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Resisting the Heartbreak of Neoliberalism in Education Advocacy

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Abstract

This paper explores how advocates in Ontario have resisted neoliberal restructuring in education since the 2018 general election, which marked an intensification of market-oriented reforms. Shaped by the insights of 23 participants, this paper shows how resistance has been accessed through multiple entry points and has been spatially heterogeneous, replete with internal contradiction. It also highlights the cost of resistance for participants whose relationship to systems engender oppression and harm. Broadly, this paper calls for vulnerable reflection on fantasies of a “good life” shaped by a normative neoliberal order that interferes with collective flourishing. Through emergent strategy, which aligns action with a vision for social justice, this paper values the non-linear and manifold ways individuals are embedded in systems; the fractal nature of change, which takes place at all scales; and a love ethic, which sustains relational the spiritual growth necessary for solidarity.



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Simone de Beauvoir's words echo in my head: It is in the recognition of the genuine conditions of our lives that we gain the strength to act and our motivation for change. (Lorde, 2022, p. 152)

October 2019: I was invited by the political action committee of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) Toronto District 12 to present findings from my doctoral research on online learning to its membership. Having recently defended my dissertation, I returned to teaching full-time at a secondary school but continued mobilizing knowledge from my study to influence proposals for reforms to education policy that were widely understood as undermining the public good and expanding privatization (Bocking, 2022). By privatization, I refer to "the movement of one or more aspects of a public good or service (i.e., its ownership, provision, governance, funding, orientation) to the private sector" (Winton, 2022, p. 9). With reference to Winchip et al. (2019, p. 83), privatization does not only refer to the wholesale transfer of public goods to the private sector but also to a "process or trajectory" through which the public sector is "gradually displaced by private sector activity" (Winton, 2022, p. 9). After some correspondence with OSSTF Toronto, we set a date on December 3rd.

November 2019: I received an email from OSSTF Toronto, as a member, announcing that there would be a one-day full withdrawal of services on December 4th—the day after my presentation. This announcement followed an escalation of job action that included information pickets and partial withdrawal of administrative services. By this time, the OSSTF had been in eight months of negotiations with the Minister of Education and their bargaining team; they had made insufficient progress. Moreover, the Minister of Education was undermining negotiations by publicly announcing bargaining positions without bringing them to the negotiating table with labour partners. The most substantial of these positions included a proposal to implement four asynchronous e-learning credits for secondary students, increase class sizes in secondary schools from an average of 22 to 28, and "adjust" school operations funding (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). At the time of the announcement, my children were elementary aged; the weight of responsibility I felt as a teacher was exacerbated by my responsibility as a parent.

December 2019: The day after my talk, I was out with my colleagues on the picket line. This would be one of several rotating strikes by OSSTF. Job action was also escalating with unions representing French-language and Catholic education workers and the Elementary Teachers' Federation. It was the first time in 20 years that all four unions were in a position to strike. Stephanie Chitpin (2020) connected these developments to Mike Harris' "common sense" attack on Ontario schools: "However, to those who have followed developments in how the province has managed education over the past two decades, it is in many ways a chilling reminder of the school fallout of 1995–2002, when Mike Harris was premier." The management of education since Harris' tenure encountered rebranding under successive Liberal governments, despite gains to stave off collapse. After the 2003 election of Dalton McGuinty, for example, the new premier "kept his educational policies in line with campaign promises and with the neoliberal mandate of markets, competition, standards, and accountability" (Parker, 2017, p. 50). The ideology of neoliberalism, which was neither limited to the Harris era nor constrained to partisanship, offers context for the process of privatization, in this case, the organization of education according to the principles of the free market and economic life (Winton, 2022, p. 17).

At the same time that strike action was ramping up, legal challenges were announced against Bill 124 that limited the wage increases of all public-sector employees to one percent a year over a three-year period (Ontario Treasury Board Secretariat, 2019). Applicants of the case

were primarily unions representing “teachers, nurses, public service employees, universities and their faculty and engineers, among dozens of other professions” (Casey, 2022). This illustrated the interdependence of collective interests in the public sector under austerity measures, the rationale for which centred a conservative discourse of fiscal responsibility and respect for taxpayers. Labour eventually won: Bill 124 was struck down as unconstitutional by the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, whose analysis detailed why, in the context of this case, an infringement on the right to freedom of association and on collective bargaining was unacceptable: “But an election promise to cut taxes does not necessarily give the government the right to breach Charter rights to achieve what appeared to be routine policy preferences rather than urgent societal needs” (*Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Assn. v. His Majesty*, 2022, ONSC 6658, section 352–355). This decision recognized that the “day-to-day management of government affairs,” rather than a legitimate “fiscal challenge,” was driving decision-making. Further, it revealed the logic of treating routine policy choices as if they were crises, which characterizes the ordinary destruction of neoliberal reforms.

