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A TRANSDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF CREATIVITY WITHIN FRIDAYS FOR FUTURE SCHOOL STRIKES

Or “Pay No Attention to That Man Behind the Curtain”

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Introduction

From Canada’s historical, political, and cultural contexts, we share our reflections as three child and youth studies researchers with a common standpoint as settler-educators within a university located on the traditional lands of Niagara’s Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. One of us is a Nigerian-born Canadian who centers deep values on interconnected issues to do with representation, marginalization, and inclusion directly related to her familial and cultural heritage. Our second author was born in Germany and moved to Canada as a child, now with a professional background as mentor to children in their free explorations of the art of dance. Our third author was born in Canada and is a faculty member who pivoted into the academy from a previous 20-year counseling career within British Columbia’s youth justice, foster care, mental health, and education systems. As the largest department within a university attempting to foster “decolonization” and “global citizenship” (Brock University Institutional Strategic Plan, 2018; Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, 2015), we are also tasked with examining how discrete disciplines, knowledge systems, and international frameworks organize our research and teaching agendas.

In his talk entitled “Changing Education Paradigms” seen now by more than 16 million viewers, global reformer Sir Ken Robinson defined creativity in the context of children’s education as the simple process of presenting original ideas that have value (Robinson, 2010). Our chapter analyses transdisciplinary and Indigenous links between Robinson’s straightforward notion and the ongoing Fridays for Future school-based climate strikes instigated and led by young people throughout the world (Alter et al., 2019; Hagedorn et al., 2019). Unexpectedly, Sir Ken passed in 2020, and true to form in a final podcast, he was optimistic that the COVID-19 lockdown that had paused the global treadmill of education has also provided educators with the opportunity to press the “reset” button (Robinson, 2020). Humans, he observed,
must make a settlement with the Earth and one that includes our inter-relationship with all forms of animal, plant, and organic life. He further observed how all of us are deeply creative creatures possessing a boundless energy for innovation through capacities that set us apart from all the others with whom we share this material realm. This boundless capacity has been our own conclusion with the children and young people passing through our research, teaching, and parenting lives (Allen, 2020; Kim, 2016; Kupers, 2019). By analyzing school-based climate strikes through transdisciplinary Indigenous lenses, we are suggesting that this unique global manifestation of young people’s creative capacities mobilizing millions to leave their desks each week in peaceful protest is, as Robinson aptly characterized, a splendid example of an original idea with great value. Generations yet to arrive stand to lose the most if pre-pandemic “business as usual” continues post-COVID, and collective planetary actions addressing the interconnected climate crises are not undertaken.

As a relatively new dimension within child and youth research, transdisciplinarity disrupts the western modern science canon found within developmental psychology’s traditional systems of hierarchical power. Transdisciplinarity is defined here as a problem-centered approach to research that answers social questions by drawing upon the full range of theories of knowledge from positivism to postmodernism, including Indigenous epistemologies (Albrecht et al., 1998; Christie, 2006; Leavy, 2011; Mitchell & Moore, 2018; Moore et al., 2005). This newer approach to childhood research and teaching contrasts dominant pedagogical discourses routinely used to silence the voices of young people in the consideration of key political and pedagogical issues directly affecting them. Significantly, this approach to researching young people’s concerns also tends to excavate intersections that developmental tropes occlude, including our concern here for identifying creative solutions that address climate change. We open with a similarly optimistic tone to Robinson’s by re-emphasizing how child and youth populations everywhere are resilient and quite capable of creatively contending with their elders’ spectacular failure in this postmodern late-capitalist moment. Our review of young people’s independent global responses to these challenges provides an historic case study of great value for us all, both in the present and quite possibly for unknown future generations.

**Childhood in the anthropocene**

Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci observed that while the old world dies and a new one struggles to be born, “now is the time of monsters” (in Žižek, 2012, p. 32). From our privileged Global North standpoint, we’ve watched and taught as this time of monsters unleashed during the planetary shutdown due to COVID-19 continues unpredictably. As a result, eco-anxiety associated with childhood depression has moved onto academic research agendas and points out our interdependence and collective well-being (Clayton, 2020; Somerville, 2018).

