “neoliberal economization of all value” (p. 21) and that “nihilism both facilitates the neoliberal economization of everything and is intensified by this economization” (p. 27). In this way, we are inscribed into an ouroboros of meaning making, trapped in an embrace of the very conditions that mobilize our anxieties—“absorption with the self, and its desires and safety” (Brown, 2023, p. 28). First, the solutions neoliberal “values” provide, like individualism and competition, worsen feelings of alienation by encouraging behaviours and actions that reify the circumstances of nihilism. Second, because neoliberal “values” are not really values tethered to anything other than the market, they remain superficial and unfulfilling, even in the rare occurrences of one’s “success.” One solution Weber proposes, which Brown critiques, is to strive to isolate values from knowledge in educational contexts. With Brown and for many reasons, I believe this radical suggestion for an epistemic approach drained of values would be impractical in a highly polarized world of information



abundance where facts are frequently ideologically interpreted. It would also handcuff pedagogy to a rather constrained and narrow framing of what constitutes knowing while severely inhibiting critical skill development. What may be more pragmatic as a starting point, and what may clarify the obscured challenges beleaguering public systems like education, is not to begin with the question of pedagogy but with the more fundamental question of educational economics. Although it is critical to analyse neoliberal “values” and their influence in pedagogy and curriculum, this analysis ought to be treated as a distinct point of discussion. By focusing on educational economics as a fundament and by clearing the path for diagnosing what ails the public good of false values and the policies they beget, we may be able to perceive more clearly that, at its root, the problem is predominantly fiscal. That is, before we can ask what education is for, we must ensure that the economic conditions for public education are in place.

Ideological disagreements can distract from the issue of the public good, which, by virtue of our participation in and embrace of neoliberal capitalism, is primarily economic. In a system starved of funds, it becomes easier to conceal that the root of the crisis is not a failure of strategy or ideology but simply a product of decades-long austerity. In Canada, we can take the erosion of the province of Ontario’s education funding as a case in point. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) tracks changes in Ontario’s public school education funding. In its recent report, it noted that funding for Ontario’s 72 school boards fell by an average of \$800 per student from 2017–2018 to 2021–2022, a cut of nearly 6% (CCPA, 2022). This cut comes at a time of rising inflation, which suggests that the actual fiscal cost will translate to even more losses in access to educational requirements. The CCPA has also published a report, *Catching Up Together: A Plan for Ontario’s Schools* (Tranjan et al., 2022), which documents not only a paucity of funding but also determines that in order to facilitate full, equal access to public education, more investment is required. Tranjan et al. (2022) recommend a 13-point plan, which I republish here in full not only because they are astute recommendations but also to highlight the non-ideological nature of the solutions and to illustrate the economic underpinning of the requisite changes:

1. Increase teaching staff for Grades 9 to 12 to allow smaller class sizes with a 22:1 student/teacher ratio and more educational supports for those students
2. Increase teaching staff for Grades 4–8 to allow smaller class sizes (24:1) and more educational supports for those students
3. Increase teaching staff for Grades 1–3 to increase educational supports for those students
4. Increase teaching staff for kindergarten
5. Give early childhood educators a pay raise to recognize their essential and challenging work and ensure that they’re no longer working poor
6. Deploy mental health and well-being teams in all schools
7. Eliminate mandatory e-learning
8. Terminate hybrid learning and mandatory full-time synchronous remote learning
9. Return to a decentralized approach to technology application
10. Increase the Learning Opportunities Grant Demographic Allocation to \$630 million, index it to inflation, and then revamp the funding calculation
11. Increase school maintenance spending to \$2 billion a year
12. Address the \$16.8 billion repair backlog within the next 10 years
13. Create transparent state-of-good-repair criteria for assessing schools, and make the information publicly available on an ongoing basis (p. 5)

In total, the authors find that an investment increase of 13% was required at the time of writing in order to address the urgent needs of public education, magnified by the COVID-19

pandemic. Unfortunately, it seems that the current political appetite for educational funding is low. Despite recommendations from parent and education advocacy groups, the provincial government's budget did not grow educational funding but deepened cuts. Press Progress (Thompson, 2022) notes that Ontario's Financial Accountability Office forecasted that, according to the current government's projections, the education system will see a \$12.3 billion "shortfall" over the next decade. As the funding envelope shrinks over the next ten years, problems and challenges caused by the shortfall will be exacerbated and will invite two outcomes: an appetite for private sector education alternatives and an onslaught of fragmentary policies that will try to provide Band-Aid solutions for an entire system under stress.