The ruling on Bill 124—in favour of Ontario public servants—resulted in a pay increase of 6.5% and was held up as exemplifying worker power and solidarity (Canadian Press, 2024); however, the power of unions is not limited to the courts. Teacher unions, for example, engage “in a wide variety of activities” and pursue “multiple strategies” to resist “unprecedented threats in the face of neoliberal educational reforms” (Bascia, 2015, p. 1). Rather than dismissing the vital work unions do to advocate and make gains for workers, which are not limited to collective bargaining, this paper theorizes resistance to neoliberal restructuring in Ontario through the figure of the “public education advocate” who is oriented toward structural change. The term “structure” broadly refers to the institutions that comprise public education, of which labour and teacher unions are a part; however, rather than tell the story of resistance through the lens of labour, which includes internal reform movements (Kirton, 2016; Ledwith, 2012; Milkman, 2006) as well as social justice unionism (Maton, 2016; Rogers & Terriquez, 2009; Weiner, 2013), I cast a wider frame to capture the intersection of social networks within which advocates are embedded. The term “neoliberalism,” within this frame, offers an agenda for change not only through the policies around which reform takes shape but also as a counter to the economic rationale for education, within which families are consumers and education workers are service providers.

Researcher Positionality

The events outlined above offer a connection among the historical and political context informing this study on resistance to neoliberal education restructuring in Ontario, my work as a public education advocate, and my former position as a secondary educator and union member with partial insider status. There are a number of methodological considerations unique to my relationship with this research (Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014). As a public education advocate in Ontario, I have prior knowledge of my research environment and the context of educational restructuring. I also have access to a network of advocates spanning the province, established primarily through knowledge mobilization activities since 2019. The broad range of actors this study attracted included participants embedded in organizational cultures I was familiar with, but whose experiences in those cultures offered analytic distance from the familiar. This is not a claim to objectivity, but rather a recognition that my standpoint was one that is “with” and “in relation to” participants, a space between and site of tension (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). In short, I was situated in multiple roles, relative to community, teaching, academia, and family. As a queer

racialized third-culture woman, I value lived experience for both its insight and standpoint. My social identities have informed the stakes of my research, my politics and practice, and my access to the diversity of spaces toward which advocates aim action.

This research was supported by the Institute for Research on Digital Literacies, where I was a cluster lead for Community Engagement and Public Scholarship (2022–2023). This project broadly sought to understand how a diverse range of advocates resisted neoliberal educational restructuring. The invitation letter to participants explicitly defined resistance through intersectional frameworks of anti-oppression, social justice, solidarity, and collective liberation and explained neoliberalism as an approach that motivates governments to act like business and encourages market competition. In what follows, I position neoliberalism as a problem statement before reviewing my research design and method as well as theoretical approaches informing my analysis. The findings and discussion that follow describe the multiple roles advocates navigate in their work and tensions within it; the scale at which change occurs, as a relation that values the everyday small-scale work of advocates; the cost of advocacy, especially for Black and racialized women; and visions for solidarity, grounded in a sustainable love ethic.

Neoliberalism as a Problem for Education

Resistance to neoliberalism, a durational political crisis and cruel economic logic that corrodes the public good, has conventionally been studied as a collective counter-structure and organized movement against social injustice. Disciplinary inflections include sociological approaches to resistance (Glasberg, 2011; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Hynes, 2013) and resistance studies (Baaz, 2018; Johansson, 2020), community organizing literature (Brown, 2017; Choudry, 2015; Shragge, 2013), labour studies (Martin, 1995; Novelli & Ferus-Comelo, 2010), and resistance literature (Harlow, 1987; Jefferess, 2008; Sharp, 2000). It is an overwhelming if not futile exercise to converge these spaces. Instead, I have spent time, in relation to the multiplicity of approaches to resistance, considering my ordinary ambitions for this project: to synthesize and analyze insights from 23 one-hour interviews with self-identified public education activists in Ontario, and to contribute to the contextually specific and local work of resistance here and elsewhere. It is not my intention to make truth-claims about resistance, neoliberalism, or education, but instead to hold space for tension and contradiction in the work of making change, with hope that it supports those doing that work in quotidian and underrepresented spaces.

Intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers (2018) described the term “neoliberalism” as the “linguistic omnivore of our times, a neologism that threatens to swallow up all the other words around it” (p. 78.) Rodgers explained that neoliberalism, with the potential of having no meaning or an infinite number of meanings, has described how finance capitalism has restructured global power through “complex structures of institutional supports, business-friendly regulations, and free-range investment opportunities” that are fragile and require “state-managed rescue operations to save [them] from [their] recurrent crises of liquidity and overinvestment” (Rodgers, 2018, p. 81; see also Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism is also an intellectual project that sought to make the market efficient, such that theories of “human capital, consumer choice and preference satisfaction, individual utility maximization, [and] the mutual benefits of free trade and comparative advantage” came to occupy the centre of economics as a study and profession (Rodgers, 2018, p. 83). Within the context of policy, neoliberalism refers to a bundle of “business-friendly policy measures that has circulated more and more widely through domestic and global politics since the 1970s” (Rodgers, 2018, p. 83). As a fragile project, these measures frequently require “public rescue”

through which disaster capitalism carves out new markets (Rodgers, 2018, p. 83; see also Klein, 2008). Finally, neoliberalism refers to the commodification of the self, an extension of market logics to all spheres of life. “Politics, deliberation, and public action dissolve under the relentless pressure for leveraging one’s self into a position of greater human capital and competitive advantage” (Rodgers, 2018, p. 84; see also brown, 2015).