While weekly school walkouts were initially highlighted in international media as being led by Swedish teen Greta Thunberg, millions have since joined forces including hundreds of thousands attending the 2019 Toronto and Montreal walkouts (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020). Those one-day events were held simultaneously around the world and were characterized as the largest climate strike in history to that point with over four million participants in 170 countries, including those led by Ms Thunberg in Montreal along with Indigenous youth and adult allies (Taylor et al., 2019). A similar collaboration took place with Ms. Thunberg, Indigenous Elders, and young people in Edmonton, Alberta, as well as on the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota later that same month. Also noteworthy
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was the letter published in the prestigious journal Science relative to these demonstrations on behalf of thousands of international climate change scientists who stated: “We see it as our social, ethical, and scholarly responsibility to state in no uncertain terms: Only if humanity acts quickly and resolutely can we limit global warming, halt the ongoing mass extinction of animal and plant species, and preserve the natural basis for the food supply and well-being of present and future generations. This is what young people want to achieve. They deserve our respect and full support” (Hagedorn et al., 2019; see also UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021).

Child and youth climate activists are simultaneously creating new forms of knowledge that are accessible, and that hold forms of currency beyond the reach of institutional and political protocols and systems of control, most often serving as gatekeepers of generalizability (Boulianne et al., 2020). They are expressing their human right to participate meaningfully in shaping their world along with greater potentials for individual and collective agency. Through creative collaborations managed primarily through social media, millions under the age of eighteen are effectively addressing their own climate concerns and anxieties. These same creative trends may be further seen through numerous high-profile lawsuits filed across Canadian jurisdiction launched by children, youth, and adult mentors in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. These developments prompted the former federal Environment Minister to respond: “Young people are pushing their governments for a more sustainable future. We hear them, and all of the Canadians who sent a clear message this election that tackling climate change is a clear priority they want this Parliament to work on” (Schmunk, 2019). Reminiscent of 1990s lawsuits against “big tobacco” in the United States, these initiatives have been premised upon similar litigation in Oregon, potentially headed to the US Supreme Court at the time of writing (Juliana v. US Government, 2021).

As Bloomberg Law Analysis reports (2020), such cases are coming from every corner from Delaware to Washington, Maine to California, and have been filed by larger cities such as New York and San Francisco, and those smaller such as Boulder and Hoboken.

Childhood and power

Following in the footsteps of numerous critical scholars, we have paid attention to French post-structuralist Michel Foucault’s (1979) work on disciplinary power to interrogate relationships with children embedded within educational contexts. More specifically, we explore how educational practices impact children’s agency as expressions of creativity. From this perspective, power is not regarded as a fixed dynamic, but rather one that exists within day-to-day relationships. That is, children, youth, and adults do not obtain, maintain, or withhold power, but instead interpersonal and structural power relations are present within their interactions and daily practices. In the school setting, these relations may be more difficult to detect than overt forms of coercive power, inferring and suggesting their implicit importance. From this vantage point, power is not solely considered or utilized as a tool for oppression or domination since some relationships with young people are asymmetrical, while some adults in authority have a greater capacity to exercise power benignly than others (Bowman, 2020).

Due to the colonized structure of Canadian classrooms, we argue children are not being supported to exercise their interpersonal and social power in meaningful ways, such that they are unable to express themselves as creative agents of social change. As per Foucault (1979), one way that disciplinary power operates is in and through the use and organization of space. In Canada, as throughout much of our world, children’s learning environments have been primarily organized through indoor settings devoid of any real connection to nature.
By promoting enclosed spaces such as the typical elementary or post-secondary classroom, it is believed that young people are then freed from unnecessary distractions. Here we are asserting that children must also focus explicitly and only upon what educators and their political paymasters deem appropriate. In doing so, we often fail to affirm that children have voice, and personal, interpersonal even trans-personal agency (James et al., 1998; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This learning model frequently limits opportunities to engage with holistic perspectives on knowledge gained through tactile, land-based interactions and direct experiences with natural environments. We suggest that enclosed pedagogical spaces may not always be the most beneficial, and even within inner-city settings, city parks and green spaces are often accessible allowing children to be exposed to more than one epistemology of learning. Instructional settings are designed by adults in such a way that we specify how children's spaces are permitted to be accessed, to be used, to be experienced. For example, children are told where they can eat, sit, play, and even need permission to toilet themselves; the best explanation for partitioning spaces in this way is the enabling of constant surveillance of their individual and collective bodies. Stipulating where and how children are able to explore their own environments promotes the ability of adults in authority to police these spaces and more easily observe them, and ultimately to control many aspects of their behavior. This control dynamic emphasizes a common viewpoint that children require provision and protection in contrast to participation.