Some of these economic realities, and the outcomes of privatization and the piecemeal policies they encourage, may be evident in the current manifestation of the conflicted approaches to reading instruction in Ontario, which pits "Science of Reading" approaches against "Balanced Literacy." For example, the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) *Right to Read* report (2022a), which focuses on the reading needs of students with reading disabilities in Ontario, is not simply an argument for a different ideological approach to how reading is best taught but can be read as a stark window into a system that has been starved of the economic resources needed to support small class sizes, reading coaches, school libraries, and librarians as well as access to educational supports, such as psychologists. Many of the report's findings and recommendations can be read as running in parallel to the CCPA recommendations delineated above. For example, one of the educators quoted in the report, when asked about resources for early intervention for reading support, explicitly noted the need for funding and small class sizes:

The disconnect here is the funding. We can say all students should, and do deserve, reading [interventions] ... 100% of the time, but funding just won't allow this.... That means only the students experiencing the worst difficulties, or with parent advocates, will be referred to very intense reading speciality [*sic*] programs in schools that require small class sizes, [one-on-one], etc. (OHRC, 2022a, p. 298)

The authors of the report acknowledge these funding shortfalls throughout. They determine that "the Ministry must also provide significant funding for literacy" (OHRC, 2022a, p. 181) and not just isolated supports for numeracy. As part of its recommendations, the OHRC makes several funding-related recommendations, including that "the Ministry evaluate existing funding structures and levels to make sure there are sufficient resources for timely and effective accommodation" (OHRC, 2022b, p. 47). They find that education staffing (and the educator–student ratio) needs to be considered when planning for better reading outcomes, noting that "school boards and the Ministry of Education (Ministry) also have a role in providing adequate funding to make sure staffing levels are enough to meet the duty to accommodate" (OHRC, 2022a, p. 321). The report highlights issues with limited access to screening and assessment for reading needs, noting that boards are constrained "by pressures due to finite school supports and resources" (p. 298). The report documents a lack of funding to support ongoing teacher learning. They find that "boards reported that lack of funding from the Ministry has resulted in having to cancel or reduce initiatives that support job-embedded professional learning such as Professional Learning Communities" (OHRC, 2022a, p. 186) and that a "lack of funding and release time from teaching has hampered job-embedded professional learning" (OHRC, 2022b, p. 29). The report also details a pattern of chronic underfunding for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit schools and schools in northern and rural areas of the province.

In a similar vein, the lack of holistic funding and supports for all the dynamic needs of Ontario's diverse student population is documented in People for Education's (2023) analysis of access to mental health supports. As with the *Right to Read* report and the CCPA *Catching Up* plan, People for Education (2023) found a dearth of supports for students in need, noting that

only 9% of schools report they have regularly scheduled access to a mental health/addiction specialist or nurse, and 46% of schools report no access at all; 28% of elementary and secondary schools report they have no access to a psychologist, either virtually or in-person; nearly double the percentage with no access in 2011; [and] 93% of schools report needing support staff such as educational assistants, administrators, and custodians. (para. 10)

Here again, for the third time, an independent body examines the public education system and finds that persistent underfunding is harming students and their families. The People for Education data also show that there are the same regional inequities for access and funding for rural school boards as was found in the *Right to Read* report. As with the CCPA and the OHRC, one of the key recommendations is to secure funding for staffing.

Although the OHRC's *Right to Read* report focuses on reading and the People for Education's report reviews mental health supports, it is clear from both that the underlying economic conditions of the public education system are worsening. The *Right to Read* report, in particular, highlights how these economic circumstances translate to unequal outcomes for families from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The report describes families' experience as follows:

Success often came at a high financial cost and toll on families. One family reported spending roughly \$40,000 so their son could graduate high school and be able to choose his educational path. This included the cost of assessments, private tutoring and programs until Grade 12. Another parent reported: "We're university educated with financial resources and we just barely got him through the public system." (OHRC, 2022a, p. 103)

What is apparent is that these families' experiences are not an indictment of a particular reading approach but are indicative of a whole system under strain. The report authors go on to address the underfunding, making an explicit connection to inequity:

Given the very limited access to board professional assessments for students with suspected reading disabilities, parents often pay thousands of dollars for a private psychoeducational assessment. This is a significant hardship for some parents, and many others cannot afford to pay for a private assessment at all. This creates a "two-tiered system" in a public education system that should be equitable for all. It can entrench pre-existing disadvantage and intergenerational cycles of low literacy. From a human rights perspective, it is critical that all students who need them have equal access to accommodations and interventions, regardless of their parents' means to pay for private assessments. (OHRC, 2022b, p. 59)

These insights and perspectives are less about any particular "best approach" and more a warning that something more fundamental is eroding equality of access. They are the symptoms of an ailing system whose main disease is the persistent underfunding of education as a public good.