In conversation with and contrast to Rodgers, Julia Ott (2018) responded that neoliberalism is a “flexible and germane” analytic concept, useful for the connections it draws between interconnected struggles. Rather than abandon it, she asked, “What kind of political work do we want from words?”, highlighting that it is humans, not words alone, that make our world. By studying social relations under neoliberalism, as historically contextual and specific to capitalism, as policies and institutions, as embedded in the values and practice of everyday life, Ott argued that we can reveal the structural underpinnings of the injustice we seek to transform and intervene in all spheres of its influence. In the case of schooling, neoliberalism manifests through fundraising, the capacity for which is concentrated in wealthier communities; the imposition of voluntary fees, through which parents purchase opportunity for their children; and the turn to international students as a revenue stream. It also occurs through alternative and specialized programs, which confer advantage on families (Yoon & Winton, 2020). These examples are just some of the ways public education under market-oriented reforms reproduce labour for a knowledge economy aimed toward the expansion of global capital.

The study of neoliberalism in education analyzes, with contextual specificity, how this process plays out across scales, as well as the interdependence of impacts across different sites: from communities to institutions, inclusive of employers, unions, and other social sectors. There is an abundance of research that has offered historicized overviews of neoliberalism (Bocking, 2020; Chitpin & Portelli, 2019; Fanelli & Thomas, 2011; Lipman, 2011; Pinto, 2016; Sattler, 2012; Winton, 2022), and this work has informed the formulation of the problem neoliberalism poses to education specifically and to the public generally, as an apparatus of the state and as an ideal of participatory democracy constituted by exclusion (Fraser, 1990). This tension is centred prominently in the concept of “public” in education. The problem neoliberalism poses public education has a lengthy history of study in scholarly literature while offering strategic value for advocates bridging the gap between theory and practice. Neoliberalism, as a social and cultural order, is not separate from but constitutes the logics of oppression, including but not limited to (intersections of) classism, ableism, racism, colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and cisheterosexism.

Research Design and Method

The objective of my research was to understand the range of ways advocates resist neoliberal market-oriented reforms in education within and across diverse social locations, communities, institutions, and geographies. I used qualitative methods that centred semi-structured in-depth interviews:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to “evaluate” as the term is normally used. [...] At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (Seidman, 2006, p. 9)

In this case, I was interested in the ways self-described advocates conceptualized action and how they made meaning of their advocacy. I recruited on social media with a wide reach (i.e., 20K views on then-Twitter) as well as through targeted outreach to advocates with requests to share internally with networks.

In this paper, I share how resistance is characterized by tension and contradiction, within which the 23 advocates I interviewed navigated change. I am mindful of the tension between the terms “advocacy” and “activism” in terms of the ways in which they signal a relationship to positional privilege in and outside social institutions. My use of the term “advocacy,” which often captures a working with and within, does not belie the reality that many participants also worked outside the system as activists; however, this is a term that is earned and which a community confers. Framing the term “advocacy” as system-oriented change in my study problematized individual advocacy, which entrenches educational inequality (Sauer & Lalvani, 2017), while honouring the distinct relationship (and righteous mistrust) activists have toward systems that uphold inequality. Finally, this project captured visions for solidarity and success, where success moves us closer toward the promise of public education as a collective investment and good.

The criterion for inclusion was having a shared aim toward collective action, social justice, solidarity, and liberation, while I also was aware that these are abstractions whose meaning is made in the context of lived and inherited experience. Participants had to self-identify as advocates of adult age systemically and collectively working to improve educational equity and strengthen a fully publicly funded education system in Ontario anytime between 2019 and 2023. The dates capture a period of educational restructuring that coincided with the election of a Conservative government, around which there was significant organizing by public education advocates: parents and caregivers, unionists, grassroots education workers, progressive organizations, and communities marginalized by social injustice. Participants included stakeholders from a diversity of geographies inside and outside the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), parents, and individuals working in nonprofits who were developing programming for students and engaging schools directly; they also included educators in elementary and secondary schools, and Catholic districts, both English and French. My intent is not to position participants as representative of a particular experience but instead to explore, within my capacity, the diversity of experiences through which sense is made and from which readers with aligned political investments can draw meaning that informs their action.

I conducted 23 1-hour-long semi-structured interviews. I met most participants for the first time during this study and had no prior knowledge of their work (n=17); however, because of the networked and often public nature of advocacy, especially on social media, I was familiar with some participants at arm’s length (n=6). All interviews were conducted online, through videoconferencing. I asked participants how, from their perspective, neoliberalism played out in their sphere of influence; the equity issues they prioritized in their advocacy; how they came to the identity of “advocate” and learned to advocate; and strategies and/or actions that were effective for their advocacy both online and offline. I also asked about the possibility and limitations of working collectively, how participants experienced and envisioned solidarity, and how they defined success individually and as a collective. Finally, I asked how participants sustained hope. This article cannot do justice to the depth of experience and wealth of insight participants offered; instead, it offers a broad framing for themes that emerged throughout the interview process.

I took a reflexive approach to analyzing my qualitative data, combining a critical interpretive framework with an inductive approach through which patterns, themes, and categories

of analysis emerged. This is a framework Prachi Srivastava and Nick Hopwood (2009) described as engaging an interactive set of processes: “a loop-like pattern of multiple rounds of revisiting the data as additional questions emerge, new connections are unearthed, and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding of the material” (Berkowitz, 1997, as cited in Srivastava and Hopwood, 2019). I went through multiple iterations of data analysis. The first comprised 62 pages of notes and associative coding taken over 23 interviews. I then reviewed the audio transcripts again for themes, both descriptive and analytical, before turning to cases that focused on social identities salient to participants as well as the sites of social change toward which participants were oriented. This article is not intended to draw causation but to deepen understanding of how advocacy can offer avenues to resist neoliberal education restructuring.