A second aspect of disciplinary power involves the control of time. Western culture has a rigid perception on how young people's time should be spent in order to enhance productivity. Aligned with this philosophy, adults structure children's activities to follow a strict schedule, embedding learning opportunities that have been deemed valuable for their success in the future. By detailing how time should be spent, adults in authority promote the view that children are “human becomings” that require skill-building as opposed to honoring children as human beings in the here and now (James et al., 1998). We believe that children within all adult-controlled institutions could be given greater opportunities to more directly co-construct how they would like to creatively spend their time. Nevertheless, we also recognize the potential drawback to this approach as it may fail to prepare children to flourish in western cultures that have such productivity expectations. In his discussion, Queen's University's (Belfast) Professor Phil Scraton (1997) offers a poignant rationale relevant to our concerns.

Adult power dominates their personal and social lives and is institutionalized in “caring” and ‘disciplining’ agencies alike. As has been evident in the plethora of contemporary scandals, it is power readily and systematically abused. It is a dangerous and debilitating power, capable of stunting the personal development and potential of even the most resilient children. It is physically and mentally painful, damaging good health and often wreaking havoc in those interpersonal relationships which require love, care, and trust. What is so difficult for adults as the power brokers to accept is that the ‘crisis’ is not one of ‘childhood’, but one of adultism.

Scraton, 1997, p. 186

A final operational component of disciplinary power to note is the management of children’s bodies through movement since within Canadian, as within most school systems around the globe, children are expected to progress through linear curricular sequences. This precise organization of movement can be constraining, in the sense that children who exercise their agency may be deemed unruly or behaving unsatisfactorily (Foucault, 1979). Children’s
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expression of what has often been defined as “non-compliance” is more accurately understood as their exercise of rights-based agency and is representative of their thoughts and feelings on how they wish to engage in their own learning experiences. What we are suggesting is that children and young people are quite competent to negotiate their own power, and this is clearly being demonstrated through the complex organizational contexts of Fridays for Future school strikes. In this light, the decisions by millions of students to vacate schools each week during Fridays for Future strikes is not only one of agency and power, but of a creative and wholly unprecedented response to scientific data and analyses being ignored by political, business, and pedagogical powerbrokers.

Childhood and Indigenous epistemologies

Philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1989) once declared it is no measure of one’s health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society, but few could have predicted how unwell human populations were to become at the outset of 2020. Nevertheless, Canada finds itself among the healthiest and wealthiest of nation-states, and arguably one of the most successful social democratic experiments in history with its global reputation for respecting human rights, the unusual politeness of its citizenry, and a perception of caring for many other citizens throughout the world. The country is frequently ranked at, or near the top of league tables by various United Nations agencies and international measures over decades. In a recent US-based Gallup poll, for example, the country placed at the top for the standards of living for newly arrived immigrants besting Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Australia to round out the top five (Esipova et al., 2020). The nation has enviable approaches to universal public health care financed from its tax base, along with maternity (and in many cases paternity) benefits, sick benefits, both federal and provincial disability benefits. Enviable, unless of course as a child, you were born into a First Nations, Aboriginal, Metis, or Inuit family where well-being indices then slide back to equal the world’s 78th nation (Blackstock, 2005; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003, 2012). Moreover, many Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change since they often inhabit areas exemplifying the effects of rapid and deleterious climate change (Redvers et al., 2020).

