

Building Other Worlds in Education Through the Radical Potency of Despair

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Abstract

Over the past few decades an overwhelming sense of despair has infiltrated education. This despair, manufactured by education's thoughtless submission to neoliberal logic exacerbates the already compromised conditions in education. Drawing on parts of my dissertation, "*Cruel Optimism, Burnt-out-souls, and the Ruptured Fantasy of Education* (2021), my keynote address responds to the conference provocations, which ask us to think about ethical possibilities in education, and educators' desires to build other worlds amidst the present conditions of education in the ruins. Inspired by F. Tony Carusi's (2017) suggestion that despair in education might "be a condition in which ethical teaching finds new movement," I register the radical potency of despair as a force which works to reckon with the "cruel optimism" of education (p. 642). Consequently, my talk does *not* join the discourse of hope in education, rather, I suggest that it is *nothope* that ignites educators who keep fighting the ruins of education but rather our despair. Our despair moves us. Our despair motors us onward, despite our burnt-out-souls, as we continue to stand up for the potential in education.

Keywords: *education, cruel optimism, despair, neoliberalism*

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LOUISE AZZARELLO

Before I begin, I would like to clarify that my use of “we” throughout this talk will refer to educators who value education’s potential to help build a better – more just world, and although one might assume that *all* educators embrace this desire – unfortunately, they do not.

Questions regarding ethical possibilities in education, and desires to build other worlds *through* education, contemplated during this conference, resonate with me profoundly and directly connect to issues that pushed me to pursue my doctorate after more than 25 years as a secondary classroom teacher. However, my work is not situated in the discipline of hope, nor in an elusive sense of utopia. Rather, I’m interested in how attending to despairing education in the ruins reveals cracks and ruptures in the depressive atmosphere that overwhelms education today and opens spaces for something different to appear.

Although my dissertation was profoundly personal, it is a philosophical political project. I render legible the “ruptured fantasy of education” by exposing the present conditions of education in the ruins, and the complex consequences of these conditions. Education philosopher Sharon Todd (2003) reminds us, “any philosophical investigation into the ethical possibilities of education... cannot only *not* ignore the – exigencies of present social conditions, but it must make those exigencies central to its conceptualization of the relation between ethics and education” (original emphasis, p. 1). With Todd’s edict in mind, I approached my dissertation and continue to center in my research and teaching practices.

Today, drawing on parts of my dissertation, “*Cruel Optimism, Burnt-out-souls, and the Ruptured Fantasy of Education* (2021), I propose that the radical potency of despair resides in its impetus to refuse the normative order of education. For me, this refusal opens spaces in which we can, as Mario Di Paolantonio (2016, 2018) proposes, pass the time together with an object in common to reclaim education’s potential. I suggest that refusing the normative order of

BUILDING OTHER WORLDS IN EDUCATION THROUGH THE RADICAL POTENCY OF DESPAIR

education is an ethical act that fosters a sense of ethical relationality in education, at least for a moment.

Many educators are attached to the optimistic idea that education holds the potential to help forge a better future. Yet, what happens when this promise of hope is shattered through the ongoing instrumentalization of education and continued violence enacted through education? The following questions, and my own despairing of education would become the underpinning of my dissertation.

- How do our attachments to the promises of education (as a hopeful place for self-flourishing and social transformation) remain hopeful while we are constantly confronted by education's disposition and historicity as a place of violence, coercion and control, which has been exacerbated by education's thoughtless submission to neoliberal logic.
- How do we maintain our desires to enact social change within education when we are continually forced to negotiate complex systems of oppression that are deeply embedded in: the structures of education, curriculum, schools, teaching practices and many teachers' and administrators' thinking?
- How do we imagine other worlds while despairing about the present ruins of education?

Lauren Berlant's (2011) conceptualization of "cruel optimism" provides a critical structure through which I track ways in which, neoliberal logic infiltrates and harms public education while exacerbating its inherent violent tendencies. Berlant describes "cruel optimism" as the "condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (p. 33). "Cruel optimism" in education rests in the attachment to the promise of education's transformative (emancipatory) potential while enduring education's reproduction of socio-political injustices. "Cruel optimism," Berlant explains is a "particular kind of affect – a kind of double bind affect"

(IPAK Center, 2016, 2:15). For Berlant (2011), the sense of “double bind” appears in the cruelty of knowing there will be a loss whether you hold onto *or* let go of your attachment to the object that is itself impeding the fulfilment of your fantasy (p. 51).

