Finally, I always go to sea as a sailor, because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck. For as in this world, head winds are far more prevalent than winds from astern (that is, if you never violate the Pythagorean maxim), so for the most part the Commodore on the quarter-deck gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle. He thinks he breathes it first; but not so. In much the same way do the commonality lead their leaders in many other things, at the same time that the leaders least expect it.

– Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*
What is the Meaning of 21st Century Education in New Brunswick?

by

Hugh Anthony Leonard


A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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in the Graduate Academic Unit of Education

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This dissertation analyzes and critiques the premise of “21st century education” reform in New Brunswick that “education is about adapting to a changing world,” as stated in the Department of Education’s (2010) YouTube video on the topic. This focus arises from my experience as a Bachelor of Education student at the University of New Brunswick during the 2010-2011 school year, when the Department introduced the reform model. The immediate product of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (an American public-private partnership, which supported George W. Bush’s notorious No Child Left Behind legislation), 21st century education rhetorically promotes so-called employability skills that centre on digital technology usage, purportedly to prepare public school students for an assumed life of constant technological change and concomitant economic uncertainty while simultaneously promising to improve the overall quality of life for the entire human species. In order to pass the internship component of my BEd programme, I was expected to teach English Language Arts and science at the secondary level in accordance with 21st century education standards; however, I was evidently supposed to do so without even understanding the meaning behind the model’s rhetoric. As I demonstrate in reviewing and contextualizing the official case for 21st century education as put forth in Trilling’s and Fadel’s (2009) 21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times and the Department’s (2010) consultation document NB3-21C: Creating a 21st Century Learning Model of Public Education Three-Year Plan 2010-2013, the model’s rhetoric presupposes its abovementioned premise. Moreover, 21st century education presupposes the conceptual framework in which its otherwise
uncritical premise and corresponding proposals presumably make sense. My primary aims are to access and critique the concepts that constitute this framework and to suggest a critical alternative to it. I determine that the model centres on nominal conceptions of progress, democracy, and justice, based on its connections (both direct and indirect) to several educational texts that draw attention to one or more of these concepts, notably The Republic of Plato (386-367 BCE/1906/1992), John Dewey’s (1916/1968) Democracy and Education, Paulo Freire’s (1970/2005) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and Theodore Christou’s (2012) Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario’s Public Schools 1919-1942. Upon analyzing the model’s passing references to these three concepts (after situating them in the context of neoliberalism, drawing on Marxist critiques of state-capitalism), I determine that it presupposes that “progress,” “democracy,” and “justice” respectively refer to capital accumulation, a neoliberal social context, and neoliberal ideology generally. With these concepts in mind, the meaning of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick and its legacy become clearer. Finally, I look to a common line of thought in the aforementioned texts of Plato, Dewey, and Freire for inspiration for a critical alternative. Though all three philosophers responded in different ways to very different social contexts, they all argued that educational experience should transform social reality in the service of life itself, not merely one socially constructed class of it. A necessary means of advancing such a transformation, I conclude, is for people to communicate with each other about the (socially constructed but no less real) world, drawing on each other’s personal, social, and formal/disciplinary
sources of knowledge, rather than to conform uncritically to the world as encouraged by 21st century education.
DEDICATION

For T. M. H.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While interviewing Leonard Cohen in 2006, upon the publication of *Book of Longing*, Michal Silverblatt noted, “Some people say that their unit as a poet or a writer is the sentence or the verse, but this seems to be about arriving at the table to write and filling the page . . . .” Cohen replied:

I think that the content of that work at the moment of arrival at the page is exactly the strategy that allowed you to get there. Because getting there is the trick. Getting there is the trouble. Once you get there – once your life is organized so beautifully that you can actually – you know, there’s a table, and a chair, and a typewriter – you know, that already is an incredible triumph. Now most people give up. They can’t – their minds – I know they’re much more fertile than mine because I speak to people whose minds are fertile but who can’t write. My only success is the fact that I’ve been able to get to the desk. So my whole life has been trying to arrange those moments when, you know, I can take care of everything that is not in that room, and have the moment to arrive. And usually what I am writing about is what I have had to do to get to the moment in front of the desk.

I quote the above, not to compare my writing with Cohen’s, but because I cannot think of a better image for the process of writing as I have experienced it.

When I first started writing this dissertation, in 2013, many people had already helped me to get to the front of my desk. My initial problem was that the writing task itself for a variety of reasons seemed overwhelming, at times impairing whatever mental
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some of the ideas that would make their way into this dissertation;

the professors, instructors, administrators, teachers, and students who helped to
inspire my critique of 21st century education reform;
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it way better too.
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Abbreviations

EFI (Early French Immersion)
ELA (English Language Arts)
FI (French Immersion)
FSL (French as a Second Language)
P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Skills)
PD Day (Professional Development Day)

NB3-21C (the policy document \textit{NB3-21C: Creating a 21st Century Learning Model of Public Education Three-Year Plan 2010-2013})

NB3-21C (refers to the policy itself, as distinct from the policy document)
Introduction

“‘Call me Ishmael,’” the speaker admitted, with skillful comedic timing, was as far as he got in *Moby Dick*. He was presenting on “21st century education” reform in New Brunswick, delivering it from the stage of Saint John High School’s auditorium. It was the first Professional Development Day of the 2010-2011 school year, and the atmosphere in the old building was muggy. (Outside, in the city, by the harbour, it was a beautiful late-summer day). To set up the punch line, the speaker had directed his audience of high school educators to think about common “20th century education” experiences, such as being assigned works of literature deemed classic. The admission of bluffing through an assignment on *Moby Dick* induced a few chuckles from the crowd, but not everyone found it funny. I know because I was in attendance as a student intern.

The joke immediately struck at my interests in literature, my formal education in the subject, and my hope of becoming a good teacher (which, I had imagined, would somehow involve sharing my love of literature with students, not imposing it on them). My reaction aside, the speaker’s main topic was no laughing matter, especially considering that his audience was effectively forced to hear it, whether as employees of the New Brunswick Department of Education or as unpaid student-teachers.

Implicitly, the message was that the Department had to reform the system because of a tendency therein among teachers to impose antiquated, elitist standards on students. Explicitly, he argued that teachers had to strike a better “balance” between directing students and letting them discover their own way, giving more weight to the latter part of
the equation. In the present century, students should be free to read for English Language Arts (ELA) class whatever interests them, we were told, for example.

If the speaker had read a little further, he would have discovered that Ishmael also makes fun of school teachers, associating their profession with the abuse of authority. While explaining his reasons for setting out on a whaling expedition, he acknowledges that the life of a low-ranking sailor is especially difficult for people who are too accustomed to giving orders. Referring to the ship’s senior crew, he reflects:

True, they rather order me about some, and make me jump from spar to spar, like a grasshopper in a May meadow. And at first, this sort of thing is unpleasant enough. It touches one’s sense of honor, particularly if you come of an old established family in the land . . . . And more than all, if just previous to putting your hand in the tar-pot, you have been lording it as a country schoolmaster, making the tallest boys stand in awe of you. The transition is a keen one, I assure you, from a schoolmaster to a sailor, and requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it. But even this wears off in time.
(Melville, 1851/2010, p. 27)

Would the speaker’s problem with being assigned *Moby Dick* have worn off too if he had worked his way to this role-reversing passage? The answer is maybe, maybe not, of course. The point is that being given assignments is not inherently oppressive. It teaches the teacher in Ishmael’s example that true authority does not require gimmicks to be effective. In Ishmael’s case, taking orders is an acceptable price to pay for sailing as a hired hand aboard the Pequod, which he describes “a ship of the old school” (p. 85).
“But,” he adds, “to all these her old antiquities, were added new and marvellous features, pertaining to the wild business that for more than half a century she had followed” (p. 85). The same could be said of “classic” literature and “old school” means of navigating the imagination with it, which is not to say that any work, “classic” or otherwise, is above criticism.

The latter thoughts did not occur to me as I listened to the speaker’s presentation. At the time, *Moby Dick* was still on my reading list. Instead, I was made to feel that I should keep my formal knowledge of literature to myself, that leading a challenging reading experience with students was inherently harmful, tantamount to forcing them to do work against their will. Compounding this feeling was the kernel of truth in the presentation: the truism that students should pursue their own interests. Obviously, even if teachers have the best of intentions, it is more than possible to harm students’ interests when introducing them to material, especially when their attendance is compulsory in the first place. Though many of my best memories from high school have to do with assigned readings in English classes, I could indirectly relate to the speaker’s disinterest in *Moby Dick*. In grade twelve, during 1998-1999, I had to take a course on computer programming in order to fulfill a graduation requirement, which meant that I could not take an art course in which I was interested. If I had to give a presentation today on the importance of respecting students’ interests, it would be tempting to mock “QBasic,” the old programming model that I was forced to study in the twentieth century. It would be wrong to do so, though, because the model may be of interest to others.

I also recall being sideswiped by the speaker’s over-the-top depiction of “20th century education.” As Herman Melville’s nineteenth-century novel reveals, for
example, the abuse of teachers’ authority over students is not merely a twentieth-century phenomenon. Nor is the obverse practice of granting students the freedom to make technical decisions (with little or no guidance from a teacher) a twenty-first-century discovery. Moreover, even the kernel of truth to the speaker’s criticism of assigned readings can be a source of error. On this point, another autobiographical example from the previous century comes to mind.

In 1996-1997, when I was in grade ten, I had to write a book report for English class, but I was allowed to choose to write it on *A Tale of Two Cities*. I had recently become interested in English literature and assumed that there was no greater novelist than Charles Dickens. Despite my best efforts, however, I could not get through the novel, finding its style too difficult to decipher. Rather than admit this by asking for help or permission to pick another novel, I based much of my report on the back cover of the novel. Were it not for my interest in literature, the frustrating experience could have turned me off reading novels for good. Instead, I made finishing a Dickens novel on my own time a personal goal, the eventual achievement of which was much more satisfying than the grade that I received on my bluffed book report. As this example reveals, the pursuit of personal interests, under certain circumstances, can be a waste of time and energy without proper guidance from a teacher. Analogously, travellers who receive proper directions from a guide will probably reach their destination more efficiently than they otherwise could. To extend the analogy, overly exhausted travellers are more likely to give up on their destination, fall to the temptation of cutting corners, or lose their way altogether.
In giving the above examples, I do not mean to cast aspersions on my high school teachers. It was not my computer programming teacher’s fault that I had no interest in the subject beyond the fact that it was a graduation requirement. I suspect that my grade ten English teacher did not have the academic freedom to align course requirements with each student’s reading interests. But the memory of these experiences does make me reflect on the kind of teacher that I was being pressured into becoming under the rubric of 21st century education. I was apparently expected to believe in the reform model uncritically, whether the speaker truly did or not. How can anyone, let alone a student intern, argue against the stated purposes of respecting students’ interests and improving on public education? Why was I asked to remember “20th century education” but effectively told to forget it? What was the real purpose of 21st century education that I was being told to support?

I immediately knew that 21st century education had something to do with the high-tech industry making private profit off public education. A Department of Education video that supplemented the speaker’s presentation could not help but reveal this unstated economic purpose.

Now posted on YouTube as “21st Century Education in New Brunswick, Canada” (2010), the video begins by simulating the posting of a Facebook message. The words “THE SHIFT IN NEW BRUNSWICK PUBLIC EDUCATION” are typed in. Up-beat music plays. The page shakes, bursts to the sound of shattered glass, and a rhetorical question soon appears against the backdrop of a digitized, two-dimensional map of the world: “DO YOU REALIZE? HOW DRAMATICALLY THE WORLD HAS CHANGED?”
Before one has a chance to ponder the idea of change and before one can make sense of all the imagery, the video moves on to a series of questions that appears to be designed to induce nostalgia. “WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME,” it asks, “THAT YOU ADJUSTED THE TRACKING ON YOUR VCR . . . USED CORRECTING FLUID . . . SENT A FILM OUT TO BE DEVELOPED . . . USED A PAYPHONE . . . GOT UP TO CHANGE THE CHANNEL.”1 As these questions are posed, an image of each of the abovementioned technologies appears and the music shifts, becoming more sentimental.

Having directed attention to these technology-related experiences and any emotions attached to them, the video returns to the topic at hand. “WHAT,” it asks, “ABOUT EDUCATION?” Several items, including blackboards and lockers, are brought up in the form of a list on a chalkboard, apparently to represent the present state of public education. One is asked whether one is aware of their potential obsolescence in 2020. During this part of the video, the music gradually returns to a higher energy. It sustains the crescendo with the following rhetorical questions:

DO YOU REALIZE? THAT WE HAVE STUDENTS . . . WHO CAN KEYBOARD 60 WORDS/MINUTE . . . IN GRADE 2 . . . USING TWITTER, FACEBOOK AND TEXT MESSAGING INSTEAD OF EMAIL . . . MANAGING NETWORKS OF 100s OF PEOPLE . . . PUBLISHING CREATIVE WORK . . . EARNING A SALARY IN THEIR SPARE TIME ONLINE . . . DO YOU REALIZE? EVERY TEXTBOOK A CHILD WILL

1 In this and subsequent quotations from the video, I have added ellipses to denote the shifts from each set of displayed words to another.
CARRY THROUGHOUT THEIR EDUCATION . . . WILL FIT ON A TABLET WEIGHING LESS THAN 300G . . . AT TODAY’S RATE OF CHANGE, TECHNOLOGY WILL EXPERIENCE 20,000 YEARS OF GROWTH THIS CENTURY . . . MANY SKILLS LEARNED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS TODAY WILL BE OBSOLETE BY GRADUATION . . . THE TOP TEN JOBS TODAY DIDN’T EXIST IN 2004

An array of sights attends these questions, including the corporate logos for the social media mentioned.

Finally, the video gets to its ostensible point. The music has gained even more energy when the following question and answer are provided:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? . . . THE FUTURE IS ACCELERATING . . . TODAY’S GRADUATES WILL HAVE 10 to 15 CAREERS IN THEIR LIFETIME . . . EDUCATION IS ABOUT . . . ADAPTING TO A CHANGING WORLD . . . HOW AND WHAT WE TEACH . . . HAS TO CHANGE AS WELL . . . TODAY’s PEN AND PAPER HAS CHANGED . . . AND IT WILL CONTINUE TO CHANGE . . . WE MUST KEEP PACE AND STAY RELEVANT TO KEEP STUDENTS ENGAGED

Several corporate logos encircle the reference to pen and paper. At the top of the circle is Google’s logo, followed by, in clockwise order, the respective logos of Myspace, YouTube, RSS, Delicious, Skype, Blogger, Facebook, and MSN Messenger. Inside the circle, flickr’s logo is above the reference to pen and paper and that of Twitter is beneath it.
The next section of the video purports to elaborate on the means by which 21st century education is supposed to promote adaptation. It begins with another bundle of rhetorical questions as the music slows down to a digestible pace:

DO YOU REALIZE? . . . THAT 21ST CENTURY LEARNING MUST . . . BE STUDENT CENTRED AND PERSONALIZED . . . PROVIDE EXPERIENCES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO APPLY KNOWLEDGE . . . BE ACCESSIBLE 7 DAYS/WEEK . . . 24HRS/DAY . . . 52 WEEKS/YEAR . . . ANYWHERE, ANYTIME . . . DO YOU REALIZE? THAT 21ST CENTURY STUDENTS WILL . . . USE A MULTITUDE OF TECHNOLOGIES TO: ACCESS CONTENT, DEMONSTRATE MASTERY, PUBLISH THEIR WORK, MAINTAIN A PORTFOLIO OF THEIR SKILLS, INTERACT WITH THE WORLD

By the end of this bundle, the music has worked its way back to another crescendo. The digitized map of the world has reappeared, this time in three dimensions.

In an apparent attempt to illustrate these purported necessities and inevitabilities (what “MUST” and “WILL” happen), the video subsequently invites the viewer to envision a few scenarios. “IMAGINE,” it states, for example, “AN ENGLISH CLASSROOM THAT RESEMBLES A TV NEWS ROOM.” No explanation for this suggestion is given. Instead, a TV set appears. Several additional screens pop out of it, each turning to news reports. Most of the scenarios similarly involve the use of technology. The last scenario, however, is about “STUDENTS BEING REQUIRED TO GIVE OF THEMSELVES TO THEIR COMMUNITIES, IN ORDER TO GRADUATE.”
Two corresponding pictures show young people interacting with elderly war veterans. A third picture shows a group of teenagers entertaining at a seniors’ home.

Toward the end of the video, an effort is made to avoid the logical conclusion that public education in New Brunswick has been failing to adapt students to a market-oriented, technology-based world of constant change that is nonetheless community-oriented. The abovementioned forms of 21st century education can already be found in “SEVERAL NEW BRUNSWICK SCHOOLS,” it states. The point, punctuated by a penultimate crescendo, is that “THE SHIFT NEEDS TO HAPPEN IN ALL NEW BRUNSWICK SCHOOLS.”

The name of the “COMPREHENSIVE SHIFT IN THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NEW BRUNSWICK,” the viewer is informed, is “NB321C.” Emphasizing the notions of comprehension and thinking, the video describes the shift as “BASED ON RESEARCH PROVEN SKILLS THAT WILL SERVE OUR STUDENTS THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS.” The first component, “NB3,” consists of “1. LITERACY 2. MATHEMATICS 3. SCIENCE.” The second component comprises so-called 21st century skills, such as “CREATIVITY” and “INNOVATION,” within a “TECHNOLOGY RICH ENVIRONMENT.”

The video concludes by reemphasizing 21st century education’s stated focus on students’ interests. “THE 21ST CENTURY BELONGS TO THE STUDENTS OF NEW BRUNSWICK,” it claims above the logo for NB321C. The music’s energy has lowered to a contemplative level. Teachers are addressed by appealing to the apparent ideals of their profession. “THE SHIFT WILL HAPPEN,” it asserts, “THROUGH YOUR
DEDICATION, INNOVATION, PARTNERSHIP, LEADERSHIP, CITIZENSHIP,
INVOLVEMENT . . . YOUR INVOLVEMENT GUARANTEES A SHIFT IN NEW
BRUNSWICK PUBLIC EDUCATION.” The latter sentence begins to shake. The music
rises quickly to a final crescendo. The screen appears to shatter like glass, revealing the
video’s (apparently) final message. Now beneath the logo for NB321C, it reads: “YOUR
INVOLVEMENT GUARANTEES OUR STUDENTS’ FUTURE.” As the video ends,
the Government of New Brunswick’s logo appears, along with its slogan: “Be … in this
place • Être … ici on le peut.”

After watching the video for the first time, I did not feel involved. I did not want
to be in the place in which I found myself. Frankly, I felt as though I was being coerced
into accepting and supporting an absurd concept of education reform. The feeling of
coercion had to do with the video’s unsupported premise that “education is about
adapting to a changing world.” According to its logic, I was uneducated just to think the
thought that education is also about changing the world, not simply adapting to it. And
did the Department really think that 21st century education had to be introduced to people
teachers and student interns in particular – by means of leading questions? At the same
time, its attempt to involve us in this way without respecting our intelligence was an
indirect recognition of our intelligence. Other than promoting market-oriented interests,
what were its presupposed reasons, if any, for failing to involve us authentically,
resorting instead to manipulative music and graphics and Orwellian doublespeak (e.g., calling an effectively alienating, coercive process “involvement”)?

My first day at D’Avray Hall, the home of UNB’s Faculty of Education, similarly consisted of my cohorts and I being put our place. One faculty member lectured on dress codes and general conformity to official policies. A couple of other members led us to the gymnasium where they insisted that we engage in an aerobics routine (without even the option of changing into gym clothes first), calling out people who did not participate enthusiastically. Among the many handouts that we received was a one-page document (n. d.), entitled “21st Century Standards of Practice for Beginning Teachers in New Brunswick.” It complemented the inaugural emphases on policies and mandatory group activity, along with the message of the YouTube video described above. At the bottom right-hand corner of the page is an image of a teacher and young students around a laptop. Below this image lie the logos of UNB, The University of St. Thomas, Crandall

2 Upon reflecting on John Dewey’s concept of adaptation in Democracy and Education, which I discuss critically in a later chapter, there is a technical sense in which education is “simply adapting.” That is, Dewey explains, all life forms must adapt both passively and actively to their environment if they are to survive in it. For example, a tree must rely passively on its inherited ability to photosynthesize but it must also actively photosynthesize (i.e., if this activity is prevented – by being blocked from a light source, for instance – it will die in spite of its ability). Likewise, humans must rely on their biological makeup (passively, insofar as this is beyond human control) but must also use it, for example in using the senses to communicate. In this sense, even technical communication is a form of education that is “about adapting.” The problem, Dewey observes, is that direct communication – simply adapting – can be harmful (depending on context) when sensory overload occurs – “no seeing the trees because of the forest” (p. 20) – in other words, when the thing being communicated is too complicated to be communicated all at once and/or when people are mistreated, forced to act in a certain way without even being given a reason for doing so, except the threat of being physically overpowered. Hence formal education is necessary, Dewey argues, both to communicate technically complicated messages by breaking them down first into manageable parts and to communicate technically simple messages that otherwise get lost. Dewey’s own theory contains impediments to communication, I show, because it falsely assumes that scientifically informed, liberal democratic messages are inherently superior to messages from all other human cultures. But the critical Deweyan point here is that the YouTube message was overwhelming to me because it manipulated my senses and emotions instead of engaging them respectfully. For me, respectful engagement would have at least included providing non-rhetorical reasons for declaring that “education is about adapting to a changing world.”
University, the New Brunswick Teachers Association, and the Government of New Brunswick.

Like Ishmael at the outset of his whaling adventure, I knew going into the programme that I would have to follow the lead of more experienced professionals, in my case teachers and professors of education. Indeed, I was looking forward to learning how to become a good teacher, as I had little experience teaching, especially at the high school level. I was also looking forward to learning more about the theory and practice of education on a conceptual level. Still, I thought that I was under no illusions that the experience would be ideal. I knew that as a teacher in training I would be expected to teach official curricula, conform to official policies, and fulfill course requirements whether I agreed with them or not. At the same time, I hoped that I could somehow meet such expectations while drawing on my own interests and genuinely engaging those of my students. Naively, I assumed that no teacher or professor would take the rhetoric of 21st century education seriously, except as a mandatory way of describing lesson plans and other forms of administrative reporting. So I was initially shocked to discover a high degree of professed support for the reform model among my mentors when it came to their evaluations of my efforts in the programme. A common critique of the teachers who supervised me was that I “over-thought” my lessons but that I did not give enough thought to honing my digital technology skills. On one particularly stressful day, one teacher sincerely attempted to console me, observing, “Knowledge is important to you.” However, the teacher made the observation in the context of rationalizing the school system’s stated focus on so-called practical skills, so I interpreted the compliment as nice way of saying that my interest in knowledge was a primary source of my stress, that I
should learn to be more practical in my thinking. Similarly, a professor expressed concern for me because of my “cerebral” disposition. Another professor took points off a presentation that I gave, commenting that the presentation was supposed to be directed at teachers, not academics.

Notwithstanding the early signs that I would have to participate in a reform process that I found to be both absurd and disrespectful, I stayed in the programme, hoping that I would still be able to find some aspects of it that would involve my three interests mentioned earlier. I was still hoping (especially as an indebted student) to become a fulltime high school teacher in New Brunswick, despite my growing awareness of the difficulty of resisting the school system’s market-oriented goals.

In retrospect, I was more susceptible than I realized to market-oriented logic. Before I entered the programme I attempted to make myself more marketable by applying to take courses and work with teachers in both ELA and science, with the idea that I could apply to teach high school science if there were no job openings in high school ELA. In practice, this decision added to my difficulties, in spite of its consistency with a common refrain in New Brunswick public education that aspiring teachers should market themselves as “generalists,” which is to say as people who are capable of teaching as many curricular subjects as possible. Although I also have formal education in science, it had been a while since I studied it, so I was less comfortable with the material than I was with ELA. Just as I had overreached with my high school book report on *A Tale of Two Cities*, I was now overreaching with two strategies for gaining employment as a high school teacher. The difference now was that I was not the only student who was being affected by my misguided decision to overestimate my abilities.
My biggest regret of my BEd experience was that my interaction with students as a new teacher was in certain respects analogous to my first attempt to read a Charles Dickens novel. I tried with what I believed were the best of intentions but, with a few exceptions, nothing meaningful was happening as far as I could see at the time. But by simply trying to pass my internship, I had become a conduit through which the oppressiveness of NB3-21C that I was experiencing could pass onto the students in my official charge. For example, I did not dare challenge a rule that the majority of my (closely supervised) lessons had to include digital technology, mainly the Smartboard at the front of nearly every classroom in which I worked. Although I knew of no pedagogical point to using digital technology as a general rule to teach either science or ELA, I did know that the rule reflected the rhetoric of 21st century education. In this sense, its rhetoric effectively served the same function for my internship that the blurb on the back of my copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* did for my book report. Evidently, it permitted me to appear to understand at least some aspects of an imposed experience that was mostly confusing to me. In the end, I did pass my internship.

Still, I felt lost during my internship. On the one hand, I could not trust the directions given in the language of 21st century education. On the other, I lacked an alternative, critical standard of pedagogy. Though the problematic values of 21st century education manifested in my supervisors’ criticism of my “over-thinking,” their point, in retrospect, was not entirely untrue. I was in fact over-thinking, and this fact was doing a disservice to my students, causing me stress, and exasperating my supervisors. Could a primary source of these problems have been my interests in knowledge and in sharing this interest with students?
Fortunately, I was encouraged by several teachers, professors, instructors, and other students who helped me to see that my problems were not mine alone. Unfortunately, this revelation took place on the margins of my BEd experience: in informal conversations with teachers who were critical of technology-based reform; in four “theory” courses out of the fourteen predominantly “practical” courses that I took at UNB; in conversations with other student interns who were disturbed by their BEd experiences; in moments when the high school students whom I was officially teaching either expressed an interest in my efforts or effectively taught me how I could make my efforts more interesting to them; and in my constant sense – inexpressible within the language of 21st century education – of being institutionally channelled in the wrong direction.

It will be no surprise that I did not find a job as a high school teacher upon graduating from the BEd programme. But even if I had exceeded the stated standards of 21st century education, it had become painfully obvious during the preceding months that the Department of Education in general was not looking to hire any additional “21st century” teachers. In the fall of 2010, the Progressive Conservative Party came to power. Under the premiership of David Alward, it proceeded to implement a series of spending cuts to public education as part of an overall project of reducing the provincial deficit through austerity, even suspending the implementation of NB3-21C. In the spring of 2011, the federal Conservative Party under Prime Minister Stephen Harper won a majority government, which continued a policy of reducing the federal government’s involvement in transferring money to provinces, regardless of their levels of debt, and in some technical ways made the political possibility of reversing this trend even more
difficult. As Richard Saillant (2014) puts it in *Over the Cliff? Acting Now to Avoid New Brunswick’s Bankruptcy*, a book that is tacitly sympathetic to neoliberal governance, “Harper has firmly started the process of loosening what he would no doubt call the ‘tax and spend’ federal ties that many believe bind us as a country” (p. 118).

Under these circumstances, a professor at UNB encouraged me – and I quickly agreed – to do a PhD in Educational Studies. Although I knew that I wanted to critique 21st century education reform in New Brunswick in a way that would especially resonate with people who had experienced it, I had difficulty starting for two reasons that are directly relevant to the method that I have decided to use. First, I already knew, in general terms, that NB3-21C was another example of neoliberalism in practice. For instance, its conflation of market-oriented interests with broader social interests exemplifies the definition that David Harvey (2005) puts forth in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Referring in particular to the neoliberal “significance of contractual relationships in the marketplace,” he defines the phenomenon as follows:

> It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. This requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace. Hence neoliberalism’s intense interest in and pursuit of information technologies (leading some to proclaim the emergence of a new kind of ‘information society’). (pp. 3-4)

With this definition in mind, I did not want to limit my dissertation to pointing out what seemed obvious to me, namely 21st century education’s neoliberal characteristics. While
pointing out the obvious can be a worthy contribution in itself, my second difficulty was that my problem, I realized, was not with 21st century education’s neoliberal traits per se, but with its rhetoric’s seeming un-openness to critique, including self-critique.

When interviewed by Elissa Schappell for the Paris Review, Toni Morrison (1993) said that she would not have started writing novels if the one that she wanted to read were already available to her. In her words, “I only wrote the first book because I thought it wasn’t there, and I wanted to read it when I got through.” I mention Morrison, not to put myself on her level, but because my purpose in writing this dissertation is similar. I want to read the book that I would have liked to have read at the start of my BEd programme, if not before. More precisely, my purpose is twofold: to uncover the meaning of 21st century education that its rhetoric presupposes and, thereby, to critique the reform model in terms that are meaningful within its own framework. At the same time, I will argue, such a critical analysis of the model is relevant socially and academically.

To begin the process of advancing this dissertation’s purpose, my next chapter details the problem that is 21st century education’s uncritical conceptual framework as put forth in Trilling’s and Fadel’s book, 21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times and the New Brunswick Department of Education’s policy document, NB3-21C: Creating a 21st Century Learning Model of Public Education Three Year Plan 2010-2013. The former text, which is part of a technology-themed display at D’Avray Hall to this day, was referenced uncritically in one or two of my “practical” BEd courses. The latter text, as its title indicates, constitutes the Department of Education’s critical view 21st century education reform.
To be clear, this dissertation does not offer a comprehensive analysis of the dizzying number of books, journal articles, policy papers, and other related documents that bear the name “21st century education.” Cory Steeves (2012) provides a glimpse into the rabbit hole that is 21st century education literature in his MA dissertation, *(De/Re)-Constructing Teachers and Their Work: A Discourse Analysis of British Columbia’s 21st-Century Policy Agenda.* Even after narrowing his search to policy-related texts on the particular concept of “21st century learning,” his search yielded “roughly 325 texts that discussed, critiqued, and otherwise analyzed 21CL since 1979” (p. 27).

While an analysis of the entire body of 21st century education literature would contribute to my purpose, it is not necessary in order to fulfill it. As a student in the BEd programme, I was not even required to read either *21st Century Skills* or *NB3-21C*, let alone the history of policy development out of which they materialized. I was, however, expected to meet the uncritical standards that these texts purport to explicate. For this reason, I base my critical analysis on their complementary presentations of the model’s framework and content.

As will become clear, if *21st Century Skills* and *NB3-21C* are at all indicative of 21st century education documents in general, a comprehensive study would take years, if not a lifetime of study. Both texts bombard their readers with numerous claims, each of which could be criticized with reference to any number of conceptual frameworks, traditions, and so on. In detailing the uncritical framework that I will be addressing throughout this dissertation, my next chapter also gives a sense of the disorienting quality of 21st century education’s stated content. Moreover, this quality is not unique to the
YouTube video described above. For instance, the latter’s reference to “research proven skills” is repeated by the two texts in question. Drawing on the respective work of Kieran Egan and Emery Hyslop-Margison, I will show that one need not conduct scientific research to realize that the specific claims of 21st century education, even if taken seriously as desirable goals, are at best unhelpful truisms. The model is replete with phrases like the following, which falls under the heading of “collaboration” in NB3-21C: “Students will demonstrate that they . . . are able to collaborate across networks, using various technologies” (p. 11). To point out the obvious, the claim that collaborative students will demonstrate collaboration is vacuous rhetoric in the absence of a definition of collaboration and at least some discussion of it. Far from obvious are the particular goals that such rhetoric promotes, hence the need to uncover and critique the model’s unstated conceptual foundation.

The stated content of 21st century education, I should emphasize, does not merely function as a distraction from the model’s underlying concepts. In addition to invoking potentially educative concepts such as collaboration, as if doing so were enough to make it inherently educative, the model is also emotionally manipulating. For example, in his MA dissertation, Steeves argues that a document published by the Premier of British Columbia’s Technology Council, entitled A Vision for 21st Century Education, in its “relative devaluation of teachers and their work provides a basis for increased school conflicts, contributes to elevated stress among teachers, and may encourage teacher ‘burnout’” (p. ii). This argument resonates with my experience of trying to make sense of the rhetoric of student-centredness and market-oriented school reform in New Brunswick.
Steeves’s MA dissertation is ground-breaking. To my knowledge, it is the most sustained and thorough critique of 21st century education to date. However, I am interested in using the presupposed (and at least technically critical) content of the model’s otherwise uncritical rhetoric as a point of entry to critical analysis, to show that the model can be critiqued on its own terms, contrary to their apparent un-openness to critique. In contrast, Steeves critically analyzes the model through the lens of critical theories that are technically external to it. In doing so, he “identifies two prominent discourses within A Vision for 21st Century Education: ‘learnification’ translates and reduces public education to terms of ‘learners’ and ‘learning,’ and ‘accountingization’ re-imagines teachers’ work as ‘that which can be counted’” (p. ii).³ While these discursive dynamics help to contextualize my problem as a former student-teacher of accessing and critiquing 21st century education’s presupposed reasoning (i.e., beyond its inferably general neoliberal quality), my problem nonetheless exceeds his methodological and theoretical scope. Consider his following observations:

. . . there are also elements of the teacher as democratic agent embedded within A Vision for 21st Century Education: teachers are encouraged to stress the importance of civic responsibility, civilized discourse, and students’ role(s) in a democratic society. For instance, the text asserts that “we share a civic responsibility and students must come to understand the importance of civilized discourse on issues and their role in a democratic society” (p. 12). Nevertheless,

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³ Steeves cites work by Gert Biesta on “learnification” and work by Greg Thompson and Ian Cook on “accountingization.”
this emphasis on democratic responsibility is such a minor feature within the text that the appeal rings hollow and instrumental, much like *A Vision for 21st Century Education*’s construction of teachers. That is to say, the text reduces civic engagement and democratic responsibility to “civilized discourse” (p. 12). As a result, the horizons of teacher as democratic agent becomes (re-)contextualized in accordance with a very particular view of citizenship. (pp. 58-59)

What is this “very particular view”? With reference to work by Kathleen Abowitz and Jason Harnish, Steeves does suggest that it may be a form of “civic republicanism,” according to which “democratic practice is understood as most appropriately grounded in the maintenance of conservative values and practices” (original emphasis, p. 59).

References to citizenship abound in 21st century education; nonetheless, I will argue, the particular view of democracy in question is at least as much about extending neoliberal social reality as it is about conserving it. To play with the notion of breaking ground, then, one must dig deeper into the framework of 21st century education to uncover its presupposed concepts.

It is indeed possible to infer the general neoliberal character of 21st century education’s presupposed concepts, given that the model promotes uncritical adaptation to social structures that are currently neoliberal, experience tells me that such an inference on its own would be of little help for teachers and students who are caught in the grip of such structures. That is, my recognition of 21st century education’s obvious (but broad) neoliberal traits did not make me more artful in my effort to navigate the classroom experiences that I shared with my students. Even if one recognizes the danger that an iceberg-riddled seascape poses, it is hard to steer clear of the danger when one cannot
identify specific icebergs and/or one lacks requisite knowledge of the ship’s inner-workings. Again, my first goal for this dissertation is to uncover the specific neoliberal concepts that are implicit in the premise that “education is about adapting to a changing world.” My second goal is to critique the concepts that such rhetoric presupposes in order to offer a critical alternative.

In pursuing the above goals, I do not address all of the problematic aspects of 21st century education’s rhetoric. For example, \textit{NB3-21C} claims in passing to be consistent with the “the deeply embedded principle of inclusive education” (p. 7). In her PhD dissertation, \textit{Inclusive Education Policy in New Brunswick: A Genealogical Study}, Carolyn Fleiger (2012) shows how this principle as presented in official policy (i.e., irrespective of any unstated intention) reflects a set of historical discourses according to which students are either ideally capable of achieving official standards or not. Official inclusion policy, she observes, purports to work toward ending the historical exclusion of students deemed incapable of meeting mainstream schooling standards. Drawing also on her experience as a Research and Methods teacher in the province, she argues that the policy is actually exclusive in its harmful impact on people’s identity, particularly through the official inclusion of so-called “special” students in terms that continue to frame them as inherently impaired, through what she calls “the discourse of deficit-to-be-managed” (p. 18). To cite one of her examples, the Department mandates a Special Education Plan for students whom it assumes to be otherwise incapable of meeting or approaching extant curricular standards; however, the very assumption that certain students are literally helpless on their own, she notes, provides the Department with a discursive excuse when the plan does not advance its purported purpose. In her words,
“If the student does not succeed in accordance with the plan’s provisions, the problem may be assumed to be intrinsic with the student rather than the social regularity of ablest productivity [i.e., the abovementioned notion of ideally capable students] that underpins the wider system of schooling” (p. 104).

Fleiger recognizes that the “deficit-to-be-managed” discourse conceals unstated purposes that are specific in time and place. “In this way,” she writes with reference to the above example, “the Special Education Plan directs attention away from issues related to the student’s performance such as inappropriate or scanty resource allocation” (p. 104). Her main concern, however, is neither the particular “neoliberal rationality” against which she must work as a Research and Methods teacher nor the policy’s “patronizing use of empathy and metaphor” (p. 193). As she explains:

Rather than promising another version of inclusive education “truth”, or trying to capture “exactly” what is going on in inclusive education policy and practice, this study brings forward how the disciplinary capabilities of policy are shaped through dominant discourses, the implications of this knowledge/power nexus to shape how subjects of inclusive education are understood, and how we may begin to shift from the limits of these constructions. (p. 220)

To put this point in terms of my study, the discursive fabric of 21st century education rhetoric, of which the model’s association with official inclusion policy under NB3-21C is one thread, is in itself a problem, regardless of the immediate reasoning behind it.

I am concerned about the immediate reasons because my ignorance of these reasons was an obstacle to my efforts to overcome the doubly oppressive experience of being unwillingly measured against a standard that insulted my intelligence. I only
regard this oppressive standard (comprising the stated content of 21st century education) as a red-herring in the technical sense that the experience of oppression that it caused distracted me from what I needed to do to get my bearings: to have a more precise idea of what it was that I was being made to do under the guise of preparing students for life in the present century.

Nonetheless, as my next chapter will also make clear, a major part of the problem that I am addressing (i.e., the model’s lack of conceptual support at the level of stated content) is that the very act of outlining this problem risks perpetuating the model’s marginalization and occlusion of people’s and peoples’ perspectives because marginalization and occlusion pervade its stated content, not just the portion of its stated content that gestures toward conceptual support. In other words, my problem as stated can be interpreted (in spite of my intention to the contrary) as meaning that the model’s meaning is incomprehensible without access to its presupposed concepts. I do not intend such an interpretation because, although it was largely incomprehensible to me, people whose personal and/or collective perspectives (including formally educated perspectives) the model marginalizes and/or occludes may very well comprehend, upon immediately experiencing the model, that it at the very least means excluding their perspectives to one degree or another. I write “may very well” because I know from experience, as someone whose particular perspectives the model excludes, that two possible (but not inevitable) effects of its exclusionary framework are confusion and inculcation, hence I failed to work out my critical concerns as a BEd student but effectively carried out the model’s command to use digital technology uncritically. Still, not everyone who has – or who will – experience the model without access to its specific presuppositions is thereby
confused and/or inculcated by it. To people who immediately recognize one or more aspect of its effective meaning, then, my problem with it may appear to be a symptom of, much less a step away from, my own state of confusion and inculcation. My answer to such potential criticism is that the most robust understandings of the model’s effective meanings risk appearing as misunderstandings within its uncritical framework and, thereby, within the mind of anyone who uncritically accepts any aspect of the model’s framework. Indeed, I hope, my outlining of the model’s lack of conceptual support – and, eventually, my conceptual analysis of its presuppositions – will at the very least suggest points of entry into dialogue with people who, like me, have been confused/inculcated by the model on account of its stated universality.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I address the additional problem of contextualizing the model’s rhetorical universality. In Chapter 3, I draw on three approaches to the general problem of understanding neoliberal rhetoric in order to build a framework for analyzing the immediate context of 21st century reform in New Brunswick (during the premiership of Shawn Graham, 2006-2010). That is, I show how neoliberal rhetoric can be understood (1) with reference to corresponding social reality, (2) in technical terms of the form of rhetoric and the history of its stated content, and (3) with reference to presupposed concepts, accessible through analysis. In Chapter 4, using the latter three points as guides, I compare and analyze the relationship between the Graham government’s rhetoric of public education reform and its focus on cutting programmes while promoting digital technology. I conclude that the rhetoric of 21st century was part of a broader rhetorical process of directly supporting, guaranteeing contextually, and legitimating capital accumulation. I also conclude that critical analysis of its rhetoric is
thereby an important means of understanding neoliberalism’s continuation, particularly in the context of public education in New Brunswick.

In Chapter 5, I outline the main methodological and theoretical approach to my problem of accessing and critiquing 21st century education’s presupposed concepts. In building a critical alternative to the model for the purpose of critically analyzing the premise that “education is about adapting to a changing world,” I draw on Paulo Freire’s concept of “concentric circles” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which involves re-representing familiar experiences of oppression to related but different contexts on the assumption that such experiences will thereby become more comprehensible to the oppressed, who thereby become better positioned to overcome such experiences. Indeed, as I will explain, I draw on Freire’s concept of concentric circles not only because it is insightful in the abstract (wherein it reminds me of the aesthetic concept of defamiliarization). It also happens to describe a revelatory experience that occurred to me while reading Theodore Christou’s *Progressive Education*, namely my realization that the history of progressivism provides a step toward the presupposed meaning of 21st century education, specifically in highlighting the centrality of the rhetoric of progress to the model. In other words, my realization that “adapting to a changing world” is a part of a history of “progress” is an example of the critical consciousness-raising or

4 As Viktor Shklovsky (1965/1999) writes in “Art as Technique,” “And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. . . . Tolstoy [for example] makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. . . . I personally feel that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found” (original emphasis, pp. 18-21). While Shklovsky obviously is referring to art in a formal sense, his analysis, I think, can be extended to art-like phenomena generally, such as the strange, potentially educative feeling of considering familiar experiences re-presented in Freirean concentric circles.
defamiliarizing effect of Freire’s concentric circles methodology.

For reasons that I will discuss, however, *Progressivism Education* does not fully reveal the specific presuppositions of 21st century education. Thus, in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, I respectively use *The Republic* of Plato, John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* itself as additional concentric circles. I choose *The Republic* and *Democracy and Education* because both Plato and Dewey are invoked by Trilling and Fadel. I also choose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* because 21st century education’s nominal respect for students and critical thinking is nominally consistent with Freire’s project. Thus, it is reasonable to consider all three books as potential points of entry to the presupposed meaning of 21st century education and/or, given the critical quality of each book, as sources of concepts for critiquing the model’s meaning once accessed. I conclude that each book is helpful in this regard but ultimately insufficient. Hence in Chapter 9, after returning to *Progressive Education* to derive two more rhetorical terms that are central of 21st century education, namely “democracy” and “justice,” I analyze references to “progress,” “democracy,” and “justice” in *21st Century Skills* and *NB3-21C*. I argue that 21st century education in New Brunswick respectively means by these terms supporting, guaranteeing contextually, and legitimating capital accumulation. At the end of Chapter 9, I use critical concepts from Plato, Dewey, and Freire to critique the model’s fundamentally state-capitalist – yet rhetorically progressive, democratic, and just – meaning.

To be clear, this dissertation is not an exercise in formal philosophy of education per se. For the most part, my critical engagement with the aforementioned philosophers is limited to the connections that I perceive between them as they relate to the problem
that this dissertation addresses. Notably, all three texts describe a kind of an ideal combination of formal education, social position, and immediate experience. For Plato, this combination occurs in the formally educated philosopher kings who legislate in accordance with the Truth that they not only know in the abstract but have personally experienced (outside the allegorical cave). Dewey evokes a similarly threefold ideal as follows: “The trinity of school topics is subject matter, methods, and administration or government” (my emphasis, p. 164). Interestingly, both Plato and Dewey, though unmentioned in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, are discernable in Freire’s explicit respect for the authority of formal education, in his concern for existing social structures, and in his conviction that human beings are by nature meant to think critically about the world in which they live. One point on which these philosophers differ, I observe, has to do with the primary source of educational authority. For Plato in The Republic it is the insights of formal education (particularly in philosophy); for Dewey in Democracy and Education it is the democratic potential of science and industry as he experienced them (i.e., through his own formal education); for Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, as the title suggests, it is the insights of people who find themselves in one or more situation of oppression (when guided toward such insights through dialogue with formally educated humanists such as Freire). When each of these books is considered in terms of these three different sources of authority, I argue that they yield means of critiquing 21st century education’s presupposed concepts. Moreover, they not only help to illustrate the model’s disrespect for formal education, nominal social ideals such as democracy, and actual experiences, particularly of teachers and students whom it tells to adapt to “a changing world” without even giving us non-rhetorical reasons for doing so. Together,
The Republic, Democracy and Education, and Pedagogy of the Oppressed also help to show that respect for formal education, genuine social authority (including formal knowledge of existing society), and of people’s and peoples’ actual experiences (including of formal knowledge and dominant social structures) is a threefold way of using 21st century education against its uncritical logic to overcome its legacy as one among many manifestations of neoliberalism.

I arrive at the above argument, in part, by an act of the imagination. This act is necessary, I will argue (with reference to secondary sources), because all three philosophical texts contain falsehoods to one degree or another. Assuming that it is possible to extend their critical insights beyond their originally flawed contexts to new contexts without extending their original flaws, such an extension not only requires distinguishing between truths and falsehoods through analysis; it also requires imagining how Platonist/Deweyan/Freirean truths might apply in a new context such as this dissertation when (hopefully) unencumbered by the falsehoods to which they are tied in their original contexts. For example, both The Republic and Democracy and Education presuppose that their perspectives are inherently “civilized” and in so doing falsely frame most of humanity as inherently “uncivilized.” Although Pedagogy of the Oppressed rejects this binary way of thinking about civilization, it nonetheless distinguishes between oppressed people and their oppressors in binary terms, which can similarly contribute to false understandings of human experiences, given the oppressive potential of binary thinking itself (e.g., for people whose identities transcend binary categories). My imaginative synthesis of the three sources of (true) educational authority is appropriate
for my purposes for three reasons, I will argue. First, as mentioned, the three texts collectively privilege all three sources, whereas 21st century education effectively discounts all of them, except insofar as they can be used to advance its presupposed purposes. Second, all three texts can be connected, either directly or indirectly, to 21st century education’s uncritical framework at the level of its stated content (e.g., its invocations of Plato and Dewey); therefore, the texts’ critical elements (if separated from their false elements) can be used to critique the model from within its otherwise uncritical framework. And, third, all three texts have proven helpful to addressing my (initially subjective but socially and academically relevant) problem of accessing and critiquing the uncritical framework of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick. In my tenth and final chapter, I summarize my conclusions and consider them as suggesting a critical alternative to the kind of adaptation to ongoing neoliberal changes that 21st century education, when accepted uncritically, promotes.
Chapter 2: The Problem

The uncritical framework of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick can be broken down into three main parts. The first has to do with the model’s apparent standard as presented at length by Trilling and Fadel. (I refer to this standard as “apparent” to distinguish it from the model’s actual but presupposed standard). The second part relates to the model’s proposed means of achieving its standard, namely the so-called 21st century skills that are the focus of Trilling’s and Fadel’s book. And the third part is the model’s presentation in NB3-21C.