Theoretical Approaches

Critical theory shaped the methodological assumptions of this study, which viewed the interviews as being situated in particular socio-political and historical contexts:

[The] intention [of critical theory] is not merely to give an account of society and behaviour but to realize a society that is based on equality and democracy for all its members. Its purpose is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them. (Cohen, 2018, p. 51)

Critical scholarship, as a multidisciplinary approach, draws theoretical resources from social and cultural theory. My analysis drew on three concepts specifically to make meaning of themes that emerged from interviews with participants: love, cruel optimism, and emergent strategy. If critical theory is prescriptive in envisioning and aiming for change, these concepts offer a response to the tension and contradiction of political life: What do we do when what we want and long for is an obstacle to our flourishing?

In their book *Desire/Love*, Lauren Berlant (2012) described desire as a “state of attachment to something or someone,” where attachment reflects needs and possibilities projected onto the object of desire (p. 6). While the object is situated outside, the desire the object evokes feels like it is coming from within. In this way, Berlant explained, the objects of our desire are not objective but in part a mirage, shaped by our needs and promises projected. Love, in their explanation, is desire that endures; love is the embrace of a dream where desire is reciprocated: “In the idealized image of their relation, desire will lead to love, which will make a world for desire’s endurance” (p. 7). This, however, does not make love real or authentic. Berlant raised the political question of how social and cultural norms produce attachments and orient desires toward living through certain fantasies. They write: “What does it mean about love that its expressions tend to be so *conventional*, so bound up in institutions like marriage and family, property relations, and stock phrases and plots?” (p. 7, emphasis in original). In this study about resistance, which aimed to document and inspire change, I invite collective reflection on attachments to the fantasy of a good life, through which we orient desire. The invitation recognizes that what we want to change is often bound to these attachments and that what we desire may not lead to love.

Berlant (2011) offered the concept of cruel optimism to describe the double bind we navigate as we seek to change conditions we are attached to. All attachments are optimistic because they move you toward a satisfaction you cannot generate on your own, but not all optimism feels optimistic, which is to say we are attached to many people, ways of life, projects, politics, ideas, and concepts that make it impossible to achieve transformation. Berlant explained that an ordinary

pleasure of attachment is to conventionality, to the fantasy of the good life, and these could be scenes of romantic love or upward mobility or the political itself: “Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?” (p. 2). The question is not posed to invite a satisfying resolution but instead to orient the reader toward the stakes of resistance and to prompt them to reflect on their own attachments through the provisional generalization these concepts offer.

What do we want and what do we long for? *Love*. Interviews with participants invited me to think about resistance as love oriented toward an enduring desire and as a state of optimistic attachment that is not cruel. Bell hooks (2018) countered the inauthentic faulty definitions of love and its cruel attachments with a definition of love as an act of will, an intention, action, and choice we make to nurture the spiritual growth in ourselves and each other (p. 6–7). She invoked this ethic of love in the work of social justice:

When I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place of love in any movement for social justice. Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasised a love ethic. (p. xviii–xix)

Movement facilitator adrienne maree brown (2017) offered the concept of emergence in her book *Emergent Strategy* to align action with a vision for collective justice and liberation. She also began with love, connecting it to our capacity for resilience and to endure with broken hearts. The concept of emergence describes how small actions connect to complex systems and patterns: “In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of parts” (p. 13). The parts here are fractals, formed out of a multiplicity of simple interactions, reflected in our nature; the lesson fractals offer is that small-scale solutions can impact the whole system. Brown offered principles to direct action not just at the scale of a “system,” conventionally understood, but also at the scale of the self, as relational, interdependent, and a system unto itself:

...emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for. (p. 7)

Put succinctly, cruel optimism is an attachment to a fantasy that interferes with our flourishing, a relationship between the parts and the whole that feels like love but cannot endure without heartbreak. To engage heartbreak with authentic love requires engaging parts and their relationship to the whole, a fractal pattern within which we are relational and interdependent with one another.

Findings and Discussion

I began each interview with an overview of the study and asked participants about problems that had stood out to them in their advocacy. Issues highlighted included economic inequality, food and housing security, anti-Black racism, xenophobia, transphobia and the suppression of gender identity and expression, early literacy and equity in reading, French-language education, and truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, alongside specific references to funding cuts and regressive education policies under successive conservative governments. In my 19th interview, a

participant explained: “I am specifically concerned about the defunding of public education that we have seen happening over the past two decades, primarily starting under Mike Harris, going through multiple liberal governments.” A participant in my sixth interview, reflecting on their tenure in a politically elected role, described the challenge of resisting underfunding:

There was this sort of unwritten... vibe, I guess, around school boards advocating. If you pushed too hard, you would be reprimanded. So, if you opposed initiatives the government was introducing or if you agreed with unions or educators on, say, not wanting to have mandatory eLearning or something like that, you would be reprimanded. If you needed a new school, maybe the government wouldn't approve your funding.

