

## **EDUCATORS AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: AN ANTIDOTE TO AUTHORITARIANISM**

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The world in which we live increasingly resembles a dystopian novel. The dream of a more democratic world is diminishing as the global assault on democracy expands. The world is awash in the discourse of white supremacy, Christian nationalism, a culture of lies, and a contempt for democracy. Since the 1980s, there has been an unyielding attack on the social contract, the common good, public goods, and government responsibility. The dark clouds of economic, political, and educational fundamentalism are with us once again. Politics is now driven by big money, civic culture is collapsing, and a form of predatory capitalism (or what can be called neoliberalism) continues to wage war on the welfare state, public goods and the social contract (Giroux, 2019).

Neoliberalism maintains that the market should govern not just the economy but all aspects of society (Piketty, 2022). It concentrates wealth in the hands of a financial elite and elevates unchecked self-interest, self-help, deregulation, and privatisation to the governing principles of society. Under neoliberalism, everything is for sale and the only obligation of citizenship is consumerism. At the same time, it ignores basic human needs such as health care, food security, decent wages, and quality education. Neoliberalism views government as the enemy of the market, limits society to the realm of the family and individuals, embraces a fixed hedonism, and challenges the very idea of the public good. Under neoliberalism, all problems are personal and individual, making it almost impossible to translate private troubles into wider systemic considerations.

We live in an age when economic activity is divorced from social costs, while policies that produce racial cleansing, environmental destruction, militarism, and staggering inequality have become defining features of

everyday life and established modes of governance. Clearly, there is a need to raise fundamental questions about the role of education in a time of impending tyranny. Or, to put it another way, what are the obligations of education to democracy itself? That is, how can education work to reclaim a notion of democracy in which matters of social justice, freedom and equality become fundamental features of learning to live with dignity in a democracy?

### **A pedagogy of repression**

The growing authoritarianism in the United States (US) and a number of other countries led largely by far-right politicians has revealed, in all its ugliness, the death-producing mechanisms of white supremacy, systemic inequality, censorship, a culture of cruelty, and an increasingly dangerous assault on public and higher education. The threat of authoritarianism has become more dangerous than ever.

All of this is spectacularly illustrated by Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, who has folded religious, economic and political fundamentalism into what may only cynically be called ‘patriotic education’. It is the antithesis of any viable and democratic form of education as it promotes the banning of books, the disparagement of critical race theory and requires educators to sign what amounts to loyalty oaths, while forcing them to post their syllabus online. DeSantis has also instituted legislation that restricts tenure and allows students to film faculty classes without consent and much more. He has enacted right-wing policies that attack race, class, gender and identity. At the heart of DeSantis’s policies is a fundamental attack on thinking, questioning, being informed and, thus, enabling students and others to be able to hold those in power to account for their actions. This is a pedagogy of repression and propaganda that wallows in deception and cover up - all justified by DeSantis’ bogus claims that Florida schools have become ‘socialism factories’ (Atterbury, 2022), and that students need not be exposed to information that makes them uncomfortable.

As extreme as this might appear, experiences in the US should serve as a warning to educators and others across Canada who work to preserve

public goods. The same rules apply here, as does the same political calculus whose purpose is nothing broader than preserving a state of neoliberal and authoritarian hegemony. In June 2019, the anti-immigration Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) passed Bill 21, An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State, which barred educators and other public sector workers in Québec from wearing clothing, symbols, jewelry or other items that might be construed as a religious symbol (National Assembly of Québec, 2019). The law was struck down by Québec Superior Court because it violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 1982) but CAQ Premier François Legault simply overrode the decision by applying the ‘notwithstanding clause’, section 33 of the Charter, enshrined to allow premiers to ignore fundamental rights (Bowal, Czaikowski and Zablocki, 2020). He recently used the same clause to shut down debate around Bill 96 that promotes French language nationalism.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford faced a similar bump when his government passed the perversely titled Protecting Ontario Elections Act (2021). Its main purpose was to make it easier for his Progressive Conservative Party to collect donations while restricting third party groups from spending money to oppose its policies. Aimed primarily at bothersome teachers’ unions, this law too was struck down by the Ontario Superior Court until Ford used the ‘notwithstanding clause’ to ensure that opposition could continue to be restricted in Ontario. Ford has had plenty of experience disrupting and controlling participation in government, cutting Toronto City Council from 47 to 25 seats as soon as his government was elected in 2018. In the summer of 2022 with no discussion, he invoked Bill 3, Strong Mayors Building Homes Act (2022) which arbitrarily gives strong mayor powers to Ottawa and Toronto so that they can rule more freely - with an eye to provincial priorities (Kelpin, 2022).