2.1) The apparent standard of 21st century education

According to Trilling and Fadel, there are four universal purposes of education. In their words:

Education plays four universal roles on society’s evolving stage. It empowers us to contribute to work and society, exercise and develop our personal talents, fulfill our civic responsibilities, and carry our traditions and values forward. These are the ‘great expectations,’ the big returns we want from our investments in education. Or put another way, these are the four universal goals we expect the education of our children to achieve. (p. 12)

The authors do not elaborate on this definition, except to imply that these four goals are really about conforming to a (purportedly evolutionary) conception of historical time, which they divide, perfunctorily, into a series of economic periods. In the “Agrarian Age,” they assert, “education beyond farming skills was not a high priority” (p. 13). They reduce education of the “Industrial Age” to training “as many factory and trade workers
“as possible” and providing “special learning opportunities” for a minority who were “destined for managerial or professional work” (p. 13). “In the Knowledge Age,” they conclude, “brainpower replaces brawnpower, and mechanical horsepower gives way to electronic hertzpower” (p. 15). Moreover, these supposedly time-specific manifestations of universal purposes appear to be descriptions of a timeless and very particular purpose, the production of workers in the image of the dominant economic paradigm of their day.

In the discursive realm of 21st century education, technological changes unquestionably constitute the dominant economic paradigm of the present and future. Hence Trilling and Fadel associate their otherwise vague thesis statement with digital technology’s relative newness and apparent staying-power:

The premise of this book is that the world has changed so fundamentally in the last few decades that the roles of learning and education in day-to-day living have also changed forever.

Though many of the skills needed in centuries past, such as critical thinking and problem solving, are even more relevant today, how these skills are learned and practiced in everyday life in the 21st century is rapidly shifting. And there are some new skills to master, such as digital media literacy, that weren’t even imagined fifty years ago. (Original emphases, pp. xxiii-xxiv)

As discussed, the same message of the New Brunswick Department of Education’s YouTube video – that “education is about adapting to a changing world” – likewise privileges technology-related changes without acknowledging the specific goals that the message entails.
Trilling and Fadel do purport to substantiate 21st century education with reference to the following topics:

• Knowledge work
• Thinking Tools
• Digital Lifestyles
• Learning Research (p. 21)

As they put it, “These four forces are simultaneously creating the need for new forms of learning in the 21st century and supplying the tools, environments, and guiding principles required to support 21st century learning practices” (pp. 21-23). However, none of these forces actually supports the stated premise of 21st century education. Rather, each one amounts to a restatement of model’s uncritical promotion of digital technology under the rhetorical guise of adapting to change.

Trilling and Fadel vaguely define “knowledge work” as “the kind of work that most people will need in the coming decades” and as work that “can be done anywhere by anyone who has the expertise, a cell phone, a laptop, and an Internet connection” (p. 6). They provide the following examples in a figure entitled “The Future of 21st Century Work,” acknowledging the National Center on Education and the Economy as their source:

• Research
• Development
• Design
• Marketing and Sales
• Global Supply Chain and Management (p. 10)
The same figure calls these examples “Creative Work” in order to distinguish them from both the “Routine Work” of human beings (who apparently lack the technological and educational resources to be creative) and the “Routine Work” of machines. Furthermore, the figure depicts “Creative Work” as the least abundant form of future work but as the main form of future work “IN MORE DEVELOPED COUNTRIES.” In contrast, it depicts the “Routine Work” of humans and machines as the most abundant forms of future work and as the main forms of future work “IN LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES.”

Leaving aside – for now – the absurd suggestion that humans require digital technology in order to work creatively and the overall dehumanizing quality of “21st Century Work,” the assertion that “knowledge work” is “creating the need for new forms of learning” begs the question. What makes “knowledge work” a learning guide in the first place, let alone a guide that supposedly requires “new forms of learning”? The answer to this question that Trilling and Fadel provide takes many forms, but they all rest on the unsupported premise that education should reflect modern society, which they implicitly define as any society that has entered the so-called “Knowledge Age.” (A society’s present existence, it is worth emphasizing, is not enough to make it modern according to Trilling and Fadel).

Although Trilling and Fadel offer a fairly detailed description of the technological changes that, in their view, constitute modern society, they stop short of describing the actual principles on which their view is based. In their account, the origin of the “Knowledge Age” is traceable to digital technology’s politico-economic predominance over “Industrial Age” products. It does not explain the reasons behind this change, much
less the reasons for education’s apparent dependence on “Knowledge Age” work and the
general usage of digital technology. The idea that digital technology has eclipsed
“Industrial Age” technology in importance merely fits (it seems) the authors’ stated
premise that education should reflect technology-related social changes, particularly as
they pertain to work in the global economy.

In lieu of providing real reasons for aligning education with the “Knowledge
Age” and its “knowledge work,” Trilling and Fadel take a carrot and stick approach.
Primarily, the stick is a threat presented as a reasonable warning that countries must
reform their public education systems according to the precepts of 21st century education
or face economic extinction. Ostensibly, the ‘reasonable warning’ here is the notion that
21st century education reform is absolutely necessary because, in aligning itself with the
“Knowledge Age,” it alone is supposed to be capable of producing “knowledge workers,”
who are supposed to be prepared to tackle all of the problems of the present century, but
especially the problem of basic “economic survival” (original emphasis, p. 6). It is not
difficult to see the appeal of such reasoning in indebted jurisdictions such as New
Brunswick, until one remembers that “knowledge workers” are meant to adapt to the
world by conforming to its current configuration, not by addressing its fundamental
problems. If taken at face value, this line of thought means that one cannot be both a
“knowledge worker” and work critically toward transforming the world, which after all is
supposed to evolve spontaneously based on Trilling’s and Fadel’s economic conception
of time. Thus, their line of thought amounts to a threat to anyone who is even slightly
critical of 21st century education’s uncritical premise. On their terms, criticism of 21st
century education is by default a threat to the well-being of entire countries and, by extension, history.

The stick also consists of the notion that the global economy is inevitably becoming a hostile place for workers, but especially for workers in “Industrial Age” parts of the world. They slip this notion in what they present as a description of the global economy as it currently exists (involving a divide between countries that are allegedly in the “Knowledge Age” and countries that are not). While at first glance this state of affairs appears to favour people who are hired to do “knowledge work,” Trilling and Fadel all but acknowledge that such work is not secure. Recall that it is the least abundant form of work in “The Future of 21st Century Work.” Also, they suggest that “knowledge work” is ephemeral in nature. “If all these changes weren’t enough,” they state, for example, “students in school today can expect to have more than eleven different jobs between the ages of eighteen and forty-two” (p. 10). More to the point, the premise of 21st century education is not only coercive toward people who are critical of it. If accepted uncritically, it entails one of two anti-worker choices for countries – either align education systems with scarce, insecure “knowledge work” or face economic extinction through automation of occupations that when “done by people barely pay a living wage” (p. 9).

A third component of the stick, then, is the assumption that the onus is on governments and their education institutions to supply “Knowledge economies” with “knowledge workers.” In an effort to lend this assumption credence, Trilling and Fadel repeat a debunked claim that there is a gap between the skills that companies require and the actual skills of students upon graduation from secondary and post-secondary
institutions: “Reports from around the world confirm that this ‘21st century skills gap’ is costing business a great deal of money in finding and hiring scarce, highly-skilled talent, and in bringing new employees up to required skill levels through costly training programs” (p. 7).[^5] Of course, even if a skills gap did exist, it does not follow that governments must in principle align their institutions with private-sector interests, in this case for the purpose of alleviating companies of a reported cost of doing business. In practice, of course, this illogical conclusion often passes for an unquestionable truism, as evidenced by the overall market-oriented logic of 21st century education reform itself. This implied truism is the neoliberal tenet that private-sector interests are universal human interests. Yet as Trevor Norris (2011) points out in Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics: “Recent events reveal that ‘what’s good for General Motors’ often means laying off thousands or turning back to the state for bailouts after years of profit” (p. 69). Meanwhile, he adds, “Children are placed in the hands of unpredictable, impersonal, and essentially unaccountable economic interests, exposed to the perils of the marketplace” (p. 69).

Yet another element of the stick is its binary opposite, the carrot. The rhetorical ingeniousness of 21st century education is that its demonstrably coercive elements can be interpreted, within its framework, as gifts. Again, the threat of economic extinction, if the model’s presupposed reasoning holds, is a life-saving warning for those countries that are supposedly capable of heeding it. If the anti-worker direction of present

technological changes were truly inevitable, reforming education systems in the same
direction – with the help of 21st century education – at least has the potential of
mitigating the related hardships of some people. And if unreformed public institutions
are the real threat to countries’ economic survival, it would appear to make sense that
they should bear the burden of producing “knowledge workers.”

On their terms, the main gift to education to which Trilling and Fadel refer just
happens to be a main product of “knowledge work,” namely digital technologies, what
they call “Thinking tools.” They present this social force a necessary supplement to
human thought processes in a high-tech world. For instance, they ask, “With [rising
online] waves of information and knowledge crashing all around them, how are today’s
students going to manage and learn from this deluge?” (p. 26). The question raises a
good point about the need for formal modes of thought, especially when people are faced
with information overload. However, the authors do not explain how new technologies
in themselves fulfill this intellectual need that the Internet and other technologies have
arguably heightened. Instead, they compound the problem of information overload with
a plethora of technically detailed statements with little to no substance.

Trilling and Fadel are careful to deny that 21st century education involves
replacing human thought processes with digital processing. For example, they write,
“knowing a field’s core ideas, understanding its fundamental principles, and applying this
knowledge to solve new problems and answer new questions are evergreen learning tasks
that will never become outdated” (p. 26). But if technology merely facilitates learning, in
what sense does digital technology necessitate “new forms of learning”? How does it
directly make actual “mental tasks . . . easier and more efficient,” as distinct from
performing certain tasks (like calculating figures) that indirectly free the mind up but that in principle would remain just as difficult or time-consuming if performed by the human mind? These phraseologies suggest that digital technology either can or already has changed the actual process of learning. Trilling and Fadel do not explain how such a change is possible, let alone why it should guide education in principle. How, for instance, could digital technology help me access and analyze the reasoning that the rhetoric of 21st century education presupposes? While it certainly has helped me to access information, I have had to learn how to structure this dissertation through course work, guided readings, reviewed writings, discussions, and so on.

Trilling and Fadel present their third social force – “digital lifestyles” – in a contradictory manner as well. They assert that public school students at the start of the present century have “a whole new set of desires and expectations” because of their “lifelong immersion in all things digital” (p. 29). In this regard, they are supposedly “different from the ‘digital immigrants’ who learned to ‘do technology’ later in life” (p. 27). Yet among a long list of allegedly new or heightened objects of desire and expectation, the authors include “detailed, behind-the-scenes analysis so they can find out what the real story is” and “openness in their interactions with others and from organizations like businesses, government, and educational institutions” (p. 29). Needless to say, these desires or expectations are hardly new and it is prejudicial to suggest that immigrants and older people are somehow inherently out of touch with

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6 Trilling and Fadel attribute the term “digital immigrants” and the phrase “do technology” to Marc Prensky.
alleged advances in education. And, as I have been arguing, the form of learning that the authors advocate as a way of complementing “digital lifestyles” is in itself an inherent impediment to analysis and openness. To overcome this impediment, again, I seek to uncover and critique 21st century education’s presupposed concepts.

Another way in which Trilling and Fadel make analysis difficult is in presenting analytic propositions as primarily empirical ones. Analytic propositions can be considered as either true or false by definition, meaning that their epistemological status is dependent on conceptual analysis, not empirical reality per se. In contrast, however, empirical claims by definition require empirical support, in the form of observable evidence or experimental results. In “The Analytic and the Arbitrary in Educational Research,” Kieran Egan (n. d.) points out that confusion between these two types of claims can result in unnecessary work:

We could treat the question “Are all unmarried men in Vancouver bachelors?” as an empirical question. We could design a tight survey, run it with great care, and analyse the results by the most sophisticated statistical methods. We could then announce that we had empirically established that 100% of the bachelors in Vancouver are unmarried. And, by such a procedure, we would indeed have established the truth of the proposition empirically. The empirical research is, of course, unnecessary; and we need feel no caution generalizing our results to Chicago or Paris. The connection between bachelors and unmarried men is established by analysis or definition. (n. p.)

(Analytic claims, Egan explains, can be generalized to any context, except in “arbitrary” cases; for instance, people may conceive of bachelorhood in ways that appear “arbitrary”
according to dominant social norms, but the terms still remain “analytic” insofar as they are ultimately established by analysis). Yet, Egan (2002) argues, “a great deal of empirical research in education involves the confusion of trying to establish empirical connections between things that are already conceptually tied” (p. 166). Hyslop-Margison (2009) has explored economic, political, and ideological implications of such confusion, while also emphasizing the importance of falsification to the modern scientific method. “The crux of Popper’s philosophy of science,” he observes, “is that although no theory can be confirmed empirically as absolutely and universally true, a theory can be falsified if one of its hypotheses can be demonstrated as false” (p. 823). Thus, a major epistemological problem with analytic propositions that are wrapped in the language of science is that they can appear to be empirically confirmed under any circumstances even though they are unfalsifiable (insofar as they can be generalized to any context) and therefore pseudo-scientific, a fact that may be beside the point. As Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2012) point out, referring to liberal democracies like Canada, “Science is generally considered the standard for epistemic justification and when social reality is supported by ‘scientific’ claims, the general public is easily convinced of its merits. After all, who are we to question science?” (p. 26).

The first nominally scientific claim that Trilling and Fadel make is that 21st century education promotes “authentic learning” by promoting classroom projects that simulate the “real-world” (p. 31). They base this claim on a set of research findings that

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7 To be clear, I am concerned in this example – and in subsequent ones – with Trilling’s and Fadel’s presentation of the research to which they refer, not with the original research itself.
they encapsulate as learning’s dependence on context. “The setting in which a new skill or piece of knowledge is learned,” they state, “strongly influences whether or not that skill or knowledge can be applied elsewhere” (p. 31). In their view, this relationship between context and learning “suggests students need more real-world problem solving, internships or apprenticeships in real work settings, and other more authentic learning experiences to make learning last and be useful” (p. 31). This claim is actually analytic because learning is nothing if not context-dependent, a point that I will develop with reference to Plato, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire in later chapters. Here it suffices to say that, beyond their rhetoric of science, Trilling and Fadel are simply stating the truism that students whose educational experiences occur under certain conditions are more likely than not to be prepared for extensions of the same conditions. The proposition does not carry scientific proof that a market-oriented education is more educative in principle than any other form of education.

Trilling and Fadel describe a second set of research findings as follows: “Both visceral (hands-on) and virtual (on-screen) modeling activities provide ways to make thinking visible, reflecting the internal model making and learning going on inside our heads” (p. 32). Rephrased, this description is an analytic proposition that visual “activities provide ways to make thinking visible.” More broadly, it effectively states that the physicality of activities stimulates the physical dimension of learning. This notion is impossible to falsify because stimulation by definition is a physical phenomenon. Even if it were possible to falsify it, the visibility or general physicality of a model obviously does not guarantee its accuracy or pedagogical appropriateness.
Observing and handling a model of a flat “world” may cause a student to believe that the world is flat, but it does not make the world itself flat.

Trilling and Fadel present their third so-called scientific claim as follows: “A rich literature of emotional intelligence studies and reports are clearly showing the advantages of being internally motivated to learn, as opposed to learning just for external motivations such as parental approval or performance on tests” (p. 33). Reworded, these studies and reports are purportedly revealing that students learn more easily when they are interested in the topic and/or in the way that the topic is presented to them. But how could learning possibly be enhanced without regard for the learner’s interests? Contradictorily, Trilling and Fadel imply that all students are intrinsically interested in a market-oriented education model that withholds its built-in interests from them and promises external rewards, such as employment.

The final two claims that the authors make are also analytic, not empirical. “The evidence is clear,” they claim, invoking more studies, “that personalized learning can have a positive effect on both learning performance and attitudes toward learning” (p. 33). They fail to mention that any learning that a person experiences, positive or otherwise, is ipso facto personalized. And, finally, they invoke studies that, in their mind, prove empirically that “learning is social” (p. 34). This statement is of course impossible to falsify, as its falsification would require evidence of an anti-social form of learning, which is nonsensical in the sense that human beings are social animals. Even if a form of anti-social learning were possible, it still would be impossible to demonstrate it
scientifically, given that science is itself a social enterprise. Trilling and Fadel do not attempt to explain how, on their view of science, denying teachers and students the actual reasoning behind 21st century education reform makes it both personalized and social.

In a nod to self-criticism, Trilling and Fadel purport to address the opposition to 21st century education reform in a section of their book entitled “The Forces of Resistance” (pp. 35-36). In brief, the resistant forces as they see them are: “Industrial Age” policies that remain in effect; “accountability” practices and standardized tests that do not reflect 21st century education skills; a longstanding tendency for teachers to instruct students directly; the economic interest of publishers to keep supposedly outdated educational materials on the market; “fear” that skills-based reform will replace knowledge-based curricula; and parents’ apparent inability to grasp the apparent truism that the kind of public education that they received as children will not help their own children succeed economically.

Even if one assumed that the above forces were entirely real (although their content clearly includes half-truths and falsehoods), Trilling and Fadel do not argue against them so much as subsume them under their system. First, though they reject market-oriented “Industrial Age” policies in practice, they affirm them in principle, stating that they “worked well until times changed” (p. 35). Second, they only criticize accountability practices and standardized testing insofar as they do not involve 21st century skills. Third, 21st century education itself constitutes a form of “direct instruction” because it directs teachers and students to its uncritical stated content, impeding access to its presupposed content. Fourth, they fail to admit their economic bias as representatives of the high-tech industry but they criticize the publishing industry
for pursuing its economic interests. Fifth, they dismiss the fear of educators regarding academic content yet make a case for 21st century education that is based on fear of economic extinction. Finally, they clearly prefer that teachers and students adapt uncritically to private sector interests in general, but criticize parents for having their own preferences for their children. In sum, none of the examples that they cite opposes their model’s apparent principle of social adaptation, just the application of the principle, which they attribute to one form of ignorance or another.

By discursively positioning opposition to 21st century education as flawed in practice but not in principle, Trilling and Fadel can claim with rhetorical consistency that their model does not reject the concerns of its opponents but balances them. Hence in a figure entitled “21st Century Learning Balance,” they depict 21st century education as “a new balance” between a set of “educational choices” (p. 39). Reproduced verbatim, the terms nominally balanced are as follows:

- Teacher-directed . . . . . . . . . . Learner-centred
- Direct instruction. . . . . . . . . . . Interactive exchange
- Knowledge. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Skills
- Content. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Process
- Basic skills. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Applied skills
- Facts and principles. . . . . Questions and problems
- Theory. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Practice
- Curriculum. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Projects
- Time-slotted. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . On-demand
- One-size-fits-all. . . . . . . . . . . Personalized
As the authors see it, the topics in the left column are no longer as important as they were once considered to prepare students for life after graduation. In this sense, their model’s emphasis on the right column is not ‘imbalanced’ because, they imply, it offsets the weight of the first column; furthermore, they claim that topics in the right column will be “more and more important as we move through our century” (p. 40). To extend the metaphor of balance, the very scale that they use to weigh the above “choices” is calibrated to up-to-date market conditions in the “Knowledge Age,” notably involving new technology. “Digital technologies,” they write, “are increasingly supporting many of the learning approaches on both sides of the balance” (p. 40).

In my introduction, I mentioned that the presentation on 21st century education that I attended on my first PD day struck at my formal education in literature, my overall interest in the subject, and my hope of becoming a good teacher. One reason that I gave was that the guest speaker implicitly said that teachers had to stop imposing antiquated standards on students, though he explicitly said that they had to strike a better “balance” between directing students and giving them the freedom to make their own choices, particularly in reading material. He was referring to the above figure. I recall being demoralized instantly because many of the figure’s terms in which I was (and remain) interested are in the left column. I was also disturbed because I knew that the figure was
somehow appropriating common educational terms in order to sell the model’s uncritical message about adapting to technology-related changes; however, I did not know how to put my disturbing experience into words, in large part because the model had already appropriated the words that were necessary to describe this disturbance. For example, even though I wanted to learn what the model was really about as an aspiring teacher who was expected to implement it, on its terms this made me overly concerned about my interests as a teacher, not “learner-centred” enough. According to figure’s discombobulating logic, my own interests had already thrown me off balance. Unbeknownst to me, I had not yet entered the “Knowledge Age.”

In one of the few critiques of P21’s model of 21st century education, Greenlaw (2011) questions “the privileging of the second term in a selection of the above oppositions” (p. 2). This privileging, however, is but one part of the iceberg’s tip. As I have shown so far in this chapter, the apparent standard of the model is both uncritical and surrounded by rhetoric that is problematic to say the least. Thus, even if the model were to give equal weight to both sides of its so-called balance of choices, the question remains: what does 21st century education reform really mean and what does its uncritical implementation logically entail, apart from the general dissemination of problematic rhetoric and technology-related private sector values?

2.2) 21st century skills

As discussed, the standard on which 21st century education appears to rest is the uncritical notion that education must reflect the technology-related changes of the “Knowledge Age.” It follows, then, that the real content on which it rests is an unstated
or presupposed form of market-oriented reasoning. But before this content can be accessed and critiqued (against the rhetoric of 21st century balance), it is necessary to look at the main means by which 21st century education is supposed to advance its apparent standard: that is, the 21st century skills themselves. The reason is that these skills are supposed to be a function of “knowledge work” and, by extension, knowledge. When looked at closely, though, the only “knowledge” that 21st century skills reflect is the model’s uncritical premise. Put simply, the plethora of so-called skills that I will now analyze boils down to one apparent imperative, the uncritical use of digital technology.

To encapsulate 21st century skills visually, Trilling and Fadel use P21’s “21st Century Knowledge-and-Skills Rainbow” (p. 47). The inner arch of the rainbow, entitled “Core Subjects and 21st Century Themes,” represents the model’s basis in “knowledge” – what the authors call “traditional” notions of literacy, mathematics, science, and other “core subjects” (p. 48) – as well as a long list of subjects that they deem relevant to contemporary societies. The outer arch comprises three sections, containing the three main sets of 21st century skills: “Life and Career Skills;” “Learning and Innovation Skills;” and “Information, Media, and Technology Skills” (p. 48). Each of these sets comprises a number of distinct categories, which in turn consist of several parts that the authors discuss with reference to bullet-points from P21’s website.

The first category that Trilling and Fadel discuss – under “Learning and Innovation Skills” – is called “Critical Thinking and Problem solving Skills” (p. 52). The latter nominally include the use of reason, thinking in terms of systems, judging and deciding (which P21 depicts in terms of analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, interpreting, and reflecting), and actually solving problems.
The second category of “Learning and Innovation Skills” that Trilling and Fadel discuss is “Communication and Collaborations Skills” (p. 55). P21 depicts communication in terms of articulating, listening, multi-purpose communicating, competent media and technology usage, and communicating across contexts. Collaboration is depicted as demonstrating a general teamwork ethic, being able to achieve group goals through compromise, and being collectively responsible for group work while valuing every team player’s efforts.

The third and final category of 21st century skills under “Learning and Innovation Skills” is “Creativity and Innovation Skills.” According to P21, creativity involves the use of thought-producing strategies (brainstorming is given as an example), the actual creation of ideas, and working out ideas. Collective creativity is presented in terms of developing and carrying out creative ideas and communicating them to people, making sure all group members’ views are respected, being respectful of practical restrictions on creativity, and learning from failure. And innovation is depicted as the use of created content within a particular context that is supposed to require such content.

The second main set of 21st century skills that Trilling and Fadel discuss consist of “Digital Literacy Skills,” which they also refer to as “Information, Media, and Technology Skills” (p. 67). The first part of this triad – “Information Literacy Skills” – is said to involve ethical and legal accessing, evaluating, managing, and general using of information. The second part – “Media Literacy Skills” – nominally involves using media for the particular yet vaguely stated purposes of analyzing and creating content. And the third part – “Technology” or “ICT Literacy Skills” – refers to general usage of technology, digital technology in particular.
The third and last main set of 21st century skills that Trilling and Fadel discuss is “Life and Career Skills.” This set comprises five categories, namely “Flexibility and Adaptability Skills,” “Initiative and Self-Direction Skills,” “Social and Cross-Cultural Skills,” “Productivity and Accountability Skills,” and “Leadership and Responsibility Skills.” Consistent with the nominal skills outlined above, the stated content of these categories consists of a mixture of generalities and outright tautologies. For example, students who have “Adaptability Skills” are said to be capable of adapting “to varied roles, job responsibilities, schedules, and contexts” (as cited, p. 77). To give a couple of additional examples, students who have “Leadership Skills” are supposed to be able to “guide others toward a goal” and show “integrity and ethical behavior in using influence and power” (as cited, p. 85).

A number of conceptual problems are evident in P21’s so-called 21st century skills. First of all, their sheer volume and level of technical detail risks distracting from the otherwise simple fact that the model fails to support its stated premise. Trilling and Fadel appear to recognize the distracting quality of their model, hence they try to make it “memorable” (p. 175). They rearrange and summarize the above plethora of 21st century skills so that the main ones are grouped by titles that begin with the same letter, which they then incorporate into a memorization formula:

So we now have the “7Cs” skills of 21st century learning:

• Critical thinking and problem solving
• Creativity and innovation
• Collaboration, teamwork, and leadership
• Cross-cultural understanding
• Communications, information, and media literacy

• Computing and ICT literacy

• Career and learning self-reliance

If we take the basic “3Rs” skills of Reading, ’Riting and ’Rithmetic and multiply them by the 7Cs, we now have a handy formula for successful learning in the 21st century (and the math works too!):

\[3R \times 7C = 21st \text{ Century Learning}\]

(Original emphases, pp. 176-177)

It is worth noting the apparent irony here that 21st century education, which purports to promote critical thinking, actually promotes the memorization of its stated content over critical engagement with it.

A second conceptual problem with 21st century skills is that they are analytic propositions. As such, their subject and predicate are basically synonymous. For example, P21 essentially defines the 21st century skill of “critical thinking” as critical thought (e.g., reasoning, etc.). Needless to say, such a definition is uninformative for anyone who wants to learn how to become – or how to teach others to become – a critical thinker, assuming for the sake of argument that critical thinking is a meaningful subject in the first place. As Hyslop-Margison (2003) argues, “Whenever teachers speak of critical thinking as a generic transferable skill or a simple set of heuristic procedures, they are potentially harming students more than helping them by encouraging what may be uninformed judgments and analyses” (p. 326). The flip side of this argument, I would add, is that the rhetoric of “critical thinking” can also harm people who are actually thinking critically about subjects about which they are knowledgeable to one degree or
another. Notably, 21st century education’s market-oriented, technology-based rhetoric of “critical thinking” suggests that any criticism about it is inherently uncritical.

Even though the actual content or purpose of 21st century skills is hidden within its rhetoric, its rhetoric nonetheless gives away an important clue. That is, it presupposes the model’s uncritical promotion of digital technology as it relates to the global economy. This promotion is obvious with regard to “Information, Media, and Technology Skills.” If at first glance, “Life and Career Skills” and “Learning and Innovation Skills” appear to have little to nothing to do with digital technology, it is important to keep in mind that the former set promotes uncritical adaptation to the constitutively high-tech “Knowledge Age.” Also, the latter set unambiguously falls within the right column of the authors’ figure of “21st Century Balance,” which in turn reflects the same notion of modern society.

2.3) *NB3-21C’s presentation of 21st century education*

The cover of *NB3-21C* shows five youths and one young adult huddling around a globe that appears to be digitally inserted into the image. All six people are smiling, propping up their heads and looking up directly towards the hidden camera, creating the illusion of eye contact with whoever sees the image. Similarly, the first two inside pages of the document display an image of children who appear to be observing the planet Earth from outer space, an obviously digitized conceit. The following declaration is associated with the young people’s perspective:

We are the future.

You will know we are ready when we are:
• Highly skilled in literacy, mathematics and scientific thinking

• Critical thinkers and creative problem solvers

• Collaborators

• Skilled communicators

• Resourceful, reliable, resilient and physically active

• Involved in our communities and connected to the world (original emphasis, p. ii)

As the document goes on to make clear, the first bullet-point refers to the content of “NB3,” and the remaining five refer to that of 21st century education, or “21C.”

The above imagery betrays the fact that 21st century education is an imposed form of direct instruction, contradicting its rhetoric of student-centredness. The cover’s image of youths looking up literally reveals a top-down perspective. Although the young people on the inside cover are looking at Earth, the image’s perspective is in the direction of the sun and starry universe beyond. The letters of the declaration, which are white against a dark-blue background, are visually associated with the image’s supposedly enlightened (or starlit) perspective.8

In the very act of uncritically accepting P21’s 21st century education model, NB3-21C obviously accepts the model’s nominal premise that educational practices must

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8 Fleiger has noticed similar imagery in the Graham government’s preceding policy, When Kids Come First. For example, referring to a web-page that discusses the policy, Fleiger writes: “The left of the web page, showing a picture of the Premier seated with a lamp at his side and a painting in the background, leads me to associate reform with middle class aspirations. Above the Premier, the action plan is represented as a golden-coloured orb, suggesting its sun-like potency. . . . In this mode of communication, I am positioned as one who desires and proves functionality by successfully accessing technological constructions of knowledge” (pp. 179-180).
reflect technology-related changes in society at large and that such practices are actually effective in promoting social adaptation. Unfortunately, the policy document repeats three basic failures of the book: it provides no conceptual support for its stated premise; it obstructs criticism with problematic rhetoric; and it does not explain the model’s professed effectiveness in realizing its stated premise. What is more, in contrast to 21st Century Skills, the document does not even make an explicit nod to self-criticism. However, it provides a set of implicit counterpoints to criticism in the form of implied subjects of continuity between the reform model and the province’s supposedly essential attributes.

The fact that NB3-21C fails to support the premise of 21st century education is straightforward to prove because its primary source is P21, which, as discussed, withholding the model’s actual purpose. The document’s five main proposals for 21st century education reform – involving curricular changes, teacher training, principal training, installing technology in classrooms, and instituting allegedly new ways of assessing students – “parallel what the Partnership for 21st Century Skills in the United States is calling for customized to our specific needs” (p. 6).⁹ “Each of the key elements that need to shift,” according to NB3-21C, “has been clearly identified in 21st Century related research and literature” (p. 14). The document reproduces Trilling’s and Fadel’s figure, “A New Balance,” claiming that it “illustrates the shift from a teacher-directed

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⁹ Although NB3-21C recognizes several related aspects of the school system, curricular change – the rhetorical shift toward supposedly knowledge-based 21st century skills – is its focal point
model to a learner-centred environment” (p. 13). It also displays P21’s rainbow, about
which it makes the following comment: “While the shift in each of the areas represented
by the graphic will naturally have to occur over time, the faster it occurs the more
relevant public education will be to today’s learners” (p. 14).

At first glance, 21st century education reform in New Brunswick may appear to
be grounded in local concerns, namely “NB3.” However, the latter is indistinguishable
from the uncritical inner arch of P21’s “21st Century Knowledge and Skills Rainbow.”
To quote NB3-21C, “We know that learning is rooted in high levels of student
achievement in the three foundation subjects: literacy, numeracy and science” (p. 6).
How is learning possible in the first place if it is dependent on the learning of three
curricular subjects? According to NB3-21C, we simply “know” and “all are agreed” (p.
6).

Regarding the outer arch of P21’s rainbow, NB3-21C rearranges its content under
five headings. Reproduced verbatim, the headings are:

1) Critical thinking and creative problem solving
2) Collaboration
3) Communication
4) Personal development and self-awareness
5) Global citizenship (pp. 10-12)

As with P21’s main sets of 21st century skills, several examples of specific 21st century
skills or “competencies” fall under each of the above headings. It would be superfluous
here to summarize the details of each heading inasmuch as, notwithstanding one direct
reference to Canada, they are all restatements of the 21st century skills that I have already
discussed. Note that the first three headings refer to P21’s “Learning and Innovation Skills” and that the last two headings refer to its “Life and Career Skills.” Direct references to P21’s “Information, Media, and Technology Skills” are explicitly evident under the first three headings. According to NB3-21C, critical thinkers and creative problem solvers “are able to acquire, process and interpret information critically to make informed decisions” (p. 10); collaborators “are able to collaborate across networks, using various technologies” (p. 11); and communicators “critically interpret and evaluate ideas presented through a variety of media” (p. 11).

What is more, all of the nominal skills that NB3-21C promotes at least implicitly involve digital technology, given the document’s stated premise that education in the “Digital Age” necessarily involves digital technology usage. It is worth emphasizing that NB3-21C’s restatements are also analytic propositions; therefore, they are insufficient in terms of actually explaining how the stated content of 21st century education reform is supposed further its stated purpose. For example, the idea that critical thinkers “interpret information critically” is at best a truism. At worst, it provides rhetorical cover for the fact that the model does not invite criticism of its stated goals – along with their presupposed content and other problematic factors – and means of achieving them.

NB3-21C does claim that P21’s model meets real needs in New Brunswick public education. Again, the proposals that the document makes that parallel P21’s recommendations are reportedly “customized to our specific needs” (p. 6). I can identity at least seven general and often overlapping implied subjects of continuity between New Brunswick’s extant social realities and the Department of Education’s proposals for 21st century education reform. Not unlike the first column of Trilling’s and Fadel’s “A New
Balance” figure, they risk functioning technically as rhetorical counters to any form of criticism that NB3-21C may induce.

One subject pertains to students’ “potential,” a word that appears three times in NB3-21C. First, the document expresses dedication to “[e]nsuring all students in our system reach their full potential” (p. 7). Second, it claims that there is a need “to ensure that New Brunswickers value learning, have heightened expectations for success and provide the opportunities that our students need to realize their potential” (p. 9). The third reference occurs in the form of a stated goal of NB3-21C: that students “will see themselves as capable learners, aware of their own potential” (p. 12). Thus, on the model’s stated terms, any criticism of it is a threat to students’ “potential.”

New Brunswick’s two official languages constitute a second subject, one that invokes the premiership of Louis Robichaud (1960-1970):

Since 1969, New Brunswick has been Canada’s only officially bilingual province.

The Department of Education respects this linguistic duality in two ways: by offering every student the opportunity to learn both English and French, and by operating as two parallel but separate linguistic sectors that are responsible for their own curriculum development and assessment. (p. 2)

The document also claims to be a continuation of more recent reforms in this area. In its words, “Recent changes to New Brunswick’s French Second Language programs are already strengthening communication skills and general literacy processes for our students” (p. 7). In this sense, any criticism of the model is a threat to the province’s bilingual status, including criticism that might argue that the model is itself such a threat.
A third subject of implied continuity is the supposed character of the local population. Consider the following three examples. First, the opening words of the Deputy Minister of Education, John Kershaw, refer to a potential for greatness based in part on existing boldness:

We can expect greatness in this century because New Brunswick is well positioned to be a world leader in learning. We are small enough to engage all our citizens in deciding our own future, and we are bold enough to think beyond our borders. These are our greatest assets and they will enable us to shift our education system to a 21st Century learning model in time to meet the needs of our students and our province. (p. iii)

Second, Assistant Deputy Minister David Roberts claims that NB3-21C not only reflects “best practices, cutting-edge research and expert advice from across North America and beyond” but also “local experience” (p. v). Third, the Anglophone Sector’s nine district education councils invoke collective responsibility. “Together,” they write, “with parents, communities, governments and stakeholders, we believe we have the opportunity, and responsibility, to move this agenda forward on an urgent basis” (p. vi).

A twofold implication here is that people who are critical of the model are not only lacking boldness, intelligence, and responsibility, but that they are also ‘bad’ New Brunswickers or anti-New-Brunswick.

The rule-urban configuration of the province is a forth subject. According to NB3-21C:

New Brunswick is the second-most rural province in Canada, with over 50 percent of its population living in a rural setting (compared with the Canadian
average of 20 percent). The largely rural nature of our province helps shape our school system, impacting the size and location of schools, availability and delivery of school services and subject options, student transportation requirements, and access to extra-curricular activities. (p. 1)

One possible interpretation of this passage is that the province’s “rural nature” – and by extension the people who live in rural communities – have helped and will continue to help shape the school system as it is reformed, not fundamentally changed. To state the obvious, then, the passage allows for the interpretation that rural New Brunswickers who do not help with the reform are somehow betraying their roots.

The province’s geography, a fifth subject, appears explicitly once in the document as follows:

Geographically, New Brunswick finds itself in an enviable location, midway between the major population centres of eastern Canada and the eastern seaboard of the United States. We are also a marine gateway between this continent and countries that ring the Atlantic. (p. 2)

Geography can also be interpreted to be an implicit part of the meaning of “world” to which the document repeatedly refers. As mentioned, the image on the inside cover the document depicts a group of young people in outer space pointing at the planet Earth. Students who are ready for the future, the attached message declares, are among other things “[i]nvolved in our communities and connected to the world” (p. i). Again, the idea is that school reform will build on – not destroy – existing conditions, in this case the physical world itself. The binary opposite of this idea is that impediments to school reform are harmful to the natural environment. “The return on investment,” the
document declares, “will be highly skilled and innovative citizens able to build the New Brunswick economy, pursue *environmentally sustainable* lifestyles, support high-quality social programs and foster free and democratic societies” (my emphasis, p. 8).

New Brunswick’s economic position within the global economy is a sixth implied subject of continuity:

The opportunities that come from our central location are balanced by the challenge of a highly competitive world. New Brunswick’s educational focus is defined by both our local realities and our position in the exciting and changing world of the 21st Century. (p. 2)

Rephrased, this passage is another suggestion that the province need not be changed fundamentally in order to thrive going forward (with more market-oriented changes). As such, it also suggests that criticism of the province’s existing market-orientation is a threat to “local realities” in general going forward.

A twofold seventh subject, *NB3-21C* clearly views the extant public school system as a foundational means to market-oriented ends. Echoing Trilling and Fadel, the document depicts “learning as the major socio-economic driver of the 21st Century” (original emphases, p. 3). Hence, as already quoted, it asserts that “investments” in its P21-inspired proposals will yield “highly skilled and innovative citizens able to build the New Brunswick economy, pursue environmentally sustainable lifestyles, support high-quality social programs and foster free and democratic societies” (p. 3). The very name of *NB3-21C* reflects this point of view: “Setting the foundation with NB3 while at the same time being driven to integrate 21st Century competencies into public education is why officials are calling this internal strategy NB3-21C” (p. 6). Such rhetoric implies
that criticism of the reform is economically unsound, environmentally unsustainable, unfree, undemocratic, and incompatible with all foundational aspects of public education.

Again, then, *NB3-21C* does not explicitly gesture toward criticism of its proposals as Trilling and Fadel do. However, in framing itself as universally agreeable (i.e., as somehow satisfying people’s and peoples’ critical perspectives in principle) it does anticipate criticism implicitly. On its rhetorically universal terms, for example, my particular critical perspective is not necessarily wrong it principle, but the implication is that it is necessarily wrong in practice at least. After all, the document claims that “all are agreed” (p. 6). If this claim actually holds within any particular context (e.g., among Department of Education officials), my problem with the model within such a context would inferably appear in some sense ‘imbalanced’ to people therein, consistent with the rhetoric of balance.

What is more, my decision to problematize 21st century education reform in New Brunswick in terms of its presupposed concepts may very well seem – or be, in ways that I cannot perceive – fundamentally flawed to people against whose personal and/or collective experiences the model’s presupposed meaning may be either obvious or irrelevant in comparison to the model’s other aspects. For example, Fleiger’s experience-based and theory-informed critique of “inclusion” policy in New Brunswick suggests that it is dangerous to take policy too seriously on its presupposed terms: given that the latter’s form is effectively exclusionary, one risks perpetuating exclusionary discourses in necessarily using them to access and critique their immediate presuppositions.

Indeed, in making the point that the above implied subjects of continuity can technically function rhetorically as counterpoints to any form of criticism that does not
explicitly address the model’s presuppositions a question arises. Am I marginalizing or occluding forms of criticism that actually may not depend on the model’s presupposed conception of its stated content? I have three examples in mind, all of which are consistent with the exclusionary quality of “inclusion” policy that Fleiger identifies.

First, NB3-21C does not refer (let alone defer) to the Wolastoqiyik, the Mi’kmaq, or the Peskotomuhkati. Instead, the document refers to “First Nations” twice, using the problematic language of “inclusion.” Under the heading of “Recent Achievements” and the subheading “Inclusion,” it commits to “Strengthening our emphasis on closing the gap in student achievement between our First Nations students and non-aboriginal students” (p. 7). Under the heading of “Challenges Ahead” and the subheading “To match success rates in First Nations education with provincial standards,” it writes: “Our challenge is to eliminate any disparity in success rates between First Nations’ students and other students in New Brunswick” (p. 9). The meaning of this language of comparing First Nations students to government-determined standards and the attendant suggestion that First Nations students especially require government intervention in order to be successful relative to “other students in New Brunswick” clearly does not depend on the model for access to its presupposed concepts, especially in light of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (2015). To quote from its preface:

Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school

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system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-Aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours. Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. Virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered. (p. vi)

In reconsidering the seven implied subjects of continuity in *NB3-21C*, lack of respect for the Wolastoqiyik, the Mi’kmaq, and the Peskotomuhkati is evident in the fact that the document all but purports to include their perspectives in the exclusionary form of rhetorical “inclusion.” In focusing on implied subjects of continuity, then, I risk overlooking actual forms of continuity that the document presupposes (such as the culture of disrespect among non-Aboriginals against Aboriginal people) but that do not require access to the model’s presupposed concepts to be understood. In this first of three examples, the Truth & Reconciliation Commission is an important reminder that many of the model’s presupposed concepts are already readily accessible outside the model’s rhetorical framework. Thus, my argument in problematizing this framework cannot be that access to its presuppositions from within it is absolutely necessary to understanding its full meaning.

Second, *NB3-21C* simultaneously presents itself as an “Anglophone Sector” document and a document for the entire province. It thereby contradicts its stated respect for official French-English bilingualism while altogether excluding First Nations
languages and any language of immigrants and migrants that is not English or French.

Third, *NB3-21C* simultaneously depicts rural life and immigration as inherent burdens in the “Digital Age” as an apparent pretext for employing technological ‘solutions’:

Effective use of technology will enable us to provide greater options to students in even the smallest school, helping to minimize any differences between rural and urban schools. . . . Over the past 20 years, our province has experienced a steady drop in population and a population shift from rural to urban areas, intensified by the arrival of new immigrants who mostly settle in our cities. (p. 9)

To spell out the implication of this depiction of rural life and immigration, both are supposed in the context of *NB3-21C* to be inherently burdensome in terms of rural population decline and urban population increase. No mention, of course, is given of the structural/politico-economic causes of population shifts, such as neoliberal governance.

To be clear, I recognize that actual people who are directly affected by *NB3-21C*’s exclusionary language – of which the above three examples are a selection – do not necessarily have to understand any of the model’s formal concepts on its presupposed terms in order to understanding their actual, effective meaning. Restated, my working assumption is that the model’s rhetorically inclusive and balanced content can nonetheless – for people who accept such rhetoric uncritically – make any criticism of it appear (either inherently or technically) ‘imbalanced,’ ‘exclusive,’ ‘uncritical,’ ‘ignorant,’ etc., because the model implies that people who accept its rhetoric uncritically are actually being balanced, inclusive, critical, knowledgeable thinkers.
In sum, I am trying to explain the importance of critically analyzing 21st century education as I understand it from experience; I am not trying to explain all perspectives of the model, even though my approach is at least indirectly connected to all perspectives of the model. Moreover, NB3-21C actually relates to various dimensions of life in ways that may seem/be either totally illegitimate or in one sense or another technically legitimate, depending on actual context(s). However, it can never be totally legitimate, I maintain, contrary to its proclaimed (principled, if technically modifiable) universality. Hence in the next two chapters, I address the problem of contextualizing the model’s purportedly universally agreeable (i.e., context-transcendent) rhetoric. Specifically, in Chapter 3, I develop a framework for contextualizing the model’s uncritical framework in an effort to avoid repeating its exclusionary form in describing and analyzing its function(s) during the Graham years; in Chapter 4, I describe and analyze the latter context and, in so doing, explain the purpose of subsequent chapters in terms of both their particular and potentially general significance to the topic of neoliberal school reform, 21st century education reform in New Brunswick especially.

Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the main problem that this dissertation address, namely the uncritical framework of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick that is supposed to support its premise that “education is about adapting to a changing world.” In doing so, I have demonstrated that the stated meaning of 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C can be restated as ‘the uncritical promotion of digital technology.’ At the same time, I have demonstrated that the model’s rhetoric resists even this implicit criticism by
implying that its proposals are consistent with ‘good’ preexisting conditions in the province, thereby implying that its proposals will only fundamentally change ‘bad’ preexisting conditions. In short, the model rhetorically puts itself above criticism by suggesting that its content, far from being disrespectful to actual contexts, is universally good and applicable in the “Knowledge Age.” As a step toward the goal of critically analyzing the model’s framework, my next chapter begins the process of contextualizing the model’s rhetoric within the immediate context of the Graham government’s one term from 2006 until 2010.
Chapter 3: A Framework for Contextualizing the Problem

Another way of illustrating the problem that is 21st century education’s stated premise is to put it in the context of public education reform in New Brunswick during the premiership of Shawn Graham, when the model officially took root in the province. Assuming that the significance of the proposition “education is about adapting to a changing world” includes realities beyond the realm of market-oriented, technology-centred rhetoric (and beyond my experience of it as a student intern), what was “the changing world” to which public education in New Brunswick was supposed to adapt in 2010? Did 21st century education reform actually promote adaptation to it in any demonstrable way?