Perhaps, then, some of the crises and failures of accomplishment oft mentioned by politicians and special interest groups are less about policies or the inherent "lack of choice" in a

system of public goods and more a straightforward economic argument highlighting the detrimental effects of neoliberal capitalism. If a system is starved long enough, it will fail. Buttressing it through alternative approaches, programs, and policies merely elides the *trompe l'oeil*: as the system flails, private “alternatives and choices” become available. So presented, we may fail to focus on the fact that money is now being funneled away from communities and into the pockets of wealthy developers, hedge funds, and holding companies. By arguing about our ideals, about how to make do with increasingly impoverished tools, we miss the forest for the trees. And now, not only does the public good collapse, so too in time does the memory of its possibility and promise. Our historical inheritance of a public good is anything but guaranteed. Our witness to its current destruction at the hands of austerity-minded governments ought to galvanize our collective sense of responsibility. Today’s teachers and students are already losing perspective on what high quality and well-funded public education can be; if we squander our historical inheritances, future generations will have an even more difficult time generating positive alternatives, since the material and phenomenological experiences of fully public education will fade from memory. In twenty years’ time, the loss of the fact of our historical inheritance of the public good will render responses to neoliberal capitalism the stuff of distant dreams and utopian imaginaries.

This issue of the *Journal of Teaching and Learning* aims to be a contribution to that historical inheritance. It foregrounds a range of perspectives across varying issues of the current educational landscape. In “Transformative Social–Emotional Learning for Teachers: Critical and Holistic Well-Being as a Marker of Success,” Madora Soutter’s qualitative study examines the role that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) plays in the lives and livelihoods of teachers. Soutter draws upon findings to call for increased attention to SEL in teacher education programs to improve teacher well-being, retention, and satisfaction. Büşra Tombak-İlhan, Bülent Alıcı, and Dilek Güven-Hastürk offer insights into the impact of teacher learning on understandings of classroom sociology and social justice in their article “Teachers Learning Classroom Sociology and Social Justice in Primary Education: An Applied Research Project.” They illustrate the value of recognizing the whole child and of sociological framing to redraw more robust definitions of success in the classroom. In “Stones from a Glass House: The Paradoxical Condemnation of Reading Recovery in the Ontario Human Rights Commission *Right to Read* Report,” Joe Stouffer and Janice Van Dyke analyze the critique of Reading Recovery in the *Right to Read* report. The authors argue that the report employs definitions of evidence and science to endorse particular approaches, such as the Empower Reading program, while not considering the scholarly evidence of effectiveness demonstrated for Reading Recovery. Katja Kathol, Enoch Leung, and Tara Flanagan provide insight into the question of how COVID-19 disrupted the delivery of sexual health curriculum in Quebec in “The Impact of COVID-19 on Instruction for and the Implementation of Quebec’s Sexual Health Curriculum: Teacher Perspectives.” Their research reveals that sexual health education is sometimes deprioritized when there are pressures on the learning environment; their work also highlights the ongoing importance of professional development supports for teachers who are responsible for delivering this curriculum, particularly when they are not subject specialists. Amy Ballin, in “Embracing a Trauma-Sensitive Approach: One School’s Transformative Experience of Creating Equitable Schooling” uses a case study approach to highlight the various considerations for designing trauma-sensitive school environments. In the final article, “Reconciliation Through Education: A Model of Ethical Spaces and Relationality,” Yvonne Poitras Pratt and Sulyn Bodnaresko give a rich interpretation of relationality as a response to the urgent work of decolonization, as called for in Canada’s Truth

and Reconciliation Commission. They describe approaches to incorporating decolonization into classroom pedagogy in ways that are sensitive to each educator's unique subjectivity.

In addition, this issue features a response to the previous issue's Dialogue & Commentary piece by Perry Klein. In "Right to Read Implies Opportunity to Read: A Contribution to the Ongoing Dialogue Concerning the Ontario Human Rights Commission *Right to Read* Report," Jim Cummins responds to Perry Klein's remarks and furthers the discussion of the impact of the *Right to Read* report on Language education in Ontario and beyond. In this issue, we also feature two book reviews. In the first, Rogene Reid offers a perspective on Ken Badley and Margaretta Patrick's edited collection *The Complexities of Authority in the Classroom: Fostering Democracy for Student Learning*. In the second, Leslie M. Boon highlights the contributions that *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom* by Kelly A. Hogan and Viji Sathy can make to a higher education learning environment.

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