Relevant to both Canadian and US political and historical contexts, Freirean pedagogue Joe Kincheloe (2008) recalls how most people are “absolutely unaware they are using Native land, it is just not part of Western consciousness that we are on Native land” (cited in Mallott, 2008, p. 158). While it seems rather obvious, he contended that a central dimension of critical pedagogy in both North and South American political contexts “has to deal with the subject of Indigeneity, and it is something very few critical scholars are aware of or interested in” (also in Malott 2008, pp. 153–154). Nevertheless, Indigenous knowledge systems are an emergent framework for research and teaching within child and youth studies in colonized states such as Canada, the United States, Latin American nations, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (DuPlessis et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Moore et al., 2005). Indeed, for more than five centuries, Indigenous communities throughout the world have faced comparable pandemics to COVID-19 and could reasonably be expected to contribute relevant knowledge to manage the current interconnected crises.

These are knowledge systems rich with deeply embedded and embodied relationships with and from the land which underscore the importance of countering contemporary modern science understandings of the climate crisis (Mills & Lefrançois, 2018; Redvers et al.2020). The intergenerational urgency of Indigenous youth climate activists whose focus is to protect the land through innovative and activist approaches, also demonstrates creativity and power
in claiming social media platforms, very often the playground for white males within politics, business, and academia as well. Kincheloe’s pedagogical identification of “Indigeneity” is commensurate with a deeper ontological assumption that again highlights how we humans, along with all other living creatures including plant, animal, and microscopic entities, draw from the same web of life for our brief temporal journeys in this realm.

Here we want to highlight important efforts made by a powerful Indigenous teenager Ms. Autumn Peltier who hails from unceded Wiikwemkoong Territory in central Canada. While still a young girl of eight, she was appointed Chief Water Commissioner within the Anishinabek Nation, a political advisory body of 40 First Nations across Ontario, the nation’s most populous province. Indigenous children’s well-being and resilience are intergenerational and an important, though perhaps not as well understood chapter in Canada’s story, one continuing to this day through traditional teachings that include ancestral connections and those yet to come. In a passionate 2018 address to delegates at the United Nations General Assembly, she pointed out, “we can’t eat money or drink oil!” Ms. Peltier’s declaration underscored that what we value collectively as educational and pedagogical knowledge must embrace different ways of understanding our shared world. Complex, interdependent knowledge systems have persisted for millennia as well as throughout more recent, violent centuries, and could allow a deeper understanding of human relationships as simply one part of the natural world—thinking quite congruent with a century of findings from within the Quantum science literature (Anthony, 2021; Nicolescu, 2002; Pycroft & Bartollas, 2014; Wendt, 2015). Indigenous knowledge systems are found worldwide and include traditional oral teachings passed down with intentions to do no harm to those generations coming after (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, 2020). This is in line with Jeff Kripal’s (2019, p. 33) analysis that “the rules of the academic table have omitted these important ways of knowing, and in so doing have truncated research approaches within common western science discourses that have now become forensically specialized, particularly within public-school systems” (see also Mitchell & Moore, 2018).

While local models of resilience and well-being could be shared more broadly, addressing complex underlying challenges necessary to transform global societies and move planetary populations toward well-being clearly require concerted multi-systemic and intercontinental responses. Indigenous epistemologies are transdisciplinary and intercontinental by their very nature (Apgar et al., 2009; Arabena, 2006; Christie, 2006) since they depend upon natural sciences, cosmology, and complex holistic systems of matrilineal governance, education, and spirituality (Denzin et al., 2008; DuPlessis et al., 2014). Australian educator Michael Christie cautions that such investigations present both opportunities and problems for community-based Indigenous knowledge holders. “Transdisciplinary research is different from interdisciplinary research because it moves beyond the disciplinarity of the university and takes into account knowledge practices which the university will never fully understand” (2006, p. 78). Indigenous knowledge systems, he emphasizes, “resist definition” from western academic perspectives since there are Traditional Knowledge practices which will “never engage with the academy, just as there are some branches of the academy which will never acknowledge Indigenous knowledge practices.” As an analytical framework, transdisciplinary thinking allows us to view this disruption of traditional systems of power that typically silence the voices and views of children, blocking them from contributing to any form of praxis or system change (Mills & Lefrançois, 2018).