Given that at least one feature of “the changing world” was the uncritical implementation of 21st century education itself, the above questions are not as straightforward as they may seem. With this feature in mind, how is it possible to begin describing the model’s relationship to the real world of neoliberalism for the purpose of contextualizing its problematic rhetoric – as a step toward analyzing it critically – when its rhetoric was part of the real world in question? How is it possible to contextualize unsupported rhetoric that, in presenting itself as universally acceptable truth, appears to exist without a particular context?

In this chapter, I build a framework for contextualizing the rhetorical premise of 21st century education out of the following three approaches to the problem of

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I have in mind, for example, the fact that in order to pass my internship I had to implement at least some uncritical aspects of the reform, for instance by following the edict to use digital technology without having a pedagogical reason for doing so.
understanding neoliberal rhetoric in general: (1) comparing neoliberal rhetoric to corresponding social reality, using knowledge of the latter to interpret neoliberal rhetoric’s social function; (2) using technical knowledge of rhetoric, such as linguistic knowledge of the formal effects of rhetoric and historical knowledge of its stated content, to critique neoliberal rhetoric’s social function; and (3) using neoliberal rhetoric itself (e.g., its unstated content, accessed through analysis) as a source of insight into its social function. Accordingly, this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section considers Henry Giroux’s (2003) and Noam Chomsky’s (2004) respective critiques of George W. Bush’s administration because they exemplify the first approach to neoliberal rhetoric while also providing further context to 21st century education itself, which is directly traceable to the Bush II administration. In the second section, I summarize three technical points that Tony Tremblay (2009) makes about the Graham government’s rhetoric of “self-sufficiency,” which immediately circumscribed the rhetoric of NB3-2IC. I also critique Tremblay’s attendant position that neoliberalism has become inevitable. In the third section, I discuss aspects of Slavoj Žižek’s (2002) perspective on “totalitarianism,” which he argues is a notion that impedes critical thought in liberal democratic societies. His argument both complements and supplements my critique of Tremblay’s position on neoliberalism; however, I also counter Žižek’s suggestion that particular experiences are mostly misleading means of contextualization in the seemingly context-free context of neoliberal capitalism. I doing so, I refer to Fleiger’s experience-inspired and theory-informed argument that “inclusive” policy in New
Brunswick is exclusionary in practice (of which 21st century education reform is an example).  

3.1) Comparing neoliberal rhetoric to corresponding social reality

As with any history, the immediate events that surrounded the Graham administration’s approach to public education did not occur in a vacuum. One important event that preceded it was the publication of A. W. MacKay’s (2006) commissioned report, formally entitled \textit{Connecting Care and Challenge: Tapping Our Human Potential; Inclusive Education: A Review of Programming and Services in New Brunswick}. The report consists of 347 pages (plus hundreds of pages of appendices among other supporting documents) and comprises three “phases”: (1) research on various dimensions of “inclusion” policy, beginning with its legal framework in Canada; (2) consultation of “a sampling of those living and working with the New Brunswick educational system” (p. 108); and (3) the author’s 95 recommendations for “inclusive” school reform. “The challenge,” according to MacKay, “rests with the Government and

12 Initially, I intended to include in this chapter my description and analysis of the immediate social context to 21st century education reform in New Brunswick. However, developing a framework for the latter purposes has proven to be lengthier than I first anticipated, warranting an entire chapter on its own. Thus, I will return in my next chapter to the questions of New Brunswick’s “changing world” to which 21st century education was supposed to promote adaptation and of the degree to which it was successful in this regard. The purpose of addressing these questions is twofold: to illustrate broader social implications of 21st century education’s problematic framework and to indicate why and how my subsequent critical analysis of its presupposed concepts is an appropriate way of responding to the “changing world” in question. Stated for the sake of clarity in advance, my next chapter’s argument is that the Graham government’s rhetoric of education reform was (and continues to be) a key component both to neoliberalism’s appearance of inevitability and to the real force of its overall configuration; therefore, critical analysis of neoliberal rhetoric is an important means of disrupting this appearance and of imagining realistic alternatives to neoliberal rhetoric’s concomitant reality. To put it more specifically, the model’s corporatist, legalistic, and authoritarian rhetoric, I will argue, helped to realize the “changing world” in question yet it did not do so inevitably. But, again, before I can arrive at these conclusions, it is first necessary to build a framework for putting the model in the context of the Graham government’s overall approach to neoliberal school reform.
through it, the people of New Brunswick, to use these recommendations as a guide to better education systems for all the children of New Brunswick” (p. 194).

In my next chapter, I will discuss the Graham government’s efforts to implement the Mackay Report’s recommendations between 2006 and 2010. Here, I would like to draw attention to the report’s child-centric rhetoric because, as I show below, it connects the Graham administration’s public education policies to the topic of neoliberal rhetoric. Thus, it serves as a useful point of entry into the three ways of understanding neoliberal rhetoric that I will be discussing in this chapter.

During the 2006 election campaign, the then-leader of the opposition rhetorically framed MacKay’s recommendations as being responsive to the otherwise neglected needs of both teachers and students:

Liberal leader Shawn Graham is vowing to implement the recommendations and timelines established in the exhaustive MacKay report on inclusive education. . . .

“Our teachers have been crying out for help for too long,” Graham says in a prepared text. “Too many children have been left behind for too long. Too much potential has been missed for too long.” (Moszynski, 2006, p. A5)

As revealed by the reference, quoted above, to “all the children of New Brunswick,” MacKay clearly used the same rhetorical frame. More significantly in terms the connection between this frame and neoliberalism, MacKay similarly positioned his report vis-à-vis “the goal of ensuring that each child can reach her or his potential (whatever that might be) and that no child ‘falls through the cracks’” (p. 55). The latter language of child/learner-centredness can be traced back further and beyond provincial borders, notably to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 in the United States. Signed
into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, NCLB led to the formation of P21 in 2002 as a public-private partnership between the U.S. Department of Education and several major corporations, according an early report by P21 (n.d.), *Learning for the 21st Century: A Report and Mile Guide for 21st Century Skills*. The same report states that P21’s proposals for American public education “complement No Child Left Behind and provide a vision for capturing the full range of 21st century skills in the assessments the law requires” (p. 3).

This direct connection between NCLB and public education policy in New Brunswick during the Graham years is evidence of the latter’s neoliberal foundation, as NCLB’s neoliberal status is well documented. For example, in a chapter on NCLB in *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy beyond the Culture of Fear*, Henry Giroux (2003) contrasts NCLB’s “promising rhetoric” (p. 72) with the neoliberal actions of the Bush administration. Among the examples that he gives are the administration’s tax cuts for the rich and reduced annual funding to public education following NCLB. “What both the education and economic stimulus packages suggest,” he writes, “is that the Bush government, in spite of its claims to improve public schools, has no substantive interest in providing educational support and opportunities for all children in this country” (p. 73).

Noam Chomsky (2004) also looks primarily to events and established doctrine surrounding the Bush administration’s policies to interpret them – and to overcome their internal logic – in *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance*:

Though Bush planners are at an extreme end of the traditional US policy spectrum, their programs and doctrines have many precursors, both in US history and among earlier aspirants to global power. More ominously, their decisions
may not be irrational within the framework of prevailing ideology and the institutions that embody it. . . . Let us try to unravel some of the many strands that enter into this complex tapestry, focusing attention on the world power that proclaims global hegemony. Its actions and guiding doctrines must be a primary concern for everyone on the planet, particularly, of course, for Americans. (p. 4)

Although the power of American hegemony is a topic that exceeds the scope of this dissertation, it is important to keep in mind that 21st century education’s meaning is largely to be found in transnational yet decidedly American forces. To quote Trilling and Fadel in their double capacity as employees for Cisco and P21 representatives, “We can look forward to a time when a powerful global learning network of 21st century schools and online learning services will provide opportunities for all children, no matter where they live, to have a quality 21st century education . . .” (p. 154).

Giroux’s and Chomsky’s similar ways of critiquing the Bush administration’s policies by contrasting its rhetoric with corresponding social reality exemplify the first of the three aforementioned approaches to understanding neoliberal rhetoric. Given the connection between NCLB and 21st century education, and my goal of critically analyzing the latter’s presupposed neoliberal content, it is appropriate to draw on this aspect of their respective methodologies to contextualize the model’s broader social significance, while still focusing on the particular context of New Brunswick public education. Thus, in my next chapter, I first outline the Graham government’s overarching policy goals for public education and its original proposals for achieving them (as these goals and proposals were expressed in rhetoric); then I trace the public record of its subsequent actions regarding public education. As Giroux’s and Chomsky’s
analyzes show, comparing neoliberal rhetoric and its corresponding social reality in this manner immediately reveals certain contradictions from which conclusions about the wider social function of neoliberal rhetoric – and the need for critical analysis of it – can be drawn.

Merely comparing rhetoric and social reality is of course an insufficient means of contextualization. The significance of any contradictions that comparison yields also depends on one’s conceptual frame of reference. Within Giroux’s explicitly political framework, for instance, neoliberal rhetoric tends to appear vacuous apart from being a fear-inducing distraction from neoliberal social reality or an outright lie about the actual purposes of neoliberal governance. Consider his view of George W. Bush’s rhetoric of anti-terrorism:

Rising from the ashes of impoverishment, human suffering, and religious fundamentalism, terrorism, at its worst, evokes a culture of fear, unquestioned loyalty, and a military definition of security from those who treat it as a pathology rather than a politics. In part this is evident in Bush’s ‘war against terrorism,’

which, fueled by calls for public service, exhausts itself in a discourse of moral absolutes and public acts of denunciation. (p. 5)

“By depoliticizing politics,” Giroux goes on to argue, “the ‘war on terrorism’ becomes both an empty abstraction and a strategic diversion . . .” (p. 11). Likewise, Chomsky argues that attendant rhetorical references to liberty and democracy were so obviously vacuous that the Bush administration and its defenders used them sparingly in the run up to the Iraq War. In Chomsky’s words, such “rhetoric is doubly hard to take seriously in the light of the display of contempt for democracy that accompanied it, not to speak of
the past record and current practices” (p. 129). It is worth adding that on his view official American definitions of terrorism used to be more or less accurate on an abstract level, “and are considered appropriate when discussing the terrorism of enemies” (p. 188). “But almost no one uses them now,” he adds, “and they have been rescinded, replaced by nothing sensible” (p. 189). He reasons that they probably have been rescinded because of their similarity to official counterterror definitions. “But counterterror is official US policy,” he notes, “and it plainly will not do to say that the US is officially committed to terrorism” (p. 189).

To be clear, I agree with Giroux and Chomsky that neoliberal rhetoric functions as distracting, empty abstractions. The definition of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick as “adapting to a changing world” functioned as an empty abstraction in the sense that it was advanced without even a clear argument for doing so, which strongly suggests that at least a couple of its actual purposes were to distract from and to occlude the unstated purposes of the reform. Still, I do not think that such rhetoric thereby “exhausts itself” or that beyond exemplifying deceit or diversion it “carries no information.” As I will show, rhetoric itself can be a source of insight about corresponding social reality, especially when the latter is permeated with rhetoric; moreover, beneath its appearance of being “an empty abstraction” rhetoric can be a means of realizing goals other than distraction and misinformation, meaning, for instance, that even its seemingly uninformative content may presuppose concepts that can help to explain this process.

To be fair, neither Giroux nor Chomsky focuses on neoliberal rhetoric as such in their respective books under consideration. In Giroux’s words, “The Abandoned
Generation argues that the United States is at war with young people” (p. xvi). It is in the context of this argument that he tends to depict neoliberal rhetoric as either distracting from or occluding neoliberal social reality. And as the title of Hegemony or Survival suggests, Chomsky’s main argument is that American hegemony has become a threat to the very survival of the human species. Again, he acknowledges that American hegemony under Bush’s presidency “may not be irrational within the framework of prevailing ideology and the institutions that embody it” (p. 4). Ultimately, however, he views it as a “nightmare” from which the world must wake itself “before it becomes all-consuming” and in order to give “a measure of peace and hope to the world that is, right now, within the reach of our opportunity and our will” (p. 237). Both arguments overall ring true to me on their own merits, but also because I have experienced the Bush administration’s legacy especially as struggling student-teacher in New Brunswick’s post- NCLB, P21-inspired public education system. Nonetheless, they are insufficient for the purpose of contextualizing the uncritical framework of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick inasmuch as they gloss over some of the substantive dimension of neoliberal rhetoric in emphasizing the real harm that it entails.

Before I elaborate on the remaining two approaches to understanding neoliberal rhetoric, I should point out that one can readily detect in Giroux’s and Chomsky’s analyses how rhetoric can be instrumental to the inner-workings of neoliberalism, as distinct from merely distracting from and concealing it. Take for example Giroux’s following point about a series of “war on drugs” ads that the Bush administration ran, which on Giroux’s summary featured teenagers admitting to their alleged involvement in drug-related crimes, including terrorism. “Blaming the young for terrorism not only
reproduces the worst forms of demonization,” he argues, “it also ignores the complexity of the problems that promote drug use among young people and adults, problems rooted in a culture of commodification and addiction, poverty, unemployment, and deep-seated alienation” (p. 15). While the act of ignoring problems that are partly caused by such market forces as commodification is technically different from the actual activation of such forces, they are nonetheless connected. After all, the act of ignoring here occurred in the context of ads, which presumably involved the production of private profit, consumption, and other capitalist processes. As Giroux later points out in the immediate context of discussing the criminalization of drugs among other forms of social control under neoliberalism: “Evidence of a growing culture of control can also be found in the fact that more money is being invested in the growth of prisons in many states in America than in higher education” (p. 49). In short, one can infer that Bush’s anti-terrorism rhetoric, in demonizing young people, simultaneously activated or at least supported market forces in the form of profit for the advertising industry and returns on investments in prisons.

Another function of neoliberal rhetoric, which one can infer from Chomsky’s analysis of the Bush administration’s language, is its legal force from the point of view of policy makers and ruling elites. Chomsky notes that the Bush administration presented its militant actions after 9/11 in part by quoting the words of “the respected liberal elder statesman Dean Acheson” who in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis “instructed the

13 In an endnote to a preceding point to this quotation, Giroux, with reference to Chomsky, writes: “State repression has a long history in both American foreign and domestic policy. What is new is that under neoliberalism, it is imposed less through an appeal to spread the ideals of a bogus democracy than through the brutal necessity of accumulating capital and profits for the multinational corporations” (p. 209).
American Society of International Law that no ‘legal issue’ arises when the US responds to a challenge to its ‘power, position, and prestige’” (p. 14). Chomsky condemns Acheson’s legal advice on moral and legal grounds; nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to interpret such language as a form of legalese that on some level protects governments from legal challenges while still regarding it in principle as unsound and immoral. As Chomsky points out, the American government drew on Acheson’s words for legal support in rejecting the World Court’s and the Security Council’s condemnation of American aggression in Nicaragua during Reagan’s presidency.

To state the obvious, these examples are consistent with Chomsky’s characterization of American hegemony, particularly in the context of the Bush II years, as a “complex tapestry.” Or as Giroux describes the same period, it is “a present in which corporate interests and power shape much of the social, political, cultural, and economic landscape” (p. ix). So how does the overlap between neoliberal rhetoric and neoliberal social reality fit into this picture?

Here I am reminded of Roger Dale’s (1989) summary of the “core problems” of state-capitalism in The State and Education Policy:

• support of the capital accumulation process;
• guaranteeing a context for its continued expansion;
• the legitimation of the capitalist mode of production, including the State’s own part in it. (p. 28)

First among the several qualifications to this summary that Dale makes is that “specifications of the problems facing the State in any particular social formation cannot be laid down theoretically in advance; they do not always appear in the same form”
This point helps to explain how the inner-workings of neoliberalism may in part take the form of rhetoric, that neoliberal rhetoric can be one among many substantive ‘solutions’ to the problems of neoliberalism on its own terms. I would add that the same form may address one or more specifications of the three core problems simultaneously and in multiple ways. Rhetoric, using the examples that I have just discussed, can be a form of ad-based or legalistic support for neoliberal capitalism while also working to guarantee and legitimate a variety of contexts for its continuation by among other things distracting, confusing, and/or even rationally persuading people who might otherwise oppose or at least support restrictions on capital accumulation politically. Moreover, when it comes to contextualizing neoliberal rhetoric, the overlap between it and neoliberal social reality is a complication that not only reflects the complexities of state-capitalism, whether in general or in specific neoliberal manifestations of it, but that also reflects the complexities of rhetorical language itself.

3.2) Using technical knowledge of neoliberal rhetoric

For knowledge of rhetoric itself – my second approach to understanding neoliberal rhetoric – I turn to Tony Tremblay’s (2009) essay, “Theorizing New Brunswick’s Self-Sufficiency: Is There a Place for Culture at the Heart of Socio-Economic Renewal?” To begin with, the essay is one among many analyses that reveal that the main official purpose behind the Graham government’s policy rhetoric was “to lift the province from the malaise of federal dependency” (p. 245). As Donald Savoie (2010) puts it: “Self-sufficiency speaks to self-sustaining economic development but also to a recognition that the province will not be able to rely on federal transfer payments as
it has in the past in developing and maintaining its public infrastructure and services” (p. 57). Three technical points in particular that Tremblay makes will prove helpful in analyzing the relationship between the Graham government’s policy rhetoric and the more concrete actions of its Department of Education.

First, Tremblay notes that the force of Graham’s rhetoric partially lies in its manifesto form, involving “the thought of a small group of self-appointed visionaries who believe themselves to be waged in a heroic struggle with orthodoxies of the past” (p. 246). He observes that a central policy document – the *Our Action Plan to be Self-Sufficient in New Brunswick* – “completely ignores questions of context and argument for declarations of achievement” (p. 246). With reference to John R. Searle, Tremblay explains that this style can cause people to accept stated content without concern for context or argument simply because it presents itself as being above such concerns, potentially “inculcating readers by enacting its own assertion” (p. 246). This point underlines the importance of noting the contradictions between neoliberal rhetoric and neoliberal social reality in general as a guard against inculcation. For the same reason, it also underlines the importance of noting the substantive coherence between the two phenomena. To use my analysis of Giroux’s example again, the demonizing rhetoric of anti-terrorism can both contradict the humanity of young people and simultaneously cohere to, by enacting, the neoliberal principle of supporting the accumulation of capital.

However, Tremblay also suggests that the manifesto form in itself is unlikely to have much of an inculcating effect because it is a longstanding political convention. In his words, a manifesto’s “bold assertion . . . is never so bold that it is unconventional; if it were, it would be dismissed out of hand” (p. 247). His second technical point on which I
will draw, then, is that the main source of neoliberal rhetoric’s power resides in its intimate connection to neoliberalism in its entirety, beginning with “the larger orthodoxy that has been building for the last four centuries perpetuating itself in ever smaller guises of self-similarity while masking itself as a non-system too irregular to be predictable” (p. 250). A key aspect of neoliberalism’s present configuration that he identifies is its “familiarity” as a “complex stew of the political and historical economies of Enlightenment optimism, Lockean liberty, and social Darwinism, to name just a few of its recognizable, self-similar ingredients,” which to him “means that it is no longer instrumental (a means to an end) but environmental” (p. 250). He goes so far as to claim that the present pervasiveness of neoliberal orthodoxy renders political efforts to overcome it “naïve,” particularly ones that focus on neoliberal policy rhetoric as distinct from its connection to broader structures of political and economic power:

It is ultimately unproductive to make the utilitarianism of ruling elites a cause of neo-liberalism’s entrenchment, for expending energy misconstruing the cause—the Graham government is not the cause of neo-liberalism— is to lose sight of the effect. As McLuhan reminds us, it is the content/cause of new media that lulls us to sleep, allowing the form/effect to do its work. Using a metaphor form T. S. Eliot, McLuhan explains that content is “the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.” In the current political economy of New Brunswick, the Action Plan is that juicy piece of meat distracting the mind while transnational market forces do their work systemically. (p. 253)

For reason that I have discussed, I disagree that policy rhetoric, when viewed as a critical means of overcoming neoliberalism’s continuation, amounts to a distraction in the
broader context of neoliberalism. But even though Tremblay views this goal as naive, the technical point that he makes about the lulling effect of neoliberal rhetoric is no less an important analytical tool. It is indeed possible that in focusing on the contradictions of neoliberal rhetoric’s content, certain effects of its form’s coherence with its social environment may be overlooked. (To be clear, I view distraction and deception as examples of these effects, while emphasizing that more substantive effects are at work too, such as rhetoric’s unstated economic and legalistic purposes).

The final technical point that I will take from Tremblay’s essay is that historical knowledge of rhetoric is a necessary means of understanding its contemporary significance. Drawing on the theories of Karl Polanyi and Karl Marx, Tremblay posits that the Action Plan is largely the product of transnational market forces that state-capitalist actors have not only been supporting but grappling with since capitalism’s beginning. To illustrate this point, he turns to Frank McKenna’s relatively recent tenure as premier of New Brunswick (1987-1997), referring in particular to the start of it. McKenna’s initial mixing of traditionally liberal, protectionist strategies with then-emerging neoliberal strategies – what Tremblay sees as a “cautious approach to Self-Sufficiency” – reminds Tremblay of the Enlightenment, when European nation-states used rhetoric among other means to protect their power against the globalizing force of capitalism:

Feeling besieged by the transition from a feudal land-based economy to one of urbanization, technological advancement, and international trade, many newly autonomous sixteenth-century nation-states in the larger competitive federation of Europe resorted to a form of protectionist self-sufficiency, which became
manifest in their fabrication of a domestic production ethic and levy of import
taxes to boost wealth and discourage outside dependency. (p. 248)

According to Tremblay, the Liberal Party of New Brunswick’s comparable and more or less consistent approach to neoliberal capitalism since McKenna — notwithstanding a greater emphasis on neoliberal buzzwords that Tremblay detects in Graham’s rhetoric, which Tremblay attributes to neoliberalism’s now “environmental” status — means that it is “predictably, and in some ways honourably, anachronistic: a reactionary rear-guard action that strives for a measure of preservation amidst market forces that threaten to de-territorialize” (p. 249). Regarding the rhetorical dimension of this action, in other words, it has always been a part of the state-capitalist toolkit, one whose purpose has not been just to deny social reality but also to preserve it. It follows that people may learn about social reality through knowledge of state-capitalist rhetoric (especially historical knowledge of it, on Tremblay’s view) whether they regard its preservative purpose as honourable or not.

It also follows that state-capitalist actors are not in full control of state-capitalist resources. As Dale puts it: “. . . state policy makers do not possess perfect knowledge of the State’s needs or of how to meet them, through education or any other means at their disposal” (p. 29). In Tremblay’s words, “governments are just as overwhelmed and hamstrung by neo-liberal orthodoxy as we are” (p. 253). However, Tremblay does not look to the history of “self-sufficiency” for the purpose of overcoming the social reality that it preserves: “the press of neo-liberal orthodoxy is an unstoppable juggernaut with at least 400 years of momentum behind it” (my emphasis, p. 252). Rather, he sees history as a way of mitigating the effects of this momentum in New Brunswick through culture-
based reform. Among other examples, he discusses Joseph Howe, who in nineteenth-century Nova Scotia “mythologized a homegrown civic humanism that deferred to public works over private development, thus deliberately countering the dominant New World republicanism narrative of the northern American states” (pp. 255-256). In doing so, Temblay argues, Howe showed how culture can animate and sustain socio-economic development. Similar efforts are necessary in twenty-century New Brunswick, Tremblay ultimately concludes, if the province is to survive neoliberalism.

For the purpose of contextualizing the Graham government’s specific policy of 21st century education reform, Tremblay is not critical enough in my view. That is, if history can supply insight into the meaning of neoliberal rhetoric for the purpose of reforming neoliberalism in New Brunswick, why cannot history supply insight for the purpose of overcoming the phenomenon, notwithstanding the difficulties that such insight would entail? As Richard Seymour (2014) observes in Against Austerity: How We Can Fix the Crisis They Made, the power of the neoliberal state as it currently functions is far from an easy phenomenon to understand, let alone counter, in spite of the fact that people are well-acquainted with it on an everyday experiential level, consistent with Tremblay’s point about neoliberalism’s “environmental” nature. “The point, though,” Seymour maintains, “is that this reality . . . should be treated as a historical outcome which needs to be explained, rather than as something to be taken for granted” (p. 88). My point is that Tremblay’s essays treats Graham’s rhetoric as a historical outcome of state-capitalism only to take for granted that some form of neoliberal state-capitalism is now absolutely inevitable, as though has become a totally ahistorical force.
Before I move on to the next section, I should add that I am not above the criticism that I have just made of Tremblay’s article. Interestingly, although I had not heard of Tremblay at the time, let alone read his essay, I (2010) made a similar argument in an opinion piece for the Telegraph Journal in the summer before I entered the BEd programme. The main point that I wanted to make – and that I still in part hold – is that the province, instead of focusing on such market-oriented things as cuts to taxes and to the school system, should focus on “culture, which is to say investment in people beyond their place in the economic order of things” (p. A9). However, to make this point, I uncritically accepted the rhetoric of “self-sufficiency” because, in ignorance of its historical purpose as a mechanism of state-capitalist power, it seemed to me to be, in the abstract and therefore potentially in reality, a “noble goal” (p. A9). Thus, I pointed out that province’s equalization pays had risen since Graham had become premier, contrary to his stated goal of making the province independent of such payments. In doing so, I did not realize, as Tremblay does, that the rhetoric of “self-sufficiency” technically was not so much a real, deliberate goal as it was a part of the neoliberal “environment,” to which I therefore contributed simply by repeating its rhetoric uncritically (as distinct from concluding that its rhetoric’s presupposed neoliberal purpose has become “unstoppable” in practice). Hence I now maintain that critical analysis of neoliberal rhetoric is necessary, not only to access technical knowledge from history, but also to access forms of knowledge that can be used to rethink neoliberal social reality in principle.
3.3) Using neoliberal rhetoric as a source of knowledge

The third and final approach to neoliberal rhetoric on which I will draw – that of taking direction from neoliberal rhetoric itself (through critical analysis of it) – is discernable in Slavoj Žižek’s (2002) Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion. The book’s premise is that “the notion of totalitarianism” has long provided an ideological justification for liberal democratic society by reignng in radical thought (lest people who express it be accused of being totalitarian). Drawing largely on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian philosophy, and with the intention of liberating radical thought from liberal democratic ideology, including its neoliberal extensions, Žižek proceeds to analyze five ways in which “totalitarianism” is, in his view, uncritically accepted.

Žižek’s highly esoteric analysis means that a detailed summary and evaluation of his entire thesis are impractical here. I will limit my discussion to the first notion of totalitarianism that he addresses because it especially complements and supplement’s Tremblay’s approach. Two points in particular are discernable in Žižek’s analysis that suggest how neoliberal rhetoric can be a source of insight: (1) cultural forms, such neoliberalism’s notion of totalitarianism, contain both familiar and unfamiliar elements and, as such, can both promote and disrupt familiar thought patterns; and (2) cultural forms impart ideas because, as human products, they on some level resonate with natural tendencies, which in turn suggests that their uncritical acceptance is never inevitable, inasmuch as resonance entails criticality. These points will help me to analyze 21st century education within the context of its seemingly context-less form.
In his introduction, Žižek summarizes the first notion of totalitarianism that he identifies as follows:

‘Totalitarianism’ is *modernism going awry*; it fills the gap opened up by the very modernist dissolution of all traditional organic social links. Traditionalist conservatives and postmodernists share this notion – the difference between them is more a matter of emphasis: for some, ‘totalitarianism’ is the necessary outcome of the modernist Enlightenment, inscribed in its very notion; while for others, it is more a threat which consummates itself when the Enlightenment does not fully realize its potential. (Original emphases, p. 5)

Note the parallel between this notion and Tremblay’s depiction of neoliberal logic as a complex set of once-deliberate tactics that are now “unstoppable” as part of neoliberalism’s “environmental” form, including the use of rhetoric to try to glue together social links that were coming undone during the shift from feudalism to capitalism. With regard to the Graham government’s rhetoric, the notion is evident in the ignored contradiction therein between its rational gestures and the irrational dimension of its framework. (The rational part pertains to the extent to which Graham’s rhetoric explains the purpose of education as a means of making the province structurally independent of federal funding, and also the extent to which it deliberately limits this explanation and contradicts it for effect, whereas the irrational part is exemplified by his rhetoric’s ultimate disregard for non-rhetorical context and argument).

As a way into critiquing the notion of totalitarianism as “modernism going awry,” Žižek posits that the ancient concepts of tragedy and fate are no longer as believable as they once were. In his words, “the advent of modernism, in effect, undermines the
traditional notion of tragedy and the concomitant notion of the mythical Fate which governs humans destiny” (p. 8). I would add that age-old notions of human rationality, agency, freedom, and so on (while their degrees of believability and unbelievability depend on context) similarly risk appearing either totally unbelievable or too readily believable within the uncritical context neoliberal rhetoric, of which 21st century education’s framework is of course an example. Žižek’s position on uncritical belief in contemporary (liberal democratic) society is that in reconsidering familiar forms of uncritical belief therein they yield otherwise undetectable meanings that can in turn be used to rethink neoliberal social reality’s seeming inevitability, what he calls “modernism going awry.” The meaning in tragedy and fate that Žižek ultimately uncovers in this notion of totalitarianism – a meaning that is critical of the traditional concepts as he understands them – helps to explain both Tremblay’s notion of neoliberalism as “unstoppable” and my own experience as a BEd student during which I felt compelled to accept aspects of 21st century education.

To arrive at Žižek’s conclusion, in order to show how it is helpful in the way just mentioned, it is first necessary to trace his approach to it. To support his position, Žižek first challenges what he characterizes as a standard interpretation of Hamlet according to which the play effectively represses and displaces incestuous desire that the Oedipus myth, in explicitly incorporating incest in its plot, is supposed to prohibit less effectively:

So, according to this standard reading, Hamlet as a modernized version of Oedipus bears witness to the strengthening of the Oedipal prohibition of incest in the passage from Antiquity to modernity: in the case of Oedipus, we are still
dealing with incest; while in *Hamlet*, the incestuous wish is repressed and displaced. (p. 9)

To disrupt this reading, Žižek first contends that the basic structure of *Hamlet*, involving a son who seeks to avenge his murdered father, precedes the Oedipus myth’s structure, about a son who unknowingly is his father’s murderer. The former structure, Žižek claims, is “a universal myth found everywhere, from old Nordic cultures through Ancient Egypt up to Iran and Polynesia” (p. 10). From this claim it follows that the repression and displacement in *Hamlet* operate on a deeper, arguably more effective level in the Oedipus myth, which, Žižek suggests, has to do with “insights into fundamental libidinal deadlocks of the human race” (p. 10). “One should retain the insight,” Žižek concludes, “that Oedipus is a proper ‘myth,’ and that the Hamlet narrative is its ‘modernizing’ dislocation/corruption; the lesson is that the Oedipal ‘myth’ – and, perhaps, mythic ‘naivety’ itself – serves to obfuscate some prohibited knowledge, ultimately knowledge about the father’s obscenity” (original emphases, pp. 11-12).

Based on the above reading, *Hamlet* is not tragic in the familiar traditional sense of the term, insofar as the latter is evoked through a hero who like Oedipus appears fated to violate social prohibitions in unknowingly murdering his father and marrying his mother, but who in eventually recognizing this fate restores social order. Rather, he views *Hamlet* as a form of melodrama on account of the excess knowledge that the play imparts, involving Hamlet’s knowledge of his father’s murder and his father’s knowledge of his own murder (appearing in ghostly form to Hamlet at the start of the play, demanding to be avenged): “as Lacan emphasizes, it is not only Hamlet who knows, it is also Hamlet’s father who mysteriously knows that he is dead and even how he died . . .
and it is this excessive knowledge that accounts for the minimal melodramatic flair of Hamlet” (original emphases, p. 12). In sum, Žižek observes, Oedipus does not know that he has killed his father until after the fact, whereas Hamlet, on Žižek’s Lacanian interpretation, cannot act decisively because he knows that his father has already been killed.

With the above observation and interpretation in mind, Žižek goes on to reason that contemporary liberal democratic thought involves a different set of contradictions or tensions between knowledge and action. As he explains,

There is, however, a third formula to be added to this couple of ‘He doesn’t know it, although he does it’ and ‘He knows it, and therefore cannot do it’: ‘He knows very well what he is doing; none the less, he does it.’ (Original emphasis, p. 14)

Notably, the third formula points to the ideological terrain that the notion of totalitarianism as “modernism going awry” serves to perpetuate, according to Žižek. In this formula, he identifies two variations of “two thoroughly opposed readings – rather like Hegelian speculative judgment, in which the lowest and the highest coincide” (p. 14).

At one end, he sees either “the domain of the ‘pathological’ – of well-being, pleasure, profit” or “the moral norms I usually follow” (p. 14). At the other end, he sees either a particular “ethical injunction” or “the unconditional injunction I feel obliged to obey” (p. 14). He deems the latter stance as indicative of “the properly modern post- or meta-tragic situation,” which in his summation takes place “when a higher necessity compels me to betray the very ethical substance of my being” (p. 14). Such a compulsion to act in accordance with a higher necessity, it is worth adding, can be either life-affirming or destructive on Žižek’s view. But the main point that I take away from this line of thought
is that the conditions that give rise to uncritical thought are not inevitable inasmuch they can be changed by obedience to “the unconditional injunction.”

Although Žižek does not explicitly say so, it follows from the above that improper “post- or meta-tragic” situations can consist of one of three general dispositions toward one’s society: (1) narcissistically taking advantage of its structures in one way or another; (2) uncritically accepting its structures as inherently moral; and (3) pragmatically working within its structures (as if they were somehow inevitable) in order to advance a particular ethical project, notwithstanding personal or collective qualms that one may have with the overall situation. While the latter disposition reminds me of Tremblay’s argument for reform, it also reminds me of my efforts as a BEd student intern. That is, in the absence of a critical alternative or “higher necessity” beyond my constant sense of being misguided, I effectively took guidance from the market-oriented rhetoric of 21st century education, in spite of my qualms with it, in the hope that in passing my internship I could still advance my interests in sharing my love of literature with students and in gaining secure employment as a public school teacher in New Brunswick.

What, then, is Žižek’s positive methodological purpose in turning to the concepts of tragedy and fate in order to overcome the ideologically engrained ethic of liberal democratic society? That is, how does he beyond clever descriptions of life in the wake of the Enlightenment?

To begin with, he makes the case that the traditional notions of tragedy and fate

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14 Žižek’s four de facto stages – the pathological/pleasurable, the socially normal, the conditionally ethical, and the unconditional injunction – and are reminiscent of Plato’s line simile and the allegory of the cave, which I summarize in my sixth chapter (pp. 133-134).
do not really disappear in the “post- or meta-tragic situation.” Rather, his approach suggests, such concepts are accessible through critical analyses of contemporary cultural products wherein such concepts are presupposed. Based on his reading of Lacan and a set of novels by Marcel Pagnol, namely Jean de Florette and Manon des Sources (along with their cinematic versions), Žižek argues that the transformed presence of the Oedipus myth therein – and therefore of its concepts of tragedy and fate – is “proof that we are dealing here with a deep structural necessity” (p. 15).

Space does not permit a detailed review of Žižek’s reading. Nonetheless, his conclusions help to illustrate what he means by this structural necessity:

In classical tragedy, the guilt is on the side of the transgressive hero-individual who is then pardoned and reintegrated into the community; while here, the basic guilt is that of the community itself: it lies not in what they did, but in the fact that they did not do anything – in the discrepancy between their knowledge and action . . . (p. 22)

In short, “structural necessity” evidently means that there is a tendency in humans for conflict with themselves and the society in which they find themselves, what Žižek earlier describes as “fundamental libidinal deadlocks of the human race.” Hence Hamlet on Žižek’s view reveals that the Oedipus myth is not naïve in supporting the supposition that these tensions are to be unclear for the sake of social order. Hence the seemingly awry direction of modernity is not inevitable on his view, insofar as contemporary culture contains traces of this “mythical” wisdom that can be used to critique it. In the case of Pagnol’s stories as Žižek discusses them, knowledge of the source of human tensions is
obfuscated on another level, whereon the “mythical” meaning of tragedy and fate appears in an unfamiliar way.

Up to a point, Tremblay’s notion of culture-based reform in the myth-making style of Howe is consistent with the above line of thought. Moreover, one way of responding to neoliberalism’s force is to try to mitigate it by consciously channeling it through local culture, based on the particular ethical injunction of liberal democratic reform. However, Žižek does not conclude that myth-making (ancient or otherwise) is the ultimate source of wisdom, at least not when it comes to overcoming “modernism going awry.” “The lesson,” as he sees it, “is that it is not enough to say that today’s myths are faked, inauthentic retro artefacts: the notion of a faked imitation of the myth should be radicalized into the notion that myth as such is a fake” (original emphases, p. 26).

Žižek’s alternative to “modernism going awry” – his “unconditional injunction” – rests on a complicated yet elucidating discussion of postmodern culture from the vantage point of his equally complicated yet elucidating interpretation of Christianity:

Perhaps it is the Christian notion of agape that shows us the way out: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’ (John 3:16). How, exactly, are we to conceive of this basic tenet of the Christian faith? (p. 45)

Žižek’s basic answer is that genuine love is recognizing that other people are no less confused about themselves than one is of oneself. “It is only in this move,” he asserts, “that properly Christian love can emerge: as Lacan emphasized again and again, love is
always love for the Other in so far as he is lacking – we love the Other because of his limitations” (original emphasis, p. 57).

Presently, I will explain why Žižek’s above alternative is too abstract for my purpose of contextualizing 21st century education reform in New Brunswick. But first, to summarize the two main points that will take from Žižek’s analysis: (1) uncritical thought, such as the first notion of “totalitarianism” that Žižek critiques, can be disrupted through analysis; and (2) critical elements can be found even within uncritical thought because both resonate with such natural human tendencies as interest in knowledge and in its obfuscation. As such, his analysis complements Tremblay’s point that cultural forms such as the manifesto more or less lose their inculcating impact once people regard them as conventional. Žižek goes further, though, by showing how conventional thoughts can nonetheless be reconsidered in unconventional ways, which can wake people from uncritical thought processes. Again, on Žižek reading of Hamlet, the play is not as sophisticated about prohibited expression as it may appear to be, except in inadvertently revealing the technical wisdom of obfuscating prohibited knowledge. Similarly, Tremblay’s particular argument for culture-based reform can be viewed as technical way of obfuscating the reasons for neoliberalism’s appearance of inevitability in an effort to survive within it. In contrast, Žižek’s analysis also provides support for my general premise that critical analysis of neoliberalism is a step toward overcoming it, and my particular premise that 21st century education presupposes concepts that can be accessed by analyzing its (manifesto-esque) form, notwithstanding the form’s seemingly obvious lack of criticality as standard neoliberal policy.
In the abstract, the notion of love to which Žižek’s analysis eventually leads is consistent with my conviction that people’s particular experiences can lead to general insight into social problems. Contradictorily, however, Žižek does not consider how this concept of love, as a means of overcoming liberal democratic ideology and its thought-impeding notions of totalitarianism, can be arrived at by actually listening to people about their particular experiences and by taking direction from their attendant insights. Consider his following comment on the problem of contextualization under late capitalism, which mixes a sexist example with an otherwise good point about the context-killing effect of late capitalism:

No less than social life itself, today’s self-professed ‘radical’ academia is permeated by unwritten rules and prohibitions – although such rules are never explicitly stated, disobedience can have dire consequences. One of these unwritten rules concerns the unquestioned ubiquity of the need to ‘contextualize’ or ‘situate’ one’s position: the easiest way to score points automatically in a debate is to claim that the opponent’s position is not properly ‘situated’ in a historical context: ‘You talk about women – *which* women? There is no woman as such, so does not your generalized talk about women, in its apparent all-encompassing neutrality, privilege certain specific figures of femininity and preclude others?’

Why is such radical historicizing false, despite the obvious moment of truth it contains? Because today’s *(late-capitalist global market) social reality is itself dominated by what Marx referred to as the power of ‘real abstraction’*: the circulation of Capital is the force of radical ‘deterioralization’ (to use Deleuze’s
term) which, in its very functioning, actively ignores specific conditions and cannot be ‘rooted’ in them. It is no longer, as in the standard ideology, the universality that occludes the twist of its partiality, of its privileging a particular content; rather, it is the very attempt to locate particular roots that ideologically occludes the social reality of the reign of ‘real abstraction.’ (Original emphases, pp. 1-2).

The above (untrue and therefore sexist) suggestion that perspectives of actual women regarding specific contexts can only be momentarily true in the context of late capitalism reveals that Žižek’s thesis is not entirely free from the ideology that he seeks to challenge. Moreover, the label “totalitarianism” is not always, as Žižek suggests, a means of impeding critical thought. Here the term applies to his comment on context-specific perspectives, particularly of actual women, notwithstanding his otherwise good point that particular experience under neoliberalism is complicated, rendering contextualization based on it complicated too.

Summarized in my introduction, Fleiger’s PhD dissertation on official inclusion policy in New Brunswick is a good example of a particular perspective that, combined with textual analysis, contains lasting truths about the context-killing effect of exclusionary language under neoliberalism (but not, as she shows, limited to neoliberalism). For reasons discussed in my next chapter, I especially concur with her observation, which she bases on her analysis of the MacKay Report, that “New Brunswick’s proposed trajectory of inclusive education reform may be understood as one that is constrained and limited” (p. 168).
Not unlike Žižek’s methodology just reviewed, Fleiger’s methodology involves making familiar concepts unfamiliar for the purpose of overcoming otherwise “constrained and limited” understandings. Unlike Žižek, however, Fleiger helpfully relates her conclusions to a particular social context of which she has direct experiential knowledge. In her words, “In taking up methods that allowed me to de/familiarize and re/view the rationalities that legitimated my schooling practices, I was alerted to how deficit representations were bound up in these rationalities and how such representations may take shape in my inquiry” (p. 214). In at least one respect, though, Fleiger’s local reference point appears to lend some credence to Žižek’s (overstated) point that contextualization can occlude abstract social reality. In passing, she writes that some of the MacKay Report’s “recommendations suggest the reshaping of New Brunswick’s model of inclusive education around a democratic, participatory rationality” even as “other recommendations situate it in a sweeping range of managerial and accountability measures” (pp. 155-156). While such rhetoric does indeed suggest “participatory rationality,” it is also, I will argue, indicative of the allure of neoliberal rhetoric, beneath which lies a particular neoliberal concept of democracy, just as “self-sufficiency” is indicative of state-capitalist power, notwithstanding the term’s rhetorical association with many possible notions of independence.

**Summary**

Again, my purpose in focusing on 21st century education’s uncritical framework stems from my experience of being confused by it as I nonetheless relied on it to pass my internship. In particular, I am focusing on the model’s unstated concepts – its
“rationalities” in Fleiger’s parlance – in order to make their familiar appearance seem unfamiliar, in order to access and critically analyze their presupposed content. In Chapter 5, I will outline my approach to defamiliarization in the context of outlining my overall methodology and its corresponding theory, including how I plan to use the model’s presupposed neoliberal concepts (among other concepts linked but not reducible to liberalism) to critique 21st century education on its own terms for the ultimate purpose of suggesting alternative terms, ones that are critical of exclusionary language.

But before proceeding to the main focus on this dissertation, it is first necessary to describe and analyze the immediate context of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick, for two related reasons. First, its immediate context provides further evidence of the problem that is the model’s uncritical framework. Second, the context in question also reveals how the model’s rhetoric both contributes to neoliberal social reality and how its rhetoric can be used, upon analysis, to rethink the otherwise seeming inevitability of neoliberalism, particularly its impact on educational experience in New Brunswick’s market-oriented public education system.

My next chapter illustrates the above reasons by describing and analyzing the relationship between the Graham governments’ broader policy on education and its eventual implementation of NB3-21C. To this end, I will use the framework that I have developed in this chapter. In sum, the framework consists of comparing neoliberal rhetoric to corresponding social reality for the purpose of exposing contradictions and coherence using three concepts of neoliberal rhetoric. The first suggests that neoliberal rhetoric can be at once a way of distracting from and occluding social reality; the second suggests that neoliberal rhetoric is also a substantive means of preserving the neoliberal
direction of social reality; and the third suggests that neoliberal rhetoric, especially when it is immediately experienced, can nonetheless function as a point of entry into critical resistance to neoliberalism.
Chapter 4: Contextualizing the Problem

In this chapter, I return to the questions posed at the start of the last chapter. What was the “changing world” to which public education in New Brunswick was supposed to adapt in 2010? And did 21st century education reform actually promote adaptation to it in any demonstrable way?

To address these questions, I will first outline the Graham government’s stated policy goals and its proposed means of achieving them as expressed in policy rhetoric, particularly its rhetoric of “inclusion.” Second, I will describe the government’s subsequent actions on its public education file, which centred on its “inclusive” cuts to Early French Immersion (EFI) and its concomitant financing of “inclusive” technology in schools. Third, I will draw conclusions from this comparative approach using the following three notions of neoliberal rhetoric on which my framework is based: (1) neoliberal rhetoric as a form of distraction or occlusion vis-à-vis neoliberal social reality; (2) neoliberal rhetoric, both its distracting/occluding surface and its unstated substance, as a coherent part of neoliberal social reality in general, especially as an extension of its broader historical context; and (3) neoliberal rhetoric as a point of entry into understanding and resisting neoliberalism – against its context-killing or “de-territorializing” effect – particularly in the context of New Brunswick public education’s ongoing market-oriented reforms.