Depending on their primary role, how participants envisioned constraints for action depended on their positional authority and relationship to the system.

Navigating Multiple Roles

The intent of this study was not to prescribe one solution but rather to reflect the ways that a diversity of tactics and strategies can be understood as resistance. Participants expressed common understanding that tension and contradiction are part of advocacy work and living broadly. The most obvious tension was between the promise of public education—as a common good and great equalizer—and the practice of public education, which reflects the systemic inequities and oppression that exists in society at large. It is not that these inequities are wholly deterministic, but they do shape the conditions under which people are educated. During our interviews, I was interested in hearing about the diversity of ways that tension manifests, and many participants expressed a desire for space to name and explore tension in their work. This naming counters some of the romanticism of resistance and allows us to learn about the processes and dynamics we need to interrupt, including those within which we are embedded.

While we may frame the location of resistance as either inside or outside the system, participants I interviewed demonstrated that they were often located in both, negotiating the contradiction of their roles in ways that were both perceptible and imperceptible by the public. This reflected a tension not between inside and outside but more a dynamic of relation across which participants made change. For example, a participant in my 22nd interview described working in a fairly conservative organization while “dipping in and out” of activist spaces over the years: “My organization won't get in the way of my civic participation. But like, ‘we don't do direct action’ is a phrase I've heard many times.” Another participant, in my 19th interview, explained that, besides waged work, volunteering was a central part of their identity as an advocate: “I volunteer my time, for instance, with [a non-profit for racial justice], and through our mission around advocacy, education, and policy development, we work on creating a more caring [and anti-racist] society.” Participants I interviewed illustrated how space—or the concept of a system—is a “product of interrelations ... constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” (Massey, 2005, p. 9). It is also a “sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity” and “coexisting heterogeneity” (p. 9). In the instances I described above, both participants were oriented toward work with the general public through nonprofits and community organizing.

Another manifestation of how participants were situated in multiple roles was in the context of unionism. In the absence of supports available by the employer, unions offer protections that

allow workers to take on the risk of action to make change, including within the union. In my 20th interview, a participant who worked outside the GTA as an educational assistant explained how experiencing inequity compelled them to get involved with their union:

[I started getting involved with my union] mostly based on the fact that I was trying to get more support for early childhood educators and educational assistants because, of course, once I was in the system, I started seeing how you're treated and the difference in the money.

In my ninth interview, a teacher similarly described how union participation helped them feel connected to a collective through which they could make change: "I think I'm leaning into the union a little bit more in all honesty, because that's what creates tension for change within our schools, right?" This participant also described their involvement in a parent advocacy group and the power of finding their voice in a collective setting: "I'm getting a little bit more interested in how perhaps my voice, how being active within those [parent] communities can amplify my voice a little bit more than within my classroom on my own."

But unions, as a space of multiplicity, also reproduce inequality. A participant, in my 17th interview, explained: "You know, we look to unions to be the ones asking for us to do better, that unions exist to lift up all workers and that should foreground the most marginalized, but we don't see unions doing that internally." They described joining provincial committees to access a "direct line to the decision-making process" and felt greater success making change there than in their local district. In my 14th interview, another participant from a different local district described barriers to leadership opportunities and how they targeted mechanisms of procedure to make change:

When I speak about the [union as a] system, we have to really do a deep dive in districts around the Constitution, around bylaws and practices and policies. [...] Because the system of the union has looked a certain way historically. I'm disrupting by asking and even, you know, addressing how to eliminate processes that are rooted in nepotism and rooted in misogyny.

Unions are complex organizations, and what teachers want from them varies depending on their geography, the value they place on what unions offer, entry points for participation, social identities, and harm incurred through exclusion and marginalization. As Nina Bascia explained:

Teachers' ambivalence, apathy, and frustration—with decision makers and with unions themselves—are rooted in part in the strategic choices unions have made about their relationships with their members, their internal organization, their strategic directions, and the discourse about teachers and teaching they promote publicly. (2008, p. 103)

Unions, as a primary defence against the austerity policies and attacks on labour that neoliberalism imposes, achieve important protections for workers; however, there is tension between "bread and butter" issues that are almost exclusively addressing capitalist exploitation and the call by union-activists for internal reform. This includes the expansion of how we perceive "issues" to include intersecting exploitation on the grounds of race and ethnicity, age, gender identity and expression, disability, and underrepresented professional classes, to name a few. The movement to address otherwise excluded worker-issues is happening in ordinary and less visible ways, often driven by those most marginalized in the system.

Scales of Change

Participants were not only multiply situated and engaged in a diversity of activities, but they were also contributing to large-scale movement building alongside small-scale action aimed toward system change. In my first interview, a Catholic school teacher explained that, during the pandemic, some teachers were compelled to engage in organizing for housing and food justice alongside education advocacy. For example, they described their engagement with direct action, attending demonstrations to physically block access to court trucks, where rental enforcement units were conducting evictions during the pandemic, and working in the community kitchen to deliver food: “[And] obviously we’d like to stop the privatization of health care and education. So, we went out to the marches with nurses and of course for the education workers in the fall.” They explain how this activism—despite occupying a space and scale outside schooling—informed their work in the classroom: “What we’re doing outside of school comes back into school. Back and forth.”