There is a lot we can learn from Doug Ford about education’s slide to the right; his alleged worker populism belies his actions. Back in 2018, when it suited his political needs to paint the ruling Liberal Party in a bad light, he decried what he called the ‘sex curriculum based on ideology’ - using proper

names for body parts and acknowledging different sexual identities. Ford got into bed with extreme social conservatives like Charles McVety who opposed funding gay pride parades and discussing homosexuality in schools, along with critical race theory opponent Tanya Granic Allen (Cantin-Nantel, 2022) whom Ford dumped as a candidate after she became a liability saying she ‘almost vomits in disbelief’ at the thought of gay marriage. As soon as the Conservatives came into office, they disbanded a curriculum writing team for Indigenous studies struck in response to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s call to change the way young Canadians are taught about Indigenous peoples. It was a slap in the face to these educators who had been revising the Ontario curriculum to reflect reality rather than the mythology we once learned as history in schools.

Governments veering towards authoritarianism cleave to a mythological past. This is about more than whitewashing history; it is about a form of racial cleansing not unlike what took place in earlier authoritarian regimes in states like Germany, South Africa and the US. For example, in Spring 2022, Conservative Education Minister, Stephen Lecce had language removed from a science and technology curriculum revision that would have students ‘explore real world issues by connecting Indigenous sciences and technologies and Western science and technology’ (Alphonso, 2022). In September 2022, Lecce struck another chord for mythical magical thinking after the death of Queen Elizabeth when he learned that one board wanted to ease off on the celebration of her life to spare families who had suffered under British colonialism. His office issued a diktat that schools should ‘ensure that the day’s activities include learning about the many contributions the Queen made to our province, country and Commonwealth, and the accession of King Charles III to the Throne’ (Teotonio and Rushowy, 2022). Once again, historical amnesia functions as a basis for a form of social and political amnesia, all of which amounts to a form of manufactured ignorance.

Over their first four years in power, Ford’s Conservatives offered up a master class in neoliberal government: defund basic services before people have time to organise opposition, degrade them so they don’t work, demonise

progressive people like public servants who complain about it and then ‘solve’ the resulting problems by privatising everything in sight. In education, that has meant continuous cuts to the point that school boards have dipped into their own reserve funds to cover pandemic-related costs. Since 2017-2018, per-pupil spending has dropped by \$800 according to Ricardo Tranjan of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA, 2022). In 2019-20, the Tories increased class sizes in order to cut thousands of teachers and rationalise the system. To the benefit of private firms like McKinsey & Company, the Tories brought in mandatory e-learning, anathema to meaningful education (Farhadi, 2021). They have left over 53,000 students with autism waiting for treatment and have cut special education funding.

The public good, overall, is not nearly as important as the ideology of profit-taking, low taxes and keeping political friends happy. Patriotic frenzy joins with acts of censorship and pedagogical repression in order to weaken the foundation of any democracy: an informed and critical citizenry. Neoliberals, like Doug Ford and others who preceded him made it plain time and again, that education is about training. He made this absolutely clear during the last leaders debate before the election in June 2022:

“...the purpose of our education system - to make sure we prepare the kids for the jobs (sic) when they get out of school - jobs of the future... and we changed the curriculum to make sure we focused on financial literacy” (TV Ontario, 2022).

Civic ignorance is just fine and so is history based in myth. Hard critical thinking has no place here - just settle back and hope for jobs that may or may not exist and be good consumers.

At work here is a pedagogy of repression and conformity, rooted in a reactionary instrumentalism that decries public schools as a laboratory for educating young people as critical citizens. There is also a notion of education that increasingly resembles a corporate and consumerist logic; an ideology endemic to fast-food chains and the mall.