The conclusion that my approach yields is that the “changing world” to which 21st century education reform in 2010 referred was not merely an “empty distraction and a strategic diversion,” to borrow Giroux’s phraseology, though it was both of these things too. More precisely, the “changing world” referred to rhetoric and its malleable,
multifarious role in the ongoing restructuring of New Brunswick public education along established neoliberal lines – involving the economic, political/institutional, and ideological promotion of private profit over all other social interests in principle if not always in practice – a process to which 21st century education reform contributed in at least three general ways: first, by promoting the consumption of digital products, including of P21’s corporate members; second, by lending legal support to market-oriented “inclusive” policy in the province; and, third, by generally promoting uncritical thinking. Nonetheless, I also conclude that the “changing world” included limited yet expandable forms of resistance to neoliberal governance in New Brunswick. In sum, I argue, the immediate context to 21st century education reform in the province was not inevitable in principle, contrary to its appearance of inevitability through the lens of its rhetoric, if accepted uncritically.

4.1) An “inclusive” approach to realizing “self-sufficiency” in New Brunswick

The main purpose of this section is to outline the Graham government’s rhetorically expressed goals for education reform and its rhetorically expressed means of achieving them for the purpose of contrasting this rhetoric to subsequent actions of its Department of Education (and some public responses to them) as described in the next section. The analytic purpose of this section and the next will not become fully explicit until the third section of this chapter, when I use the first two approaches to neoliberal rhetoric to contextualize the “changing world” of which the descriptions in the first two sections are otherwise, by definition, uncontextualized examples; in the summary section that follows the third section, I will complete my contextualization of the problem that is
21st century education’s framework using the third approach to neoliberal rhetoric, considering the model’s framework as a general point of entry into further critical analysis, in particular as a point of entry to the approach that this dissertation will take in subsequent chapters. In the meantime, this section and the next may give the reader a sense of the often (for me) discombobulating “changing world” as it was without a worked out critical alternative to it.

In June of 2007, the Graham government released its first major policy document on public education, *When Kids Come First: A Challenge to All New Brunswicker’s to Build Canada’s Best Education System*. The premier’s message therein reveals that the official purpose of school reform was to advance the goal of “self-sufficiency”:

> The Government of New Brunswick has set an ambitious target of being self-sufficient by the year 2026. While much will need to be accomplished to reach this target, one thing is clear: the road to self-sufficiency begins with education. We will need to educate our kids to be self-sufficient citizens if we are to be a self-sufficient province. (p.7)

The document does not make an argument for “self-sufficiency” or even define the term. Instead, it associates the term with the notion of making the public education system the “best” in Canada. Clearly, the document suggests that advancing the goals of “self-sufficiency” and making the “best” system in Canada must involve focusing on young students. It is also clear that the practical meaning of this focus has to do with raising market-oriented standardized test scores for several stated purposes, such as preparing students for work in the global economy. As Minister of Education Kelly Lamrock puts it in his message, “If our kids don’t read, write or do math well enough to learn new skills
in a world of constant change, the jobs will move somewhere else – somewhere that did a
better job of teaching them” (p. 5). However, given that the document not explain the
meaning behind its rhetorical goals, the actual meaning of its proposed means of pursuing
them is largely unclear.

Nonetheless, the document purports to support “three fundamental goals,” which it lists as follows:

1. Every child will arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.
2. Every child will leave Grade 5 having mastered the tools to learn – reading,
   writing and numeracy.
3. Every child will graduate from high school having had the opportunity to
discover his or her personal strengths and to find something he or she loves doing.

(p. 9)
The bulk of the document also purports to elaborate on these stated goals in terms of
“eight commitments to New Brunswick’s children” (p. 9). But, again, it does not actually
elaborate on the goals in question in any “fundamental” sense beyond the rhetoric of
“self-sufficiency” and the attendant “vision of having the best education system in
Canada” (p. 29).

That said, it is worth reviewing the commitments because, as I will discuss, they help to make sense of the government’s subsequent approach to school reform. The eight commitments are as follows:

1. To Ensure School Readiness . . .
2. To Work Urgently on Literacy, Numeracy and Science . . .
3. To Help Children Develop a Passion for Learning . . .
4. To Give Educators the Tools to Innovate and Lead . . .

5. To Live Up to the Promise of Inclusion . . .

6. To Engage Communities and Partners in Improving Schools . . .

7. To Promote Cultural Identity and Linguistic Growth . . .

8. To Create Healthy and Safe Schools . . . (Original emphases, p. 9)

Note that the first three commitments are essentially restatements of the “three fundamental goals.” However, the first three are not the only commitments to contain details that overlap with details of other commitments. Notably, the fifth commitment mentions that the MacKay Report’s “scope – core competencies of personnel, student assessment, classrooms, communities and discipline and so on – is reflected throughout this plan” (p. 21). The fifth commitment is notable, furthermore, because “the Promise of Inclusion” addresses Graham’s campaign promise to implement the MacKay Report’s recommendations for school reform. In other words, *When Kids Come First* can be summarized, at the level of rhetoric, as the government’s proposed “inclusive” means of advancing “self-sufficiency” through public education reform and with it “the best education system in Canada.”

Presently, I will use the theme of “inclusion” that runs through all eight commitments to summarize their wordy and often redundant content. But before I do, it is necessary to summarize the MacKay Report’s notion of “inclusion” because it is this concept that *When Kids Come First* explicitly uses. As I will show, the eight commitments basically amount to wordy restatements of MacKay’s rhetoric of “connecting care and challenge” and “tapping our human potential.” However, they also refer to specific decisions that the government would subsequently make, along with
specific decisions that it presumably intended to make but did not. As such, they together provide a more detailed point of reference for comparing official rhetoric and corresponding social reality.

The MacKay Report’s notion of “connecting care and challenge” refers to the oft-expressed policy goal of improving the academic quality of public education in New Brunswick in ways that are supposed to respect every student therein. In the words of the report’s approving account of Finland’s belief about education, “high standards and results can be married with care for the well being of students” (p. 15). As for the notion of “tapping human potential,” it refers to the also oft-expressed policy goal of improving the overall quality of life for people in New Brunswick through market-oriented means. For example, in drawing on Finland for inspiration, the report states, “What is attractive about Finland’s system is that Finnish students performed the best in the world on the PISA standardized tests” (p. 200). As a branch of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), of which Canada is a member, PISA purports to assist participating governments in cultivating or developing their economies. According to OECD’s website, “OECD uses its wealth of information on a broad range of topics to help governments foster prosperity and fight poverty through economic growth and financial stability.” The PISA section of the same website states that the test’s specific purpose is “to assess to what extent [fifteen-year-old] students at the end of compulsory education can apply their knowledge to real-life situations and be equipped for full participation in society.” In sum, “inclusion” here means the provision of schooling services that, in rhetorical terms at least, are supposed to be of improved academic,
The first commitment – “To Ensure School Readiness” – implies that the school system must be more caring because, it also implies, some parents are unable for geographic or socio-economic reasons to prepare their children for school. The stated purpose of this commitment is to give each entry-level student “an equal chance to succeed in school no matter where he or she lives, or how much money his or her parents make” (p. 10). One of its pledged actions is to make (unspecified) improvements to “information-sharing among government departments, to better serve kindergarten children with particular challenges” (p. 10).

The second commitment – “To Work Urgently on Literacy, Numeracy and Science” – is an allusion to PISA. Explicitly, the commitment involves “resources for students early on who experience difficulties that may stand in their way of acquiring these basic skills” (p. 11). Its pledged actions include the provision of “a minimum of $2 million per year in new resources through the Innovative Learning Fund to support the best practices for helping struggling readers and challenging gifted students” (p. 11).

The third commitment – “To Help Children Develop a Passion for Learning” – connects the MacKay Report’s notions of care and challenge to a bundle of sub-topics, ranging from “Diversity in learning” to “Post-secondary participation and success” (original emphases, pp. 12-18). Whereas the first commitment suggests that some

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15 According to the PISA section of the OCED’s website, the content of the assessment comprises “the key subjects: reading, mathematics and science, with a focus on one subject in each year of assessment.”
parents are an obstacle to students’ learning, this commitment is associated with the
notion that all parents know when their children are interested in learning. In prefacing
the first sub-topic, it states, “Parents know when their kids are motivated: their kids want
to go to school, they are animated and talk about their learning, and they want to share
their experiences” (Original emphasis, p. 12). The commitment’s pledged actions include
the promotion of “best practices in student-driven learning and experiential learning
techniques” (p. 12).

The fourth commitment – “To Give Educators the Tools to Innovate and Lead” –
comprises two sub-topics, “Innovative teachers and school teams” and “Supporting
innovation through technology” (original emphases, pp. 19-20). It describes the former
as teachers who “know how to develop stimulating and engaging projects for students
and garner the support of parents and the community, . . . how to track student success
and use it to their advantage, and . . . how to benefit from the knowledge and expertise of
their peers in the teaching field” (p. 19). The second sub-topic emphasizes the goal of
making the “best” system in the country: “Being the best in Canada and calling on our
teachers to be innovative and creative leaders in our schools means leading the country in
providing them with modern learning and information technologies” (p. 20). Not
surprisingly, many of commitment’s actions explicitly involve the promotion of
technology. For example, it pledges to form the aforementioned Innovative Learning
Fund, allocating to it “a minimum of $5 million per year . . . to provide laptop computers
to schools with the best-developed plans for using technology to: create student-driven
learning, support cross-curricular studies, or enhance inclusion in the classroom” (p. 20).
The commitment also foreshadows 21st century education reform, “a multi-year plan to
create technology-enriched classrooms that house such technologies as interactive whiteboards, FM systems and other appropriate technologies” (p. 20).

As mentioned, the fifth commitment – “To Live Up to the Promise of Inclusion” – reveals the document’s basis in the MacKay Report. “The MacKay report on inclusion,” it states, “provides a framework for doing better, and the recommendations will be used to guide the development of a more inclusive education system in New Brunswick” (p. 21). Although no specific recommendation is quoted, one pledged action is as follows: “Continue to respond to the MacKay report recommendations, such as those for behaviour interventionists, guidance counsellors and resource teachers” (p. 22).

The sixth commitment – “To Engage Communities and Partners in Improving Schools” – echoes the MacKay Report’s call for collective support for its recommendations. The distinction here between communities and partners is a technical one that assumes a common interest among various people in New Brunswick, including members of the private sector. One of this commitment’s pledged actions is to consider “innovative arrangements with community organizations, non-governmental organizations, municipalities and the private sector for activities which expand learning and teaching opportunities in community schools” (p. 23).

The seventh commitment – “To Promote Cultural Identity and Linguistic Growth” – comprises three sub-topics: “Learning a second language,” “A strong francophone identity,” and “Improving education for First Nations students” (original emphases, pp. 24-26). This commitment celebrates but does not contextualize the fact that English and French are the official languages of New Brunswick and its public education system. English and French, for example, are implicitly referred to as the
languages of “two great cultures” (p. 24). No explicit reference is made to Acadians, only “the Acadian Peninsula” (p. 25). The document appears to exclude First Nations languages from its notion of cultural greatness, which is mentioned in the context of discussing official English-French bilingualism. Neither the commitment nor the broader document refers to the Wolastqiyik, the Mi’kmaq, and the Peskotomuhkati by name. The only other people to whom the seventh commitment refers are “new immigrants” (p. 9).

It is worth quoting the seventh commitment’s account of the first sub-topic at length because, as I will discuss, subsequent events would render it especially significant in retrospect (with regard to the relationship between the rhetoric of the Graham administration and the rest of its approach to school reform):

New Brunswick has set an ambitious target of ensuring that 70% of all high school graduates will function effectively in speaking their second official language. To meet this target, however, we will have to accept that we are still falling short of our goal, and examine how second language instruction is being provided. We will need to talk openly and honestly with teachers, parents, students, administrators and citizens about how they expect our schools to contribute to a bilingual society.

In the anglophone system, we will also need to improve the balance of inclusive education and French Immersion better than we have done to date. And we must ensure that our efforts to improve school readiness and early learning in New Brunswick are balanced with efforts to promote second language acquisition. (p. 24)
Of particular significance in retrospect is the specific pledge to “[a]ppoint a commissioner to review French Second Language (FSL) programming in New Brunswick with a mandate to consult widely and report by January 2008 with policy options” (p. 25).

And, finally, the eighth commitment – “To Create Healthy and Safe School” – combines two issues: the overall health and safety of students as human beings and the physical condition and operation of schools. Its pledged actions range from looking at “new and innovative tools to prevent and reduce bullying, violence, dating violence, homophobia and other forms of discrimination in schools by working with communities and school leaders” to forming “a plan to reduce by 25%, in constant dollars, the energy and maintenance costs of school buildings in New Brunswick” (pp. 27-28).

To summarize, the immediate rhetorical meaning of the Graham government’s 21st century education reform, which is traceable to When Kids Come First and the MacKay Report, is that it is an “inclusive” means of advancing the long-term goal of provincial “self-sufficiency.” Here “inclusion,” not unlike P21’s rainbow of skills, is both constrained and expansive in its meaning. It is constrained particularly in the abstract wherein it contains no conceptual basis, merely a series of overlapping (and therefore essentially synonymous) market-oriented declarations involving the uncritical use of digital technology in one sense or another. Yet at the same time, it refers to a plethora of “commitments” that in turn reference, if only nominally, several technical aspects of New Brunswick’s public education system and some of the people who come into contact with it. Problematically, however, its commitments frame people and peoples as being in total agreement with the Department of Education’s policy agenda.
4.2) A description of the “changing world” after *When Kids Come First*

In this section, I provide a description of the Department’s publicly recorded path from the publication of *When Kids Come First* in 2007 to the 2010 provincial election campaign, during which the Graham government unannounced and began to implement 21st century education reform. Although I note some responses to the government along this path, my description is meant neither as a comprehensive account of the period nor as a critique of it per se. Rather, it is meant to provide a glimpse of the period, one that draws attention to the overlap between rhetoric and the Graham government’s programme-cutting, technology-promoting approach to school reform. As such, it is also meant to provide a point of reference for the next sections of this chapter, in which I analyze the overlap under consideration in order to contextualize my critical analysis of 21st century education’s stated premise in subsequent chapters.

In July of 2007, the Graham government acted on the seventh commitment of *When Kids Come First* in particular by commissioning Dr. James Croll and Patricia Lee with the tasks of reviewing the province’s FSL programming and consulting educators, parents, and other “stakeholders.” The commissioners used following quotation from the terms of reference as the stated purpose of their report:

“The Commissioner(s) will be mandated to conduct a comprehensive assessment of FSL programming and services and to engage educators and interested stakeholders in an assessment of the current models of FSL instruction within the Anglophone sector. The Commissioner(s) will provide recommendations to the Minister on identifying the best way forward to improving student achievement.
levels while at the same time addressing and/or eliminating any associated negative impacts on the overall system, as identified above (e.g. streaming/art/music/physical education).” (Original emphases, Croll & Lee, 2008, as cited, p. 6)

As expressed, then, their purpose was virtually indistinguishable from the government’s rhetoric of inclusion. As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, the Department also assumed through *When Kids Come First* that a review of FSL would be necessary “to improve the balance of inclusive education and French Immersion better than we have done to date.”

Later in the year, PISA publicly released the results of its 2006 test, which suggested that the rhetorical basis for school reform was founded on fact. As cited by Bussière et al. (2007) in their analysis for Statistics Canada, New Brunswick students collectively scored lower in all three PISA subjects than the Canadian averages, scoring last in “science,” PISA’s focus that year. “Results from PISA 2006,” they also noted, “found that for science in the combined scale, students enrolled in the French language school systems in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba performed significantly lower than students in the English-language school systems” (p. 26).

When compared to participating jurisdictions around the world, Bussière et al. also showed that New Brunswick students collectively scored above average in both “science” and “mathematics,” and average in “reading.” Still, the authors gave the impression that the province’s standing relative to the rest of Canada was a cause for concern, especially economic:
In an increasingly technology-based society, knowledge and skills in science are critical to economic progress. Canada’s performance in PISA 2006 suggests that, on the whole, Canadian 15-year-olds are equipped with the science knowledge and skills to participate in a society in which science and technology play a significant role. However, while all provinces scored above the OECD average, there were differences in performance among provinces. While the comparative approach taken in this chapter does not lend itself to developing explanations for these differences, further analysis could explore how resources, schools and classroom conditions, as well as individual and family circumstances, affect variation in achievement. (p. 28)

Based on this line of thought, the Graham government was making “progress,” having already commissioned Croll and Lee to review the school system’s FSL programing.

Meanwhile, the government was keeping busy with its overall “self-sufficiency” agenda. In November, it reiterated its plans for public education through *Our Action Plan to be Self-Sufficient in New Brunswick*. According to an official online press release (2007), the agenda was supposed to promote “transformative change through strategic initiatives in four key areas: our economy, our workforce, our relationships, and our government.” Although the release did not refer explicitly to *When Kids Come First*, it emphasized many of the latter’s points, in some instances verbatim. Among the economic initiatives listed was technology promotion. Its workplace initiatives included the following:

- Make the strategic investments required to ensure that every child arrives at kindergarten ready to learn.
• Ensure that each and every child leaves Grade 5 having mastered the tools to learn – reading, writing and numeracy, and that they graduate from high school having had the opportunity to discover their personal strengths and to find something they love doing.

The first relationship initiative was another stated commitment to “public engagement [that] is meaningful, effective, collaborative and sustainable so that citizens can be active participants in governance.” And under the category of governmental initiatives, the government’s market-orientation appeared perfunctorily. It stated, for example, that the government would place “citizens and businesses first in the delivery of public services.”

In January of 2008, in the face of intense public opposition, the government backed away from a proposal to turn the University of New Brunswick’s Saint John campus into a polytechnic institution. As it explained in “State of the Province Address: 2008 to be turning point for province” (an online press release): “UNBSJ will retain programs like liberal arts while expanding with new program offerings to meet emerging economic opportunities.” Presently, it would be under public pressure to explain the purpose of removing another popular educational choice in the province.

In February, Croll and Lee presented Lamrock with their report, A Comprehensive Review of French Second Language Programs and Services within the Anglophone Sector of the New Brunswick Department of Education. According to the commissioners, FSL had to be reformed in order to make it more inclusive, as the Mackay Report defined the term:

In order that the inclusionary recommendations of the Wayne McKay [sic] report and policies of the Department of Education be carried out within the context of
all of the FSL programs, it is necessary that FSL programs be adopted which have been proven to successfully meet the various learning needs and the greatest numbers of New Brunswick children. (p. 99)

Notably, the commissioners implied that Early French Immersion (EFI) was especially inconsistent with MacKay’s recommendations. In their view, the programme not only benefited too few students but could only benefit a few, and at too high a cost, specifically at a “total annual cost” of $5,394,824 (p. 74). “Despite the various commendable features which recommend Early Immersion French Second Language Program to many students,” they concluded, “the persistence rates, attainment levels, sustainability data and costs all clearly state that it is not a program suitable for the majority of New Brunswick students” (p. 98). Hence they effectively recommended the elimination of EFI in recommending that the entry point for French Immersion be moved from grade one to grade six (with an “Intensive French” programme available in grade 5) and “all other existing French Second Language programs in New Brunswick schools be ‘grandfathered’ out, commencing with the introduction of the two French Second Language programs recommended by this report” (original emphasis, p. 13).

In March, the government decided to end the system’s French Immersion programme for elementary students, shifting the entry point from grade one to grade six, the first year of middle school (“French Immersion Fast Facts,” 2008, p. A15). Before the end of the month, over 100 people in Saint John protested the decision (“Saint John rally,” 2008). Outside the provincial legislature, approximately 400 parents reportedly “booed and jeered” Lamrock (“Early French Immersion,” 2008).
Contrary to the government’s narrative that education reform was instrumental to the province’s economic “self-sufficiency,” Lamrock claimed that the programme cut was not economically motivated (“Early French Immersion,” 2008). He instead claimed that EFI had caused the core programme’s higher number of “special needs” students, a situation that he in turn presented as the cause of the province’s low test scores. In the words of the latter CBC report, “The minister blamed their lack of progress, in part, on the unusually high number of special needs children in the regular stream.”

According to Lamrock’s message in *When Kids Come First*, the document was “not a plan as much as a challenge” (p. 6). Nearly a year later, in April 2008, he announced the first plan, “NB3.” Its apparent focus was on raising PISA test scores, based on an online press release, “NB3 to improve results in literacy, mathematics and science (anglophone sector).” However, the release also referred to several of the Department’s other commitments from *When Kids Come First*. For example, it alluded to the provision of new technology for teachers, stating that the government would focus “the Innovative Learning Fund on investing in teachers who offer new and innovative approaches to improving literacy, mathematics and science scores.” To give one more example, it alluded to its commitment to official inclusion policy, quoting Lamrock’s following response to low test scores: “We are determined to improve this situation by working relentlessly with District Education Councils, educators, parents and community groups to ensure that all students benefit from excellent instruction, the key variable affecting student achievement” (my emphasis).

Clearly, a main theme of NB3 was curricular reform, centring on the three PISA topics to which the title of plan was an allusion. To achieve this goal, according to the
abovementioned press release, the Department would direct school district funding towards “school leadership and teacher-training programs in NB3 objectives.” It would also make cuts to existing programmes. “The current curricula overall have far too many outcomes,” Lamrock is quoted as saying in the release: “The focus for teachers should be ensuring that kids have a deep understanding of the essential concepts, rather than on covering as many outcomes as possible.” Or as a Telegraph Journal article paraphrased the minister, “The province’s education system has been criticized for having a plethora of specific objectives, which can restrict teachers in their methods. Reducing the number of objectives would . . . provide leeway for different ways of teaching” (O’Toole, 2008, p. A3).

By spring, several local academics voiced their criticism of the government’s “self-sufficiency” agenda. As Diana Hamilton and Matthew Litvak (2008) observed in a commentary for the Telegraph Journal in April, “Since the Minister says this [cut to French Immersion] is not about money, why not invest funds to improve core French (e.g., offer intensive French when appropriate), keep early immersion, and invest resources to make it more inclusive” (p. A5). In May, Dicks (2008) also defended the programme by appealing to the rhetoric of inclusion. “We would be much further ahead,” he wrote, “if we spent our energies addressing the systemic problems in our educational system in order to improve overall literacy development for all students, including measures to make EFI the inclusive French program it should be” (p. 9).

Also in May, it is worth noting, St. Thomas University held a conference, entitled Exploring the Dimensions of Self-Sufficiency for New Brunswick. One of the presenters was Tony Tremblay, whose paper was later published in the proceedings under the title
In June, two parents took the Graham government to court over the changes to EFI. According to Justice H. H. McLellan’s summary of the case (Small & Ryan v. New Brunswick, 2008), the applicants argued that the Minister of Education’s decision violated their right, under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to have their children educated in French. They also argued that the decision violated their rights “to natural justice and procedural fairness,” as quoted by the judge, claiming that Lamrock made the decision before giving them a promised chance to voice their perspective on the matter. McLellan ruled that “the decision of the Minister was unfair and unreasonable,” determining that Lamrock did make but did not fulfill a public promise that the issue would be debated before any decision was made. However, the judge also ruled that Lamrock’s decision did not violate the parents’ Charter rights. Thus, though he undid Lamrock’s original decision, he did not rule in principle against the provincial government’s power to cut the programme.

In response to the court’s decision, Lamrock (2008) defended his decision in the Telegraph Journal:

After reviewing a number of previous reports studying our FSL system, and reading the report of a commission our government appointed, we came to two important conclusions: to improve literacy rates, we must reduce the effects of splitting our kids into two groups through immersion and non-immersion learning streams; and to reach our goal of 70 per cent of our anglophone graduates being proficient in French we must provide effective FSL programs to all kids. (p. A11)
To recap, “improving literacy rates” at a minimum meant raising scores on tests that PISA had designed allegedly to measure students’ level of preparedness for life in a technology-based economy, for a life of “self-sufficiency” to use the government’s rhetoric. At the same time, its rhetoric depicted technology as inherently inclusive, whereas it suggested that French Immersion was a primary cause of exclusion in the system.

In August, after satisfying the court’s call for more public consultations, Lamrock still decided to cut Early Immersion, but not all of it. Instead of moving the entry point from grade one to grade six, he allowed students to enter the programme in either grade three or grade six (“Consultation results,” 2008). Marcelle Mersereau (2008), a prominent provincial Liberal, characterized the results as follows in a commentary for the Telegraph Journal:

The decision to revise the original French immersion program proposal leaves no doubt that the Graham government was listening to New Brunswickers and as a young, twenty-something New Brunswicker stated recently during a television interview on the issue – democracy is alive and well in New Brunswick. (p. A12)

It is worth adding that the government had similarly invoked democracy twice in When Kids Come First. Referring to school children, it stated, “They need to be able to determine the principles and actions of just, pluralistic and democratic societies” (p. 14). In discussing civic education, it referred to “knowledge of political institutions which will allow them to participate fully in democratic society” (p. 15).

In the wake of the 2008 global market crash, in a stated effort to promote economic growth, the premier cut taxes, projecting to remove hundreds of millions of
dollars in revenue according to *The Plan for Lower Taxes in New Brunswick* (2009). In the fall of 2009, to offset the growing debt, he set out to sell much of NB-Power to Hydro-Quebec, though the proposal ultimately fell through, in part because of widespread public opposition. At a summit on 21st century education reform in March 2010, Graham reportedly “called it ‘a bit refreshing to talk about education instead of energy,’ a reference to the failed negotiations with Hydro-Québec” (Gowan, 2010, p. A1).

On 5 and 6 May 2010, New Brunswick’s Department of Education convened high-ranking members of its francophone sector to promote the government’s latest education policy. A news release on the government’s website describes the policy as “offering young people the tools to develop sustainable success in the 21st century.”

Graham, one of three notable speakers at the convention, linked the meaning of success to economics and cultural identity. As quoted in the news release, he stated, “More than ever before, our New Brunswick society needs to be competitive, and that begins with every young person acquiring solid literacy, math, and science skills, and it includes the development of identity building.” Also as quoted in the release, new Minister of Education, Roland Haché, referred to the audience as “highly committed, competent leaders able to take up educational challenges.” The third speaker was Charles Fadel, co-author of *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times*. Dubbed an “education expert” in the release, Fadel expanded on the government’s concept of success and the challenges surrounding its realization within the global economy. It quotes his following statement: “Our young people are living in a world in which transformation is accelerating, and productivity and competitiveness are two crucial issues for all of the
world’s societies.” To quote the release’s paraphrasing, Fadel claimed that “young people need to develop those skills in entrepreneurship, innovation and technology that will enable them to choose and carve out a place for themselves in society.”

Announced during an election year, the reform also connoted the immediate prospect of increased funding to the school system, or at least the absence of cuts. Haché announced the government’s intention to build “ultra-modern” schools and refurbish existing schools according to “21st century” standards, with the caveat that it could not afford to carry out its full intention immediately (McKnight, 2010, p. B5). Graham nonetheless made a number of concrete pledges, including: the construction of a couple more elementary schools (MacLean, 2010); the installation of digital whiteboards and classroom computers in nine existing elementary schools (Pollack, 2010); and the distribution of laptops to the province’s 61,000 students in grades six through twelve (Bundale, 2010; Shingler, 2010).

New Brunswick’s Progressive Conservative (PC) party put forth an education policy that was consistent with NB3-21C’s focus on digital technology. “In pursuit of our Learning Agenda,” their 2010 election platform states, “we will encourage our teachers and other educators to develop leading edge learning strategies and will support appropriate innovations including the use of information technology” (p. 15). Other PC platform promises included retaining the existing number of teachers employed in the school system and establishing a fund for classroom teachers to help pay for supplies. Like the Liberals, the PC party did not directly talk of spending cuts to public education prior to the September election, though it did criticize the Liberals’ laptop-distribution proposal on financial grounds (“Who’s got the answers?” 2010).
It was therefore a disappointment, if not a shock, to some who were involved with NB3-21C when David Alward’s newly elected PC government not only suspended the initiative but also enacted a series of cuts to school district budgets in order to reduce the provincial deficit (Bundale, 2010; “School districts scramble,” 2010). As one district chairperson asserted, the cuts would entail “less innovation” in public education (“Districts struggle, 2011). “So to continue to develop a 21st century learning environment,” she explained, “which is what we have been doing, that will become more difficult.”

According to Action Canada’s (2013) report on the status of 21st century education across the country, “the transition in government following the 2010 provincial election has introduced an element of inertia into the preceding momentum in education policy” (p. 8). The pro-P21 organization viewed the fate of NB3-21C as uncertain because of the Alward government’s “new series of policies focusing on organizational changes of the New Brunswick education system . . . including an action plan for early childhood education – Putting Children First – the goal of which is to better prepare young children for the future” (p. 8).

In sum, the Department of Education under Graham’s premiership nominally focused on two of its eight commitments from When Kids Come First: its second commitment – “To Work Urgently on Literacy, Numeracy and Science” – would become known as “NB3” and its fourth commitment – “To Give Educators the Tools to Innovate and Lead” – would become known as 21st century education, or “21C.” In doing so, however, it clearly could check off promises that it had made under all eight commitments on account of their fundamental synonymousness at the level of stated
content, whereon they all could be reduced to one rhetorical term, namely “inclusion,” which in turn could be expanded to mean a variety of technically different things, from raising standardized tests scores (while variously acknowledging and denying their “economic” purpose) to promoting official bilingualism (while cutting EFI). Thus, in spite of widespread criticism to its actions, it could claim with rhetorical consistency that it had on “balance” changed public education in the province for the better.

4.3) An analysis of the “changing world” after When Kids Come First

In this section, I analyze the relationship between the Graham government’s rhetoric of reform as outlined in When Kid Come First and the subsequent rhetoric-infused actions of its Department of Education along with public responses to it. (To this end, I will draw on my review in section 4.1 and my description in section 4.2). As mentioned, I will base this analysis on first two of the three approaches to neoliberal rhetoric that I outlined in my previous chapter. First, I consider ways in which the “changing world” of 21st century education reform had to do with rhetoric that distracted from and occluded corresponding social realities. Second, I consider ways in which rhetoric was a substantive part of “changing world” in the form of state-capitalist solutions to the three state-capitalist problems that Dale summarizes as supporting, guaranteeing contextually, and legitimating capital accumulation. In the summary section of this chapter, I will consider ways in which the “changing world” provides a point of entry into further critical analysis, particularly the form of critical analysis that I will carry out in subsequent chapters.
The “changing world” as a distraction/occlusion

Based on the first function of neoliberal rhetoric discussed in my previous chapter, the “changing world” to which 21st century education reform claimed to promote adaptation was an “an empty abstraction and a strategic diversion,” to quote Giroux’s phrase again. Related to the other aspects of such rhetoric (discussed below in terms of the substantive content of neoliberal rhetoric) is the risk that this function poses of inculcating people. Indeed, it inculcated me, for instance, making me feel compelled to include digital technology in most of my lesson plans even though I lacked a worked out pedagogical purpose for doing so. It also distracted me, in the sense that the energy that I spent on trying to figure it out would have been better spent on developing a critical pedagogy. For these reasons, it is important to consider overt ways in which the Graham government’s rhetoric of reform was both vacuous yet deliberately diversionary. It is also worth considering this function as a segue to less obvious rhetorical forms of inculcation.

Just as Giroux saw some promise in the rhetoric of NCLB until comparing it with the Bush administration’s subsequent actions, the rhetoric of “self-sufficiency” may seem prima facie appealing. Who would not want to be “self-sufficient,” for instance, if the implicit alternative is to lack independence? Upon analysis of When Kids Come First and related policy texts, however, the term is so contradictory on an abstract level that it promises nothing objectively credible except some form of imposed, market-oriented, technology-related reform (even if one forgets the latter’s connection to NCLB’s broken promise of prioritizing “kids”). For example, When Kids Come First rhetorically puts kids first yet explicitly describes their education as a means of advancing the primary and
explicitly futuristic goal of “self-sufficiency,” thereby removing students’ immediate interests from first place even in the realm of rhetoric.

What is more, “first” can plausibly be interpreted as an extra-textual reference to the government’s desired ranking for students on market-oriented tests such as PISA. As Fleiger points out in her critique of *When Kids Come First*, the document especially frames the very students whom it purports to include as needy, not “self-sufficient” in any meaningful sense: “Here policy makers, interested in promoting learning conditions conducive to higher rankings on international assessments, drive the explication and reiteration of need” (p. 175). This aspect of policy, of course, precedes the Graham administration. “Through its silence on the relation between poverty and inclusive education,” Fleiger observes, for example, “the MacKay Report sustains the privilege of class and the normative belief that certain students are inherently ‘able’ and others inherently ‘needy’” (p. 157).

Clearly, the Graham government’s overall actions under the rubric of “self-sufficiency” were contradictory. As observed by Boudreau, Toner, and Temblay (2009),

Many of the authors in this book take issue with one of the more striking claims made in the *Action Plan*: that a self-sufficient New Brunswick “will be productive, innovative, strong, and self-reliant.” This claim implies that New Brunswick does not, and never did, exhibit any of these characteristics, but as many authors clearly demonstrate, New Brunswick certainly was and is productive and innovative, if not self-sufficient, often in the face of structural obstacles that it has had to overcome to remain competitive. (p. 1)
Similarly, *When Kids Come First* and related policy documents imply that teachers and students – and, indeed, all people who are not policymakers but whom public education reform affects – are to blame for the province’s supposed lack of “self-sufficiency.” Although *NB3-21C* does not explicitly mention “self-sufficiency,” it does repeat the condescending notion that people across the province are culturally deficient. “Our challenge,” it asserts, “is to change our very culture: to take steps to ensure that New Brunswickers value learning, have heightened expectations for success and provide the opportunities that our students need to realize their potential” (p. 9).

In addition to being contradictory, the actions taken by the Department of Education were largely redundant. Its eight commitments listed in *When Kids Come First* were basically restatements of the rhetorical goals of “inclusion,” namely ‘improving’ schooling on nominally academic, moral/ethical, and economic grounds. Recall that its primary source for 21st century education reform – Trilling’s and Fadel’s book – likewise lists a slew of nominal skills, each of which can be summarized as the uncritical use of digital technology. As discussed in my second chapter, one implication of such redundancy is that it can distract from the reform’s uncritical framework. It follows that it can also distract from the realization of the unstated purposes of reform. For example, the very name of “NB3-21C” potentially distracted from the government’s contested preoccupation with cutting EFI (even though one rationale for cutting the programme was to improve test scores to “prepare” students for life in a technology-16

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16 I am particularly referring here to the rhetorical terms that the government used to describe its actions, though the latter qualifies as redundant too. After all, describing its actions in redundant terms is itself a redundant action.
based global economy) given the explicit connection between “NB3” and PISA-defined subject matter and the emphasis on technology in “21C.”

Another implication is that such rhetoric both marginalizes and occludes a range of perspectives on the public education system. Again, the Wolastoqiyik, the Mi’kmaq, the Peskotomuhkati, Acadians, and immigrants are barely alluded to by When Kids Come First and NB3-21C alike. Consider two more examples. First, the government promised via the former document “to prevent and reduce bullying, violence, dating violence, homophobia and other forms of discrimination in schools” yet neither document elaborates on this point, let alone with reference to people whose knowledge about overcoming discrimination is grounded in experience, including but not limited to members of the province’s LGBTQIA+ community. For instance, NB3-21C does not mention Pride in Education (PIE), according to whose website “is a volunteer provincial committee that was started in 2008 by teachers concerned about the well-being and safety of sexual and gender minority students in New Brunswick.” Second, the “deficit-to-managed” discourse that Fleiger identifies at the level of policy made its way into the official rationale for cutting much of EFI.

In general, it is probable that the Graham government’s rhetoric of reform contributed to its implementation, at least in the short-term, by distracting some people with its contradictory content and/or by making it seem (in part by occluding critical perspectives) that its implementation was in some sense inevitable. When local academics critiqued the Graham government’s “self-sufficiency” agenda in the spring of 2008, it was well underway. Although protests and a court challenge pressured the government to revisit its decision to cut EFI in its entirety, it still cut much of it.
While Graham became the first premier in New Brunswick history to be defeated electorally after only one term, the subsequent – and also one-term – government under David Alward’s premiership continued in the same market-oriented, “inclusive” direction, technical differences aside (e.g., his decision to suspend NB3-21C officially). And, to give one more example, while students like me struggled through internships in the hope of meaningful job security in public education, many of us were met with unemployment in our desired field or uncertain substituting positions instead. In short, Tremblay was not incorrect to describe reactions to policy rhetoric in terms of McLuhan’s interpretation of T. S. Eliot’s analogy about a guard dog who takes the thief’s bait. “In the current political economy of New Brunswick,” to quote Tremblay again, “the Action Plan is that juicy piece of meat distracting the mind while transnational market forces do their work systemically” (p. 253).

What, then, is one to make of the suggestion that people who are preoccupied with policy rhetoric are comparable to ineffective guard dogs? Personally, I take the suggestion as a compliment. According to Plato (in a section of The Republic to which I will return in a later chapter) dogs are by nature philosophical because they can know the difference between friend and foe. Discussed below, there is much substance to business-friendly policy rhetoric in spite of its distracting and occluding contradictions and redundancies. In this sense, the act of sniffing it out, so to speak, is a fundamentally philosophical one. Moreover, at least one pervasive component of “changing world” in question consisted of the ongoing restructuring of the province along neoliberal lines, a
process in which rhetoric functioned not only as a distraction and mask but also as a part of the very substance of reform.¹⁷

The “changing world” as three substantive (state-capitalist) solutions

Dale’s summary of the problems of state-capitalism provides a framework for organizing my analysis of the technical functions of the Graham government’s rhetoric in advancing neoliberalism through public education reform (consistent with Tremblay’s points about the lulling effect of familiar state-capitalist rhetoric). Thus, I will first consider ways in which the government’s rhetoric supported capital accumulation, followed by ways in which it helped to guarantee and legitimate a context for its continuation.

i) supporting capital accumulation

Perhaps the most direct, substantive support for capital accumulation that the Graham government’s rhetoric of reform provided was in signally that public funds would be spent on the products of the high-tech industry. In When Kids Come First, an annual sum of $5 million was set aside to promote digital technology usage through the

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¹⁷ Plato’s reference to dogs occurs in Book II in the context of discussing the kind of guardian that education, in his view, should cultivate: “... this instinct in the dog is a very fine thing, and genuinely philosophical... [because] he distinguishes between a friendly and an unfriendly face, simply by the fact that he knows the one and is ignorant of the other. Now, how could the creature be anything but fond of learning when knowledge and ignorance are its criterion to distinguish between the friendly and the strange?” (pp. 52-3). Plato also observes that a dog will consider familiar people friendly even if they harm it, implying that instinctual knowledge is insufficient for distinguishing between true friends and true foes. I will go on to critique Plato’s privileging of formal knowledge over other sources of insight; nonetheless, the complimentary point here is that one is philosophical in instinctively questioning unknown things (in my case rhetoric that claims to promote knowledge yet is an obstacle to knowledge of its unstated content).
Innovative Learning Fund. As mentioned, the Croll-Lee Report calculated that the annual cost of running the EFI programme was $5,394,824. Evidently, then, even if the similar amount were a coincidence, one purpose of cutting the programme was to free up money for buying digital products.

Another means of support was basic advertising. For example, recall that the logos of several companies flashed across the screen over the course of Department’s YouTube video on 21st century education that I had to watch as a student intern. In one sense, the point of displaying the logos was to represent the modern world to which 21st century education was supposed to promote adaptation. In doing so uncritically, however, the video effectively functioned as an advertisement for the companies involved. Norris makes a similar observation in *Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics*. Commenting on George W. Bush’s promotion of shopping following the 9/11 attacks, Norris writes, “This thoroughgoing equation of America’s strength as a nation with ‘consumer confidence’ perhaps was intended simply to reassure the population by conveying a sense of normalcy” (p. 4). But normalcy, unquestioned, can be all-consuming, he points out, particularly in the context of public schools: “Consumerism, however, undermines the critical task of education, reducing it to a process by which students become increasingly acquisitive yet decreasingly inquisitive” (p. 8).

Advertising also doubled as a public relations strategy. P21’s corporate partners could claim to be supporting “inclusion” in public education while profiting from cuts to it. At the same time, P21’s products were used for more specific public relations purposes. In 2006, CBC news reported on local residents’ concerns over Irving Oil’s
plan to build a second oil refinery on the east side of Saint John, New Brunswick. A press release (2009) on company’s website still boasts of donating Smart boards to a nearby elementary school through “CHEER (Champlain Heights Educational Enhancement Relationship), a partnership between Irving Oil Refining and Champlain Heights School.” According to the release, “CHEER supports the school’s curriculum by providing tutoring programs, a book club, class trips, computer supplies and a refinery education program where students learn about refining first-hand from our employees and on refinery tours.” It is safe to say that SMART Technologies also cheered and continue to cheer whenever its product is the content of another company’s public relations strategy.

It is plausible that the Graham government’s rhetoric of reform was supportive of capital accumulation by transparently cultivating specific technical abilities and dispositions that increase productivity and other work-related values in the global economy. To illustrate this point, a brief anecdote from my life is helpful. I did not own a computer until part-way through my undergraduate years, in 2001, when I bought a desktop computer to facilitate essay writing. (Until that point, I wrote my essays by hand at home, and typed them up in one of UNBSJ’s many computer labs). I have done most of my writing ever since on a computer, to the point that my hand tends to cramp up when I use it to write much. Consequently, I bought a laptop when I moved away to do my MA degree in 2004. In 2009, when I returned to New Brunswick, the only job that I could find after months of searching was at a call centre in Saint John. If it had not been for my previous eight-years of using a computer, I would have had more difficulty
training for my call-centre position, which requiring typing in credit card numbers quickly and effectively, navigating a variety of computer programmes, and so on, while maintaining a “customer-friendly” disposition. With this experience in mind, the rhetorical claim that actual jobs in the “knowledge” economy require a range of abilities and dispositions is a truism, notwithstanding the claim’s misleading promise of good-paying jobs for students post-graduation.

In “Career Education and Labour Market Conditions: The Skills Gap Myth,” Hyslop-Margison and Welsh (2003) argue that skills-based education tends to have no real impact on employment or economic growth, contrary to the still-prevalent notion of a gap between labour’s skill level and the level required for available employment. An exception that they note is its function as a means of increasing competition over existing jobs. In their words,

It is difficult to identify specific labour market benefit to students, workers, or nations from a general up-skilling of the labour market, but there is an obvious advantage to corporations. A highly skilled labour market creates a supply side advantage to employers by ensuring intense competition between workers for available job opportunities. Competition between workers for available jobs reduces employee benefits, forces wages to be lowered, and encourages students to increase their human capital through additional education and training. (p. 15)

It follows that the Graham government’s reform agenda, in alleging to bridge the skills “gap” without providing any reason to believe in its existence, was at least indirectly supportive of capital accumulation, in this instance helping to lower corporations’ immediate cost of doing business.
ii) contributing to capitalist context(s)

A closely related implication of Hyslop-Margison’s and Welsh’s point about the supply side advantage that skill-based education gives employers is that the Graham government’s skill-based reform did not merely support capital accumulation by lowering the cost of business; it also contributed to a social context (i.e., neoliberalism) in which capital accumulation could continue to occur by artificially contributing to the competition for existing jobs. Moreover, the government’s stated focus on so-called 21st century skills helped to sustain a discursive context on which marketing relies if its stated content is to have any effect. For instance, Wyndham Worldwide (2006), a “hospitality” company with a call centre in Saint John, uses similar rhetoric to 21st century education’s “Life and Career Skills” in effectively advertising its “service-oriented culture” on its website as one “in which each associate strives to be responsive, be respectful and deliver great experiences to our customers, guests, partners and communities as well as to each other.” One could argue that such rhetoric is a form of false advertising inasmuch as the company’s culture is actually in alignment with market-oriented skills and dispositions, not with “service” per se. Nonetheless, the company could counter with technical honesty that its self-representation is true because its rhetoric is consistent with stated objectives of the public education system from which many of its New Brunswick employees graduate.

Pro-technology rhetoric of course can help to normalize the actual environment of technology-inundated schools, the very fact of which is another way of contributing to a context for capital accumulation. It is by now common knowledge that digital technologies collect reams of private data from users, which is then used for various
private-sector purposes such as marketing. One of the more obvious examples of data collection in New Brunswick occurs in New Maryland Elementary School, which Microsoft dubbed a “World Tour School” in 2012 “for the way it uses technology in its classrooms” (2012, Chislett, p. A3). A document (2008) from the school’s website promotes student-use of “biometric scanning” (i.e., fingerprint scanning) in its cafeteria. Ignoring the profit motive behind this technology, the document frames it not only as “revolutionary” but as a safer, more efficient way for students to buy lunch.

The context that state-capitalist actors seek to guarantee for the continuation of capital accumulation, it is important to emphasize, is not economic per se. That is, the context of the Graham administration’s “self-sufficiency” agenda was not merely about supporting capital accumulation and guaranteeing material and virtual spaces for its continuation. Another context-related function of rhetoric was its contribution to a preexisting legal framework for the continuation of neoliberal reforms to public education. To make this point, it is necessary to revisit the MacKay Report.

Again, according to MacKay, the Department of Education’s policy on inclusion means “that care for the more academically challenged students goes hand in hand with high standards and challenges for all the students” (p. 15). “Care and challenge can and must be ‘connected,’” he asserted: “The trick is to find out how to do it” (p. 16). The “trick,” he might have added more directly, involves constitutional power. As his report made clear, New Brunswick’s official standard of inclusion is a function of Canadian

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18 Fleiger refers to this passage as one of many “narrative techniques” by which the MacKay Report strives to frame her (as a teacher) “as docile and compliant with education reform” (p. 184). As such, the “trick” also contributes to the generally authoritarian aspect of neoliberal sociality, which I will discuss after discussing aspects of the trick’s specifically legal function here.
law, especially as it relates to equality rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. He based his report’s conceptual framework on Supreme Court decisions on equality rights, in order to actualize “important trends in the Supreme Court of Canada decisions,” and to “analyze various legal structures and systems in education with a view to uncovering some of the systemic barriers to [juridical interpretations of] equality and inclusion” (p. 40). It follows that the official meanings of “care” and “challenge” – and the connection that the Department of Education made between them under Lamrock’s authority – were a part of the same constitutional framework. In MacKay’s words: “The court’s role is to evaluate the framework and decisions for consistency with their enabling statutes and the Constitution” (p. 35). Continuing, he added, “The specifics of decision making though, remain squarely in the hands of those officials to whom it is delegated” (p. 35).