Similarly, a participant in my 21st interview described activity outside the school as a site of change, while simultaneously working within the school as an educator. Specifically, they identified a need to represent their linguistically and ethnically diverse community at leadership tables, which led to the founding of an education network through which they engaged in both advocacy and activism: “We are essentially approaching both the [school] board and Ministry [of Education], and having monthly meetings with our community, with activists, nonprofits, youth, some politicians, and just having conversations before we approach the boards to bring some sort of accountability.” In addition to their advocacy in community spaces, this participant was also engaged actively in their union.

Not all participants, however, were oriented toward or had capacity for political action, where politics is captured in the sphere of collective organizing. A parent in my second interview, for instance, explained that, in the context of neoliberal school reforms in 1980s Los Angeles, California, fundraising was an action parents engaged in to hire librarians, nurses, and counsellors, which is not permitted in Ontario. The large-scale fundraising culture accompanied the parent, and shaped their framework for action in Ontario:

...if the budget is made, what else is there to do [on School Council] besides fundraising? I mean, you can protest and there may be long-term changes that could happen, but once the budget is done, I don’t know, I’m not familiar enough with the system to know what kind of things could be pursued at this point.

While recognizing the inequity of fundraising, and the cruel attachment families have to it in an underfunded system, this parent held tension between local fundraising and large-scale political action, particularly as they recalled local organizing that was activated after the Trump presidency:

People were taking it upon themselves to highlight what issues are coming up at each board meeting and people could, without reinventing the wheel every time, have some awareness of what was coming up. [...] but that requires so much time, it requires really dedicated organizing for that kind of information to be conveyed because I don’t think the board necessarily wants that information to be conveyed. [...] I said before, it’s like there’s short-term problems, and there’s long-term problems and the whole neoliberal paradigm is that you end up getting so strapped

on every front, not just education. But then you just don't have the energy to do what you need to do to fight it. And that's the tragic double bind.

This double bind was a position that not only parents but also educators were placed in—to fill the gap for under-resourced schools. My first participant, who advocated for nutrition programs, explained:

I have snacks in the classroom, we have advocated for a nutrition program at school. So, we do have some wins, and some good things are happening. Coaching track and field, I just took the kids to basketball... if you look at the small scale, children are smiling and playing and swinging on the swings. We can take a deep breath and just keep going.

The contradiction here is that nutrition programs also required fundraising from major grocers, whose monopoly contributes to high food costs:

And we have a parent volunteer running the school nutrition program now, so all the kids have access to it. [...] Ultimately, this should be the government that does this. Stephen Lecce and Ford should be going, "We need to feed our kids. This will be a great equalizer. We'll keep the \$200 tax on the licence plates, and we'll use that billion dollars to feed all the students in Ontario." It's such a no-brainer, but instead we have to do it ourselves, piecemeal.

"We have to do it ourselves" is an impossible double bind many teachers and parents experience within a system that refuses to meet basic needs. In their research on fundraising, Sue Winton and Michelle Milani (2017) showed the contradiction of these perceived goods:

We found that Ontario's school fundraising policy and that the practice of school fundraising within public schools undermines critical democratic efforts including equity, inclusion, participatory decision-making, and critical mindedness. Furthermore, school fundraising compromises the ideal of quality public education for all students as it constructs education as a private rather than a public good by shifting the responsibility of government funded education supported by collective citizens to individual students and their families (p. 7).

Action must therefore be read in the context of shifting responsibility from government-funded education to, in this case, teachers and parents.

The Cost of Advocacy

Tension held between inside and outside was manifested not only in ways that folks worked outside their primary professional role or engaged personal growth inside their role but also in their negotiation with the social and cultural spaces where their advocacy work was embedded. In my 16th interview, a public-school teacher who worked formerly in a central equity role described divesting from equity work in the context of employment and directing it toward community work outside their professional role, which offered an opportunity to feel success. Success was defined by the participant as a contribution to the conditions for others to flourish:

Where do I feel like I can flourish? Yeah, sometimes it feels small and offline; I don't even mean grassroots—which is often a kind of trademark—but just like local collectives of people. One of the most enlivening experiences I've had in the last

couple of years that felt humanizing for everyone involved was a local collective of neighbours and community members organizing against exploitative labour practices within our community.

In this interview, the participant questioned the idea of the workplace being an exclusive site for change, asking:

Why is the workplace going to be the place where I realize all these things? That in and of itself is interesting and maybe problematic. It's also the source of a lot of people's woes and frustrations with equity, but it's also one space, right? [...] No one role is going to be everything to everybody. I guess [the question that is] personally relevant and helpful for me is, [in] whatever space I'm in, what would support me feeling like I'm like a human, humanizing others? I think that healthy distance from one's work is maybe one way to show up as a full human and support others in their humanness as well.

While this participant divested from equity work within their school board, they turned toward the neighbourhoods and communities that equity work serves. When we look for resistance, evaluating a space for action, or looking for who is "doing the work," how we make meaning of absence, particularly the absence of racialized people, matters. Absence from one space does not mean the work is not being done, but possibly that the space itself does not facilitate the conditions to make that work sustainable. Valuing how participants conceptualized change, at multiple sites and scales, can illustrate both the benefit and cost of advocacy.