## **Critical pedagogy**

Given the current crisis of politics, agency, history, and memory, educators need a new political and pedagogical language for addressing the changing contexts and issues facing a world in which anti-democratic forces draw upon an unprecedented convergence of resources - financial, cultural, political, economic, scientific, military, and technological - to exercise powerful and diverse forms of control. If educators and others are to counter the forces of market fundamentalism and white supremacy, it is crucial to develop educational approaches that reject a collapse of the distinction between market liberties and civil liberties, a market economy and a market society. It is also crucial to make visible and attack all attempts to turn public education into white supremacy factories that erase history, degrade LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) and students of colour, and define any talk about racism, equality, and social justice as un-American or unpatriotic.

In this instance, critical pedagogy becomes a political and moral practice in the fight to revive civic literacy, civic culture, and a notion of shared and engaged citizenship (Giroux, 2020). Politics loses its emancipatory possibilities if it cannot provide the educational conditions for enabling students and others to think against the grain, take risks, and realise themselves as informed, critical, and engaged individuals. At the very least, critical pedagogy proposes that education is a form of political intervention in the world and is capable of creating the possibilities for social transformation. Rather than viewing teaching as a technical practice, critical pedagogy, in the broadest terms, is a moral and political practice premised on the assumption that learning is not about processing received knowledge but about actually transforming it as part of a more expansive struggle for individual rights and social justice.

You can see this thinking in significant efforts on the part of educators across Canada. The long-known but suppressed horrors of Canada's Indigenous residential schools have given rise to compelling work. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation during the week leading up to 2022's Orange Shirt Day focused on remembering the children forced into

residential schools, losing their language, homes and families and the life-learning that should have accompanied them. The First Nations Métis and Inuit Association of Ontario (FNMIEAO) has a powerful curriculum aimed at demystifying First Nations histories. One of the units, ‘Who We Are’, describes people and their connections within the Kitchinuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation, Ojibways of Onigaming First Nation, Chapleau Cree First Nation along with language of the Oneida clan. Co-chair Jodie Williams is one of those whose suggestions about Indigenous knowledge were deleted from the final draft of the Ministry’s revised science and technology curriculum (Paul, 2022).

The Orange Shirt Society (OSS), led by Phyllis Webstad, whose residential school experience gave rise to Orange Shirt Day, offers a curriculum developed by Alberta teacher Robin Drinkwater that presses students to look critically at Canadian history, rather than accept at face value whatever comes from texts. It combines current affairs and history with literature to help young people grasp the effects of abusive, hostile residential schools on the children who attended them, their families and communities as well as Canada as a whole. The curriculum rests on a dual pedagogy of critical study combined with Indigenous ways of knowing, such as the talking circle which places equal value on the speaker and listener - a concept in short supply today.

Toronto teachers, Tiffany Barrett, D. Tyler Robinson, Remy Basu and Kiersten Wynter developed the high school course, ‘Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism’ (Barret, Robinson, Basu and Wynter, 2021). It proceeds from the idea that talking about white supremacy is more than just naming obviously racist Ku Klux Klansmen, Proud Boys and so on, but teaching students how sociologists, historians and other academics have promulgated the myth that white is the default normal. They teach about the historical effects of this default normal running through everything from slavery to the Black Lives Matter movement as well as its pervasive influence in current media. The course gives students language like ‘privilege’, ‘micro-aggression’ and similar terms to help them put words to hard-to-define perceptions. Their unit on

critical race theory asks fundamental questions: where racism first occurs, why this construct was developed and how enslavement was connected to imperialism and capitalism.

The essential thread that runs through these approaches to critical pedagogy is their focus, not on individualised problems, personal successes against overwhelming odds and aspirations, but on what groups have done and may continue to do in order to deal with circumstances facing their communities. At stake here is a project and vision that embraces notions of solidarity, collective work and struggle, and a vision that is as empowering as it is emancipatory. Critical pedagogy is not aimed at improving students' job chances and greater power to consume and control, but at becoming skilled citizens.