Based on McLellan’s summary of the case against the Graham government’s decision to cut EFI, the complainants did not attempt to argue that the programme cut had violated their rights to a certain standard of French education for their children. After all, under the Charter, provincial governments are not obligated to provide a specific standard of education, and are only obligated to provide public education in either English or French in a few circumstances. Section 15 ostensibly makes governments responsible for ensuring equal access to any standard that they do provide. The MacKay Report indicated, for example, that governments must meet a legal standard of accommodation for students who are, in legal terms, unable to meet a common standard. To quote the report, “Accommodations for individuals must be undertaken up to the point of undue hardship, although the Supreme Court of Canada cautions that undue hardship means that
some hardship is acceptable” (p. 27). In any event, even the right to equality is not guaranteed. Section 1 of the Charter states that the all of the rights and freedoms that it guarantees are “subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.”

The MacKay Report outlined three main legal principles for guiding governments in considering their legal responsibility toward equality rights, what it called “major challenges” (p. 30). In brief, the principles involve equality in the funding of new methods, guaranteeing the continuation of programmes for students who have already entered them, and promoting system-wide “inclusion.” While framing these principles in terms of governmental responsibility towards Charter rights, the report also emphasized, with reference to section 1 of the Charter, “that rights are not absolute but must be balanced against the rights of other individuals and the larger collective” (p. 40). As I will show, MacKay’s presentation of the three “challenges” suggests that a government can in principle legally interpret its responsibility and power in ways that place more social value on withdrawing or withholding funding than on realizing in practice any person’s or persons’ legal rights.

Before I illustrate the latter point, it is important to underline three attendant points. First, I will focus on MacKay’s account of three court cases that illustrate the “major challenges” to him, not on the official court cases themselves, because MacKay’s account was/is itself a source of legal advice for provincial governments, New Brunswick’s Department of Education in particular of course. Second, the three court cases in question are not the only cases that MacKay discussed, so further analysis of his
report is necessary to determine the full scope of his legal advice; nonetheless, the three cases under consideration are worth highlighting because he himself highlighted them. And third, in arguing that his account effectively strengthened the Graham government’s legal standing in cutting EFI, of which I am critical, I am not thereby affirming, in principle, all legal arguments against the withholding/cutting of programme funding.

The cases that MacKay discussed involved legal arguments (1) against the withholding and cutting of programme funding for Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) methods, which are used on autistic students, and (2) for private schooling of students who have been diagnosed “with learning difficulties and ADD/ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder]” (p. 32). Fleiger’s critique of the “deficit-to-be-managed” discourse is a reminder of the importance of being critical of programmes and related processes that explicitly or implicitly make top-down claims about people’s identities.

Hence my purpose in summarizing MacKay’s following account of three cases is to note their general legal principles, not to affirm, thereby, all legal challenges to these principles. As MacKay put it, problematically referring to autism as a “condition” rather than a part of autistic people’s identity, “the most recent cases involving equality and disability have centered around one condition, autism” yet “[g]eneral principles such as equality when evaluating new or emerging treatments and the principle that once a government offers a service it cannot arbitrarily cut it off, can likely be interpreted more broadly than the autism context” (pp. 31-32).

The first case discussed is Auton (Guardian Ad Litem) v. British Columbia (Attorney General) (2004). According to MacKay’s summary of the case, the complainants initially argued unsuccessfully that the British Columbian government
discriminated when it refused to fund an ABA method of instruction, namely Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI), which the complainants regarded as a new service for autistic students. Apparently, lower courts did not focus on the aims and methods of ABA itself but instead focused on the question of the government’s commitment to comparable programmes, a commitment that courts deemed non-existent. While noting that the Supreme Court ruled that the government technically did discriminate, based on “a very narrow definition of the comparator group for the purpose of the equality analysis,” MacKay took away the following principle: “Governments should be on the alert that decisions with regard to assessing and implementing new research and methodologies may have an impact on equality” (my emphasis, p. 31). It follows that governments that plan to limit funding to public education may do so ‘inclusively’ by denying funding to new programmes as a general policy, possibly without regard for a new programme’s educational value or lack thereof. This principle is discernable in Lamrock’s assumption that more students in the Anglophone system would benefit from cutting EFI than from making it more accommodating, legally speaking. Given the equality guarantee under the Charter, if had he invested more funds in order to provide EFI to more students, he would have opened the door to legally compelling arguments for more funding to other parts of the system.

MacKay described the second legal principle in terms of a “whole government’s responsibility to promote and ensure equality, particularly with regard to providing a ‘continuum of services’ for children” (my emphasis, p. 31). The case that he cited to illustrate this principle is Wynberg v. Ontario (2005). At the time of writing his report, he explained, the Ontario government was in the process of appealing the judge’s
decision that government could not end funding for the same IBI programme mentioned
above when doing so affected parents’ children who were already enrolled in the
programme. Ostensibly, the outcome of the appeal was irrelevant to the point that
MacKay took from the original decision. That is, as soon as governments decide to
provide a new programme, as a rule they are not legally permitted to withdraw it
suddenly from those who have already entered it. Lamrock’s initial decision to phase out
the EFI programme, not to end it for those who were already in it (i.e., only to end it for
those who were about to be eligible for it), was in keeping with this principle.

The third principle pertains to “systemic inquiry,” which allows a government to
“minimize the need for individual accommodation” (my emphasis, p. 32). The nominal
ideal that attends this principle is a system that is inherently inclusive, in which no one,
by definition, faces systemic exclusion. But MacKay’s analysis reveals that this principle
can legally justify cuts that directly affect a minority of students, by framing the cuts in
one way or another as benefiting all students. According to his summary of Bernadette
Cudmore and Human Rights Commission v. New Brunswick (Department of Education)
and School District 2, the Department of Education used to fund “a special school for
students with learning disabilities and ADD/ADHD]” (p. 32); however, the Department
decided to stop funding the private option and instead redirected the related funding
toward the public school system, which had begun “to implement inclusion in schools”
and in this sense had “a more inclusive setting” (p. 32). (Again, I am noting the legal
principle at work here; I am not directly commenting on the actual experiences of
students who receive “learning disabilities” and ADD/ADHD diagnoses). The
complainants lost their case that the government thereby discriminated against their son,
whom they placed in the private programme after being dissatisfied with the public school system’s approaches to accommodation. “Even though the Tribunal finds that the student was still not thriving in school,” MacKay explained, “it concludes that the efforts to accommodate him were reasonable” (p. 32). That is, as part of a nominally inclusive public school system, the efforts in this case rhetorically but legally ‘balanced’ the government’s responsibility to accommodate against its power to make funding cuts based on the logic of austerity. In MacKay’s words, “There are many good reasons to invest scarce resources in building a better public system for all students” (p. 33).

Lamrock’s original and subsequently revised decision to cut EFI was consistent with the above line of reasoning in at least two ways and, thereby, likely added to the government’s legal standing. First, it involved overtures toward ‘improving’ on the academic quality of French Immersion in general, which could be interpreted as meeting the legal requirement for ‘reasonably’ accommodating students who were directly impacted by the cut (e.g., all students who were denied the option of enrolling in EFI in grade one). As quoted earlier, Lamrock explained that “. . . to reach our goal of 70 per cent of our anglophone graduates being proficient in French we must provide effective FSL programs to all kids.” Second, the decision to cut EFI involved the notion that the programme was inherently exclusive – that is was inherently incompatible with “inclusion.” In particular, the Graham government exploited the notion that French Immersion was inherently exclusive in allegedly causing the core English programme to have a higher percentage of “exceptional students” or “special needs” students, thus simultaneously perpetuating the attendant exclusionary notion that students so-labelled
were a strain on the system. To quote the CBC again, “The minister blamed their lack of progress, in part, on the unusually high number of special needs children in the regular stream.” And to quote once more from Lamrock’s own piece in the *Telegraph Journal*, “... we must reduce the effects of splitting our kids into two groups through immersion and non-immersion learning streams.”

A related way in which rhetoric contributed to capital accumulation’s various contexts was as a means of effectively authoritarian communication. This point is discernable in the MacKay Report’s tacit point that governments’ are legally required neither to communicate to citizens the precise meaning behind policy rhetoric nor to comply with principled (as distinct from technical) counterarguments communicated to them from citizens. Consistent with this point, the Graham administration lost part of its court challenge over the cuts to EFI because it broke its promise to debate the issue before making a decision on it; it did not lose in terms of the principle(s) behind the cuts. Again, the judge clearly affirmed the government’s legal authority to make the final decision. Thus, the original decision to cut the programme might not have been quashed.

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19 On this point, is worth noting that the cuts to EFI were consistent, in retrospect of course, with the concerns of a dissenting member of the tribunal in *Bernadette Cudmore and Human Rights Commission v. New Brunswick (Department of Education) and School District 2*. MacKay explains in a footnote: “The lone dissenter on the panel of three found that there was discrimination. This tribunal member highlighted the high proportion of students with individual plans in this student’s class and his last year of public school, among other factors. The popularity of the French Immersion program in some New Brunswick districts appears to concentrate the number of exceptional students in the English only classes” (p. 32).

20 Referring to Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, Dale writes: “The right in the United States and Britain has thoroughly renovated and reformed itself. It has developed strategies based upon what might best be called authoritarian populism. As [S] Hall has defined this [Dale cites *Marxism and Democracy*, edited by A. Hunt in 1980], such a policy is based on an increasingly close relationship between government and the capitalist economy, a radical decline in the institutions and powers of political democracy, and attempts at curtailing ‘liberties’ that have been gained in the past” (original emphasis, pp. 5-6).
if the government had not made the promise to debate first. One can also infer that the original decision would not have necessarily been blocked by even the strongest of counterarguments. Indeed, the cuts were eventually implemented, albeit in technically revised form, even after the government complied with the court’s order to comply with the promise to listen to people’s positions on the issue.

What is more, citizens who take governments to court on the issue of “inclusion” not only risk losing a legal battle; they also risk being publicly framed, in effect, as exclusionary. Consider MacKay’s following comments on *Bernadette Cudmore and Human Rights Commission v. New Brunswick (Department of Education) and School District 2*:

A significant part of this decision is the finding by the majority that the mother of this child had failed in her duty under the New Brunswick Education Act to communicate effectively with educational officials and provide all pertinent information about the student. (pp. 32-33)

MacKay went on to compare other aspects of this case to an earlier case, which he described as “one of the very few court challenges to inclusion in New Brunswick” (p. 34). One implication of this line of thinking, insofar as it is accepted, is that any criticism of “inclusion” policy that does not fit the legalistic parameters of the policy itself is a “failed” form of “inclusion” or an obstacle to it. In other words, principled criticism of “inclusion” is itself as an exclusionary act according to the logic of “inclusion.” As discussed, Trilling and Fadel also framed any criticism of 21st century education as a threat to the very survival of “Knowledge Age” countries and, by extension, the entire species inasmuch as they conceptually subordinated humanity to their market-oriented,
techno-centric conception of history. Recall that NB3-21C invoked “the deeply embedded principle of inclusive education” (p. 7).

It is worth giving a few more examples of how uncritically pro-technology rhetoric contributed to the legally top-down relationship between the Graham government and the officially governed. According to the MacKay Report, technology not only reflects contemporary social values, but in principle reflects the ideal of “inclusive” education to connect “care” and academic “challenge.” Among other pro-technology recommendations it called for investments in FM technology, declaring that it leads to “a calmer, gentler voice and clearer communications by the teacher” and “good hearing regardless of where the listener is located in the room” (p. 131). As indicated in When Kids Come First and later in NB3-21C, the Graham government included FM technology among its general promotion of digital technology. However, technology-mediated communication as curricular content was not a matter that the MacKay Report discussed in any depth, though it did express fears that students may potentially access such online content as “pornography, violent games, and bomb making” (p. 66). Still, to be consistent with official inclusion policy, the report suggested that technology need only be technically communicative, content aside, as illustrated by its abovementioned recommendations. While it gestured toward a critical view of technology, its rhetoric effectively limited critical inquiry on the overall topic of technology (among other curricular topics) to a narrow, legalistic, and fear-based notion of communication. Moreover, its expressed concerns about online threats to students were limited to what may happen if they use technology without proper supervision. In MacKay’s words: “Educators who approach this issue proactively will use computers to aid in instruction
and student learning but will be wary of unstructured student use and will be vigilant of anything that interferes with the safe school environment” (p. 67). Although this language raises the important issue of communicating with students about online dangers, it is nonetheless problematic for at least two reasons. First, it puts the focus on the behaviour of unsupervised students, overlooking the dangers of technology-based supervision itself, such as corporations’ and governments’ access to users’ personal information for various non-consensual purposes in practice, if technically legal. Second, it also overlooks the fact that corporations and governments are largely responsible for exposing people of all ages to digital technology and, therefore, to all of the dangers that it entails. For example, in implementing nominally inclusive cuts, in part to finance technology for technically communicative reasons, the Graham government technically heard or had access to substantive counterarguments – in part through technological media such as e-mail and online forums – but it still did not really listen to them or genuinely communicate its actual position on reform (i.e., it did not genuinely seek the “consent of the governed”), instead framing opposition as obstacles to “progress,” thereby, in effect, endangering genuine democratic debate and discourse.21

21 In my chapter on John Dewey, I will discuss his version of this liberal democratic idea that educated citizens of democracies consent to being governed by their elected representatives. Christopher Hedges (2010) in Empire of an Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle refers to the phrase in a way that is consistent with my observation that the Graham government did not really listen to criticism: “The words the consent of the governed have become an empty phrase. . . . The government [of the United States], stripped of any real sovereignty, provides little more than technical expertise for elites and corporations that lack moral restraints and a concept of the common good” (original emphasis, pp. 142-143).
iii) legitimating capital accumulation

While discussing the distracting/occluding and context-guaranteeing potential of rhetoric, I have occasionally noted that such potential relies on the uncritical acceptance of rhetoric’s stated content. For example, the YouTube video on 21st century education would only be effective as an advertisement if people who viewed it were consequently more inclined to purchase or otherwise consume the products of the corporations mentioned therein, and one way of being more inclined would be to view the corporate logos therein without thinking critically about them (i.e., to view them merely in the uncritical context of the video as signs of “modern” life in the present century).

Similarly, people who take the rhetoric of inclusion at all seriously might be less inclined to challenge “inclusive” cuts to popular programmes out of fear of appearing to be exclusionary. But as Tremblay’s article reveals – among other responses to the Graham government’s rhetoric, including my own, particularly as a student intern – it is possible to think critically about something such as the rhetoric of “self-sufficiency” and still act uncritically with regard to it.

As discussed, Žižek views this paradox as central to the ideological terrain of liberal democratic societies since the Enlightenment. In *Ideology: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton (1991/2007) draws on Žižek’s work to make the case for the endurance of ideology, what Eagleton summarizes, in reference to a Thom Gunn poem, as that which sometimes makes humans “mistake” other humans for either “gods or vermin” (xxii). One manifestation of ideology, so defined, is when official discourse is structured in such a way that it allows for critical thoughts about dehumanizing situations that in turn
paradoxically allow such situations to continue fundamentally unchanged. As Eagleton explains in a chapter entitled “Ideological Strategies”:

The government spokesman announces that there is no truth in the charges of widespread corruption within the Cabinet; nobody believes him; he knows that nobody believes him, we know that he knows it, and he knows this too.

Meanwhile the corruption carries on – which is just the point that Žižek makes against the conclusion that false consciousness is therefore a thing of the past. (p. 40)

Although ideology, in this sense, is fundamentally a form of “false consciousness,” Eagleton observes that it is effective, in part, because it contains a degree of truth, in the above example the obvious truth that corruption is occurring in spite of the government’s claim to the contrary. One of the many ideological strategies that Eagleton discusses that specifically allow for this paradoxical combination of falsity and truth is legitimation. “A mode of domination is generally legitimated,” Eagleton argues, “when those subjected to it come to judge their own behaviour by the criteria of their rulers” (p. 55). In the above example people do not work to overcome governmental corruption that they know to be occurring because the (unstated) criteria of the government (by whose criteria they judge their own behaviour, including in relation to the government as citizens) evidently permit corruption on some level.

It follows that rhetoric as state-capitalist ideology does not simply distract people, occlude critical perspectives, and guarantee various contexts. It can also be a form of
ideological legitimation, three features of which that Eagleton identifies are identifiable in the rhetoric of 21st century education.\textsuperscript{22}

The first feature is twofold, involving the rhetorical expansion of both spatial and temporal meaning:

An important device by which an ideology achieves legitimacy is by universalizing and ‘eternalizing’ itself. Values and interests which are in fact specific to a certain place and time are projected as the values and interests of all humanity. The assumption is that if this were not so, the sectoral, self-interested nature of the ideology would loom too embarrassingly large, and so would impede general acceptance. (Original emphasis, p. 56)

The degree of truth that Eagleton detects in this device is that it speaks to the fact that human beings share common (i.e., universal and timeless) interests, both principled and practical. “It is indeed ultimately in the interests of all individuals,” he writes, for example, “that women should emancipate themselves; and the belief that one’s values are finally universal may provide some significant impetus in gaining legitimacy for them”

\textsuperscript{22} Eagleton also discusses ideological strategies that can be used to explain the role of rhetoric in supporting and guaranteeing contexts for capital accumulation, namely “unifying, action-oriented, [and] rationalizing” features of ideologies (original emphases, p. 45). In brief, these features respectively refer to the ideological provision of worked-out ideas, ideas that are nonetheless useful in specific contexts, and ideas that can be specifically used to make excuses for unstated prejudices (none of which necessarily has to do with legitimating the state’s interests in capital accumulation itself). For example, 21st century education in this sense is an ideological “theory” of the “Knowledge Age” that effectively channels teachers’ and students’ and others’ actions toward the global market in ways that can seem to make unifying and practical sense to them and that can rationalize existing prejudices (e.g., against people whom “inclusion” policy effectively excludes) but that do not necessarily legitimate neoliberalism itself.
Thus, on one level, 21st century education’s rhetoric of universal agreement throughout New Brunswick and the world, in the temporal category of the “Knowledge Age” (that nonetheless is a rhetorical extension of past periods that P21 defines in terms of the production of workers), might have caused legitimation by cancelling out its otherwise obvious promotion of state-capitalist interests. On another level, it might have caused legitimation simply by invoking the grandiose notion of grounding education reform in a supposedly universal and eternal ideal. Recall that a District chairperson asserted that the Alward government’s cuts to budgets would entail “less innovation” in public education and that, therefore, “to continue to develop a 21st century learning environment, which is what we have been doing, that will become more difficult.”

Recall also that NB3-21C policy had invoked, among other things, the goal of “innovation” and the realization of teachers’ professional ideals. If Eagleton’s analysis holds, it follows that the chairperson’s (universalizing and eternalizing) logic of not wanting to impede the continuation of ‘innovative’ 21st century education reform was a sign of legitimation at work, in practice if not fully in principle. After all, the chairperson was criticizing government cuts to budgets (albeit with uncritical reference to 21st century education, not commenting on its connection through “inclusion” to cuts to EFI).

The second feature of ideological legitimation that Eagleton identifies is naturalization. (Technically, he argues that naturalization is not necessarily a feature of legitimation; I discuss it here because, as I will show, it happens to relate to 21st century education). In Eagleton’s words:

Successful ideologies are often thought to render their beliefs natural and self-evident – to identify them with the ‘common sense’ of a society so that nobody
could imagine how they might ever be different. . . . Like universalization, naturalization is part of the *dehistoricizing* thrust of ideology, its tacit denial that ideas and beliefs are specific to a particular time, place, and social group.

(Original emphasis, pp. 58-59)

Recall that the implied ‘good’ subjects of continuity that I identify in *NB3-21C* are (1) the “potential” of students in New Brunswick, (2) official bilingualism in the province, (3) the supposedly bold, intelligent, responsible traits of New Brunswickers who support the model, (4) the roots of rural life, (5) geography, (6) the provincial economy in relation to the global economy, and (7) subject matter in which the model is “rooted.” Recall also that Tremblay, notwithstanding his historical analysis of “self-sufficiency,” asserts that neoliberalism in general has become an “unstoppable” part of the now familiar “environment.” Similarly, I ‘naturally’ framed my *Telegraph Journal* article with reference to the ‘common sense’ notion of “self-sufficiency” and subsequently framed my internship, in part, with reference to “common sense” buzzwords about digital technology (e.g., by simply using digital technology as if it were a “natural” part of any pedagogy). In ways such as these, the “naturalizing” rhetoric of 21st century contributed to legitimation in effect, if not always in principle. “We need to distinguish between such ‘normative’ acceptance,” Eagleton argues, “and what is probably the more widespread condition of ‘pragmatic’ acceptance, in which subaltern groups endorse the right of their rulers to govern because they can see no realistic alternative” (p. 56).

Another ideological strategy that Eagleton notes is that ideology can take the form of denying that one is ideological:
The supposed obviousness of ideology goes along with its presumed lack of self-reflexiveness. The assumption here is that it would be impossible for somebody to hold ideological views and be simultaneously aware that they were ideological. . . ‘Ideology,’ observes Louis Althusser, ‘never says: “I am ideological.”’ Though this may be true much of the time, that ‘never’ is surely an overstatement. ‘I know that I am a terrible sexist, but I just can’t stand the sight of a woman in trousers’; ‘Sorry to be bourgeois, but would you mind spitting in the sink rather than in the food mixer?’: such utterances may be little more than attempts to forestall criticism by their arch frankness, but they indicate a limited degree of ironic self-awareness which a full-blooded ‘naturalization’ theory fails to take into account. I may have some consciousness of the social origins and function of my beliefs, without on that score ceasing to hold them. A novelist like E.M. Forster is perfectly capable of discerning something of the exploitative conditions on which his own liberal humanism rests, without thereby ceasing to be a liberal humanist. (pp. 60-61)

The rhetoric of 21st century education, including the rhetoric of “self-sufficiency” by which it was framed, is indicative of denial in the above sense because its authors could have used other commonplace terms to universalize, eternalize, and naturalize the model but instead used historically loaded terms. In doing so, they effectively said, ‘History is important, but we are going to dehistoricize our claims nonetheless by, among other means, suggesting that they are fundamentally unique to the twentieth-century.’ Similarly, as discussed, Temblay historicizes “self-sufficiency” only to conclude that it has become in a technical sense ahiistorical. And I used the top-down rhetoric of 21st
century education to survive my internship even though I had experienced the effects of top-down pedagogy as a high school student when, for example, I found myself unable to understand *A Tale of Two Cities* even though I was interested in reading it for an assigned book report and, later, when I found myself in a computer programming course instead of the art course in which I was interested.

**Summary: the “changing world” as a point of entry into further critical analysis**

To summarize my analysis so far, the “changing world” to which 21st century education reform in New Brunswick claimed to promote adaptation comprised, in general, at least two overlapping dimensions. First, it referred to aspects of neoliberal social reality that were and remain irreducible to rhetoric, notably the experiences of distraction and confusion to which its rhetoric contributed, explainable in part because of the inculcating form of rhetoric itself, in part because of the various perspective that the rhetoric in question occludes. Second, the “changing world” did not refer to non-rhetorical social reality so much as the rhetorical phrase’s own discursive history as a tool in the toolkit of state-capitalist power, a toolkit that now includes rhetoric’s seemingly ubiquitous role in supporting capital accumulation, guaranteeing contexts for it, and legitimating it.

So far, however, I have for the most part described the overlap between these two dimensions, first in terms of the immediate social context to 21st century education reform in New Brunswick, second in terms of critiques of state-capitalism. In what ways can further critical analysis work to overcome the neoliberal direction of the “changing world”?
Before addressing the latter question, it is worth emphasizing the fact that 21st century education’s influence has exceeded the official lifespan of NB3-21C policy. A search for “21st century education” and “New Brunswick” on Google brings up a link to “C21 Research – C21 Canada,” the Canadian offshoot of P21. Searching “New Brunswick” on C21’s website brings up an interview from 2013 between C21’s Vice President, Robert Martellacci, and the University of New Brunswick’s Dean of Education, Dr. Ann Sherman, whom I know in my capacity as a student at UNB. In the interview, Dr. Sherman expresses support for 21st century education reform and Martellacci asks for her perspective on “the transformation” to 21st century education in schools across the country. “How,” he asks, “do you accelerate that?” As part of her response, amidst more expressions of support for the model, Dr. Sherman notes that she is “talking about far more than just technology here.” “Absolutely,” Martellacci chimes in, “that’s one sliver of the bigger pie.” Yet Martellacci describes the interview as “a MindShare moment.” Google informs me that he is also the President of MindShare Learning Technologies. On its website, under “About Us,” the company introduces itself as follows:

MindShare Learning is Canada’s leading EdTech strategy consulting, news, and professional learning events company. Its hallmark is providing strategic solutions to learning and technology providers in the K-12, higher ed and lifelong learning space, to support student success. MindShare Learning’s partial client list includes: Adaptive Curriculum, Adobe, Blackboard Inc., Contact North, Dell, Discovery Education Canada, EPSON, Follett, Smart Technologies Canada, GlobalScholar, Intel Canada, Learning.com, RM PLC UK, Softease Ltd. UK,
IMSI (ClipArt.com), C21 Canada, CERC (Canadian Education Resources Council), Tech4Learning, and ERDI Canada.

Lest there is any doubt about the economic intentions behind MindShare Learning’s interest in 21st century education reform, its website posts its advertising methods and fees under “Services.” “Over 30,000 copies of the MindShare Learning Report,” it notes, for instance, “are passed across Canada, monthly.” For “$950/month,” at the higher end of priced options, a client becomes an “issue sponsor,” whose “150-word ad will appear at the top of the issue.” Thus, one can infer, no matter what else 21st century education reform may entail, its implementation means profit for MindShare Learning and the corporations that employ its services.

This chapter has suggested three (potentially parallel or complementary) ways forward. First, more extensive juxtapositions of past and ongoing critiques of neoliberalism (and its history) with neoliberal depictions of social reality in New Brunswick and beyond (depictions such as that which 21st century education reform provides) could reduce if not immediately eliminate the distracting and occluding effects of neoliberal reformist rhetoric. For example, the reform could be considered more extensively as more than a rhetorical extension of No Child Left Behind into local contexts, as a distracting/occluding means, that is, of securing and advancing global hegemonic power.

Second, more critical analysis is required to understand, with more precision, the various technical functions of neoliberal rhetoric such as the functions of 21st century education reform that I have outlined in terms of supporting, guaranteeing contextually, and legitimating capital accumulation. For example, people with formal education in
economics could study in more detail the relationship between rhetoric and capital accumulation; people with formal education in Canadian law could build on my observation that the model’s alignment with “inclusion” rhetoric helps to secure a legal basis for neoliberal reforms and, in doing so, come up with legal strategies for challenging neoliberal reforms; and people with formal education in critical theories could explore the model’s ideological dimension in more depth.

And, third, more critical analysis that stems from actual, informal experiences of 21st century education reform (or related reforms that precede and succeed it) is required to redirect experience along critical lines within the otherwise overwhelming, ideologically fraught context(s) of neoliberalism. To quote Eagleton once more:

It is important to see that, in the critique of ideology, only those interventions will work which make sense to the mystified subject itself. . . . This is not to claim that oppressed individuals secretly harbor some full-blown alternative to their unhappiness; but it is to claim that, once they have freed themselves from the causes of their suffering, they must be able to look back, re-write their life-histories and recognize that what they enjoy now is what they would have previously desired, if only they had been able to be aware of it. It is a testimony to the fact that nobody is, ideologically speaking, a complete dupe that people who are characterized as inferior must actually learn to be so. (Original emphasis, p. xxiii)

For example, the various people and peoples whom 21st century education rhetoric frames as inherently subordinate in one way or another (e.g., by being marginalized or altogether excluded by its rhetoric) are uniquely qualified, not only to free themselves,
but to participate with others in the production of emancipatory, life-affirming knowledge about actual experiences of oppression and liberation.

Although I certainly do not claim to be entirely free of ideology, neoliberal or otherwise, I have freed myself in at least one respect from the uncritical confines of 21st century education’s stated standard. That is, I now know in formal terms that 21st century education in New Brunswick fundamentally meant within its exclusionary framework – and continues to mean through ongoing reforms – principled support for capital accumulation, whether directly in the form of buying digital products and promoting their consumption, or more indirectly through legalistic and/or ideological means. The rest of this dissertation is a form of re-writing and extending my experience of realizing that this knowledge is accessible through critical analysis of 21st century education’s stated standard itself, which had previously taught me, in effect, to act uncritically in spite of my qualms with it.

The broader point of what follows is twofold. First, it is a critique of a particular form of market-oriented thinking in the area of public education reform based on the social fact of my conceptual difficulty with 21st century education’s stated premise. As such, it will hopefully be of interest to people (and/or their communities) who have experienced and/or who continue to experience the same or similar types of reform. Second, if my contention at all holds that I have learned from my experience of being confused by 21st century education, what follows will hopefully be of interest as well to those who work in the area of educational studies, specifically as a way of drawing on the methodology of Paulo Freire and related theories of education for the purposes of
accessing and critiquing content that is presupposed by state-capitalist rhetoric, rhetoric that people are in various ways pressured into accepting.
Chapter 5: Introduction to Theory and Methodology

Given that the framework of New Brunswick’s 21st century education reform is inherently uncritical as it appears in *21st Century Skills* and *NB3-2IC*, an alternative framework is necessary in order to access and critique the presupposed concepts of the reform’s stated premise. But how is it possible to access the presupposed concepts of 21st century education? Once they are accessed, against what standard should they be critiqued? In other words, what is my methodology and theory?

This chapter outlines, in the abstract, my approach to the above questions. Subsequent chapters are devoted to the actual methodological and theoretical process of accessing and critiquing 21st century education’s presupposed concepts. That process, as I have indicated in my introduction, will rely heavily on *The Republic* of Plato, John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Theodore Christou’s *Progressive Education*. Thus, I begin this chapter’s outline by elaborating on my reasons for choosing to use these texts to carry out my methodological and theoretical purposes in the first place.

Christou’s book was the first to provide me with insight into the problem that is 21st century education’s uncritical framework. His book reveals that 21st century education’s rhetoric of social adaptation is an extension of progressivist discourse, particularly as it functioned within Ontario’s public education system between 1919 and 1942. As he points out in passing:

We are following to this day the wake of that progressive movement; and in the clarion calls for twenty-first-century schools that echo through contemporary school districts and faculties of education, I can hear the progressive ethos
rejuvenated. At the root of ‘21C’ – the catch term now popular among
educationalists in several provinces when they refer to the cultivation of skills that
will be necessary in the coming century – is the progressivists’ insistence that
schools adjust to modern life, which is fraught with radically accelerated
technological and social change. (p. 5)

In light of this observation, the New Brunswick Department of Education’s definition of
21st century education as “adapting to a changing world” evidently presupposes a
particular concept of progress. (While the references to “progress” pop up throughout
21st Century Skills and related policy documents, the term’s centrality to 21st century
education did not occur to me until reading the above passage because it is one among
many conceptual terms that the model rhetorically invokes).

In addition to the above conceptual lead, Christou’s methodological focus on
official progressivist rhetoric is a source of encouragement to me. In his words, his
primary sources comprise “the rhetoric of reform that was published between 1919 and
1942 in two widely distributed and accessible journals in Ontario: The School and The
Canadian School Journal” (p. ix). Both journals, he points out, tended to reflect official
positions on educational progress, the former as the publication of the Toronto-based
Ontario College of Education, “the main institution for secondary school teacher
education in the province” (p. 34), the latter as the Ontario Education Association’s
“official organ” (p. 31), whose “content and tone were very close to the positions
espoused by the Department of Education” (p. 34). He notes that the content of the
journals arguably “represented a consensus view of education reform, in that the net they
cast was not broad enough to capture actual debate, tension, or rhetorical cutting and
thrusting” (p. 134). His focus on these journals nonetheless encourages me because it is another reminder that official rhetoric, notwithstanding its function in channelling thought in certain uncritical directions, is in itself a potential means of understanding historical and contemporary reforms to public education. Indeed, Christou’s main purpose in analyzing the rhetoric of the aforementioned journals is “to weave consistency and order out of the various meanings of progressive education articulated by Ontario’s educational communities, whose members encountered progressivist ideas and used these as a means of revisioning public education” (p. 139).

Although *Progressive Education* helpfully points out that rhetoric of progress is central to 21st century education, the non-rhetorical content of any particular progressivist position exceeds the theoretical scope of Christou’s analysis, which he explicitly limits to “matters of pedagogy and rhetoric, not political or ideological trends of progressivism writ large in provincial or national contexts” (p. 6). Accordingly, he does not concern himself with the methodological problem of accessing the presupposed meaning of the rhetoric of progress. Rather, he concerns himself with stated meanings historically associated with the term. In his words, his methodological goal is to provide “an inclusive model for describing the historical meanings of progressive education” (p. ix). Being “inclusive” here means comparing as many notions of progressivism as are identifiable over a period within a given context such as Christou’s source material; it also it means understanding progressivism as people have defined the concept historically, not as they arguably should have defined it. To analyze the phenomenon’s various meanings with reference to “a working definition that narrows the field to certain terms” is “highly problematic” because, Christou argues, it risks obfuscating history:
Overly narrow definitions of progressive education have added to the conceptual confusion regarding what progressive education is. If each account sets its own parameters as to what is progressive, the entire field of study has become normatively constructed. (Original emphasis, pp. 39-40)

Thus, while *Progressive Education* connects 21st century education’s rhetoric to a historical form of progressivism, it does not ultimately peer beyond what “is” the stated meaning 21st century education, insofar as the latter is an extension of the stated content of the historical form in question.

In contrast, I am interested in the non-rhetorical and normative meaning of progressivist rhetoric as it also “is” in the form of 21st century education. To the extent that its strand of progressivism (historically and currently) conceals this complex meaning within its rhetoric, an alternative, critical framework is essential, I argue, if 21st century education is to be fully understood on its own terms, let alone critiqued. After all, the centrality of progressivist discourse to 21st century education only occurred to me upon reading Christou’s book. Again, it was not readily apparent to me upon reading *21st Century Skills*, which I read first.

Initially, I had difficulty finding further insight because I first looked for it in the overwhelmingly vast area of academic literature on the topic of education, progressive education in particular. My thought process went like this: ‘now that I know that 21st century education presupposes a particular concept of progress, one that wraps itself in the rhetoric of technology-related social adaptation, the next thing to do is to search scholarly literature for a precise description of this concept, which I can then use to make sense of 21st century education as a prerequisite for critiquing it.’ In retrospect, I know
that this way of thinking was misguided for my purposes because it did not stem from my
direct experience of realizing, upon reading Christou, that the very rhetoric of 21st
century education could be used to open up the model to criticism, that the model in other
words contains the means of critiquing it, its uncritical appearance notwithstanding (and
notwithstanding the fact that my realization’s methodological and theoretical implications
exceed Christou’s approach). I still instinctively assumed that I should primarily look to
well-established academic sources of authority for primary direction on how to address
my (originally subjective yet socially implicated) problem with 21st century education’s
uncritical framework as a student intern. Put simply, I did not trust my own experience,
even in light of the insight that occurred to me during my experience of reading Christou.

To be clear, the vastness of academic literature on progressive education is not in
itself a reason for not taking primary direction from it. Christou, for example,
acknowledges that his initially frustrating search for the historical meaning of progressive
education eventually served him well. “The more I read,” he writes, “the less I
understood about the concept” (p. 4). Yet this process “led . . . to the discovery of two
journals, The School and The Canadian School Journal . . .” (p. 139). And these sources
“proved useful resources for mining progressivist rhetoric in the province” (p. 143). In
contrast, I already had my source in advance, along with some direct knowledge of its
content, namely its connection to my experience of being used and confused by 21st
century education reform. To put it another way, I required technical guidance from
academic literature on how to critically analyze 21st century education’s presuppositions,
and even to realize that my main problem with the model was its uncritical framework,
but I did not require guidance toward the main source of my problem. (Ultimately, it was
the suggestion of my supervisor, Dr. Evie Plaice, to write out my first experience of 21st century education as a problem that gave shape to my introductory chapter and with it my realization that model’s uncritical framework was my main problem).

To extend Christou’s analogy, the methodology that I require can be thought of in terms of mining 21st century education’s rhetoric itself – as distinct from its external sources, whether in distant history or in its immediate social context. I base this distinction on the fact that the model’s sources are not necessarily elucidative with regard to the specific contemporaneous meaning of its rhetoric. As mentioned above, Christou’s historical account of progressivism reveals that the rhetoric of progress is central to the model, but it does not focus on non-rhetorical meanings of the term. Similarly, Tremblay traces the term “self-sufficiency” to sixteenth-century state-capitalist practices only to conclude that neoliberal extensions of those practices have become inevitable. What is more, while in theory 21st century education’s presupposed concepts can be found in the reams of literature that precede 21st century education’s spin on self-styled progressive reform, it is possible that there is no preexisting concept of progressivism that adequately explains 21st century education’s stated premise. The model may very well presuppose an original take on progressivism’s general preoccupation with adapting schools to so-called modern life. At the same time, even if its precise presuppositions are entirely unoriginal, there are so many particular versions of progressivism that any effort to align 21st century education with one would merit a separate study. As Cremin (1962) states at the start of The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957:
The reader will search these pages in vain for any capsule definition of progressive education. None exists, and none ever will; for throughout its history progressive education meant different things to different people, and these differences were only compounded by the remarkable diversity of American education. (p. x)

More to the point, even if I could discover the (originally American) model’s presupposed concept of progress via a formal literature search, such a discovery would not advance my methodological goal of using 21st century education’s rhetoric itself to advance my theoretical goals of analyzing and critiquing the model. Again, my overall goal in writing this dissertation is to make sense of my (socially and academically relevant) experience of being used as a student intern in New Brunswick by means of 21st century education’s uncritical rhetoric. My working assumption is that the latter nonetheless contains, at the level of presuppositions, the primary means of critically analyzing this experience. To this end, secondary sources are necessary, but only insofar as they can be connected to both the model’s stated framework and my experience of its oppressive effects.

So, how is it possible to use my initially oppressive experience of 21st century education’s rhetoric as guide to analyzing and critiquing its rhetoric? Eventually, the answer to this question occurred to me while reading and reflecting upon Pedagogy of the Oppressed. (I first encountered Freire’s ideas in one of my few “theory” courses at UNB, but I did not read Pedagogy of the Oppressed until I started to do research for this dissertation).
To begin with, Freire’s concept of *conscientização* is consistent with my experience of becoming aware of 21st century education’s “progressive” content while reading Christou’s book, an experience that constituted the first break-through in terms of ‘solving’ the problem that this dissertation addresses. Freire defines *conscientização* as “the deepening of the attitude of awareness” (p. 109). This deepening occurs, he argues, as people reflect critically on the situation in which they find themselves, motivating themselves to overcome any oppressive component to their situation. Or as translator Myra Bergman Ramos puts it: “The term *conscientização* refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35).

Given that Freire’s concept describes my own experience, it is appropriate to draw on his methodological approach to realizing *conscientização* in order to extend the insight that 21st century education presupposes, among other concepts, a certain notion of progress as “adapting to a changing world.” Thus, it is also appropriate to draw on his overall theoretical approach.

In the opening paragraph to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire affirms his conviction that the universal problem of human beings is “humanization” (p. 44). However, he does not to proceed to analyze the concept at length. Thus, it is worth quoting the summary of the concept that Dale and Hyslop-Marigson (2011) provide in *Paulo Freire: Teaching for Freedom and Transformation: The Philosophical Influences on the Work of Paulo Freire*:

Humanization is the single most important component to Freire’s overall educational program and it is largely indebted to Aristotle’s ontology and rational
essentialism. Aristotle’s philosophy, in every matter from biology to ethics to ontology, was concerned with identifying the respective telos, or final objective of particular entities. A telos, then, most simply defined, is the final purpose of any given entity. Aristotle also viewed the telos as a particular entity’s excellence because it comprised its essence and, therefore, identified the unique quality for which it was primarily designed. . . .

In the case of human beings, Aristotle argued that human excellence was reasoning because it is the primary distinguishing quality of being human. The telos of human action, then, is to reason and reason well, for it is through such reasoning, especially in the moral and political realms (phronesis), that Eudaimonia or human happiness is most likely to be achieved. Eudaimonia is not happiness in the short-lived contemporary sense of some passing euphoria instilled by consumer purchases or sensory fulfillment, but it is a happiness based on a reflective understanding of the world and one’s special place within it. (pp. 78-79)

In short, humanization for Freire necessarily involves reasoning and reasoning well, defined generally as happiness-inducing reflection, whereas dehumanization involves threats to this twofold telos. As Dale and Hyslop-Margison explain with reference to Freire’s critique of “banking education,” which I will discuss in a later chapter, such a dehumanizing act is “an act of violence because it interferes with the human capacity to reason, prevents happiness, or eudaimonia, and therefore denies the possibility of humanization” (p. 79).
Moreover, nominal forms of education are dehumanizing on Freire’s view when they control or otherwise undermine people’s life-affirming capacity to reason for themselves. In Freire’s parlance, such forms are therefore oppressive, death-affirming. To quote from Pedagogy of the Oppressed, “Oppression – overwhelming control – is nourished by love of death, not life” (p. 77).

According to Freire, a central problem with oppressive social realities is that they conceal the fallacious reasoning behind them in order to suppress the critical thinking that is required to reinvent social reality. He argues that a crucial step toward identifying the concepts and values that characterize a given epoch is to identify their material expression, what he calls “themes” (p. 101). In his words, “The concrete representation of many of these ideas, values, concepts, and hopes as well as the obstacles which impede the people’s full humanization, constitutes the themes of that epoch” (p. 101). As I see it, the rhetorical premise of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick – that “education is about adapting to a change world” – constitutes a theme in this sense: it is the concrete representation (one that I personally felt) of a presupposed conceptual framework, along with its attendant values, and so on.

What is one to do with a theme once one has identified it? To understand Freire’s approach to this question, it is necessary to understand his use of Alvaro Vieira Pinto’s concept of “limit-situations” (p. 99). Limit-situations, Freire explains, consist of themes (and the dimensions of reflection and action that they concretely represent) that limit the freedom of humans to achieve their human potential through dialogue but that nonetheless provide the content with which such a dialogue can begin. “Thus,” writes Freire, “it is not the limit-situations in and of themselves which create a climate of
hopelessness, but rather how they are perceived by women and men at a given historical moment: whether they appear as fetters or as insurmountable barriers” (p. 99). It is as themes that they are surmountable through what Freire, citing Pinto, refers to as “‘limit-acts’: those directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the ‘given’” (p. 99). “In the last analysis,” Freire goes on to write, “the themes both contain and are contained in limit-situations; the tasks they imply require limit-acts” (original emphases, p. 102).

To recap the above line of thought, themes that, on their own terms, are inherently dehumanizing can occasion, through limit-acts, humanizing themes. For this reason, Freire calls all themes “generative” in the sense that “(however they are comprehended and whatever action they may evoke) they contain the possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in their turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled” (footnote 19, p. 102). In terms of this study, 21st century education’s uncritical framework (particularly as a reflection of neoliberal reform during the Graham years) is a limit-situation, of which its stated premise, as mentioned, is one theme. Thus, in trying to access and critique 21st century education’s presupposed concepts, this dissertation is a limit-act.

Freire argues that a limit-situation can generate further themes when educators, upon identifying – though dialogue – people’s familiar experiences of oppression (i.e., primary themes), re-presents these experiences within different yet related contexts. He calls these contexts their “thematic universe,” which he describes as follows:

Generative themes can be located in concentric circles [within an epoch], moving from the general to the particular. The broadest epochal unit, which
includes a diversified range of units and sub-units – continental, regional, national, and so forth – contains themes of a universal character. . . .

Within the smaller circles, we find themes and limit-situations characteristic of societies (on the continent or on different continents) which through these themes and limit-situations share historical similarities. . . .

Any given society within the broader epochal unit contains, in addition to the universal, continental, or historically similar themes, its own particular themes, its own limit-situations. Within yet smaller circles, thematic diversifications can be found which are related to the societal whole. These constitute epochal sub-units. (p. 103)

According to Freire, a local, limiting theme loses its appearance of inevitability in relation to manifestations of it within larger and larger concentric circles. When this happens, the theme is open to new forms reflection and action through which the content that it represents becomes apparent and thereby susceptible to critique. In this way, limit-situations are transformable, humanization is achievable.

Freire elaborates on his methodology with reference to a hypothetical “plan for adult education in a peasant area with a high percentage of illiteracy” (p. 110). As the methodological goal my dissertation does not directly involve the process of dialoguing with people (but instead directly involves the process of accessing and critiquing the presupposed concepts of an oppressive framework in the hope of contributing to dialogue), I will not go over this elaboration here (though I will return to the historical context to Freire’s approach in a later chapter). Suffice it to say, this technical difference does not mean that Freire’s methodology is any less insightful for my purposes, contrary
to Joseph Betz’s (1992) following comment in “Paulo Freire and John Dewey”:

How does this educational practice [of Freire] compare with Dewey’s? This education only proceeds with the group; Dewey’s can well proceed with individuals studying alone though the aim is always to connect their powers with those of others. (p. 121)

As discussed, Freire’s approach connects to mine in two main ways. First, it is consistent with my revelatory experience of reading Christou, thereby providing further methodological insight. Second, it reminds me of the aesthetic concept of defamiliarization, whereby art – and any art-like experiences in general – can make familiar experiences seem unfamiliar, opening them up to reconsideration.

In Freirean terms, then, Christou’s book effectively functioned for me as a defamiliarizing concentric circle in which the theme that is 21st century education’s uncritical, closed framework first became open to me, revealing the connection between the model and an historical account of progressivism. To state the obvious, though, it is one thing to realize that the rhetoric of “progress” is a point of entry to 21st century education’s presupposed concepts; it is another thing to access the presupposed concepts themselves and to critique them. While the connection between my abovementioned experience and Freire’s concept of conscientização could support a case for using Freire’s overall theoretical framework as the primary means of critically analyzing the model, such a case would not address my goal of critically analyzing the model on its own stated terms. That is, though Freire helps to explain my experience of the model as a problem, he is not explicitly invoked in either 21st Century Skills or NB3-21C. Insofar as
the latter are resistant to outside criticism in practice, it is necessary to begin the process of critical analysis from within its uncritical framework.