The “double bind” creates a conflict between being able to break away from attachments that we know are not working, therefore losing the fantasy, which sustains us. Given this, how do we survive our cruel attachment to education? How do we attempt to unravel, disrupt, fight and hope for change while trying to survive the constraints of education’s compromised conditions of possibility? The question for many educators becomes: Do we abandon the fantasy and turn away from education or continue on, despite the consequences to ourselves and more disturbing the consequences to our students? Berlant (2011) tells us, part of the effects of “cruel optimism” is that people are “worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world” (p. 28). This wearing down is rendered through an “optimism” that maybe *this* time the promise will be fulfilled. My claim here is that through continued attachment to the promises of education what occurs is an overwhelming sense of despair, and yet we, educators committed to the possibilities of education to help build a better - more just world, continue *anyways*.

Our despair moves us. Our despair motors us onward, despite our burnt-out souls, as we continue to stand up for the potential in education. Consequently, my work does *not* join the discourse of hope in education, which according to scholar Julian Edgoose (2010), is storied as “hope through progress, hope through goal directed action, and hope through rebirth” (p. 388). Rather, I suggest that it is *not* hope that ignites educators who keep fighting the ruins of education but our despair.

Although, normative understandings of despair in education train us to view despair as an obstacle that must be overcome, refused, or ignored, many of us working in education are

BUILDING OTHER WORLDS IN EDUCATION THROUGH THE RADICAL POTENCY OF DESPAIR

despairing. When we vocalize our despair, we are constructed as “negative,” “cynical,” “complainers.” We are often confronted by hostile, accusatory voices that demand quick fixes. (As if we could individually propose a solution to alter the inequities and violence plaguing education). And, when we point to the layered socio-political complexities that have converged to propagate education in ruins - we are often belittled or patronized for our “idealism.” Think of Sara Ahmed’s (2021) deconstruction of complaint. She writes, “to be heard as complaining is not to be heard” (Ahmed, 2021, p.1). Thinking with Ahmed (2021), I suggest, to be *seen* as despairing is to *not be seen* or to be seen as a “pest,” an insect buzzing around which people try ignore and swat away but cannot annihilate.

Rather than reject despair in education, educational philosopher Tony Carusi (2017) suggests, despair might “be a condition in which ethical teaching finds new movement” (p. 642). The conceptualization of despair as an ethical act which moves us towards something new counters normative notions of despair as a state of immobilization or an act of giving up. Educational philosopher, Oded Zipory (2021) suggests, “teachers’ despair can be seen as positive in itself and as a sign of vitality, especially in comparison to cynicism, resignation or even in comparison to automatic optimism” (p. 393). Zipory (2021) goes on to state:

Listening with attention to the voice of despair, not as a pathology or as a moral flaw, but as a legitimate and potentially inspiring part of human political nature, could give education new vitality. It could distance education from privatisation and instrumentalisation, which are often served today chiefly by the proponents of hope. (p. 394)

When we pay attention to what despair has to offer education, we witness educators harnessing their despair as an impetus to keep moving, working and thinking. Scholar Ann Cvetkovich

(2012) would call this the “productive possibilities” of despair (p.14). I suggest, despair encourages an ethical response to the present toxic conditions in education through acts of refusal. The despairing refuse to give up, accept the status quo, and acquiesce to the use of hollowed out language and superficial promises. The despairing in education refuse to keep repeating the same thing, hoping that something will change. The despairing are drowning in heartbreak, while constantly trying to move towards something new – something different through which to counter the normative constraints of education.

Despair, I propose, is a radical force. A force of critique and a force of ethical action. Drawing on Todd’s (2003) understanding of a Levinasian sense of ethics I do not use ethics to mean the instrumentalization of teaching morality, which as she notes, would be administered through the acquisition of “knowledge” (p. 6). Rather, like Todd (2003), I am interested in ethics “in terms of those *moments of relationality that resist codification*” (original emphasis, p. 9). In my experience, despair provokes (some) educators to hold time and space open for pedagogical encounters which interrupt education in the ruins. These encounters hold the potential for us to consider our responsibilities to and for others, even for a moment.