Racialized people, particularly Black women, are often calculating the benefit of continuing equity work in a system in which their suffering is imperceptible; a number persist because of a sense of purpose greater than the system itself. One participant, in my 14th interview, explained:

The cost for me not to say anything was for the trauma to continue generationally. And that cost, I have to decide, again, with the tensions, the duality, you know, sitting in it. Do I allow for the trauma to continue to my children and other people's children who may be historically marginalized? Or do I use my positionality at a cost to my own mental health, to my professional access and leadership opportunity, right? Even my physicality? I lost my hair around that time because I was so stressed. I lost my hair. It was constant, it was a constant depletion [...] I don't think systems are equipped to see that cost.

As we continued our interview, this participant described the importance of affinity groups in sustaining the relationships needed to counter depletion, a space that offered not only care, healing, and restoration but also strategizing and action planning. Farima Pour-Khorshid's (2018) ethnographic study on racial affinity groups highlighted the way that affinity groups can offer humanity to participants, a sacred space to learn and heal, and critical camaraderie for resistance through a counterspace for action.

The importance of supportive leadership was also highlighted in my fifth interview by another teacher who was unable to sustain equity work within the school because of parental complaints about culturally responsive pedagogy. Questions were being fielded to her weekly, including by administrators:

And then in the 2021–2022 school year, it just became, like I’m constantly defending, not only what we are doing as an English department but also defending myself. [Parents asked,] “...why are you doing this and why can’t you do what the other schools are doing and why can’t my child read Shakespeare and what’s wrong with *Lord of the Flies*?” It just became overwhelming, the number of phone calls and emails I had to respond to. [...] I was dealing with on average one or two a week. Over the course of a year [...] it just beat me down. So, I made the decision, I need to take a year off because this is just, it’s overwhelming.

I later asked this teacher to explain the conditions that would need to be met to return to their job. They were clear:

If there’s a complaint about the program itself and what we’re doing, I would need admin to handle that. Admin has to handle that. This is the school board’s multi-year plan. Your teachers are initiating the plan. So, if there’s a complaint about it, your teacher should not be defending it. It should be the administrator.

They also expressed a desire for time to support and mentor teachers so they feel comfortable doing equity work; however, while this participant expressed a longing for the classroom and feelings of loss from not teaching secondary students, they made clear that the impact of fielding parental complaints was not worth the cost of defending a successful equity program in their department.

Within the construct of capitalist time, where productivity is measured by observable output, stepping back from equity work in a school may feel like the suspension of success; however, thinking within a “rest is resistance” framework, Tricia Hersey (2022) compels us to start at the scale of the personal and consider the function of rest as a life-saving force, especially for Black women: “We are sleep deprived because systems view us as machines, but bodies are not machines. Our bodies are a site of liberation. We are divine and our rest is divine. There is synergy, interconnectedness, and deep communal healing within our rest movement” (Preface). In her contribution to stop a legacy of exhaustion, Hersey called for rest as care, as radical care, that disrupts capitalism and white supremacy. Rest, as Hersey explained, is a love practice through which we can turn toward ourselves with tenderness and power. Systems here are placed under scrutiny, rather than being a site of transformation: “I don’t belong to systems. They cannot have me. I will never donate my body to a system that views it as only a tool for its production” (Preface).

Solidarity: A Love Ethic

Bell hooks (2018) described political cynicism as “the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart,” (p. xviii), and this description makes it possible to think about the impact of neoliberalism, and the ordinary and durational crisis it enacts, as a kind of heartbreak. A return to the question of organizing political life—what we really want and long for—can orient our desire toward a love ethic that sustains relational spiritual growth, so that what we might long for is love, to ease heartbreak. Success or solidarity here is not a destination but the integrity of process, a commitment to fail and fall in love. The idea of humanizing and “showing up” for the people participants encountered was brought up frequently, shaping the subtext of my reading of love as a way that participants approached themselves not only through rest but also by engaging in the work of solidarity. A participant, in my 19th interview drew, on spiritual teachings to explain:

I grew up in the church. The scripture says you're supposed to love people, like love your neighbour, right? And so, for me, I take it literally. I don't care who my neighbour is, I'm going to love them the same way that I love myself or I love my child and so there's not an exception.

A participant in my 22nd interview similarly described solidarity as an expression of love:

When I heard you say that word [justice] to me, the Venn diagram of that is solidarity. It's acting in an embodied way from love for people you don't know because it's right to just have each other's backs, because it's fucked up what's happening to them.

Interviewer: So, in this Venn diagram, justice is on one side. And what's the other?

Participant: Love. Love. I'm not that interested in either without the other. I guess for some there are versions of love or justice that don't involve the other but to me, they're incomplete.

Kurt Bayertz's (1999) "Four Uses of Solidarity" explained solidarity as a law of obligation, a mutual responsibility between an individual and society, and a mutual attachment between individuals not just in terms of common ground but also mutual aid. Solidarity is not just an ethical orientation but can also serve as a political watchword, more conventionally used by union activists as a large-scale rallying cry for change; however, on the ground, there is tension between rank-and-file membership, particularly around equity work. In my 15th interview, one participant expressed a longing for solidarity *within* their local district, in the context on their equity work on Indigenous education, truth, and reconciliation:

I go back to like, just being part of the union. There's so much tension within our group, our members, with our program leads, I feel they were not in solidarity with us. For me, solidarity would be to, in my workplace, and even with my students, create a culture of supporting each other. That's how I see solidarity within union members. We're all supporting each other's goals, supporting each other's objectives, professional objectives, and I don't feel that in my workplace from members of my union.