The model’s terms include a passing reference to philosophy of education in *21st Century Skills*. Trilling and Fadel frame their notions of questioning and problem-posing as follows: “Philosophers, education theorists, and thought leaders from Confucius to Socrates, and Plato to John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, Seymour Papert, and others have placed questioning and inquiry at the heart of learning and understanding” (p. 90). Presumably, then, 21st century education’s presupposed concepts are consistent with the works of these thinkers or, at the very least, their works can be used to question/problematize the model’s stated content. Thus, in Chapters 6 and 7, I will consider whether or not 21st century education’s stated premise is at all consistent with two of the many works of philosophy of education that the latter quotation effectively invokes: *The Republic* of Plato and Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. In Freirean terms, I will use these texts as concentric circles in which to consider the theme of social adaptation that is 21st century education’s stated premise. Although the model does not explicitly invoke Freire’s work, the former does appropriate many of the critical concepts that can be found in the latter, such as “critical thinking, “problem-posing” education, and respect for students’ interests, what 21st century education rhetorically refers to as child/student-centredness. Thus, in Chapter 8, I will use *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* itself as a concentric circle.

In sum, the next three chapters (6-8) will explore the stated premise of 21st century education against the backdrop of *The Republic, Democracy and Education*, and further concepts from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The purpose in doing so is threefold:
(1) to defamiliarize the uncritical premise of 21st century education by putting it in the critical contexts of these texts; (2) to consider the extent to which The Republic and Democracy and Education, in addition to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, help to access the model’s presupposed concepts; and (3) to derive a set of critical concepts from these texts, given their direct/indirect connection to the model’s stated premise and my experience of being confused by it, in order to critique the model’s presupposed concepts on its terms once they are accessed. I conclude that all three texts, in different ways, are helpful but ultimately insufficient means of accessing the specific presuppositions of 21st century education. Thus, in Chapter 9, I access this meaning as precisely as possible, first by using Christou’s analysis to add the rhetoric of “democracy” and “justice” to his observation that the model is an extension of an historical notion of “progress,” then by examining the implied meaning of these terms in 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C. I conclude Chapter 9 with a critique of the presupposed meaning of 21st century education using a set of critical concepts derived from Plato, Dewey, and Freire.

Before I proceed, it is necessary to highlight a critical concern to which I will return in my discussions of The Republic, Democracy and Education, and Pedagogy of the Oppressed. That is, each of these texts, in similar and different ways, notwithstanding their respective critical insights, is exclusionary to one degree or another. In The Republic, Plato provides insights into formal philosophy, including pedagogical means of opening up formal philosophy to people who are not formally educated in the subject, yet he bases his dialogue on an exclusionary notion of civilization, one that falsely implies that “justice” includes such dehumanizing practices as sexism, racism, slavery. Similarly, in Democracy and Education, Dewey develops potentially humanistic
ideas that are implicit in his liberal democratic society, yet he assumes that liberal
democracies are inherently superior to all other societies, thereby repeating Plato’s
exclusionary notion of civilization. And in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire affirms
the humanistic principle that human beings who are dehumanized must ultimately teach
themselves and others how to overcome oppression, yet his distinction between
oppressed and oppressors contains exclusionary assumptions too (e.g., its binary form
occludes oppressive experiences of traditional gender and/or sex categories).

I am also arguing that Plato, Dewey, and Freire respectively privilege, in the texts
under consideration, formal philosophy, formal education of dominant social structures,
and immediate experience as sources of knowledge. If my argument holds, The Republic
tends to discount the educative value of social structures and immediate experience,
except as means of advancing philosophical abstractions; Democracy and Education
tends to discount forms of education and even experience (contrary to a common and not
incorrect understanding of Dewey as promoting experience-based education), except
insofar as they are conducive to dominant society; and Pedagogy of the Oppressed tends
to discount forms of formal education and social structures, except insofar as they can be
used to overcome oppression as he defines it in binary terms, based on his experience as
an educator in Brazil.

To be clear, in pointing out the above conceptual and moral failings, I am not
therefore arguing that the three works under consideration lack conceptual and moral
insights. The very fact that all three texts recognize sources of knowledge other than the
sources that they respectively privilege can be used, I will argue, to extend critical lines
of thought that these texts otherwise curtail. In particular, I will eventually use the
general categories of formal education, social structures, and immediate experience (as these are common to all three texts) to critique the presupposed concepts of 21st century education, whose uncritical framework implies that formal education, social structures, and immediate experience are all “about adapting to a changing world” that is fundamentally state-capitalist. Moreover, when considered together, as a critical backdrop to 21st century education’s presuppositions (the specifics of which I will access in Chapter 9), *The Republic, Democracy and Education*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* at the very least expose the falsehood – in terms that are internally consistent with 21st century education – that capital accumulation is an ideal goal for all of humanity. What is more, in this manner, each text can be used to advance the principle that all sources of knowledge must be respected to humanize education, particularly forms of education that currently take direction from or are otherwise consistent with 21st century education.
Chapter 6: *The Republic* as a Concentric Circle

In this chapter, I use *The Republic* as a concentric circle in which to put the theme that is the oppressive framework of 21st century education. In doing so, my immediate goal is twofold. First, I seek to defamiliarize the framework’s self-suggested exemption from criticism by showing how its self-identification with Plato is criticizable. Second, I consider the extent to which *The Republic* provides any additional methodological insight into the problem of accessing and critiquing the presupposed concepts of 21st century education.

Toward the above goals, this chapter comprises five sections. First, I briefly address the dialogue’s historical context and its own argumentative context, whereby it can be read as a critique of Athenian democracy. Second and third, I outline Plato’s “noble falsehood” in the context of the dialogue itself and subsequently point out two of its purposes therein (i.e., in general terms, pedagogy and philosophy). Fourth, I critique two liberal democratic positions on *The Republic*, namely John Wild’s defence of the dialogue and Karl Popper’s critique of it. Fifth, I consider 21st century as hybrid form of sophistry and Platonism. Put simply, I argue that 21st century education reflects both critical and uncritical aspects of *The Republic*, rendering it an insufficient, though a partly helpful, means of critically analyzing the model.

6.1) *The Republic* as a philosophical critique of Athenian democracy

Above all, on its terms at least, *The Republic* is a philosophical work about the nature of justice, which Plato defines as philosophically grounded self-control and social order. In his words, “so far as the mere [universal] form of justice is concerned, the just

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man will in no way differ from the just city” (p. 115). The latter occurs when every occupational class on which a city depends for its survival “tends to what belongs to it, each doing its own work in the city” (p. 115). The former involves each citizen’s “internal management of his soul, his truest self and his truest possessions” (p. 125). Or as Duncan (1990) summarizes Plato’s definition: “Justice is, indeed, a matter of correct order and harmony, whether of the city or of the soul” (p. 1321).

Presently, I will elaborate on Plato’s definition as it relates to his philosophy of education as outlined in The Republic, in order to consider the extent to which The Republic can be used to access and critique the presupposed concepts of 21st century education. But before I do, I should emphasize, it is important to avoid reading too much into his discussion of education or any of the various topics through which he advances his definition of justice. As Duncan maintains: “All the discussions of art, music, geometry, politics, leadership, cities, food, and so on are but constructs to facilitate [the dialogue’s philosophical] project” (p. 1317). Still, one can identify in these discussions certain connections between Plato’s concept of justice and his views on other subjects. Notably, Plato’s concept is connected to the sophist concept of justice of day as he understood it.

Although The Republic is primarily a philosophical work, it can also be read as a critique of Athenian society in the fourth century BCE.23 It takes the form of a dialogue between Socrates and a group of Athenian men on the outskirts of Athens during a

23 According to my copy of the dialogue, it was written at some point around 386-367 BCE.
religious festival. Several preliminary definitions of justice are considered, but it is the socially prevalent position of Thrasymachus that the dialogue engages the most. As Lindsay (1906) observes, Thrasymachus is “the sophist” in the dialogue, “the representative of the most modern school of thought” (xxxix).

Joseph Vogt (1965/1975) observes in *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* that historical sophists were actually more critical of Greek society than Plato suggests. Vogt writes, “They contrasted *physis* with *noms*, natural with artificial rules, and some, like Hippias, stated that slavery constituted an infringement of natural justice” (p. 31). Indeed, Vogt argues, *The Republic* is one among many Platonist, anti-sophist dialogues that condone slavery:

> Slaves are mentioned several times in the description of the different classes of the ideal community in the *Republic*. Although slaves are not mentioned in the description of primeval Athens it is not explicitly stated that slavery is to be abolished. In *Laws*, finally, the position of slaves in civil society and sacred law is described in terms similar to Attic law; yet some of the particular provisions made by Plato are stricter than the legal requirements current at that time. Perhaps this can be explained in the context of Plato’s desire to return to a more primitive age; but in the last analysis this intensification of the distinct status of slaves must be based on the conviction that certain kinds of human beings are naturally inferior. (p. 33)

If Vogt’s historical analysis holds, it follows that 21st century education, in associating itself with Platonist philosophy, may presuppose the false belief that slavery and its racist implications are not only justifiable but examples of true justice. It also follows from
Vogt’s argument that *The Republic* is decidedly not a source of moral insight into critiquing Neo-Platonism in neoliberal school reform models generally. Alternatively, if Vogt overlooks challenges to his argument, 21st century education’s self-identification with Plato may open up the model’s uncritical form to internally consistent criticism and, by extension, to forms of criticism that the model’s rhetoric otherwise risks framing as external to its inner “balance,” and so on.

To restate the argument that I am making in this chapter, Plato’s momentary silence on the topic of slavery – in the context of what Vogt calls “the description of primeval Athens” in *The Republic* – is one of many possible points of contact between the dialogue’s internally critical form and forms of criticism that its internal logic excludes. (Other points of contact that I will discuss are the pedagogical and philosophical functions of the noble falsehood and Plato’s recognition of the educative character of immediate experience, existing social structures, and formal education, notwithstanding the fact that he problematically privileges the latter in the end). In other words, it is more than valid to conclude that the dialogue’s original, familiar form is irredeemably a slave-condoning product of a slave-society that ultimately considered itself as Civilization incarnate, discursively framing the rest of humanity as inferior and therefore enslaveable, consistent with Vogt’s argument. But it is nonetheless possible, beginning with a basic act of the imagination, to extend lines of thoughts in *The Republic* in ways that disrupt its otherwise exclusionary form. To this end, I begin with Plato’s critique of sophistry.

What is the basic reasoning behind sophistry as depicted in *The Republic*? Lindsay summarizes Thrasyphasus’s position as follows:

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Justice is not worth defining, because just people are either dupes or cowards.
The ruler rules because he is unjust, and injustice is virtue and wisdom, strength
and happiness. All men admit that this is the case with the successful villain, who
is not hampered in his pursuit of happiness by being the dupe of moral
conventions, and who is strong and clever enough to use other people for his own
ends. (p. xl)

In contrast, Plato famously concludes that injustice, so defined, actually entails
unhappiness, whereas the concept of justice that he defends entails happiness, whether it
is realized at the level of the individual or society.

Although Thrasymachus’s ultimate position on justice is that it “is not worth
defining,” he initially tries to define it as whatever serves the self-interests of the
powerful. He gives up this definition in irritation after Socrates, challenging its rational
basis, argues that the exercising of power should be limited, by definition, to serving the
less powerful or powerless. In failing to provide a good argument for his real belief in
injustice, though, Thrasymachus represents another challenge. Moreover, the main
problem with sophistry, as Plato represents it in The Republic, is not that it contradicts the
belief that justice entails happiness. Rather, the problem is that sophistry rhetorically
places itself above criticism. The following exchange between Socrates and
Thrasymachus is worth quoting because it illustrates the problem in question:

‘I understand,’ I said [to Thrasymachus], ‘that that is what you mean, but I
marvelled that you should class injustice with virtue and wisdom and justice with
their opposites.’

‘Well, that is exactly what I do.’
‘This is a much more stubborn position,’ I said, ‘and it is hard to know what to say to it. For if you had said that injustice is profitable, but admitted that it is a vice and evil, as certain people do, then we should have had something to say in accordance with ordinary notions about it; but now it is evident that you will say that it is also beautiful and strong, and you will give it all the attributes which we used to give to justice, since you have actually dared to class it with virtue and wisdom.’

‘You are a most true prophet,’ he said.

‘Nevertheless,’ I said, ‘I must not shrink if I may take it that this is your real opinion, but must take thought and attack the argument; for I imagine, Thrasymachus, that you are really not scoffing, but are saying what is your opinion of the truth.’

‘What difference does it make to you,’ he said, ‘whether this is my real opinion or not? Can you refute the argument?’ (pp. 24–25)

The question raises another that remains relevant to this day. That is, how is it possible to critique (let alone refute) an argument whose very terms imply immunity from criticism? In terms of the question that this dissertation asks, how is it possible to know the presupposed meaning of 21st century education when the model’s rhetoric effectively distracts from and conceals this meaning?

Plato’s approach to critiquing sophistry, as defined, is to consider the extent to which it is true, notwithstanding its lack of openness to criticism. Although Socrates initially concludes that Thrasymachus’s position must be untrue by reasoning that goodness and justice are conceptually linked, he tells Thrasymachus that he does not
want “to settle the matter in such an off-hand way” (p. 28). Instead, accepting
Thrasymachus’s position for the sake of argument, he asks him if “a city, or an army, or a
band of robbers or thieves, or any other company which pursue some unjust end in
common, would be able to effect anything if they were unjust to one another?” (p. 28).
Thrasymachus replies that the unjust society would not be effective in achieving its
unjust goals if its members were unjust to each other, and he does not dispute Socrates’s
reasoning “that injustice and hatred make men quarrel and fight with one another, while
justice makes them friendly and of one mind” (p. 28).

The above line of thought leads to a provisional definition of justice as the
rational cause of collective activity. As Socrates says to Thrasymachus:

And when we say that any vigorous joint action is the work of unjust men, our
language is not altogether accurate. If they had been thoroughly unjust, they
could not have kept their hands off one and other. Clearly they must have
possessed justice of a sort, enough to keep them from exercising their injustice
against each other at the same time as on their victims. They did what they did by
reason of their justice, and their injustice partially disabled them in the pursuit of
their unjust purposes. For the thorough villains who are perfectly unjust, are also
perfectly incapable of action. That I see to be true . . . (p. 29)

If this notion of justice holds, it follows that any good that appears to come from injustice
is really the outcome of a trace of justice, contrary to Thrasymachus’s assertion. In this
way, Plato begins to clear the obstacle that “the most modern school of thought” presents
to his philosophical interest in defining justice universally.
No sooner does Plato clear the above ground than another sophist obstacle presents itself. That is, as Socrates’s interlocutors in effect ask, how can one know that a philosophical argument for justice is not merely another form of sophistry? To answer this question, Plato uses the rhetorical devices of sophistry to imagine a series of cities founded on different constitutions as a means of comparing the level of happiness of their respective citizens and to illustrate his position that the philosophical foundation of justice can only really be known by a true philosopher, defined as someone who is both naturally inclined to study philosophy and who has actually studied it. (Technically, Plato believes that women are just as natural at philosophy as men, though his ideal philosopher is clearly a man, a point to which I will return critically). One of Plato’s most familiar devices is the noble lie, which Lindsay translates as the “noble falsehood.” Thus, I will consider the extent to which 21st century education can be deemed Platonist as a kind of noble lie (as the model is at the very least a lie of some kind inasmuch as it presents itself as universally acceptable when it is not). Given that the model provides no conceptual context to its self-identification with Plato, it is first necessary to outline the function of the noble lie in the context of *The Republic.*

6.2) Plato’s “noble falsehood”

As a way into defending the inherent value of justice, Plato first imagines, through his characterization of Socrates, what a naturally just city would look like. He does so on the assumption that justice, as an individual and social phenomenon, “may exist in greater proportions in the greater space, and be easier to discover [therein]” (p. 44). He observes that no individual can survive without basic support, including other
human beings, whom Plato describes in patriarchal terms: “. . . men, being in want of many things, gather into one settlement many partners and helpers; one taking to himself one man, and another, to satisfy their diverse needs, and to this common settlement we give the name of city” (p. 44). Based on the primary needs that he identifies, namely food and shelter, he reasons that his city would only include a few primary occupations, such as farming and carpentry, and a few secondary occupations, such as mercantilism and shop-keeping in order to trade and sell products on both external and domestic markets. He determines that all occupations in this “city of bare necessity” would reflect “the principle . . . of one man one trade” (p. 45) on the grounds that “no two of us are by nature altogether alike” (p. 45). The idea is that for every necessary social occupation there are individuals who are naturally capable of performing it better than others. The realization of this idea is supposed to entail every member of society being of service to the city while benefiting from the services of others. To give a few examples, the merchants in the city use its surplus of products to buy products abroad that the city needs but cannot make (i.e., the surplus is not used to enrich the merchants alone); in contrast to Ancient Athens, the city that Plato imagines is based on paid rather than slave labour; also in contrast to his actual society, it is plausible to interpret the city as including women as citizens, although as I will discuss this interpretation requires support from subsequent parts of the dialogue because Plato does not explicitly mention women in the context of the city in question.

So what is the cause of an unhealthy society according to Plato? In the context of the dialogue, Glaucon (who takes up Thrasymachus’s position for the sake of argument) believes that the “city of bare necessity” would produce unhappy citizens without
“couches to lie on and tables to eat from, and the ordinary dishes and desserts of modern life” (p. 48). Socrates obliges him by shifting the discussion to a second city, the foundation of which is identical to the first except for the addition of luxury, hence Plato names it the “luxurious city” (p. 48). Before he continues, however, he states his conviction that the first city is “the one true one, what we may call the city of health” (p. 49). In contrast, he states that the second city, by producing more than it needs to survive, “is suffering from an inflammation” (p. 49).

The dialogue’s shift from the first to the second city leads to a couple of points that in turn lead to Plato’s concept of formal education. First, the corollary of Plato’s second city is war. In his view, once its citizens exhaust their common resources, the desire for luxury will compel them to steal resources from other cities. Second, war, as he sees it, requires guardians who are both “spirited” and “gentle” in nature (p. 51). His reasons for this requirement are that the guardians must be able to defend the city from invasion but they should not rule it on their own by force, otherwise “they will prevent the enemy from destroying the city by doing it first themselves” (p. 51). To resolve this apparent contradiction in the nature of the guardians, Plato deems formal education necessary. The reasons that he gives are that the guardians must learn both the technical knowledge required for warfare and the difference between friend and foe. Thus, on top of being naturally capable of spiritedness and gentleness, the guardians “must be by nature [like dogs, in Plato’s view] philosophical and fond of learning” (p. 53).

How can formal education turn people from ignorance to knowledge, from the sensory indulgence of luxury to rational self-control and social order? In theory, Plato’s primary education system provides students true forms of healthy living to imitate
through two subject areas. The first is music, which consists of stories and songs. Given their power to make anything appear good, Plato argues that they must idealize virtuous behaviour, so that the future guardians “imitate from childhood subjects befitting their vocation” (p. 73). The second subject area, gymnastics, is supposed to promote students’ physical health while testing their capability of being virtuous under a variety of circumstances. Only those who excel in both areas are assumed to be suited for guarding the city. Upon graduating, they proceed to advanced studies to determine whether they are to become guardians or the guardians’ auxiliaries. Everyone else is assigned one of the other occupations on which the city depends. In this way, the system is meant to socialize students for particular roles within the second city but in keeping with the life principle that the first city symbolizes.

It is in this context that Plato devises his “noble falsehood.” With regard to the second city, its purpose is to secure the loyalty of citizens to their assigned occupations by instilling in them a shared sense of origin and life-affirming purpose. According to the falsehood, students’ early education was just a dream that occurred underground while they were being formed out of the source of life, what Plato describes as “this earth, their mother” (p. 94). They were delivered aboveground, the story goes, once they were prepared to work together in order to protect life in general: “Now, therefore, they must watch over the land in which they dwell, as their mother and nurse, and defend her against all invaders, and look upon the other cities as their brothers and children of the same soil” (p. 94). Each citizen is told that true guardians have golden souls, auxiliaries have silver souls, and that every other citizen’s soul consists of either iron or copper.
Based on this symbolism, the guardians deserve to be obeyed, as long as they actually guard the city and do not abuse their power. For example, the guardians are not allowed to pass on their power to their children for the sake of hereditary rule, but must grant power to any citizen whose soul has gold in it.

Once the second city is established with the aid of the noble falsehood, the dialogue proceeds to address the question of justice and its relationship to life more directly. In order to see how the lie relates to the rest of the dialogue, it is helpful to summarize the latter, which can be broken down into four main components.

First, Plato concludes that social justice consists of rule by golden natures, protection by silver natures, and sustenance by iron and copper natures, and that such a social order reflects justice at the level of each citizen’s nature or “soul.” The latter, he argues, similarly comprises three parts: “the rational part” (p. 121), “the irrational and desiring part” (p. 121), and “spiritedness” (p. 122), or the courage to meet the rational demands of the soul and society. In theory, the rational part allows all citizens to know informally when they are truly living a just life. That is, the rational part does not merely allow the philosophically inclined citizens to pursue formal knowledge of justice. Within the more spirited and materially minded citizens it allows them to pursue the knowledge that they require, respectively, to protect their society and to sustain it physically.

After outlining justice in the abstract, Plato details his formal philosophy system without which his metaphorical first and second cities would be formally indistinguishable from sophistry. In brief, he reasons that particular, finite things that share a common form really are reflections of one universal, unchanging Form. The ultimate task of philosophy, he maintains, is to know “the Form of the good” (p. 192).
Once philosophers have accessed this form, his theory goes, they are in the best position to legislate in accordance with it.

Next, Plato compares his philosophical city to four other social forms: *timocracy*, *oligarchy*, (sophist) *democracy*, and *tyranny*. In short, he respectively defines these forms as the rule of the military, the wealthy, working people, and one tyrant. More importantly, however, he uses his depiction of each of these systems to illustrate his position that philosophically grounded social justice entails individual and collective happiness and that Thrasymachus’s sophistic definition of justice entails the opposite. At one end of the spectrum, under philosophical rule, everyone is in principle free to pursue personal interests on the philosophically argued grounds that the system actually aligns everyone’s individual nature with a socially necessary occupation; furthermore, this principle is meant to be constantly approached with each advancement in the philosophical knowledge of the rulers, whose duty is to legislate in accordance with such knowledge. In contrast, at the other end of the spectrum, under tyranny, no one, not even the tyrant, is truly free to pursue personal interests on the grounds that freedom from the rational rule of law is synonymous with subordination to immediate desires, whether at the level of the “soul” or society.

Finally, Plato concludes the dialogue by criticizing art and outlining his concept of immortality. Although his criticism of art can be interpreted as subordinating it to philosophy, he at least welcomes counterarguments: “Nevertheless, let us state that if the pleasure-producing poetry and imitation has any arguments to show that she is in her right place in a well-government city, we shall be very glad to receive her back again” (p.
In his preface to *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, Gilbert Murray (1920) writes, “Aristotle certainly knew the passage, and it looks as if his treatise on poetry was an answer to Plato’s challenge” (p. 3). As discussed, Freire’s methodology – which I am applying here – has its philosophical roots in Aristotelianism.

6.3) The “noble falsehood” as pedagogy and philosophy

In the context of *The Republic*, a falsehood is only noble if it is a necessary means of conveying a truth. To repeat, the truth that Plato seeks to convey is the inherent goodness of justice. Thus, the falsehood’s function is at least twofold.

First, it is a pedagogical means of translating Plato’s philosophical argument into sophist terms to render it intelligible to more people within his social context. Through his depiction of the exchange between Thrasymachus and Socrates, Plato reveals the function of analogies, metaphors, and other technical falsehoods when dialoguing with people who cannot immediately understand the claim in formally precise terms. As Wild explains in terms of answering the questions of young children: “When they ask, we usually give them some concrete story or picture, which may convey something of the truth to them, but certainly not the clear, abstract truth as we understand it” (p. 118).

Second, the falsehood is also, thereby, a philosophical means of redirecting sophist thought toward his philosophical alternative. In respecting the rationality of sophists like Thrasymachus by considering the extent to which their perspective on

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24 Technically, Murray quotes lines (although from the same general passage) that follow the ones I quote above.
justice is true, Plato is compelled to think in terms that are not absolutely true to his own way of thinking. But he does so in a way that invites thinking on his own terms, while inviting criticism too. Wild points out, for example, that Plato’s distinction between the noble falsehood and outright (ignoble) lying permits criticism. “If, as Popper supposes,” he writes, “the guardians were using this myth as political propaganda to support their own unjust rule, they would be guilty, on Plato’s view, of ignorance and self-deception concerning the most important matters – the lie of the soul” (p. 119).

6.4) A critique of two liberal considerations of The Republic

Wild, of course, is referring to Karl Popper’s (1943/1966) critique of Plato in The Open Society and Its Enemies, specifically its first volume, “The Spell of Plato.” Writing during the height of Nazi totalitarianism, Popper argues that Plato’s cleverness as a philosopher has mesmerized his followers, who fail to believe as Popper does “that Plato’s political programme, far from being morally superior to totalitarianism, is fundamentally identical with it” (p. 86). As he goes on to argue:

What did Plato mean by ‘justice’? I assert that in the Republic he used the term ‘just’ as a synonym for ‘that which is in the interest of the best state.’ And what is in the interest of this best state? To arrest all change, by the maintenance of a rigid class division and class rule. If I am right in this interpretation, then we should have to say that Plato’s demand for justice leaves his political programme the level of totalitarianism; and we should have to conclude that we must guard against the danger of being impressed by mere words. (p. 89)
Among the examples that Popper gives is the eugenics of Plato’s philosopher kings, who try to ensure that only people with “golden” natures mate with each other after the establishment of the philosophically grounded city. Popper argues that the programme is based on “racialism,” which he defines, in effect, as any political system that grants power to people who consider themselves superior in terms of race. Hence he argues that for Plato “it is important that the master class should feel as one superior master race” (p. 51).

In his defense of Plato, Wild takes issue with among other things Popper’s interpretation of “race”:

We may grant that the metals [in Plato’s noble falsehood] refer to what Plato held to be hereditary tendencies toward greater or less intelligence. But from this it does not follow that these differences are racial. Racial traits are hereditary, but all hereditary traits are not racial.

According to Popper, the purpose of the myth is to emphasize these differences, and to strengthen ‘the rule of the master race.’ As a matter of fact, Plato makes it quite clear that the purpose is rather that of emphasizing a unity of race, so far as race means common ancestry, and thus of eliciting a loyalty to the whole community which transcends differences of intelligence and social function. (p. 119)

On this view, moreover, “race” ultimately means ‘the human race,’ as all humans biologically share a “common ancestry.”

As I see it, Popper and Wild both make plausible arguments with reference to The Republic. Problematically, however, both philosophers repeat Plato’s civilized-
uncivilized binary. As such, as I argue below, their above comments on the subject of race, though coherent with respect to their respective arguments, are effectively (though not necessarily consciously) racist because they are predicated on the exclusion of actual people – indeed, most of humanity – whom they categorize as ‘uncivilized.’ George Elliot Clarke (2005) depicts the racist character of such binary thinking as follows in his novel *George & Rue*:

As Silver [a WWII veteran and cab driver in Fredericton in 1949] saw it, the centuries-misplaced and ocean-displaced Negroes, stranded in New Brunswick since 1783, had a problem with *Civilization*, its culture of taxes and jails, for they dared to love *Freedom* too much, liquor and lovin too much, music and guffaws too much, and were ornery, contrary, and disrespectful. They was natchally uppity, sassy, seditious, loud. They made poetry only when making fists – or making love. . . . True, Silver regretted slavery, too bad it happened. He don’t think his ancestors were involved in that grotty trade. But even if they had been, so was everybody else. (Original emphases, pp. 118-119)

Recall Žižek’s reasoning that contemporary thought within liberal democratic societies entails four forms of knowledge-based action (i.e., acting pathologically or for pleasure, meeting social norms, reforming social norms, or being compelled to follow a “higher necessity”). In the above passage, Silver without apparently realizing it is racist simply

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25 Space does not allow for a full consideration of the novel, which tells the story of George and Rue Hamilton, cousins of Clarke’s mother, who were hanged for murder in 1949. Suffice it to say, the novel does not merely depict racism. As Clarke explains in a disclaimer that precedes the story, “George and Rufus Hamilton always lived outside boundaries (including knowledge, including history, including archives). They are ‘encompassed’ here only by unrestrained imagination. That is the only truth in this novel, whose English ain’t broken, but ‘blackened.’”
by thinking according to a dominant norm of his society. Similarly, as I will now show, Popper and Wild make racist assumptions simply by discussing the subject of race in *The Republic* from two technically different but commonly liberal democratic perspectives.

Popper’s argument that *The Republic* is totalitarian is plausible because, in a sense, the dialogue is about maintaining an unchanging state that consists of “a rigid class division and class rule.” Even if Plato’s philosopher kings were to use their experience and formal knowledge with the best of intentions, one can imagine how oppressive it would be to live under their constant rule, which may in part explain Plato’s restriction on the imagination in the form of banning poetry from his ideal city. Yet Popper himself restricts the imagination in describing the world in binary terms of “civilization” and its ‘opposite.’ One point of the book, he states, is “to show that this civilization [of his] has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth – the transition from the tribal or ‘closed society,’ with its submission to magical forces, to the ‘open society’ which sets free the critical powers of man” (p. 1). Within this frame, Popper’s problem with “racialism” is not so much with the racist claim to superiority but with the claim’s application to political matters:

. . . I wish to express my belief that personal superiority, whether racial or intellectual or moral or educational, can never establish a claim to political prerogatives, even if such superiority could be ascertained. Most people in civilized countries nowadays admit racial superiority to be a myth; but even if it were an established fact, it should not create special political rights, though it might create special moral responsibilities for the superior persons. (p. 49)
To be clear, Popper does appear to reject the idea of “racial superiority” on a conscious level; nonetheless, within the binary civilized-uncivilized framework of his book, it is at the very least effectively racist to grant, even for the sake of argument, that the idea “could be ascertained” as “an established fact” because this form of thinking falsely implies that self-styled “civilized” people are natural authorities, in this case on the subject of race, excluding from the idea of “civilization” the perspectives of human beings who actually know what it is like to be excluded on racist grounds. It is also untrue and therefore racist to suggest that self-styled “civilized” people are less likely to believe in “racial superiority” than are their ‘uncivilized’ opposites, as is the suggestion that “a myth” in the (liberal) sense of ‘a false belief’ is more akin to ‘uncivilized’ people. As Silver’s thoughts on Civilization in George & Rue illustrate, the notion, in binary form, is itself a false belief, one that carries such falsities as the idea that “Negroes . . . was natchally uppity, sassy, seditious, loud.”

Similarly, the problem with Wild’s interpretation of Plato’s concept of race is that it also contains effectively racist assumptions, just on another level. Wild plausibly argues that the particulars of The Republic, such as its imaginary cities and references to race therein, are not meant to be interpreted as literal political proposals but rather as illustrations of Plato’s philosophical concept of justice. Yet Plato’s belief in Greek “racial superiority” is discernable both in his philosophically grounded city and his

26 Pedagogical exceptions – that is, strategically arguing with racists on their terms for the purpose of persuading them not to be racist – obviously would have to try to disrupt racist logic, such as the civilized-uncivilized binary, not promote it.
concept of universal justice, whether one interprets the philosophically grounded city as a tentative illustration of the concept or as a fixed description of it. Put simply, Wild does not consider the racist sense in which “race” implies that some groups of human beings are naturally superior/inferior to others.

In sum, neither Popper nor Wild is critical of the racist implications of *The Republic* per se. Whereas Popper is technically critical of its presence in Plato’s political proposal for realizing universal justice through a particular “golden” class of Greeks – but not in Plato’s own binary thinking about “civilization” – Wild is critical of Popper for reducing the intended universality of Platonist justice to the particulars of *The Republic* without recognizing the degree to which Popper was correct in criticizing Plato’s depiction of race. In these ways, they both repeat the racism that is implicit in Plato’s dehumanizing distinction between Greek “civilization” and the “barbarous” rest of humanity.

As mentioned, Plato’s first city in *The Republic* – the “city of health” – does not mention slavery or even appear to imply it because it explicitly relies on paid labour (though it does trade with neighbouring cities without mentioning whether or not their labourers are paid). Thus, the city can be interpreted as a trace of humanistic inclusivity within the dialogue’s otherwise exclusionary form. However, the “city of health” still remains exclusionary. Notably, it does not (in Lindsay’s translation at least) mention women. The philosophically grounded city does include women, but in sexist terms: “Women naturally participate in all occupations,” Plato states, “and so do men; but in all women are weaker than men” (p. 136). It follows that the life-affirming standard that the
latter city is supposed to restore may not include an internal critique of the standard’s exclusionary dimensions and effects.

Insofar as Plato’s philosophers sincerely search for knowledge, it also follows that they are at least theoretically open to being educated about sexism, racism, and other exclusionary traits of their society. What is more, insofar as the knowledge that they use is amendable in this way, it can be regarded – not unlike a liberal democratic constitution – as a mechanism for re-writing its laws and for revising its education system so as to exclude its exclusionary traits. For this reason, *The Republic* can be interpreted as doing justice to at least some general commonalities between human beings, in this case humans’ interests in being able to change their society through one conception of education or another. Along this line of thought, then, the noble lie and other parts of the dialogue can be viewed as partially successful (though ultimately failed) attempts to realize the first city’s standard both pedagogically and philosophically. The problem with this line of thought is that it is essentially liberal democratic, which contains exclusionary elements, as the arguments of Popper and Wild confirm.\(^{27}\) In this sense, it is at least historically connected to neoliberal concepts of education such as 21st century education.

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\(^{27}\) Uday S. Mehta (1990) argues in “Liberal Strategies of Exclusion” that liberalism is actually exclusionary at the level of theory, its stated assertions notwithstanding. In her words: “The universalistic reach of liberalism derives from the capacities that it identifies with human nature and from the presumption, which it encourages, that these capacities are sufficient and not merely necessary for an individual’s political inclusion. It encourages this presumption by giving a specifically political significance to human nature. Being born equal, free, and rational, birth – notwithstanding its various uncertain potentialities – becomes the moment of an assured political identity. That long tutelage through which Plato’s guardians acquired their political spurs and the revolutions through which in de Tocqueville’s words nations and individuals ‘became equal’ is in Locke’s ostensible vision compressed into the moment of our birth. However, what is
Drawing on Žižek’s methodology, though, is there any unfamiliar or unconventional way of reading *The Republic* that can be used to critique liberal/neoliberal notions? Discussed below, I detect three sources of knowledge in *The Republic*: immediate personal experiences, existing social structures, and formally educated experience. Although the dialogue clearly privileges the latter, all three sources are implicit in Plato’s ideal philosopher and, by extension, his ideal notion of social justice; furthermore, traces of each source are discernable in his descriptions of (in his view) imperfect thinkers and corresponding social situations. In the next chapter, I will discuss John Dewey’s concept of democratic education and liberal democracy, which can be interpreted as extending Plato’s ideal to existing social structures. And in my chapter on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I will discuss Freire’s premise that overcoming oppression is a necessary condition to realizing humanization, which can be interpreted as the inverse of Plato’s ideal. That is, though Freire does not make this comparison, on his philosophy the chained cave dwellers of Plato’s analogy (summarized below) are the most knowledgeable about how to liberate themselves because they have immediate knowledge of what it is like to be chained.

With regard to personal experience, the dialogue begins with Socrates asking the elderly Cephalus for his thoughts on life. As Socrates puts it, “very old men . . . have

 concealed behind the endorsement of these universal capacities are the specific cultural and psychological conditions woven in as preconditions for the actualization of these capacities. Liberal exclusion works by modulating the distance between the interstices of human capacities and the conditions for their political effectivity. It is the content between these interstices that settles boundaries between who is included and who is not” (original emphasis, pp. 429-430). As I see it, Popper’s and Wild’s common (liberal) view of civilization (inherited in part from Plato) is an example of the exclusionary content to which Mehta is referring.
gone before us along a road which we must all travel in our turn, and it is good that we should ask them of the nature of that road, whether it be rough and difficult, or easy and smooth” (p. 2).

In response to a question from Socrates, Cephalus claims to have made most of his wealth, which allows Plato to introduce the idea that justice is discernable in individual natures as much as it is in social arrangements or philosophical abstractions:

‘I asked,’ I said, ‘because you seemed to me not excessively fond of money, and that is usually the case with men who have not made it. But those who have made their money are twice as much attached to it as others; for as poets love their poems and fathers their children, just so money-makers value their money, not only for its uses, as other people do, but because it is their own production. They are disagreeable for people to meet for that reason: they have no praise for anything but riches.’ (pp. 3-4)

Moreover, this passage anticipates the idea behind Plato’s first city that justice is observable in its purest form when productive activity is both an intrinsic expression of a person’s nature and intrinsically useful to other people. It also anticipates Plato’s argument, implicit in his second city, that wealth production is a social ill when it is merely a luxurious end in itself, particularly for wealth-producers. (The above assumption that actual wealth-producers “are disagreeable” is nonetheless problematic; it probably has much to do with Plato’s aristocratic upbringing in a slave society, wherein he had the social privilege of contemplating things other than riches because he was already rich from the forced labour of other human beings).
It is worth noting that Cephalus introduces the topic of injustice when, in response to another question from Socrates, he states his opinion that wealth is most advantageous when it allows the wealthy to pay any debt before they die, in order to avoid being punished in Hades. However, Cephalus quickly loses interest in the topic once he is pressed for a definition of justice that does not only reflect his self-perceived interests as a wealthy member of society. As Socrates points out, the latter definition is inadequate because it fails to account for the folly of repaying some debts, giving the example of returning borrowed weapons to a friend who has become “mad” (p. 5). On one level, the example problematically conflates violence with the overall notion of madness. But insofar as “mad” is limited to meaning ‘violently angry,’ the example shows Cephalus’s experience (and individual experience in general) to be a necessary but insufficient source of authority, in this case on the subjects of justice and injustice.

While Cephalus demonstrates one limit of individual experience as a source of authority, this source is nonetheless, in a certain respect, Plato’s ideal. The citizens of his first city naturally pursue their personal interests in ways that simultaneously benefit the entire city without disturbing neighbouring cities. Also, toward the end of the dialogue, his authentic philosopher (a man) willingly chooses to live a just life even if he cannot legislatively compel others to live according to the same standard. Along the same lines, Plato concludes that the tyrant who rules society according to Thrasymachus’s standard is the unhappiest person imaginable, tyrannized by an almost total lack of self-control, including over the fear of being overthrown. Needless to say, the type of individual experience that Plato idealizes here is conspicuously exclusionary. My point here is
simply that his privileging of formal knowledge does not thereby totally exclude actual individual experience from his notion of what is educative.

Plato also idealizes his second source of authority – society – in a sense. After all, he views humans as both individual and social beings. On this view, every personal experience in some way is social and visa-versa, whether intentionally or not. His intended interest in defining justice and in demonstrating its inherent goodness is to advance a society in which every member may know the happiness of pursuing personal interests for each member’s benefit. Insofar as Thrasymachus represents a dominant worldview in Athenian society, it makes sense for the dialogue to engage this worldview pedagogically, in an attempt to critique it both on its terms, so as to persuade its proponents that their worldview is faulty, and against the standard of justice that is otherwise the dialogue’s main topic, in order to ground persuasion in truth.

Ultimately, The Republic privileges the authority of formal educational experiences. Glaucon’s interest in luxury represents the fact that human beings are technically free to make both good and bad choices, whether for themselves as individuals or in the place of others. According to Plato’s image of the ideal city, people who are by nature farmers or merchants make a bad choice when they pursue a political or military career. By the same token, their society suffers because its nominal farmers and merchants will be less suited to their occupations, while it will be ruled and defended by people who are likewise unqualified. Once more, the point of his formal education system is to sort out the natures of each citizen and to assign everyone a corresponding occupation.
To encapsulate his theory of education, and to illustrate the status of formal thought therein, Plato uses two main figurative devices. The first is his famous line simile. The way to full knowledge, he says, is like a vertical line that is divided into two main parts, both of which are also divided in two. Each section of the lower part denotes a type of observable reality: shadows and reflections in the first section and, in the second, the physical objects to which they correspond. The sections of the higher part of the line represent two kinds of unobservable realities, namely hypothetical knowledge of observable reality, followed by knowledge of the principles on which hypotheses rest. According to Plato, only natural-born philosophers are capable of reaching the end of the line, where he locates “intelligence” (p. 195). In the three preceding parts of the line he locates, in descending order, “understanding,” “faith,” and “imagining” (p. 195). Thus, in one sense, the simile suggests that everyone’s education begins in the lowest part of the line, consistent with the noble lie’s depiction of early education as an underground dream. In another sense, however, it also suggests that people in his other two classes of human beings are only capable of reaching the second or third parts.

Plato’s second main figurative device is his cave allegory. According to the allegory, humans have always lived at the bottom of an inclined cave, chained in such a way that they must face a cave wall with their backs to a manufactured wall, along which all sorts of objects pass. Between the chained inhabitants and the manufactured wall is a fire, which projects the images of the objects on the cave wall. In ignorance, the cave people believe that the images are real. Only a philosopher (a man in Plato’s example) has been freed of the chains, ascended the cave, and, after adjusting his eyes to the light, contemplated the truth about reality. This truth compels him to return to the cave in order
to help free the people with whom he used to be imprisoned, a task that is not easy. Plato anticipates that the people would rather kill the philosopher than let him try to free them while they continue to believe, falsely, that they are better off in the cave. Plato also anticipates that the philosopher would have a difficult time readjusting his eyes in the cave’s darkness, to the point that he might be as confused as he was when he first saw the light: “. . . the eyes may be confused in two ways, and for two reasons – by a change from light to darkness, or from darkness to light” (p. 200).

In many respects, the analogy does an injustice to students’ rationality by describing the student-teacher relationship as one between people who need to be liberated and people who are capable of liberating. But in intent at least, it is a warning for educators not to be insulting. As Plato points out, “. . . education is not what certain of its professors declare it to be” when they profess to “put knowledge in the soul where no knowledge has been” (p. 201). Moreover, he at least recognizes that education, though good for people in principle, is harmful when educators act as though they must save people from absolute ignorance. Hence he defines education as

‘. . . an art of conversion, and [one that] will consider in what manner the soul will be turned round most easily and effectively. Its aim will not be to implant vision in the instrument of sight. It will regard it as already possessing that, but as being turned in a wrong direction, and not looking where it ought, and it will try to set this right.’ (p. 201)

In the context of the analogy, “the instrument of sight” is unambiguously a metaphor for the rational element that Plato perceives in each human, contradicting his dehumanizing views. It is this element, not merely the rule of wise guardians, that makes Platonist
justice theoretically achievable both socially and in individuals, whether they are formally trained philosophers or not.

In sum, *The Republic* contains a plethora of insightful concepts – such as “noble” lying for pedagogical and philosophical purposes – yet simultaneously impedes insightfulness by artificially dividing human beings in binary terms of ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized,’ Greek and ‘barbarian,’ ‘ideal’ representatives of the human ‘race’ and ‘inferior’ Others. In the remaining section of this chapter, I consider the extent to which 21st century education’s uncritical premise is consistent with *The Republic*. I conclude that it reflects both the problems with sophistry that Plato identifies and Plato’s own problematic, exclusionary way of thinking. As such, *The Republic* is a helpful but ultimately insufficient means of accessing and critiquing the model’s presupposed concepts. Specifically, the dialogue is helpful because, when compared with 21st century education, the former’s internally critical content is evidently not a source of the latter’s uncritical stated content, consistent with my contention that the model’s presupposed meaning can be found within its own rhetoric upon analysis. In terms of my goal of critiquing the model’s concepts once accessed, the dialogue is also helpful as a reminder of the importance of formal education. Although its conception of the latter is exclusionary, it nonetheless contains an inkling of more inclusive forms in recognizing the educative quality of both immediate experience and existing social structures.

6.5) 21st century education’s sophist and Platonist characteristics

If Plato were alive today, he could be forgiven for regarding 21st century education as the product of neo-sophists. Although Trilling and Fadel invoke justice (and
certainly do not position themselves as defenders of injustice), they evidently believe that the meaning of justice is irrelevant because they do not even attempt to define it. Indeed, both 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C fail to provide the overall reasoning behind the market-oriented standard of social adaptation that they espouse, distracting instead from this failure with rhetoric that takes the standard for granted. This connection between 21st century education and Plato’s depiction of sophism in The Republic is another indication that the dialogue is an appropriate place to begin to look for the real reasons behind the rhetoric of 21st century education.

Thrasy-machus, of course, at least admits that his actual position on injustice contradicts the commonly professed belief that it is good to be just in principle (while arguing that most people would be unjust in practice if they could get away with it). In contrast, 21st century education does not even acknowledge its contradictions, let alone its actual position on them. While it similarly places itself above criticism, the distance is therefore greater. As discussed, it claims without any evidence or conceptual support to be the best form of education in the present century, inherently “balanced,” scientifically valid, and so on; it presents itself as a stark choice between adapting to modern society and not adapting to it; it does not acknowledge the fact that it uncritically promotes private-sector values, such as the consumption of digital technology, to the obvious economic advantage of high-tech companies.

Still, 21st century education raises a number of questions that The Republic may help to answer insofar as the model is reminiscent of Thrasy-machus’s uncritical rhetoric. What difference does it make whether or not Department officials and other proponents
of the model sincerely believe in it? Is it possible to critique the model when it withholds the conditions on which criticism depends, here the model’s actual reasons for presenting market-oriented education as the only option? How is it even possible to accept the model without access to the true reasons for it?

Imagine, then, if instead of Thrasyvachus, Trilling and Fadel had entered the dialogue as representatives of 21st century education, ostensibly “the most modern school of thought” on education in the twenty-first-century. Imagine that they could show the New Brunswick Department of Education’s YouTube video that they helped to inspire. Is it at all rational to defend the stated claim that “education is about adapting to a changing world”? On one level, the premise is obviously absurd if universalized, as the world could be changing on account of human behaviour in a direction that is so dangerous that total adaptation to it would be totally wrong, and therefore uneducative, barring a death wish. But, on another level, it is not difficult to see that there is some truth to the premise. Even if the world is changing for the worse, it would be just as wrong not to adapt to it critically, either to change its course if possible or to survive for as long as possible. The question arises: against what standard is it true to assert that “adapting to a changing world” is educative? Does 21st century education at all presuppose such a standard within its falsehood-riddled rhetoric, or is the model false to its core? To what extent does The Republic provide insight into these questions that it helps to raise?