Many Indigenous children in the Canadian nation-state along with their peers in the dominant society have turned to social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter to engage creative potentials, and share knowledge more freely with broader
global audiences. These outlets for creative flow in young people serve to challenge inherent power imbalances embedded within traditional industrial-age education and accompanying institutional knowledge production practices (Arnold, 2018; Boulianne et al., 2020). Such contemporary methods of engagement have blossomed since the occurrences of COVID-19 lockdowns and serve as important platforms to generate auto/ethnographical data in a way disrupting dominant research agendas through both popularity and authenticity. Young people are choosing visual essays, artwork, spoken word, and other creative forms of knowledge not viewed traditionally as credible or even reliable sources. Child and youth social media climate activists share a common message that is clear, concise, and typically delivered in a discrete timeframe which is the relatively short period necessary to hold someone’s online attention. This contrasts with the time and tenacity it takes to deconstruct traditional research papers, and extract information relevant to the lived experiences of young people. Child and youth social media influencers employ various techniques that are not entrenched within colonized practices of writing and knowledge dissemination, as well as rendering issues such as traditional understanding of validity and reliability as problematic (Redvers et al., 2020).

In no way intended to diminish Ms. Thunberg’s efforts, our analysis does endeavor to shine a brighter light on similar Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized youth communities of color (BIPOC) whose voices and views are not as frequently portrayed in domestic or international media. One glaring example of this bias ignited a firestorm in early 2020 after a British editor chose to crop Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate’s image from a newspaper photo with Ms Thunberg and two other Caucasian teens at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland (Evelyn, 2020). For Indigenous children and youth, there is also inherent value in storytelling as a valid form of knowledge transmission, and as such, activists from these communities harbor a deep awareness and respect for their ancestral lands (Arnold, 2018; Watts, 2013).

Concluding thoughts

As Bendell (2018) and others now consider that a climate-influenced collapse of societies in most parts of the world in coming decades is likely, inevitable or already unfolding, we see child and youth-led school-based activism as a creative and appropriate intercontinental response, perhaps with greater value than any of their elders yet appreciate. Our reflective piece on young people’s creative responses to planetary climate crises through Fridays for Future is in no way a challenge to the irrefutable findings of the United Nations IPCC (2021); nevertheless, we regularly ponder how younger humans of today might transcend the complex predicament their elders have left for them. Clearly, a new kind of scientific revolution may be at hand as string theoretical physicist Michio Kaku recently pointed out and to which others are alluding. The possibilities for a new scientific revolution offer us interesting and intriguing intersections for generations to come, and in similar ways to the intersections, we have noted within both Indigenous and transdisciplinary paradigms. Thus, we end with a simple though clearly not a rhetorical question: will the creative acts of young people demonstrated through Fridays for Future climate strikes inspire those in authority to take appropriate action in time to avert a planetary-wide catastrophe?

The future is not only uncertain but also wholly unpredictable since subsequent local/global events are premised upon present ones which are all firmly fixed in a Quantum energy field, a field with which very few humans have yet to engage meaningfully (Hubl, 2020; Kripal, 2019; Wendt, 2015). As Kaku also recalls, Isaac Newton was sent home from Cambridge University during a pandemic in his early 20s (Anthony, 2021), though that one concerned...
the bubonic plague and was located on two continents only as far as we know. Perhaps not coincidentally for our purpose here, it was during this time he came up with the whole mathematical basis for the enlightenment revolution of thinking and western modern science upon which the vast majority of current “evidenced-based” research is conducted—the worthwhile as well as the irrelevant.

While much worthwhile climate science “evidence” continues to mount and now includes the irrevocable tipping points regularly cited by the UN’s IPCC (2021), they are only one of a growing chorus of voices sounding planetary alarm. As a previous creative voice from the United States also reminded us, the end is always near, yet the future remains uncertain. This final observation offers an appropriate closing reflection, as well as an apt entry point where the individual and collective creative power of young people will continue to play an important role.

Note

1 The terms “children,” “childhood,” “young people,” and “youth” are used interchangeably herein and are meant to convey the international legal designation found within Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)—without prejudice—which states “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years.”

References


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