Another participant, in my 8th interview, highlighted the interconnection between systems and people, placing emphasis on doing work in multiple spaces and on their vision for solidarity in public education:

...the education system is dependent on so many other entities, like community and parents and government and universities, and there's a web of interdependency there that you look to for allyship. One big thing that we always say is, we as educators, we don't have the skill or the resources to deal with all the challenges that are presented to us. So, if you don't move beyond the space of the education institution that you're in, you're not effective in the real lives of kids that you're serving. There are many reasons to do this work in different spaces.

This does not belie the reality that public education is also a site of tension and contestation; however, a vision that can hold space for multitudes can offer an antidote to the scarcity mindset shaped by neoliberal policies that have groups "fighting for dollars." In my 10th interview, a participant explained:

I think that the solidarity is needed to start... when you come to public education, what are we trying to do here? Why does it matter? Why do we have to fight tooth and nail for it? Because the alternative is really fucking frightening. I think solidarity is also recognizing that we need to play different roles. [...] I think the scarcity mindset means that people are fighting for dollars [...] I think solidarity is about having a vision, but it comes with a multitude. It's not one but a multitude.

And finally, a participant in my 16th interview highlighted the limitations of thinking about solidarity through a Western individualist framing of charity or obligation; instead, they offered insight on solidarity as spirit or as a way of being:

I'm Sikh Punjabi. That's a really important part of my identity. And I think charity is something that, in a neoliberal context, will be like, "Oh, Sikh people do *langar* [free communal eating, commonly in gurdwaras] and we are charitable about food" and [that might be] a learning experience with students and learners. But community members [might see this as] reframing the principles of our faith and religion, [a system that is] already coherent: *Sewa* [selfless giving], *langar* [community eating] is supposed to fortify us, our collective understanding.

The interpretation of solidarity offered by this participant was that charity is an intrinsic and embodied part of struggle, a way of being, and a spiritual orientation. Learning is not outside of community but a part of being *in* community. When *langar* and *sewa* are framed as "generosity" in neoliberal discourse, it instrumentalizes solidarity.

adrienne maree brown described the importance of shared principles that offer a collective practice and common understanding of the aims of change and referenced the Jemez principles for democratic organizing, among other sources, to guide emergent strategy and make intentional change in ways that value the relationship between simple interactions and complex systems. This includes a commitment to building inclusion into our work, strengthening already existing networks, centring those impacted by harm, and integrating their needs into our work. It also requires a commitment to building just relationships between ourselves and within ourselves, through self-transformation.

Emergent Strategy

Adrienne maree brown wrote: "Emergent strategy is about shifting the way we see and feel the world and each other. If we begin to understand ourselves as practice ground for transformation, we can transform the world" (p. 121). Transformation, according to brown, requires curiosity about our lives and values, vulnerable reflection, pattern disruption, practice at building relationships that honour the interdependence necessary for transformation, and an orientation to hope as a strategy. Elements of emergent strategy honour the fractal, adaptive, non-linear, iterative character of change, oriented toward transformation, resilience, and the creation of possibilities; these elements are reflected in our natural environment, which reflects an ecosystem of interdependent parts both large and small. Emergent strategy driven by a love ethic is an antidote of world building in response to neoliberalism, and the heartbreak we sustain through our cruel attachments to its fantasy.

This article began with the context of the study on resistance to neoliberal restructuring and a call for vulnerable reflection on our attachment to fantasies of a "good life," shaped by forces

that interfere with our flourishing. Resisting neoliberal restructuring begins by situating the stakes of the loss we endure when we confront the heartbreak of trickle-down injustice and market-driven subjectivity. This article also grounded readers in a love ethic and emergent strategy, elements of which I highlighted through interviews with participants. This approach values the non-linear and multiple ways individuals are embedded in systems and the fractal nature of change, which takes place at big (i.e., organizing and movement building) and small (i.e., relationship and spirit-building) scales.

Through interviews, I showed how resistance is accessed through multiple entry points and is spatially heterogeneous, replete with internal contradiction; this is not a shortcoming but a feature of transformation, one we must tolerate. I also showed the cost of resistance for participants whose relationship to systems engendered oppression and harm. I focused on racialized and Black women (n=7) who entrusted me to represent their experiences with dignity and care because the cost of advocacy on their mind, body, and spirit was a pattern that emerged consistently in interviews. I highlighted the value of affinity spaces and rest from advocacy as an integral part of sustaining resistance, work that is disproportionately carried out by those who are surviving the very systems that deplete them. Following bell hooks, I returned to love and solidarity as an antidote to the heartbreak of ordinary crisis and to neoliberal restructuring that rationalizes schooling as a project of social reproduction under new forms of economic organization rather than as a democratic project of community cohesion and interdependent self-actualization.

It is my hope that this article serves as one entry point rather than a destination for thinking about resistance to neoliberal restructuring specifically and the work of advocacy more broadly. References to critical and cultural theorists alongside a diversity of resistance scholarship frame the politics and values that bind this article to common goals and encourage mutual trust and reciprocity, the building blocks of solidarity. It is one touchpoint from which to pursue our curiosity, heal heartbreak, and engage the process of transformation in ourselves; in so doing, we may change one another and the world.

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