Given their Thrasyvachusian disinterest in actually supporting their premise philosophically, it is ironic that Trilling and Fadel suggest that 21st century education is consistent with Platonist philosophy. In their words, quoted earlier, “Philosophers,
education theorists, and thought leaders from Confucius to Socrates, and Plato to John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, Seymour Papert, and others have placed questioning and inquiry at the heart of learning and understanding” (p. 90). “What would a 21st century learning model look like,” they go on to inquire, “that uses the power of problems and questions – the ‘Ps and Qs’ of engaged learning – to drive deep interest, understanding, caring, and the application of 21st century skills to real-world challenges?” (p. 94). The specific “learning model” that they give as a supposed example of philosophically grounded problem-posing and questioning is “the Project Learning Bicycle” (p. 97). “Define, Plan, Do, and Review – these are the stages,” they state, “in the project learning and teaching cycles – the project ‘wheels’ – for both the students and the teacher” (original emphases, p. 99). Continuing, they write, “Students and teachers must coordinate their project cycle work, co-managing the whole learning project (the bicycle frame), and using the driving question and problem (the handlebars) to steer and guide the project forward” (p. 100). The “learning gears” on the bike notably represent technology: “the lab equipment, Internet access for research, and all the rest” (p. 101).

At first glance, it is tempting to dismiss Trilling’s and Fadel’s above reference to Plato as shameless namedropping. After all, the market-orientation of “the Project Learning Bicycle” is not a possible problem or question within the overall framework of 21st century education. The direction of what is otherwise presented as inherently educative is, as I have been arguing, presupposed. For example, the authors play on the notion of balance, as if doing so were a serious explanation of their “learning model,” while presenting it as an ideal that should simply be accepted by teachers and students:
Balance is also important: if the project bicycle leans too far to the left, the teacher may be oversteering (applying too much direct instruction and control); too far to the right, and there may be too much collaborative creativity and independent construction of knowledge . . . without enough teacher guidance to ensure the desired learning objectives are achieved and the principles involved are understood. (p. 101)

Suppose, though, that the actual reasoning that this rhetoric conceals is somehow consistent with Plato’s philosophical standard, as we cannot tell what the true reasons behind the model are insofar as they are hidden within it. Is the “real-world” of change to which it allegedly promotes adaptation somehow headed in the best possible direction (at least as Plato perceived it in *The Republic*), in spite of the contradictions pointed out above?

While 21st century education’s fallacious rhetoric is clearly a form of social regulation (one that I have experienced personally), it serves no philosophical or pedagogical purpose that I can detect. That is, it is not even part of an attempt to defend its underlying principle(s), and it certainly does not support the implication that such principles are somehow too complicated for teachers and students to understand in formal terms. For these reasons, its self-identification with Plato can be viewed as a misapplication of the concept of the noble lie. It is fair to say that Trilling and Fadel invoke Plato to make the model’s market-orientation appear philosophically grounded because they make no serious attempt to engage critically with Platonist philosophy. Indeed, they do not show any philosophical interest questioning “the real-world challenges” of market-oriented society, uncritically promoting adaptation to their...
worldview instead. This contradiction between their model’s philosophical pretensions and its demonstrable lack of openness to philosophical inquiry further highlights the need for accessing the non-rhetorical reasoning behind the model.

At the same time, *The Republic* is itself demonstrably – but not inevitably – unopen to philosophical inquiry on account of its exclusionary form. That is, the dialogue at the very least invites criticism of its privileging of formal education inasmuch as it recognizes existing society and individual experiences as sources of knowledge too. In this sense, 21st century education’s uncritical form is consistent with Platonism. Hence, to open the model up to self-criticism, it is necessary to put the model’s uncritical premise in further concentric circles, consistent with Plato’s recognition that existing social structures and immediate experiences of them are indispensable to a proper a formal education.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have used *The Republic* as a means of defamiliarizing 21st century education’s premise that “education is about adapting to a changing world” as way of opening up this premise to critical analysis. I have shown that the premise can be interpreted as a misapplication of Plato’s “noble falsehood,” the intended twofold purpose of which in the dialogue is to disrupt sophist thinking and to redirect it toward philosophical inquiry as Plato defines it. I have also shown that Plato’s philosophy is fundamentally exclusionary in the absence of critical engagement. Toward such an engagement, I have noted the presence of three sources of knowledge in the dialogue: immediate personal experiences, existing social structures, and formal education.
Although Plato suggests that these sources are ideally present in a “golden” class of Greeks, they can nonetheless be used, through an act of the imagination, to critique exclusionary thinking. Based on my immediate experience of an existing social structure – the New Brunswick Department of Education, through the lens of 21st century education reform – I declare that 21st century education’s uncritical rhetoric is pedagogically and philosophically unjustifiable and, therefore, unjust in Plato’s terms. However, further analysis is required to determine, as precisely as possible, 21st century education’s presupposed meaning. Whereas it appears to be a paradoxical hybrid of sophist and Platonist “justice” when its stated meaning is considered in the context of *The Republic*, in the context of *Democracy and Education*, to which I now turn, it appears to be a similarly paradoxical hybrid of liberal and illiberal “democracy.”
Chapter 7: Democracy and Education as a Concentric Circle

In this chapter, I consider Democracy and Education as a concentric circle. As with my last chapter, my immediate goal here is twofold: to defamiliarize 21st century education’s uncritical framework by criticizing, in this case, its uncritical self-identification with Dewey; and to consider Democracy and Education as a means of accessing and critiquing the model’s presupposed concepts.

I address the above goals over five main sections. First, I situate Democracy and Education in its immediate historical context and relate the latter to my overall goal of critically analyzing 21st century education. Second, I outline the form and some of the content of Democracy and Education. Third and fourth, I outline and critique Dewey’s concept of adaptation. And, fifth, I consider the extent to which 21st century education’s stated premise is consistent and/or inconsistent with Dewey’s philosophy of education as outlined in Democracy and Education.

7.1) Democracy and Education as a response to industrialization

First published in 1916, Democracy and Education was in large part a response to the immense changes that industrialization had made, especially in the United States. Howard Zinn (1980/2010) summarizes these changes as follows in A People’s History of the United States:

Between the Civil War and 1900, steam and electricity replaced human muscle, iron replaced wood, and steel replaced iron (before the Bessemer process, iron was hardened into steel at the rate of 3 to 5 tons a day; now the same amount could be processed in 15 minutes). Machines could now drive steel tools. Oil
could lubricate machines and light homes, streets, factories. People and goods could move by railroad, propelled by steam along steel rails; by 1900 there were 193,000 miles of railroad. The telephone, the typewriter, and the adding machines speeded up the work of business.

Machines changed farming. Before the Civil War it took 61 hours of labor to produce an acre of wheat. By 1900, it took 3 hours, 19 minutes. Manufactured ice enabled the transport of food over long distances, and the industry of meatpacking was born.

Steam drove textile mills spindles; it drove sewing machines. It came from coal. Pneumatic drills now drilled deeper into the earth for coal. In 1860, 14 million tons of coal were mined; by 1884 it was over 100 million tons. More coal meant more steel, because coal furnaces converted iron into steel; by 1880 a million tons of steel were being produced; by 1910, 25 million tons. By now electricity was being produced to replace steam. Electrical wire needed cooper, of which 30,000 tons were produced in 1880; 500,000 tons by 1910.

To accomplish this required ingenious inventors and new processes and new machines, clever organizers and administrators of the new corporations, a country rich with land and animals, and a huge supply of human beings to do the back-breaking, unhealthful, and dangerous work. Immigrants would come from Europe and China, to make the new labor force. Farmers unable to buy the new machinery or pay the new railroad rates would move to the cities. Between 1860 and 1914, New York grew from 850,000 to 4 million, Chicago from 110,000 to 2 million, Philadelphia from 650,00 to 1 ½ million. (pp. 253-254)
Zinn is critical of the legislative reforms of the early twentieth-century, which he describes as unreliable “to blacks, to feminists, to labor organizations and socialists” (p. 349). “True,” he writes, “this was the ‘Progressive Period,’ the start of the Age of Reform; but it was a reluctant reform, aimed at quieting the popular rising, not making fundamental changes” (p. 349).

In contrast, many self-styled progressives of the period sincerely believed that they were extending the fruits of “progress” to people who were assumed to be in need. In Cremin’s account:

. . . progressive education began as part of a vast humanitarian effort to apply the promise of American life – the ideal of government by, of, and for the people – to the puzzling new urban-industrial civilization that came into begin during the latter half of the nineteenth-century. The word progressive provides a clue to what it really was: the educational phase of American Progressivism writ large. In effect, progressive education began as Progressivism in education: a many-sided effort to use schools to improve the lives of individuals. In the minds of Progressives this meant several things.

First, it meant broadening the program and function of the school to include direct concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life.

Second, it meant applying in the classroom the pedagogical principles derived from new scientific research in psychology and the social sciences.

Third, it meant tailoring instruction more and more to the different kinds of classes of children who were being brought within the purview of the school. . .
Finally, Progressivism implied the radical faith that culture could be democratized without being vulgarized, the faith that everyone could share not only in the benefits of the new sciences but in the pursuit of the arts as well. (pp. viii-ix)

Cremin also makes it clear that Progressivism was not just an American phenomenon, in the sense that “what happened was part of a much larger worldwide response to industrialism, and that while the American movement proceeded in terms of the American experience, many of its elements were similar to, and indeed influenced by, contemporary developments in other industrial nations” (p. x).

Christou’s *Progressive Education* makes clear that there were also differences. He notes, for example, that the humanities (i.e., liberal arts) were rhetorically and institutionally marginalized by “progressive” reforms in Ontario between the First and Second World Wars:

In this book, notwithstanding the broad associations of the terms such as *humanities* and *humanistic study*, the term *humanist* is used as a foil to the progressivist position. The humanists’ defense of the classical curriculum – principally, that it developed [the] intellect and trained mental faculties – lost its dominance at the rhetorical level; that said, the humanists also believed that at least libraries, which preserved traditional educational ideals, would remain closely associated with schools. (Original emphases, p. 8)

Christou also observes that, as a self-identified progressive, John Dewey argued against both extremes, namely uncritical conformity to “the classical curriculum” at one end and uncritical conformity to industry-induced changes at the other. Indeed, in a chapter of
*Democracy and Education* entitled “Education as Conservative and Progressive,” Dewey discusses how education in the present “may be treated as [a] process of accommodating the future to the past, or as an utilization of the past for a resource in developing the future” (p. 79).

A question therefore arises: on one level, 21st century education (in rhetorically promoting social adaptation) is an extension of the strand of progressivism that Christou documents but on another level (in invoking Plato and John Dewey, for example) it appears to break with the same historical, rhetorically anti-classical strand (as described by Christou). This question is a potential problem for my purposes because I plan to use rhetoric of progress – among related rhetorical terms – to access 21st century education’s presupposed meaning. So if “progress” in the anti-classical sense of the term that Christou uncovers historically is not actually central to 21st century education – that is, if its rhetorical references to humanistic concerns are more indicative of its presupposed meaning – then I should structure my eventual analysis of *21st Century Skills* and *NB3-21C* accordingly. That is, perhaps I should use its rhetorical references to liberal arts as primary guides to its presupposed meaning.

As I have already shown, however, the rhetoric of 21st century education does not actually promote the humanistic dimension of *The Republic*, though it is consistent with Plato’s exclusionary, dehumanizing form of thinking therein. In this sense, the model remains consistent in effect with the anti-humanism that Christou discusses in *Progressive Education*. Does the model promote humanistic elements that can be found in *Democracy and Education*? To answer this question, it is first necessary to outline the
latter book’s form and to discuss some of its content, to which Dewey’s philosophically and scientifically informed concept of adaptation, I will show, is foundational.

7.2) “Continuity” between philosophy and science in *Democracy and Education*

Covering a plethora of concepts over twenty-six chapters, *Democracy and Education* can be divided into four sections, which are reminiscent of the four sections of Plato’s line simile and the ascendancy of his philosopher from the cave to the light. The first six chapters consider education as a universal human phenomenon, but one that is not universally equal in quality in Dewey’s view. Hence his summary at the start of his seventh chapter: “For the most part, save incidentally, we have hitherto been concerned with education as it may exist in any social group” (p. 81). The latter chapter is the second section. As its title “The Democratic Conception in Education” reveals, it is concerned with education as it actually exists, in Dewey’s view, in (liberal) democratic societies, which he deems superior to all other existing societies; it also includes Dewey’s definition of an ideal democracy (to which I will return). The next sixteen chapters constitute the book’s third section, discussing a range of ideas that Dewey deems essential if liberal democracy is to live up to its implicit ideal. In his words, they are “chapters . . . devoted to making explicit the implications of the democratic ideas in education” (p. 88). The book’s fourth section consists of the broader topics of its final three chapters, respectively entitled “Philosophy of Education,” “Theories of Knowledge,” and Theories of Morals.” That is, they outline Dewey’s largely science-inspired concept of “the good” to which, in his view, all of humanity can and should aspire, beginning with reforms to public schooling within existing democratic societies.
As he puts it in his final chapter, in exclusionary (particularly sexist) terms on which I will focus later in this chapter, “The something for which a man must be good is capacity to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others balances with what he contributes. . . . Education is such a life” (my emphasis, pp. 359-360). Insofar as it realizes such a life, he argues, “. . . the school becomes itself a form of social life, a miniature community and one in close interaction with other modes of associated experience beyond school wall” (p. 360). Hence he argues that school reform is a necessary means of reforming society at large.

Thus, *Democracy and Education* critically develops, but clearly does not reject, the premise of *The Republic* that human life is dependent on formal knowledge of what is good for it. After developing this premise over the course of his first six chapters, which largely draw on biological science, Dewey states their connection to Platonism as follows:

Much which has been said so far is borrowed from what Plato first consciously taught the world. . . . Plato’s starting point is that the organization of society depends ultimately upon knowledge of the end of existence. If we do not know its end, we shall be at the mercy of accident and caprice. Unless we know the and, the good, we shall have no criterion for rationally deciding what the possibilities are which should be promoted, nor how social arrangements are to be order. We shall have no conception of the proper limits and distribution of activities – what he called justice – as a trait of both individual and social organization. But how is the knowledge of the final and permanent good to be achieved? (p. 88)
In asking this question Dewey sets up the main problem with Platonist philosophy as he understands it. On one level, he argues that it was formed under social conditions that were hostile to advancing beyond the abovementioned starting point. In Dewey’s words, “the society in which the theory was propounded was so undemocratic that Plato could not work out a solution for the problem whose terms he clearly saw” (p. 89). But on another level, Dewey believes that the theory itself conceives of “the good” in terms that are too abstract to be adequately realized socially.28

Moreover, Platonism is one of many “dualistic” philosophies that Dewey critiques throughout Democracy and Education. The opening paragraph to Chapter 24, “Theories of Knowledge,” is worth quoting because, in addition to contrasting the concept with Dewey’s alternative in “continuity,” it emphasizes the fact that he does not blame dualism on dualistic philosophers so much as on their societies:

A number of theories of knowing have been criticized in the previous pages. In spite of their differences from one another, they all agree in one fundamental respect which contrasts with the theory which has been positively advanced. The

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28 According Richard Rorty (1979/2009), Dewey ultimately rejected the idea (traceable to Plato and, more recently, seventeenth-century philosophies) that philosophy can discover universal human truths. Referring to “Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey,” Rorty writes, “Each tried, in his early years, to find a new way of making philosophy ‘foundational’ – a new way of formulating an ultimate context for thought. Wittgenstein tried to construct a new theory of representation which would have nothing to do with mentalism, Heidegger to construct a new set of philosophical categories, or the Cartesian quest for certainty, and Dewey to construct a naturalized version of Hegel’s vision of history. Each of the three came to see his earlier effort as self-deceptive, as an attempt to retain a certain conception of philosophy after the notions needed to flesh out that conception (seventeenth-century notions of knowledge and mind) had been discarded. . . . Thus, their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program” (pp. 5-6). As I will discuss, traces of foundationalism remain in Democracy and Education, as it does in Rorty’s use of the pronouns “his” and “him” to represent a ‘universal’ reader.
latter assumes continuity; the former state or imply certain basic divisions, separations, or antitheses, technically called dualisms. The origin of these divisions we have found in the hard and fast walls which mark off social groups and classes within a group: like those between rich and poor, men and women, noble and baseborn, ruler and ruled. These barriers mean absence of fluent and free intercourse. This absence is equivalent to the setting up of different types of life-experience, each with isolated subject matter, aim, and standard of values. Every such social condition must be formulated in a dualistic philosophy, if philosophy is to be a sincere account of experience. When it gets beyond dualism – as many philosophies do in form – it can only be by appeal to something higher than anything found in experience, by a flight to some transcendental aim. And in denying duality in name such theories restore it in fact, for they end in a division between things of this world as mere appearances and an inaccessible essence of reality. (pp. 333-334)

In other words, then, Dewey’s philosophical contention is that dualistic theories of knowing, on account of divisive social conditions in which they are formed, are unlikely to gain access to knowledge of what is truly good for human life, however much they may claim to do so in formal terms, inasmuch as they are cut off from – and in turn cut off – more achievable approaches to such knowledge.

According to Dewey, Plato was cut off from key avenues because of “conditions which he could not intellectually control” (p. 88). As mentioned, Dewey deems Athenian democracy to be “so undemocratic” as to be unresponsive to Plato’s theoretical insights into the humanistic value of knowledge. But he also suggests that Plato just happened to
be born during an intellectually immature point in history, millennia before the rise of evolutionary biology among other scientific and generally formal theories of knowing that in Dewey’s view refute much of Platonism, particularly its notion of a tripartite soul and the concomitant suggestion that people with “golden” souls are more naturally suited for formal philosophy and for political power. Hence Dewey comments that “progress in knowledge has made us aware of the superficiality of Plato’s lumping of individuals and their original powers into a few sharply marked-off classes; it has taught us that original capacities are indefinitely numerous and variable” (p. 90).

To be clear, Dewey regards the liberal democratic societies of his day as insufficiently democratic. In particular, he takes aim at state-capitalist structures of early twentieth-century American democracy. He describes as “machine-like” a prevalent kind of relationship of his day between “parent and child, teacher and pupil, employer and employee, governor and governed” (p. 5). Each one of these relationships, he says, often involves treating human beings as machine parts “so as to get desired results, without reference to the emotional and intellectual disposition and consent of those used” (p. 5). He locates one of the main obstacles to humanizing such relationships in “present economic conditions, which split society into classes some of which are made merely tools for the higher culture of others” (p. 98). Still, he believes that the primary cause of these relationships – at least in his society – is in the faulty (i.e. dualistic) thinking of distant European history. He believes that such thinking continues to influence people up to his day, especially in the United States, thereby impeding continuity between the theory and the actual practice of liberal democracy. As he puts it in his preface, “The discussion includes . . . a critical estimate of the theories of knowing and moral
development which were formulated in earlier social conditions, but which still operate, in societies nominally democratic, to hamper the adequate realization of the democratic ideal” (p. iii).

So how does Dewey address this apparent chicken-and-egg situation whereby dualism is both the cause and result of social divisions, including in his own society? I can identify five basic moves. First, he argues that philosophical standards, on their own, are too abstract to be useful in critiquing any given society, but that standards taken from existing societies risk perpetuating their imperfections:

We cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practicable one. But . . . the ideal cannot simply repeat the traits which are actually found. The problem is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement. (p. 83)

Second, he surmises that a degree of mutual interest among members and contact with non-members are universally desirable societal traits. In his words, “Now in any social group whatever, even in a gang of thieves, we find some interest held in common, and we find a certain about of interaction and coöperative intercourse with other groups” (p. 83).

Third, after contemplating the expansion of these traits – in terms of the highest number of and widest variety of mutual interests and the most substantive and free quality of inter-societal exchange – he concludes that these “two traits are precisely what characterize the democratically constituted society” (p. 87). Fourth, while arguing that rational decision-making, and therefore education, is required to conserve and promote
both traits, he argues that their historical cause was not entirely rational, in the sense that they were not caused on purpose, hence their historical connection to “machine-like” social structures. “On the contrary,” he writes, “they were caused by the development of modes of manufacture and commerce, travel, migration, and intercommunication which flowed from the command of science over natural energy” (p. 87). And, finally, he draws on the technical knowledge that attends these developments (on the grounds that such knowledge has already proven to produce real results) in order to use it to conserve and to promote the desired traits and to eliminate undesirable traits.

In an effort to affirm knowledge of “the good” while rejecting classist rule, Dewey’s working theory is that the dominant social realities of his day, science and industry, by virtue of existing, can and should be promoted as practical ways of equalizing access to real goods – mutual interests and exposure to different views – both within existing democracies and beyond. On this theory, existing democracies are the most practical means of promoting this notion of universal equality because they have already advanced the notion, albeit within the unequal context of their dominant classes. In brief, the possibility of democracy from Dewey’s standpoint is for members of dominant classes to stop dominating and to start liberating by sharing their cultural and material resources with others. Accordingly, his definition of an ideally democratic society is one “which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustments of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life” (p. 99).
7.3) Dewey’s concept of adaptation

Central to Dewey’s concept of life is his concept of adaptation. He begins *Democracy and Education* by affirming the premise of evolutionary biology that all life forms exist by means of adapting to their environment. “As some species die out,” he writes, “forms better adapted to utilize the obstacles against which they struggled in vain come into being” (p. 2). However, he emphasizes that adaptation is not simply a passive process but also involves organisms’ “continued activity” (p. 2). As he explains, “Continuity of life means continual readaptation of the environment to meet the needs of living organisms” (p. 2).

In other words, the survival of a given species is not primarily the result of biologically inherited, physical forms: that is, the technical ability to continue living under existing circumstances. It is also the result of organisms’ use of their abilities to change their circumstances, to make them more inhabitable. A non-human example that comes to mind is the fact that all healthy trees technically can photosynthesize, but only trees that do photosynthesize will survive; otherwise they will die, even if they are technically able to photosynthesize (e.g., if they are simply blocked for a long enough time from any source of light). With regard to sentient, social species, survival does not merely depend on physical processes, Dewey observes. In the case of humans, in his view, it depends on “the whole range of experience, individual and racial” (p. 2).

Like Wild’s view of race in his defence of *The Republic*, Dewey in one sense means ‘all of humanity’ by “racial.” I will first consider his concept of adaptation as it relates to ‘all of humanity’ – particularly to education as common human practice – before critiquing the racist and generally exclusionary implications of the concept.
If a society is to survive the death of individual members, Dewey observes, it must actively share its experiences, especially with new members:

With the renewal of physical existence goes, in the case of human beings, the recreation of beliefs, ideals, hopes, misery, and practices. The continuity of any experience, through renewing of the social group, is a literal fact. Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life. . . . Each individual, each unit who is a carrier of the life-experience of his [or her, or their] group, in time passes away. Yet the life of the group goes on. (p. 2)

Given life’s general adaptive quality and its social dimension in *homo sapiens*, human adaptation, in Deweyan terms, technically is essential to any form of socialization (regardless of the overall quality of life that it entails). Moreover, adaptation in this sense does not merely refer to humans’ physical dimension (insofar as there is any real difference between physical and mental activity). Rather, adaptation here involves a continuum or continuity between physical and mental activity. As Dewey puts it in “Theories of Knowledge,” “The advance of physiology and the psychology associated with it have shown the connection of mental activity with that of the nervous system” (p. 336).

Clearly, Dewey advocates both progressive and democratic socialization. He describes the former as a society’s ability to promote its better qualities over its imperfections, particularly in interactions between experienced and relatively inexperienced members (e.g. between older and younger members). In his words, “progressive communities . . . endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future
adult society be an improvement on their own” (p. 79). He differentiates progressive
democratic socialization from all other existing forms by locating in it his twofold ideal
of conserving and promoting experiences that he deems universally desirable (mutual
interests and freedom of association by means of liberal democratic, scientifically
informed control over natural energy) and by ending experiences that he deems
universally detrimental to humanity’s long-term survival (imposed limits on interests and
association which are perpetuated, he maintains, by the short-term denial of liberal-
democratic, scientifically informed culture to people on classist or otherwise authoritarian
grounds). As Cremin explains:

Ultimately, it is the conception of growth [as described by biological science] that
ties Dewey’s theory of the individual to progressivism writ large. He wanted
education constantly to expand the range of social situations in which individuals
perceived issues and made and acted upon choices. He wanted schools to
inculcate habits that would enable individuals to control their surroundings rather
than merely adapt to them. And he wanted each generation to go beyond its
predecessors in the quality of behaviour it sought to nurture in its children. (p. 123)

In a footnote to this passage, Cremin observes that in Democracy and Education “Dewey
speaks of habits that facilitate accommodation to the environment and habits that
facilitate control over it,” adding that the concept of education advanced therein “is
concerned with both but more importantly with the latter” (original emphases, p. 123).
The passage to which he is referring occurs in Chapter 4, “Education as Growth.” To
quote Dewey on this point, “Adaptation, in fine, is quite as much adaptation of the
environment to our own activities as of our activities to the environment” (original emphases, p. 47).

Thus, one can summarize Dewey’s definition of adaptation as ‘a common biological process – one that is partly passive, partly active, and in humans simultaneously physical and mental, individual and social, and therefore educational.’ Dewey’s point, in other words, is that education, in the broadest sense that he gives it, is a functioning society, a common human form of controlling the passive dimension of adaptation and extending its active dimension in socially acceptable directions, so that people are less reactive or uncritical toward their environment and more meaningful or critical in their actions, and therefore more likely to survive as a society and, ultimately, as a species. Hence Plato, for example, sought to socialize young people in what he considered to be ideal forms of mental and physical actions in music and gymnastics.

For Dewey, though, any form of human activity is potentially “ideal” in practice – that is, critically adaptive, educative – insofar as human activity is by definition at least technically social or communal and therefore communicative. This point is discernable in the following passage especially, notwithstanding its barriers to communication (notably the use of ‘men’ as a synonym for ‘humans’):

There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding – like-mindedness as the sociologists says. . . . The parts of a machine work with a
maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community. But this would involve communication. Each would have to know what the other was about and would have to have some way of keeping the other informed as to his own purpose and progress. Consensus demands communication. (pp. 4-5)

Given that communication is rooted in adaptation, a biological process, Dewey argues that science – particularly biology – is a necessary source of knowledge for progressively and democratically increasing the substantive – as distinct from merely technical – communicative quality of human interactions and for decreasing their machine-like (i.e., non-consensual) quality.

7.4) A critique of Deweyan adaptation

Dewey’s synthesis of philosophy and science, as exemplified by his concept of adaptation as the biological basis for education, provides much insight into human social interactions. For example, the connection that he draws attention to between (the socially constructed categories) of mental and physical activities can indeed promote communication between people. For instance, a teacher who is aware of this connection in the abstract may be less likely in practice to react badly to a student who might otherwise appear to be acting badly according to an existing social norm (e.g., by not ‘paying attention’ in class). Instead of getting angry, such a teacher might realize that the student’s apparent lack of attention is actually a sign of attention that is simply directed at
things in which the student is actually interested (i.e., things that are literally more stimulating than a relatively unstimulating lesson or that provide a degree of real relief from a relatively overwhelming lesson). With such a realization, the teacher is in a better position to adapt meaningfully to the student’s actual disposition (e.g., by not getting angry for no reason), thereby making the classroom environment more inviting to the student (e.g., who will notice that the teacher is not getting angry, which may be enough to spark interest in the teacher’s lesson).

Unfortunately, however, Dewey implies that formal knowledge, particularly of his own society’s scientific culture, is the most ‘civilized’ means of controlling the active dimension of adaptation. Consider his following example, which is representative of a ‘civilized’-‘savage’ binary that pervades *Democracy and Education*:

> A savage tribe manages to live on a desert plain. It adapts itself. But its adaptation involves a maximum of accepting, tolerating, putting up with things as they are, a maximum of passive acquiescence, and a minimum of active control, of subjection to use. A civilized people enters upon the scene. It also adapts itself. It introduces irrigation; it searches the world for plants and animals that will flourish under such conditions; it improves, by careful selection, those which are growing there. As a consequence, the wilderness blossoms as a rose. The savage is merely habituated; the civilized man has habits which transform the environment. (pp. 74-48)

Within the bounds of this effectively (though not necessarily consciously) racist and generally exclusionary mindset, it is virtually impossible to imagine how a perceived “savage” society’s way of “putting up with things as they are” can be in principle – not
only in practice – a wiser, more critical form of transforming the environment than liberal democratic society’s self-styled “civilized” way of altering it (e.g., by introducing irrigation, new plant and animal species, and so on).\textsuperscript{29} Hence Dewey reduces transformative actives of his imagined “savage” to luck and dismisses the formal knowledge associated with such activities as unreliable belief systems. “What we call magic,” he writes, “was with respect to many things the experimental method of the savage; but for him, to try was to try his luck, not ideas” (p. 338).

Isabelle Knockwood (1992/2006) offers a way out of the racist mindset of dividing humanity into binary ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ categories – and this mindset’s real legacy – in Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi’kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia. That is, she frames her experience-based and researched account of residential schooling in Shubenacadie as one that is being told as she holds the Talking Stick. As she explains:

Our Mi’kmaw ancestors used the Talking Stick to guarantee that everyone who wanted to speak would have a chance to be heard and that they would be allowed to take as long as they need to say what was on their minds without fear of being interrupted with questions, criticisms, lectures or scoldings, or even to be

\textsuperscript{29} History is replete with examples of how “putting up with things as they are” – such as the lack of sugar in Europe before the Crusades – might have contributed to more humanizing historical developments. I have in mind Philip D. Curtin’s (1999) observation in The Rise and the Fall of the Plantation Complex that the introduction of sugar (as distinct from honey) to Europe during the Crusades led to its systematic use of slavery: “The use of salves in agriculture was rare during this period, but the occasional use of slaves in sugar planting began the transition toward the kind of slave society that was to characterize the plantation complex after it expanded across the Atlantic” (p. 7).
presented with solutions to their problems. An ordinary stick of any kind or size is used. Those seated in the Circle commit themselves to staying to the end, not getting up to leave or walk about because this behaviour is considered an interruption. Anyone who leaves the Circle can return and sit with the latecomers whose only role is to observe and listen. This is because they have missed some information and therefore cannot offer advice or make an informed decision. The person who has a problem or an issue to discuss holds the Talking Stick and relates everything pertaining to it, especially everything they have done to solve it. After they are through, they pass the stick to the person on their left, following the sun’s direction. The next person, Nekm, states everything they know about the problem without repeating anything that was already said. They tell what they or others have done in similar situations. They neither agree nor disagree with what others have said.

The Talking Stick goes around until it returns to the person with the problem or issue, who then acknowledges everyone present and what they have said. Sometimes the solution or answer comes through as soon as everyone has spoken. Maybe the person has already thought it out, or it may come as an inspiration in the form of a vision or a dream. Dreams were a very important part of problem-solving with the First People of the land. Maybe a Spirit Guide will come, or some new information be brought to light or a series of events will fall into place. The talking stick is an instrument of free speech that gives people who were once silenced an opportunity to say what is on their minds in the language they choose. (pp. 7-8)
Knockwood closes her book by declaring, “I pass the Talking Stick to you” (p. 161). Notice that she first refers to the “Talking Stick” when explaining the Mi’kmaw practice, then to the “talking stick” in reference to the liberal democratic notion of free speech, and again to the “Talking Stick.” I interpret this movement (from capitalizing the term to writing it in lower case letters, to capitalizing it again) as an affirmation of the authority of Mi’kmaw culture – as symbolized by the “Talking Stick” – that simultaneously recognizes itself – in the unfamiliar form of a “talking stick” – in the liberal democratic concept of free speech. In other words, Knockwood’s form is authoritative, not authoritarian, in overcoming the binary us-them categories and related abuse that residential schooling inflicted on her and other Mi’kmaw children. “For us,” she writes, “the Native Way with its Sacred Circle and respect for all living things is a means of healing that abuse” (p. 160).

With Fleiger’s critical analysis of “inclusion” policy in mind, one connection that I can identify between Knockwood’s testimony and the generally exclusionary form of Dewey’s binary way of thinking about civilization is that the latter implies that any person who is acting ‘badly’ according to a ‘civilized’ norm is either ignorant about the latter or somehow physically/naturally incapable of meeting it. Along this line of thinking, then, even well-intentioned ‘civilized’ teachers will misconstrue a student whom they suppose is being ‘bad’ or ‘uncivilized’ or otherwise ‘disruptive’ but who, for instance, may be refusing to be ‘good’ or ‘civilized’ or ‘cooperative’ for any number of principled reasons.

Susan White (2012) illustrates the kind of break-down in communication that I have in mind in her novel Ten Thousand Truths, the thirteen-year-old protagonist of
which, Rachel, has moved from one foster home to another in New Brunswick after her mother and brother die in an accident and while she is estranged from her father:

Rachel sat in math class, willing the day to end. Her class had been taught by supply teachers for the last two days while her regular teacher, Mrs. White, was off with a sprained angle. And today a new woman was standing at the front of the room. Rachel was already having enough trouble in math and having three different teachers definitely wasn’t helping.

“Do review questions 1, 2, 5, 8, and 10 on page 157,” the teacher said, wrapping up the lesson. “Your test will be tomorrow.”

Rachel opened up her notebook and slowly wrote the date and page number, trying to use up as much time as she could. She had no idea how to do any of the questions she’d been assigned. She probably would have asked Mrs. White for help, but she had no intention of letting this stranger know she didn’t have a clue how to do any of the questions.

Rachel looked up at the clock and saw that there were only a few more minutes of class left. She put her head back down to the page, returning to the intricate doodling of a meaningless picture.

“Rachel, what question are you on?” asked a voice from above.

Rachel looked up from her book and saw that the supply teacher was standing right behind her, looking at the doodles in her notebook.

“I don’t understand this stuff,” Rachel mumbled, hoping the bell would ring and save her.
“If you were having trouble, you should have told me,” the teacher said, looking at her watch. “I don’t have time to help you now. I suggest you get your mom or dad to help you tonight.”

Rachel did not respond.

The bell rang and everyone started moving. Rachel picked up her books and rushed from the room. As she walked through the door, another kid walked in and Rachel bumped right into him.

“Get out of my way, asshole!” she screamed, pushing him with her free hand. (pp. 58-59)

The point that I take from this passage is threefold. First, the supply teacher and Rachel, consistent with Dewey’s concept of adaptation, are technically capable as human beings to respond to the above situation in a variety of ways, at any point in it. Second, consistent with Dewey’s conviction that socially dominant formal knowledge (especially scientific knowledge) promotes more meaningful or communicative interactions, Rachel knows that she at least has the socially acceptable choice of asking a strange supply teacher for help or of waiting for the class to end in the hope that she will not be discovered; similarly, the teacher knows that getting totally upset with Rachel, when she is discovered to be doodling, would at least be a waste of time, hence she instead tells Rachel what she “should have” done and suggests what she should do to prepare for the test, namely ask her parents for help later. Third, socially dominant knowledge in this situation actually exacerbates its exclusionary form. That is, the ‘civilized’ or socially normal thing to do in this familiar public school scenario (in liberal democratic societies, in which students and socially subordinate people in general, within legally sanctioned
boundaries, are expected to do what social authorities tell them to do) requires the teacher to be oblivious of or indifferent to the harm that it poses to people therein. In this case, Rachel is already suffering within it by being formally denied her human will to do things that are meaningful to her but that may appear to be “meaningless,” as her doodling does in this social context. Thus, the teacher’s oblivious suggestion doubly adds to Rachel’s suffering, reminding her that she is in this situation because her mother and brother have died and her father is not in her life. And then – as the story immediately continues – Rachel gets in more trouble for pushing the boy after uncontrollably bumping into him and screaming at him while reacting to the overwhelming situation.30

To recap, Democracy and Education, especially when considered in terms of the central concept of adaptation therein, critically builds on Plato’s premise that formal knowledge is necessary for – or in some sense foundational to – achieving justice at the social and individual levels. Dewey uses dominant disciplinary knowledge of his liberal democratic society, its scientific knowledge in particular, to revise such classical concepts as “justice” in an attempt to make them more likely to be realized socially. In brief, social justice, for Dewey, involves progressively realizing, through science-inspired school reform, his liberal democratic society’s implicit ideals, such as fully communicative or consensual interactions between people. Thus, not unlike Plato, Dewey recognizes individual experience, social structures, and formal education as sources of knowledge; however, in contrast to Plato, Dewey privileges social structures

30 Space does not allow for a full consideration of the novel, which does not merely depict conflict but ultimately imagines a way beyond it.
(e.g., formal scientific knowledge of adaptation and his society’s implicit conceptual foundation) over actual experience itself (as exemplified by his dismissal of perspectives that he imagines to be inherently ‘uncivilized’) and over what he considers to be overly abstract philosophical views of experience. With these points in mind, I now return to 21st century education to consider the extent to which, if at all, its stated premise is consistent with *Democracy and Education*.

### 7.5) 21st century education: an extension of *Democracy and Education*?

Recall the point from my last chapter that Plato could be forgiven for regarding 21st century education as the product of neo-sophists if he were alive today. Similarly, if Dewey were still alive, he could be forgiven for seeing it as the product of an uncritical, mechanical, dualistic process. After all, it appears to lack a rational foundation, yet boldly divides the world into two socio-economic categories: “knowledge countries” that take P21’s advice on education reform and “low-wage countries” that allegedly remain stuck in the industrial past (even though P21 admits that the technology-based global economy still depends on industrial labour).

In terms of Dewey’s definition of communication, 21st century education rhetorically promotes common outcomes, notably the production of workers who are employable in the global economy of the “Knowledge Age,” but it does not directly refer the global economy’s non-rhetorical purposes. At least on the surface, it mechanically reduces the concept of adaptation to an uncommunicative means of existing within existing social conditions. Compounding this fact, the model invokes the concept of communication under its rainbow of stated skills, claiming that its framework is
communicative even though it is not open about its true intentions. Recall that all 21st
century skills effectively serve as pretexts for using digital technology for the sake of it.
Next to this lack of criticality, it is worth adding, the model’s rhetoric of critical thinking
also compounds the “machine-like” quality of 21st century education’s uncritical concept
of adaptation by depicting it as a normal form of human interaction. In doing so, it
discursively frames actual instances of critical thinking as incompatible with the health of
the human species under present politico-economic conditions.

In my last chapter, following Plato’s lead, I explored the extent to which 21st
century education’s premise is nonetheless true, if only in the abstract. With Dewey’s
critique of Plato in mind, another set of questions arises. To what extent does the
model’s premise – as an existing social phenomenon – reflect both the mutual interests of
people in New Brunswick and interaction with people outside the province’s jurisdiction?
Can these traits, if detected in the model, be used to critique its otherwise uncritical
framework?

Certainly, 21st century education reform in New Brunswick speaks both to intra-
provincial interests and to interests that transcend provincial considerations. The former
interests are evident in NB3-21C’s notions of consultation, local economic development,
student-centredness, and so on. The latter are especially evident in its reliance on P21
and in its references to Canada, multiculturalism, and of course the global economy. At
the same time, NB3-21C, in withholding its particular market-oriented perspective,
contradicts its rhetoric of provincial representativeness and its rhetoric of
multiculturalism. As I have been arguing, its uncritical conceptual framework is an
impediment to dialogue among people – teachers and students in particular – who are
expected to live up to the model’s stated standard of “adapting to a changing world.” Likewise, if its stated content is accepted uncritically, the model is impervious to general critique.

While it is hard for me to imagine how any thinking person can freely accept *NB3-21C* in light of the above contradictions, I can imagine that the model’s proponents have their specific reasons for promoting the model (and I need not imagine that it at least has something to do with private profit). Moreover, it is possible, if only in theory, that the above contradictions are somehow acceptable with reference to the model’s presupposed concepts. Again, the problem is that, without these concepts, it is hard if not impossible to know whether or not 21st century education reform has any social intention that transcends its exclusionary form. In Deweyan terms, it is not immediately clear how “to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement” because the model presents itself as above criticism. Within its uncritical framework, one must simply desire the model in its entirety or be socially undesirable oneself (i.e., as threat to its prima facie unassailable principles, such as nominal student-centredness).

Still, *NB3-21C* inadvertently provides points of entry into its hidden reasoning. As quoted earlier, its primary source – Trilling’s and Fadel’s book – invokes Dewey uncritically. Taken at its word, then, the model’s presupposed concepts are somehow consistent with his philosophy of education. If true, one could in theory find desirable elements within its Dewey-inspired concepts and use them to critique its undesirable elements, in keeping with Dewey’s method. Of course, the model’s word alone is untrustworthy, especially when its source also references Plato uncritically, in glaring
contrast to Dewey’s critical use of Plato touched on above. But just as Plato’s Socrates is not content to dismiss Thrasymachus’s view of justice “in an off-hand way,” it is more convincing to show how the model falls short of Dewey’s overall standard of education, at least as it appears in *Democracy and Education*. One way to make this illustration is to suppose, for the sake of argument, that 21st century education actually presupposes robust scientific and economic arguments for presenting itself in pseudo-scientific and classist terms, and through problematic rhetoric generally. Is there any line of thought in *Democracy and Education* that is consistent with such a hypothetical case?

One sense in which the model is technically Deweyan is as an example of Dewey’s broadest concept of education as “the means of . . . social continuity of life.” Given the latter definition’s basis in his scientific concept of adaptation as both passive and active, it is at least technically correct to say that “education is about adapting to a changing world” is a Deweyan proposition. In other words, 21st century education reform in New Brunswick is educative on Dewey’s terms insofar as it is the product of a particular society. As Cremin says of early Dewey, “Society, he contended in Platonic terms, educates” (p. 117). Or as Dewey puts it in *Democracy and Education*, “Any education given by a group tends to socialize its members, but the quality and value of socialization depends upon habits and aims of the group” (p. 83). While it may not be immediately clear how 21st century education actively promotes adaptation to the “Knowledge Age” beyond its rhetoric – except generally, through the uncritical use of digital technology – the model does fit Dewey’s broad definition of education to the extent that it (actively) socializes people for life, in its case under “Knowledge Age” social conditions.
Also, it does not contradict Dewey to say that one effect of 21st century education is the communication of the message that its uncritical proposals are to be carried out (i.e., adapted to) without question. Indeed, according to Dewey, even machine-like interactions between human beings are technically communicative because human beings are not machines. In this sense, people who appear to submit to top-down authority are, for one reason or another, actually making a rational decision to comply with a technically greater power. To be clear, on Dewey’s view, such a decision would normally constitute an impaired, unhealthy form of communication, especially in the context of formal educational experiences. The point that I want to underline here is that the activities that his concept of adaptation signifies include technical forms of communication, which 21st century education’s notion of adaptation exemplifies even though the actual message that it communicates appears to be uncommunicative in principle insofar as its rhetoric impedes access to it.

Nonetheless, I can detect two general ways which the model in principle falls short of Dewey’s standard of education. The first has to do with the inferable fact that, in the long run, the model is unlikely to secure its ideal “Knowledge Age” society if Dewey’s analysis holds. Such authority is always at risk of being overthrown (if only through attrition) because it does not flow from truly shared interests, namely a consensus. Rather it is imposed, in the way that an external purpose is necessary for a machine to operate; it treats people as if they were machine parts, even though it depends on human capabilities in order to be effective. To quote one of Dewey’s examples: “Even when a person is frightened by threats into doing something, the threat works only because the person has an instinct of fear” (p. 25). But if the person either lacks fear or...
can control it, “the threat has no more influence upon him [or her or them] than light has in causing a person to see who has no eyes” (p. 25). If this physiological line of thought holds, it follows that 21st century education, in channeling fear of economic misery, is unlikely to sustain any influence that it may have on people. It is in this sense that its long-term rhetorical goal – the preservation of “Knowledge Age” societies – is unsustainable in principle on Dewey’s philosophy. Second, even if everyone in New Brunswick and/or beyond were in technical agreement with 21st century education reform and its implications, the result would not be democratic in Dewey’s sense of the term because the model is resistant even to technical changes (i.e., technical changes that could arise from the perspectives of any people or peoples whom it positions as socially subordinate) in impeding access to its presupposed meaning.

In sum, there may very well be robust scientific and economic concepts presupposed by the pseudo-scientific and classist rhetoric of 21st century education, but only in a technical sense from Dewey’s perspective in *Democracy and Education*. The biological and social phenomena to which the model’s presupposed concepts actually refer evidently exclude critical interests of people, particularly teachers and students who are supposed to adapt to its market-oriented rhetoric without knowing its intended purposes. Otherwise, the model would at the very least open itself up to criticism. As it stands, any adaptation that it promotes must be, at best, only partially critical.

The exclusionary form of 21st century, in the end, however, is consistent with the exclusionary form of Dewey’s binary thinking. Is it possible to draw on some of the content of his thought without repeating its exclusionary form? As with Plato, my approach to this question is first to note the fact that Dewey draws on at least three
sources of knowledge (immediate experience, social structures, and formal education) even though he privileges the second source in *Democracy and Education*, I argue. Thus, I also argue, through critical, analytical, imaginative acts, it is possible to extend insightful lines of his thought in ways that promote genuine communication. Indeed, Dewey himself gestures, albeit with exclusionary reference to “systematized” scientific methods and “men,” toward a notion of science that would incorporate moral considerations:

> The experimental method is new as a scientific resource – as a systematized means of making knowledge, though as old as life itself as a practical device. Hence it is not surprising that men have not recognized its full scope. For the most part, its significance is regarded as belonging to certain technical and merely physical matters. It will doubtless take a long time to secure the perception that it holds equally as to the forming and testing of ideas in social and moral matters.