This is not to suggest that learning work skills is not important, but to insist that education is about more than learning such skills. Education reduced to learning work skills functions as a pedagogical coma. It undermines the moral imagination while diminishing any viable notion of political agency. On the contrary, critical pedagogy calls on young people to think, doubt, question, and expand their critical capacities to be reflective about themselves, others, and the larger world. All forms of critical education acknowledge that education is never neutral and constitutes an important struggle over identity, knowledge, authority, power, and what it means to live in a world with deadening inequalities, social injustices, and repressive forms of governing. Critical pedagogy takes seriously what it means to educate young people to learn how to govern, not merely be governed.

### **Teachers as public intellectuals**

Educators and other cultural workers bear an enormous responsibility as public intellectuals in order to sustain and expand the values, knowledge, modes of thinking and identities crucial to bringing democratic political culture back to life. Teachers need to assume the role of citizen educators, acutely aware of the school and their roles and responsibilities to guide young people to be



informed, active, creative, and socially responsible members of society and the larger world. They have a responsibility to educate young people to be not only knowledgeable and critically informed, but also compassionate and caring, refusing to allow the spark of justice to go dead in themselves and the larger society (Giroux, 2022).

As public intellectuals, educators must have control over the conditions of their labour, affirm and engage student experience, connect learning to social problems that bear down on the lives of young people, and inspire young people to take risks and combine a faith in reason, moral courage, and the power of justice, compassion for others and democracy itself. Teachers must take active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they are to teach and what the larger goals are for which they are striving. This means that they must take a responsible role in shaping the purposes and conditions of schooling. That much has been evident over the past four years as educators fought with an Ontario government dedicated to narrowing education, increasing class sizes and leaving schools themselves to break down around the students in them.

Their role as public intellectuals is a huge undertaking calling on them to look at their work as a political, civic and ethical practice that combines critical reflection and action as part of a struggle to overcome economic, political and social injustices. Educators, themselves, are following this example when they push their unions beyond traditional bargaining to demand more inclusive curricula, support and conditions for their students to overcome the rapidly increasing disparities in their chances for active engagement in their lives. A critical pedagogical practice does not transfer knowledge but creates the possibilities for its production, analysis and use. Without succumbing to a kind of rigid dogmatism, teachers should provide the pedagogical conditions for students to bear witness to history, their own actions and the mechanisms that drive the larger social order so that they can imagine the inseparable connection between the human condition and the ethical basis of our existence.

It means:

- Teaching students how to hold power accountable while learning how to govern and develop a responsibility to others and a respect for civic life. This also means treating students as critical agents with an active voice in their learning experiences.
- Making knowledge problematic - open to debate and in doing so, helping students engage in critical and thoughtful dialogue.
- Enabling students to make connections, develop a historical consciousness, and uncover truths hiding in the shadows of lies, misrepresentations, and historical amnesia. At the very least, this would suggest teaching students how to translate private issues into larger systemic concerns, especially at a time when societal problems are individualised and treated as personal issues.
- Central to our concerns is educating students to not only be critical consumers of knowledge but also producers of knowledge and culture. In part, this opens up a more expansive notion of literacy/literacies regarding print culture, visual culture, digital culture, and other domains of knowledge making.
- Educators should teach students how to bridge the gap between history and the present, learning and everyday life, acts of moral and political courage, and the connection between power, self-determination, and knowledge while also teaching them both a language of critique and a language of possibility.
- Finally, it is crucial to teach students to view learning as a life-long process and to embrace their individual lives and their connections with others as a life-long endeavour.

Educators are doing their jobs as public intellectuals when they teach their students to fact check articles about 2021's truckers' convoy in Ottawa, (Paul, 2022) when they give them the language they need to understand and

express their experiences with racism and homophobia or show them how genocide of Indigenous peoples is tied to colonial economic interests. Educators are doing this important intellectual work with primary level students when they take the time to help them ask questions and do a deep research dive into the ‘real stuff of the world’ as they understand it (Martell and MacIntosh, 2019). The process is as varied as the children who engage in it.

The pedagogical starting point is not the isolated student removed from the historical and cultural forces that bear down on their lives but individuals in their various cultural, class, racial and historical contexts, along with the particularity of their diverse problems, hopes, and dreams. It is crucial to remember that education should be seen as a public good, allowing students to realise themselves as critical citizens while creating conditions to enable them to speak, write, and act from a position of agency and empowerment.

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