Such interruptions, come in many forms. For me, these interruptions, conceived in despair, are a force which opens spaces in which we can slow down, and as Mario Di Paolantonio (2016), proposes pass time together to reclaim education’s potential through relational encounters where, “human beings come together to influence each other with words and interpretations that work to forge and sustain a common world” (p. 149). These interruptions appear in moments when, in our classrooms we take time, and attend to an object in common – together. Moments when a sense of attentiveness appears and together, we can consider our responsibilities to each other, the object at hand, and the world. In these moments I suggest a turn

BUILDING OTHER WORLDS IN EDUCATION THROUGH THE RADICAL POTENCY OF DESPAIR

to Cree scholar Dwayne Donald's (2012) notion of ethical relationality as an "ethical stance that requires attentiveness to the responsibilities that come with a declaration of being in relation" (p. 535).

These interruptions, and this notion of ethical relationality cannot be codified, constructed, planned, predicted or necessarily expected – they do not entail "learning goals" or "outcomes" but rather they appear in brief, fleeting moments that the classroom can sometimes shelter. An example of such a moment occurred in a grade nine class when a student – despite his complicated life, distractions from his screen-absorbed world, the chaos vibrating through the classroom walls suddenly – viscerally displayed an affective response to an image, becoming so attentive that it seemed as if time stopped. The image that induced this reaction was the photograph of 14-year-old Waneek Horn-Miller, cradling her four-year-old sister Kaniehtiio, after having been stabbed in the chest by a Canadian soldier on the last day of the 1990 siege of Kaneshatake (Remiorz, 1990). Brian Massumi (1995) writes, "the skin is faster than the word" (p. 86), and I suggest faster than the eyes. It was as if the student on registering the image of Waneek-Horn Miller was touched by fire. Before his eyes could totally absorb what he was seeing he jumped up from his desk (leapt out of his skin so to speak), his phone suddenly no longer of interest and his mind racing. His body reacted, registering feelings of agitation and concern. It was as if his body had become his eyes. His verbal responses were a mixture of confusion and anger. His reaction had a sense of whiplash, a double take that stopped time. Subsequently, a moment of complete attentiveness encased the room as the other students were drawn together in the moment. The other students who had only seconds before been absorbed in their own worlds seemingly trying to survive the mundane depressive world of school were

suddenly “passing time together” thinking *with* and *attending* to the image of Waneeek-Horn Miller and her sister.

Engaging with the complex, violent, ongoing colonization of Indigenous land had remained a somewhat abstract concept difficult for these grade nine students to grasp, until this moment. They were now talking about, questioning, and thinking about each other’s responses to the image and their realization that colonial events of violence are not located in the far past but present in our everyday lives. They were in a rudimentary sense beginning to attend to the responsibilities that come with being in relation (even if just for a moment).

What moments like this offer, no matter how fleeting, is an interruption in the normative order of education. Such moments, I suggest, hold a radical potential to think about building, if not other worlds, *our world* differently. So, although my offering is not quite hopeful, it is not, as Italian political philosopher and activist Franco “Bifo” Berardi would say, “*hopeless*” (Leskanich, n.d. para. 6).

BUILDING OTHER WORLDS IN EDUCATION THROUGH THE RADICAL POTENCY OF
DESPAIR

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Louise Azzarello holds a PhD in education from York University. Her research focuses on how an ethics of responsibility to and for others might be fostered in schools given the compromised conditions of public education. Her thesis, *“Cruel Optimism” Burnt-out-Souls and the Ruptured Fantasy of Education*, interrogates and disrupts education’s reliance on an ethical system which prioritizes the labour market thus focusing on personal success which reinforces hyper-individualism, socio-political inequities, and notions of assimilation. Her ongoing research and teaching practices draw on visual cultural texts such as artworks, films, popular culture artifacts, media images, and advertisements to provoke pedagogical interruptions to think about unjust harms and suffering, that we cause each other and that many students experience daily.

Louise has over twenty-five years of experience as a high school educator with the Toronto District School Board where she worked closely with educators, students and artists from the Urban Indigenous Education Centre. Presently she is a course director at York University and a Sessional Instructor at OISE, working with teaching teacher candidates to think through ways to disrupt colonial notions of education and interrupt the ways in which systemic discrimination and oppression continues to impact students daily.