(p. 339)

Of course, this perception can continue to go (as it has gone) in authoritarian, totalitarian directions, toward the idea that science alone can decide what is good and bad for people and life in general. Again, as Dale and Hyslop-Margison point out, “Science is generally considered the standard for epistemic justification and when social reality is supported by ‘scientific’ claims, the general public is easily convinced of its merits. After all, who are we to question science?” (p. 26). But the same perception can promote the notion that science can – when connected with other formal disciplines and with informal, experiential knowledge – contribute authoritatively to moral positions. Hyslop-Margison (2009) has made the same basic point in a complementary manner. Instead of
jettisoning empirical research on account of widespread conceptual problems therein, he argues that researchers, particularly in the area of policy, “must simply adopt a more modest expectation on the outcomes empirically based research in education can realistically achieve,” and calls on “policy developers, funding agencies, and other stakeholders to support areas of inquiry and scholarship beyond scientifically based practices” (p. 828).

Summary

As much as Dewey is stimulated by his society to advance its democratic ideal – rethinking its “machine-like” form and function through his science-inspired critique of Plato, for example – his privileging of social structures over actual experiences of them is clearly problematic, to say the least. For instance, the technical truth that science has much to say about biological commonalities and differences within the human species does not give scientists the authority to speak on behalf of actual human beings about their dynamic personal and social experiences. To do so is dehumanizing, Dewey’s sincere humanitarian intentions notwithstanding. In making the latter point I have in mind Freire’s following observation in Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

For the oppressors, however, it is always the oppressed (whom they obviously never call “the oppressed” but – depending on whether they are fellow countrymen or not – “those people” or “the blind and envious masses” or “savages” or “natives” or “subversives”) who are disaffected, who are “violent,” “barbaric,” “wicked,” or “ferocious” when they react to the violence of the
oppressors. (p. 56)

As I discuss in the next section of this chapter, such violence can take the form of formal knowledge of “justice” or of practical “democratic” knowledge when the formally educated fail to learn from human beings who may lack such knowledge but who have immediate knowledge of the “just” or “democratic” social structures in question.
Chapter 8: Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a Concentric Circle

Although Paulo Freire is not among the thinkers with whom 21st century education associates itself, the model does claim to promote concepts, such as critical thinking and student-centred learning, which are nominally consistent with Freire’s emphases on the human telos of critical thinking and the centrality of oppressed people in realizing this telos. Hence this chapter considers Pedagogy of the Oppressed itself as a concentric circle in which to put 21st century education’s uncritical premise.

8.1) Philosophical and historical dimensions of Pedagogy of the Oppressed

As discussed, Freire does not provide an extended philosophical analysis of his concept of humanization in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Instead, dehumanization is the immediate problem that the book addresses. “Concern for humanization,” he writes, “leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality” (p. 43). In recognizing dehumanization as an historical reality, his book can be said to take primary direction from human beings’ actual experiences, as distinct from formal philosophical or scientific understandings of them as in The Republic and Democracy and Education. In his comparison of Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Democracy and Education, Betz effectively makes the same point, albeit in suggesting that the former text is therefore philosophically weaker than the latter: “Though Freire has been the more dramatically successful educator in increasing the feelings of self-worth of those their society deems worthless, Dewey is the better philosopher of education, and is better precisely for taking Freire’s thought farther and rooting it deeper than Freire does” (p. 109). By limiting philosophy of education to
formal analysis, however, Betz overlooks context-related factors on which formal analysis depends. For example, Dale and Hyslop-Margison argue that Freire’s opening paragraph, in which he invokes humanization before shifting the discussion to dehumanization, “sets the entire stage for Freire’s . . . ontological and humanization argument” (p. 79). As they explain, “In order to achieve his humanizing objectives, Freire’s pedagogy encouraged students to create meaning in their lives by asking them to reflect on historical reality” (p. 79).

Thus, to understand Freire’s focus on dehumanization and the insights of people who are oppressed, it is necessary to put Pedagogy of the Oppressed into historical context. Freire (1921-1997) wrote the book during the late 1960s while in exile from Brazil, in whose northeastern state of Pernambuco he was born (in the city of Recife). Andrew J. Kirkendall (2004) provides a thorough account of Freire’s contribution to literacy education – in Pernambuco and two other northeastern states, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe – in the years preceding the US-backed coup of 1964 in “Entering History: Paulo Freire and the Politics of the Brazilian Northeast, 1958-1964.”

Literacy, Kirkendall explains, was central to the northeastern politics of the period. For example, he observes, the United States provided funding for literacy campaigns as part of its aid-based pretext for intervention in the region, especially in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, while Brazil’s leftist parties in ascendance following the Second World War used literacy (sometimes with US support, sometime rejecting it) as a means of mobilizing workers and winning votes. In other words, various actors used literacy as a means of using people in turn as means to one end or another; “Paulo Freire’s new literacy training techniques, however, posed the potential of transforming
traditional peasant mentalities, making them more likely to see themselves as historical actors and organize on their own” (p. 170).

It is worth quoting, at some length, Kirkendall’s outline of a particular literacy campaign (in Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte) because it illustrates Freire’s “concentric circles” methodology, along with his attendant theory of humanization. The leader of this campaign, Marcos Guerra, Kirkendall notes, was taught by Freire and Freire’s colleagues:

Teachers went door to door in Angicos looking for people who did not know how to read and write. They announced from a loudspeaker mounted on a jeep that they would teach anyone who wanted to learn. As one of those involved in the program later remarked, the traditional night school of earlier Brazilian literacy campaigns “was replaced by culture circles” of the type created by the MCP. Teachers were now “dialogue coordinators,” and students “small group participants.” An examination of the local community and interviews with the local population allowed the Guerra team to create a “vocabulary universe, roughly 400 words related to their students’ daily activities.” Beginning in January 1963, 299 students (156 men and 143 women), most between the ages of 14 and 29, began the course. (The oldest student was 72 years old). The single largest occupation represented was domestic workers (94).

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31 Earlier in the article, Kirkendall notes that Freire “was one of the founders of the local Popular Culture Movement (MCP) in the state [of Pernambuco] and had begun to develop his ideas about literacy training within that movement while working in poor neighborhoods in Recife. Encouraged by Recife mayor Miguel Arraes, the MCP, employing professionals, artists, and political activists, ran schools in neighborhood associations, sport clubs, and churches” (p. 172). For the many sources to which Kirkendall refers in this passage, see his endnote 27, (pp. 186-187).
(There were also classes taught in the local prisons.) The students viewed slides depicting their daily lives and discussed what they saw, as they learned to write words such as “fair,” “goalie,” “vote,” and “people.” One of the slides chosen for discussion portrayed a man from the northeast voting. Teachers and administrators sought to combat what they saw as the “accommodating, conformist, indifferent, and fatalistic” attitudes of their malnourished and prematurely old students, who could not see any way to improve their lives. Freire argued at the time that Brazil was undergoing a fundamental transition in search of new values and attitudes. The students were challenged to adopt “more critical positions” through dialogue and debate. Class monitors posed questions that were intended to promote discussion. (Although debates were generally lively, teachers lamented the fact that women and younger students participated less frequently.) In the classes, the group learned the difference between “massa” and “povo.” The “masses” were illiterate; “people” were those who were conscious of themselves as citizens. As one student remarked, “People is what we are at election time.” At the end of the course, a newly literate 32-year-old washerwoman named Francisca Andrade wrote to the Brazilian president, proclaiming that “now I am no longer part of the ‘masses,’ I am ‘people’ and I can demand my rights.” One of Guerra’s own classes that began with the notion of work as culture continued with a discussion of constitutional rights to an 8-hour day and a minimum wage; Guerra and the students then discussed the possibility that foreign owners of local fazendas and salt businesses be thrown out of the country. Even discussions of
sports turned political, as monitors compared soccer teams to rural workers’ unions; both required unity for victory. (pp. 175-176)

In part because of the revolutionary potential of such learning, Brazil’s military, with U.S. support, would soon overthrew President João Goulart, who had “expressed his wish that hundreds of these courses could spread out throughout Brazil, so that people could have the ‘right [. . .] to participate and integrate themselves in the life of the nation,’ as the students in Angicos were now able to do, to demand their rights and make sure that laws on the books were borne out in practice” (p. 176).

In terms of Freire’s methodology and theory as described in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, one can infer that at least two familiar themes were successfully identified through the abovementioned discussions, insofar as Kirkendall’s account of them holds: the image of “a man from the northeast,” though his act of “voting” might have seemed unfamiliar at first; and soccer teams’ dependence on “unity for victory.” In relation to students’ common vocabulary, both themes were evidently effective in guiding the teaching and learning of basic literacy and beyond. Moreover, in relation to otherwise unfamiliar concentric circles – such as the notions of full citizenship, constitutional rights, work as culture, and union membership – the themes promoted the humanizing process of conscientização, as evidenced by Francisca Andrade’s letter to the president.

Kirkendall’s summary is also a reminder that Freire’s approach is not above criticism. For example, it evidently did not encourage all students to participate fully on their own terms because “teachers lamented the fact that women and younger students participated less frequently.” Freire’s dialectical (i.e., question-posing) methodology suggests that the proper way of critiquing its pedagogical failure in such instances is to
ask people, either directly or indirectly, why they are participating less frequently than others. But as Dale and Hylsop-Margison discuss, the very act of asking a question can be oppressive. They focus on questions whose terms or assumptions are bifurcated (e.g., that frame people in binary terms as either men or women, younger or older, lively or unlively, active or passive, oppressors or oppressed, etc.):

Dialectic, as Freire employed it, is a type of Socratic questioning, a continual process of inquiry intended to develop a synthesis to deconstruct social reality. From an arrived-at synthesis emerges a new antithesis out of which a new synthesis is created. In addition to his oppressor and oppressed distinction, Freire used dialectic, then, to foster learner understanding about the dynamic nature of the world and the role of agency in generating change.

The entire idea of dialectic as both a process and an analytic approach is not without critics. Some feminist theorists have suggested that the dominant conception of the dialectic denies women the opportunity for transcendence and that the dialectic of radical pedagogy is inadequate for an increasingly pluralistic culture and a reconstructed dialectic must engage feminist thought which incorporates a multiplicity of dialectics as opposed to the simple bifurcations we note above, a practice that will ultimately bring about positive social change. (pp. 115-116)

To summarize their point, people’s – and peoples’ – experiences cannot be reduced to “either/or” categories, so lines of inquiry that occur within such categories risk shutting down dialogue, even when the intention is to promote it. “Hence,” Dale and Hyslop-Margison write, “the dialectical portion of Freire’s overall theory, and the
misunderstandings it generates, may be the weakest link in his otherwise insightful and important contributions to critical pedagogy” (p. 118).

Louis Althusser (1971/2014) in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* similarly cautions against the notion, sometimes promoted by Marxists, that the history of capitalism is simply the history of an oppressor class whose members are fully conscious of what they are doing. In outlining his theory of “the state,” he writes:

We shall say that a theory is ‘descriptive’ when we can perfectly well bring the vast majority of observable facts in the domain on which it bears into correspondence with its definition of its object. Thus the definition of the state as a class state that exists in the repressive state apparatus sheds a very revealing light on all the facts observable in the various orders of repression in whatever domain: from the massacres of June 1848 and the Paris Commune . . . to all the direct or indirect forms of the slaughter of the popular masses (imperialist wars), their exploitation, and the subtle everyday domination in which is revealed, in the forms of political democracy, for example, what Lenin called, after Marx, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. . . .

If this definition were to remain at the first stage, in which it functions as a ‘descriptive theory,’ it would risk finding itself in an unstable equilibrium, as if it were poised on a narrow mountain ridge, on the point, that is, of falling to one side or the other. This instability and the attendant risk of a fall have been very well analyzed in a recent book [*Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales* by Nikos Poulantzas in 1968]. Here we shall only note the book’s reminder that, precisely because of the instability of the ‘descriptive theory’ of the state, certain Marxists,
and by no means the least of them, have ‘fallen’ to the wrong side of the path on the ridge by presenting the state as a *mere instrument* of domination and repression in the service of *objectives*, that is, of the dominant class’s *conscious will*. (Original emphases, pp. 71-72)

Given the ‘either/or’ appearance of Freire’s oppressor-oppressed formulation, which draws on Marxism, it also risks a fall from accurately describing oppressive social realities to participating in their perpetuation. For example, in passionately describing the struggle of “the oppressed” to overcome oppression it risks romanticizing some people while demonizing others, overlooking the historical roots of people’s and peoples’ positions in existing social structures, thereby overlooking causes of oppression that cannot be reduced to human subjectivity. As Althusser says of the above fallen state of theory, it is “a bourgeois, instrumentalist conception . . . reinforced by a bourgeois idealist (humanist) conception of social classes as ‘subjects’” (p. 72). Or as Dale and Hyslop-Margison observe, “Freire’s dialectic between the oppressed and the oppressors seemingly neglects the reality that an individual may fall into both categories not only in the course of his/her life, but also in a single day’s actions” (p. 116). One such action can take the form of exclusionary terms such as pronouns that occlude people’s identities. “The developing richer understandings of the transgender and intersexual movements,” they write, for example, “highlights the problematic classifications that often emerge from scientific analysis and imposed classifications and categorizations” (p. 116).

An important challenge to the dialectical dimension of Freire’s philosophy that Dale and Hyslop-Margison identify within Freire’s philosophy is his critique of the
Marxist concept of dialectical materialism (sometimes called historical materialism).

They summarize the latter concept as follows:

The early Marx believed that one historical event inevitably led to the next and the present is the culmination of these antecedent casual relationships. Marx viewed capitalism as one of those historically determined steps and likened it to a spell unleashed by a genie: Once the spell was caste, it could not be undone. . . .

In Marx’s view, communism was the natural outcome of previous historical antagonisms between labor and capital (p. 118)

In contrast, they observe, Freire believed that human beings are ultimately capable of determining history, once people realize their common human ability to think and act critically towards their situation, against the mystifying effects of actually oppressive forces therein. As Freire puts it in Pedagogy of the Oppressed – with reference to his experience of dialoguing with actually oppressed people, as distinct from merely invoking “the oppressed” in the abstract – “until they concretely ‘discover’ their oppressor and in turn their own consciousness, they nearly always express fatalistic attitudes toward their situation” (p. 61). Such fatalism, he adds, may appear “in the guise of docility” – as a seeming “trait of national character” – but it is nonetheless “the fruit of

32 In this sense, there is truth to Marx’s claim that historical forces are somehow ahistorical, mystifying. Unfortunately, he associates the real experience of being mystified by historical forces with the Orientalist notion that a “genie” naturally represents mystifying experiences. As Edward Said (1978/1999) writes in Orientalism: “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. . . . ‘Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten warden [They cannot represent themselves; they must be spoken for],’ as Marx wrote in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (p. 875). Dale and Hyslop-Margison similarly comment, “The theory of dialectical materialism, while interesting and perhaps even containing some measure of historical truth, is ultimately an unsatisfactory explanation of human experience because of its taxonomic oversimplification, its notion that history has an end, and its failure to recognize human agency as a critical transformative force” (p. 120).
an historical and sociological situation, not an essential characteristic of people’s behaviour” (p. 61). Or as Dale and Hyslop-Margison describe Freire’s position on history, “humans are not hopelessly ensconced as objects in history, geography, or caught in the current of deterministic materialism, but are capable of rising about their social and environmental circumstances” (p. 121).

To recap, Freire’s philosophy of education centres on the experiences of actually oppressed people (e.g., in Angicos) within a dialectical framework that is intended to encourage people to liberate themselves with reference to bifurcated terms, such as the oppressor-oppressed distinction. On one level, bifurcated terms possibly contribute to experiences of oppression, contradicting Freire’s humanizing intention, insofar as the terms in question do not actually resonate with or altogether deny people’s dynamic personal and collective experiences. On another level, Freire’s experience-based and philosophically informed belief in human rationality and agency can be perceived (and inspire) in spite of his sometimes problematic terminology and attendant assumptions. To quote Dale and Hyslop-Margison once more:

The purpose of these two categories [of oppressor and oppressed] is not so much the rigid placement of individuals into particular roles, the forcing of individuals into constructed categories, but rather as forms of action that humans have a choice to pursue based on different understandings. In some sense, they represent for Freire mere headings under which other actions, emotions, and concerns may be grouped together rather than referring to specific groups of individuals. He understood very well that far too often in the history of social transformation and
revolutionary movements the oppressed simply become oppressors themselves.

(p. 116)

As made clear in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he also understood that in professing to contribute to the emancipatory cause of oppressed people he ran the risk of impeding it in effect, on account of his own limitations. “I will be satisfied,” he writes in his preface, “if among the readers of this work there are those whose sufficiently critical to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, to deepen affirmations and to point out aspects I have not perceived” (p. 39). To minimize the risk of mistakes, etc., he centres his formal pronouncements on actual experience as he understood it through dialogue. In his words, “in my experience as an educator with the people, using a dialogical and problem-posing education, I have accumulated a comparative wealth of material that challenged me to run the risk of making the affirmations contained in this work” (p. 40).

Although I have merely touched on the historical context to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, including the history of its philosophical foundations, two basic points have emerged that will inform my subsequent review of a selection of specific concepts from the book. First, for Freire, actual human experience(s) of a given subject area must guide any form of dialogue about it if it is to be meaningful, whether in the realm of formal disciplines or everyday social contexts. Second, Freire’s approach to overcoming dehumanization through dialogue with people who are actually oppressed nonetheless draws on formal philosophical concepts, which for a variety of reasons can either extend or shut down lines of communication. With regard to the first point, I will presently select and underline a few more concepts from Pedagogy of the Oppressed because,
when compared to 21st century education’s rhetoric as I have experienced it, they help to illustrate the deficiency of the model’s stated meaning. With regard to the second point, I hope to open rather than shut down lines of communication with people; therefore, in drawing on formal concepts I have tried to do so in ways that are aligned with my experience-based problem of accessing and critiquing the model’s presupposed concepts, so that, in the critical spirit of Freire, I may take the risk of stating conclusions to which my methodological and theoretical approach leads.

8.2) A selection of Freirean concepts that help to explain 21st century education

According to Freire, “false generosity” is the desire of oppressors to perpetuate oppression expressed as efforts to mitigate its impact on the oppressed, “to ‘soften’ the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed” (p. 44). The effect is the realization of the oppressors’ desire:

In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity,” which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. (p. 44)

The oppressed participate in the protection of this source, even if they recognize its existence, Freire argues, unless they supplement their recognition of it with a critical confrontation with it.

Again, although Freire depicts oppression in bifurcated terms, he infers from its very existence as a general human problem is that its objective resolution is to be found
in the actual human beings who are involved in particular situations of oppression. As he explains:

Since it is a concrete situation that the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is established, the resolution of this contradiction must be objectively verifiable.

Hence, the radical requirement—both for the individual who discovers himself or herself to be an oppressor and the oppressed—that the concrete situation which begets oppression must be transformed. (Original emphasis, p. 50).

In asserting this position, Freire is quick to add that he is not denying the subjective dimension of human relationships. “On the contrary,” he writes, “one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity” (p. 50). To think of social transformation as a purely objective process, he acknowledges, would be to overlook the part that human consciousness plays in producing social structures. He calls the latter way of thinking “objectivism” (p. 50). But, he also acknowledges, to think of social transformation in terms of pure subjectivity would be to overlook the actual social world that is produced, thereby denying “action itself by denying objective reality” (p. 50). He calls the latter “subjectivism” (p. 50).

Against both objectivism and subjectivism, Freire advances his take on the Marxist concept of “praxis,” defined as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). In doing so, he draws on the idea (attributing it to Georg Lukács) that revolutionary leaders must provide people with an explanation of their confrontation with systemic oppression, both to sustain the revolution and to ensure that it retains its humanizing impetus. “For us, however,” Freire says, “the requirement is seen not in terms of explaining to, but rather dialoguing with the people about their actions” (p. 53).
On Freire’s philosophy, then, formal concepts such as “praxis” are transformative only insofar as they help the oppressed to reflect on their situation in ways that motivate them to be autonomous participants therein. Inasmuch as their starting point is the uncritical state of oppression that Freire describes, it follows that formal concepts must be translated into familiar language. But, in contrast to Plato’s noble falsehood, the point of any such translation is not to convey a truth to which only formally trained philosophers (or official revolutionary leaders) have initial access. Nor is the point to provide a model of civilization to a people who are presumed to be uncivilized. Rather, in the context of actually oppressive social structures, it is to facilitate, through dialogue, oppressed people’s expression of the truth of their experience of oppression, as the first step toward its dissolution. Hence Freire summarizes the dissolution of oppression in terms of two “distinct stages” (p. 54). The first stage, he explains, occurs when people recognize their oppression and resolve to transform it “through the praxis” (p. 54). The second stage opens up this truth to the broader human community: “all people in the process of permanent liberation” (p. 54).

Freire contrasts what he calls “the ‘banking’ concept of education” (p. 72) with genuine “problem-posing education” (p. 79). He defines the former method as the imposition of content on students and the expectation of them to regurgitate it, just as money is deposited in and withdrawn from banks. Genuine problem-posing, he argues, necessarily involves dialogue between teachers and students, not to replace teachers’ knowledge for fear that it may be oppressive, but to align it with the knowledge of students for the purpose of both teachers and students becoming more knowledgeable. “At the point of encounter,” in dialogue, he writes, “there are neither utter ignoramuses
nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (p. 90).

Reminiscent of Plato’s concept of the rational and therefore redirectable soul and Dewey’s concept of adaptation, Freire’s concept of dialogue is predicated on a notion of language as being simultaneously passive and active. Both features of language, Freire argues, must be engaged for words to be both objectively true and transformative. In addition, and in keeping with his belief in Catholicism (through the lens of liberation theology), he identifies five necessary dispositions for actual dialogue: love, humility, faith, trust, and hope as well as critical thinking. He defines “critical thinking” as thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits no dichotomy between them – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (p. 92)

He contrasts such thinking with “naïve thinking” (p. 92). He assigns the latter term to people who, in the absence of dialogue, conform to their social context. In doing so, he again brings Plato and Dewey to my mind, particularly their respective concepts of enchained cave dwellers and people deemed in need of a liberator. In important contrast, however, Freire locates the ultimate source of naivety in the logic of oppression, not in the nature or culture of people who suffer under one form of oppression or another. Moreover, whereas Plato envisions a philosopher king descending into the cave to free its chained inhabitants, and whereas Dewey envisions a kind of universal social justice in liberal democracies living up to and spreading their ideal, Freire regards oppressed
people as a principal source of knowledge about how to overcome oppression, hence the title of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. “The important thing,” he writes, “from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (p. 124).

The latter quotation is reminiscent of an oft-quoted line from *Democracy and Education* in which Dewey describes the goal of education as making young people “equipped to be masters of their own economic and social careers” (p. 98). But the key difference is that Dewey ultimately relies on his society’s implicit ideals – and its cultural products, such as formal scientific discoveries – as guides for reforming public education toward such liberal democratic ends as the production of critical citizens. In contrast, Freire looks to “themes” of oppression, accessed through dialogue with oppressed people, for the content of educational experience. That is, his “view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people,” meaning that the function of his view of education is “to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed, in the elaboration of which the oppressed must participate” (p. 124).

### 8.3) 21st century education as an obstacle to dialogue

In Chapter 2, I argued that 21st century education takes a carrot and stick approach to making its stated case. The carrot, I showed, consisted of a series of purported gifts. “If the anti-worker direction of present technological changes were truly inevitable,” I wrote, for example, “reforming education systems in the same direction –
with the help of 21st century education – at least has the potential of mitigating the related hardships of some people.” In this sense, the model can be considered as a form of false generosity.

Rhetorically, 21st century education promotes reflection and action, though it certainly does not invoke the Marxist notion of praxis. Its rhetoric is, however, consistent with the “fallen” state of Marxist theory that Althusser describes as effectively “bourgeois,” the Marxist term for members of the capitalist class. That is, a large part of the model’s rhetorical effectiveness has to do with its technically accurate, albeit vague, references to social realities such as the seeming ubiquity of digital technology. Implicit and at times explicit in its rhetoric is the notion that such social realities are universally desirable and consciously accepted. Thus, 21st century education is at once a form of “objectivism” (insofar as its rhetoric emphasizes the world as it is) and “subjectivism” (in presupposing universal agreement). As such, it falls short of Freire’s dialogical concept of praxis and instead exemplifies his concept of “banking” education (especially in terms of imposing conceptually flawed “skills” on students in the form of compulsory curricular outcomes; but in some cases “banking” also occurs literally, as in the use of digital fingerprint scanning in New Brunswick’s school system as a stated means of making lunch purchases more efficient and secure).

Given its stated promotion of problem-based learning, 21st century education may at first glance seem to be consistent with Freire’s approach to problem solving. Based on my experience, though, the model clearly lacks the dispositional criteria that Freire deems essential to real dialogue. How can a model that stimulates fear of economic misery be loving? Given that it places itself above criticism, how can it exude humility? Where is
its faith in teachers and students? What is hopeful about its over-the-top promise of a better future for people who submit uncritically to its logic? Discussed earlier, 21st century education’s stated content is an impediment to critical analysis, not simply because the model excludes its reasoning but because it presents itself as inherently reasonable. After all, it explicitly claims to promote “critical thinking” among other so-called 21st century skills.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have elaborated on the historical and philosophical context to Freire’s methodology of concentric circles and his theory of humanization, introduced in an earlier chapter. In doing so, I have qualified my use of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as the latter rests on a problematic notion of dialectical thinking, one that risks perpetuating actual forms of oppression by reducing them to “either/or” (oppressed-oppressor) terms. Although the risk is minimized when the book is considered in historical and philosophical context, wherein it is an extension of Freire’s largely successful experience as a co-educator with people, his terminology is nonetheless problematic, especially when necessarily abstracting it from its original context for the purpose of critically analyzing “oppressive” reforms such as 21st century education reform in New Brunswick. One reason that it thereby remains problematic is that is can suggest (notwithstanding the fact that Freire explicitly argues otherwise) that such reforms are fully within the control of individual policy makers, politicians, administrators, teachers, student interns, and/or anyone else who is at all officially involved in implementing public education policy, potentially framing such people as inherent oppressors. As I
mentioned in my introduction, my biggest regret of my BEd experience was that the oppressiveness that I was experiencing as a student intern who was coerced into adhering to 21st century education standards could pass on to students in my official charge, simply through my efforts to pass the programme. Hence in referring to the model as “oppressive,” I do not mean to apply Freirean terminology uncritically (e.g., I do not mean to suggest that I am above criticism). Rather, I use it with direct reference to my (socially and academically relevant) experience of being confused and manipulated by the rhetoric of 21st century education because it describes this experience while also providing methodological and theoretical insight into using it as a primary means of critically analyzing the model’s uncritical framework for the ultimate purpose of suggesting a critical alternative to it.

In sum, Freire’s de facto privileging of his experience of dialoguing with “the oppressed” (a term that in itself occludes the full scope of any oppressed person’s or peoples’ experiences) can be offset by extending his critical emphases on dialogue (a form of social structure) and humanization (a key component of formal education, in Aristotelian philosophy in particular). I have attempted to extend these lines by subjecting 21st century education’s stated premise to criticism by juxtaposing it with four products of formal education to which it is connected (through Trilling’s and Fadel’s invocation of Plato and Dewey, through its rhetoric’s nominal similarity to Freire’s focus on critical thinking and students’ experiences, and through Christou’s historical analysis): The Republic, Democracy and Education, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and Progressive Education. In my next chapter, I return to Progressive Education to add two more rhetorical terms to “progress,” which I will then use as guides for accessing their
presupposed meaning in *21st Century Skills* and *NB3-21C*. Once accessed, I will critique them in (reimagined) terms of Plato’s, Dewey’s, and Freire’s common respect for immediate experience, existing social structures, and formal education.
Chapter 9: Accessing and Critiquing 21st Century Education’s Meaning

In this chapter, I put the premise of New Brunswick’s 21st century education reform in three more concentric circles: Christou’s *Progressive Education*, Trilling’s and Fadel’s *21st Century Skills*, and the New Brunswick Department of Education’s policy document, *NB3-21C*. I return to Christou’s book because, as mentioned, it makes a direct connection between the rhetoric of 21st century education and uncritical rhetoric of progress. Thus, although it is an insufficient means of directly accessing the presupposed meaning of such rhetoric, it is an appropriate means of accessing related rhetorical terms that can be used to access the meaning in question. Specifically, it effectively shows that 21st century education is also connected to uncritical rhetoric of democracy and justice (among other uncritical concepts). What is more, it explicitly reveals that this discursive context to which the model is historically connected is a function of capitalism. And in explicitly connecting “progressivism” to the official institutions in the province of Ontario, it reveals that this discourse a function of state-capitalism.

Again, although it is of course possible to make these connections simply by reading *21st Century Skills* and *NB3-21C* because their market-orient rhetoric includes nominal references to these concepts, initially distracted by the model’s plethora of stated concepts (which suggest that the model is not only market-oriented but oriented toward universal human needs), I did not notice the centrality of “progress,” “democracy,” and “justice” to the model’s presupposed framework until reading Christou’s book. It is also possible to make the connections upon reading *The Republic* and *Democracy and*
Education, as the model rhetorically aligns itself with Platonism and Deweyanism and therefore with the former’s stance against sophist democracy and the latter’s advocacy of liberal democracy and its effective advocacy of state-capitalist democracy. However, as I have shown, the actual alignment is dubious at best, rendering dubious any inference that The Republic and Democracy and Education are direct sources of the model’s stated concepts, let alone of their precise presupposed meaning. (Given the fact that the model is not explicitly associated with Freire as it is with Plato and Dewey, the terminological similarities between Pedagogy of the Oppressed and 21st century education’s rhetoric of student-centredness and critical thinking do not suggest that the latter are as closely connected or central to the model’s presupposed meaning as are its rhetorical references to progress, democracy, and justice). Similarly, while the model is clearly state-capitalist, specifically as the Graham administration’s framework for public education reform, it does not present itself as such. Hence to declare, on its terms, that the model presupposes state-capitalist concepts of progress, democracy, and justice, it is first necessary to connect its terms to a demonstrably state-capitalist “progressive,” “democratic,” and “just” framework. Christou’s book, based on my reading of it, makes such a connection, albeit in indirectly.

With “progress,” “democracy,” and “justice” in mind, I subsequently analyze their presence in both 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C. Using Dale’s summary of the problems of state-capitalism as an additional guide, I conclude that “progress” in 21st century education is consistent with the principle of providing support for capital accumulation, whereas “democracy” and “justice” in 21st century education are
respectively consistent with the principles of guaranteeing and legitimating a given context in which capital accumulation may continue.

9.1) Progressive Education as a concentric circle

Within the scope of Christou’s analysis, the rhetoric of progressive education on which he focuses is complex and varied. He identifies three common “domains”: “(a) concern for active learning, (b) a preoccupation with individualized instruction, and (c) the desire to link schools with contemporary society” (6). He also identifies three “orientations” within each of these three domains, “(a) child study and developmental psychology, (b) social efficiency, and (c) social meliorism” (p. 7).

Christou clearly argues that the specific content of any self-styled progressive movement must be analyzed in its particular historical context. What should be generalized on his view, then, is the method of analyzing the rhetoric of progressive education in terms of period-specific domains and orientations. “I argue,” in his words, “that describing progressive education in any particular historical context requires us to frame both the domain of progressive thought and the orientation to this domain – or, the various ways that aspects of progressive education were interpreted” (p. 7).

When one applies this method to 21st century education, the topics of all of the abovementioned domains and orientations reappear. Consider NB3-2IC, for example. It claims to promote lifestyles that are “physically active” (p. ii). It describes itself as “a learner-centred learning model” (p. 13). And it links this model to its notion of modern society, the “Digital Age” (p. iii), otherwise known as “the knowledge and innovation age” (p. 5). One of its many stated commitments is to collect “provincial and regional
profiles of child and youth service requirements using data housed in several
departments, existing surveys of client groups, and collected school data” in order to
“provide new information to school districts and partner departments as well as assist in
the piloting of the new Integrated Services Delivery Model for Children and Youth” (p.
26). Another commitment is to “use available resources efficiently” (p. 22). Yet another
is nominally melioristic: “to change our very culture: to take steps to ensure that New
Brunswickers value learning, have heightened expectations for success and provide the
opportunities that our students need to realize their potential” (p. 9).

For reasons given earlier, Christou’s approach does not provide a direct way
beyond the rhetorical parameters of the strand of progressivism that he documents.
However, it does provide an indirect way by revealing that this strand presupposes that
“progress” here means adapting to a technology-related notion of modern capitalist
society. In Christou’s words, “Relating schools to society meant, in many respects,
assessing the needs of industry and the business community” (p. 94). Evidently, then,
relating schools to society was not always an overtly capitalist act. Summarizing “the
social meliorism” position within the domain of connecting schools to modern society,
Christou writes that it saw public schools “as vital to the creation of a more cooperative,
democratic, and socially just society” (my emphasis, p. 102). Ostensibly, though, the
latter was deemed compatible with capitalism in principle, if not always in practice. For
example, Christou notes the position of a member of the Ontario Educational Association
(John Cook) that aligning public schooling with contemporary society through melioristic
means is next to impossible within a laissez-faire capitalist economy. Yet Cook
apparently did not regard capitalism itself as a threat to social meliorism, in light of his
musing that it “may be as good an economic system as could be evolved to meet a situation where there was a scarcity of the necessities of life” (as quoted in endnote 107, p. 203).

The above positions as Christou describes them provide another clue about the kind of society to which they were meant (on his analysis) to promote adjustment/adaptation, as it existed beyond rhetoric. That is, the otherwise different and sometimes competing meanings that he detects within these journals inferably share an exclusive form, involving both the idea that progress means adapting to – as distinct from analyzing and critiquing – a particular conception of modern society and the idea that people in positions of official authority should define this conception. In Christou’s words, “Progressive education would be linked to the shifting needs of contemporary life, as defined by educationalists at the time” (p. 8). For the purposes of his analysis, he defines educationalists as “stakeholders in education, including – but not limited to – teachers, administrators, professors of education, school inspectors, and officials in the Department of Education” (p. 6). He explores the extent to which their technically different but commonly “progressive” approaches both overshadowed humanist definitions of education and shaped actual reform policy in Ontario’s public education system. In his view, the journals probably erred in overlooking the contributions of humanist education – including the humanism of John Dewey’s progressivism – in opposition to which they partially defined their strand of progressivism. As mentioned, however, Christou does not critique the view that education should be defined primarily with reference to one aspect or another of contemporary life. “Perhaps,” he concludes,
“we need to slow down our reformist agendas and define the qualities of an educated person for our own time” (p. 145).

In sum, Progressive Education connects 21st century education to a historical strand of state-capitalist, rhetorically progressive, democratic, and just education reform. Using these three rhetorical and (in this instance) state-capitalist terms, I now return to 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C to access these texts’ presupposed meaning of 21st century education. Of the three general problems of state-capitalism that Dale identifies, I will explain, 21st century education’s rhetoric of progress is primarily associated with capital accumulation, whereas its rhetoric of democracy and justice are mainly associated, respectively, with the problems of guaranteeing and legitimating capital accumulation. Although these associations are nominal – and thereby occlude the power of rhetoric to be many things at once – they are important to note, as they suggest that the model is primarily a means of supporting capital accumulation, which makes sense given its emphatic promotion of digital products.

9.2) “Progress” in 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C

Trilling’s and Fadel’s 206-page book (including promotional quotations and the authors’ autobiographical blurbs) invokes progress, by my count, 25 times. It does so in at least five general and overlapping ways. In no particular order, these ways consist of explicit and/or implicit references to nominal forms of (1) education, (2) economics, (3) “Knowledge Age” societies, (4) universal human needs, and (5) both physics and
metaphysics. Thus, in order to arrive at 21st century education’s primary meaning of “progress,” it is first necessary to analyze these references in more detail.\textsuperscript{33}

Not surprisingly, all of the 25 invocations of progress refer to education in one sense or another, either implicitly or explicitly. I identify six themes, four of which pertain to nominally educative goals, the remainder to means of advancing such goals.

One of the four goals is to realize the stated premise of 21st century education, namely to reform public education in accordance with various global “changes [that] will continue to make new demands on education as the century \textit{progresses}” (p. 5). As discussed, Trilling and Fadel regard technology-related changes as especially educative. For example, Fadel’s autobiographical blurb refers to the “the mass personalization of learning” that technology is meant “to \textit{progressively} enable” (p. xvii).

A second goal is the learning of content that is deemed foundational, as when “students \textit{progress} through the grade levels, investigating various aspects of a ‘big idea’ over time” (p. 129). This goal consistent with the inner arch of the 21st Century Rainbow, which as discussed is consistent with the PISA topics of “NB3.”

A third goal is the promotion of practices that are considered reflective of cutting-edge workplace conditions. For example, the authors write, “Learning in a community of learners who share knowledge, questions, skills, \textit{progress}, and passion for a subject is exactly how adults learn when they participate in their communities of work and professional practice” (p. 34).

\textsuperscript{33} For emphasis, I have put these references in bold font (as I have also put subsequently discussed references to democracy and justice).
A fourth and final goal that I can detect is “human progress” (p. 92). Trilling and Fadel depict the latter as a goal that the arts and sciences among other educated practices have advanced over the course of history and presumably continue to advance. That said, certain forms of this notion of progress are ostensibly antiquated in the present century and beyond. Hence the authors contrast “industrial progress” with service-industry innovation in a table entitled “Society’s Educational Goals Throughout the Ages” (p. 14). One means-related theme pertains to proposed pedagogical methods of measuring, testing, recording, and reporting students’ learning. “Collections of formative assessments,” Trilling and Fadel write, for instance, “can also be used as part of a summative evaluation, offering a rich set of multiple measures as the basis for an end-of-project or end-of-unit assessment of progress toward learning goals and standards” (p. 134).

Another means-related theme centres on administrative/political and technical dimensions of implementing 21st century education reform, involving “leaders [who] must also openly and frequently communicate progress” and “progress being made in . . . systems” (pp. 124-125). Notably, Trilling and Fadel associate their book with the latter goals, inasmuch as it employs P21’s model, which they suggest may be “the most important factor of all in P21’s progress” (p. 170). One member of P21, it is also worth noting, goes by the name of “Measured Progress” (p. 169).

Although all of the above examples of “progress” are clearly meant to be interpreted in one sense or another as educational, they are also vague enough to admit other interpretations, notably economic interpretations. For example, “the mass personalization of learning” that technology is supposed “to progressively enable” may
refer in part to sincere efforts to use technology to increase access to educational material (e.g., by streaming a lecture that is otherwise difficult to access). But it may also refer to the marketing of material as educational – irrespective of the material’s actual quality – to make private profit.

Consider one more example, the authors’ following statement: “We are fortunate to have a large and growing number of schools, school networks, states, countries, and enthusiastic and committed education leaders and teachers that have already achieved a great deal of progress in moving education into the 21st century” (p. 145). “We” in the immediate context of this statement is vague and seemingly inclusive (in the broad, not necessarily legalistic sense of the term), but it could refer exclusively to the authors themselves, their public-private partnership or any of its individual members, and/or anyone in the world who views 21st century education reform as a fortunate thing. Indeed, the point for many of P21’s partners is to be fortunate, in the sense of making a fortune or profit off school reform. Moreover, it important to remember that “We” implies the presence of “Them,” in this case people whose economic misfortunes are part of the nominally progressive meaning of 21st century education. “Routine tasks are being increasingly automated,” the authors admit after all, “and the routine jobs still [are being] done by people barely paid a living wage” (p. 9).

Related to the above notions of education and economics, of course, “progress” in 21st century education also invokes the topic of society. Put another way, any collective activity that is supportive of 21st century education is on its terms considered progressive, whereas any resistance is implicitly considered regressive. In discussing “The Project Learning Bicycle,” Trilling and Fadel convey this broad social meaning as
follows: “School and community support for this type of learning can provide a tailwind to help propel the project; lack of such support could be seen as strong headwinds to thwart progress” (p. 101). Although “progress” in this sense implies a particular (market-oriented) society, Trilling and Fadel nonetheless associate the term with the entire human species, implying again that their model is a form of human progress. This latter meaning of “progress” is especially apparent in their association between the model’s stated promotion of questioning and following quotation, which they attribute to Indira Ghandi: “The power to question is the basis of all human progress” (p. 89).

In another sense “progress” may simply refer to physical movement in space and time. For example, students’ “progress” in school may be synonymous with their physical movements from one activity to another, their institutional movement toward graduation each year, and so on. In yet another sense, however, Trilling and Fadel imbue “progress” with metaphysical significance. Recall that they depict historical changes in education as universally occurring on “society’s evolving stage” (p. 12). On that stage “industrial progress” gives way to the market-oriented developments of the “Knowledge Age.”

Recall that 21st century education’s stated framework (as outlined in Chapter 2) risks distracting attention from the simple fact that it is conceptually unsupported. For example, its plethora of stated skills, upon analysis, are all denotable as ‘the uncritical use of digital technology.’ Recall also that the various commitments of When Kids Come First (as outlined in Chapter 4) can be restated in terms of the MacKay Report’s connotatively malleable yet legally constrained rhetoric of inclusion, which effectively guaranteed market-based, legal, and ideological contexts for capital accumulation in the
province’s schools and beyond, especially a legal context for continued neoliberal reforms. Similarly, I maintain, the various connotations of “progress” in 21st Century Skills belie fact that their economic connotations are primary.

But is it accurate, on the model’s terms, to declare that its primary meaning of “progress” is economic? Yes, inasmuch as its terms are an extension of the fundamentally state-capitalist discourse of progressivism that Christou documents. Of the three problems of state-capitalism that Dale identifies, then, to what one does “progress” in 21st century education refer? Given the malleability of rhetoric (as discussed in Chapter 3), any aspect of the model’s rhetoric may simultaneously address all three problems. However, the model’s stated premise emphasizes market-oriented technological changes, thereby deemphasizing any notion of the context(s) on which such changes depends and any notion of legitimating them. Given that technology is a (profitable) product of the high-tech industry, moreover, I conclude that the presupposed meaning of “progress” in 21st century education is ‘principled support for capital accumulation.’

In NB3-21C, there are only three invocations of progress, all of which are consistent with Trilling’s and Fadel’s use of the term. Indeed, the document cites the authors’ book as a primary source.

Consider, first of all, the opening message of Deputy Minister of Education, John Kershaw. “In the Digital Age,” he writes, “a well-educated society is the prerequisite to economic success, social progress and personal empowerment” (p. iii). This direct association between digital technology and the alleged essence of modern society implies
that there is no real distinction between economic success under existing conditions and
the document’s presupposed meaning of progress.

The second and third invocations of progress likewise connect the rhetoric of
progress to the document’s implicit definition of the “Digital Age,” namely the ubiquity
of the high-tech industry’s products. “Learning systems designed to promote creativity in
team settings across virtual networks,” it states, “will be the trademark of economically
competitive and socially progressive societies in the 21st Century” (p. 3). And a stated
strategy for assessing learning that it plans to consider consists of “new technologies to
support progress monitoring for all students, and to provide data on cohorts of students at
all levels of the K-12 system” (p. 20).

9.3) “Democracy” in 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C

On the surface, 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C provide even less information
about their notion of democracy than they do about their notion of progress. Trilling and
Fadel, for example, invoke the former concept a mere two times, in keeping with P21’s
NCLB origins. “It is worth noting,” Giroux notes, “that the words ‘democracy’ and
‘citizenship’ are virtually absent from Bush’s 28-page education plan, No Child Left
Behind” (p. 76).34 First, Trilling and Fadel do so in the context of promoting digital
technology, which they describe, in a section entitled “Fulfilling Civic Responsibilities,”
as a democratic means of disseminating information:

34 In contrast, 21st century education does refer to citizenship frequently. The concept of democracy on
which its concept of citizenship rests is nonetheless neoliberal, I argue.
With access to the expanded spectrum of issues, facts, opinions, and conversations that our increasingly media-rich and Internet-connected world brings us, our potential for informed participation in democratic decision making has never been better. E-mail, the Internet, and cell phones have made it easier to connect with others who share our interests and concerns and to coordinate our social, civic, and community activities. (p. 17)

They go on to acknowledge that digital technology simultaneously poses the threat of “information overload,” mixing “well-informed and reliable” material with that which is “woefully uninformed and even deliberately misleading” (p. 17). However, their solution is to promote 21st century education, even though the model misleadingly promises universal well-being while withholding basic information, notably its presupposed concepts. Their second invocation of democracy refers to classical Athens and occurs in passing, in the context of discussing academic standards that are supposed to promote the learning of ideas in “depth” as students “progress” through public education: “An example would be learning about ancient Greek culture in Grade 4, Athenian democracy in Grade 8, and comparative Greek and other political philosophies and practices in Grade 12” (p. 129).

In comparison, NB3-2IC provides slightly more information. It states that 21st century education reform in New Brunswick will promote, among other “investment” returns, citizens who can “build the New Brunswick economy, pursue environmentally sustainable lifestyles, support high-quality social programs and foster free and democratic societies” (p. 3). Ostensibly, New Brunswick’s political system is one such society, given the public education system’s mission statement: “To have each student
develop the attributes needed to be a life-long learner, to achieve personal fulfillment and to contribute to a productive, just and democratic society” (p. 1). The document only lists “Global Citizenship” as one of five overarching points of 21st century education reform. As global citizens, it states, students will “comprehend Canada’s political, social and economic systems in a global context” and “understand key ideas and concepts related to democracy (for example: human rights),” among other outcomes (p. 12).

Based on the above references to freedom and rights-based democracy, and given the capitalist meaning of progress with which it is associated, I claim that 21st century education presupposes that “democracy” means ‘any context that works to guarantee the freedom of capitalists to accumulate capital.’ In Social Torment: Globalization in Atlantic Canada, Thom Workman (2003) makes a similar claim:

Globalization is not about attacking democracies, nor does it take aim at “the people.” Rather, it embraces any form of government that promotes its agenda, and it attacks working people. Globalization is not populist; it is classist.

(Original emphasis, p. 134).

Similarly, when realized in actual contexts, 21st century education’s presupposed concept of “democracy” means, for example, that the high-tech industry will continue to have a reliable, “democratically” arranged market for its products, notably (increasingly nominal) public education systems. “The hidden curriculum,” writes Giroux of some of NCLB’s effects, “is that testing is used as a ploy to ensure that teachers are de-skilled as they are reduced to mere technicians, that students be treated as customers in the marketplace rather than as engaged, critical learners, and that public schools fail so that they can [be] eventually privatized” (p. 73).

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9.4) “Justice” in 21st Century Skills and NB3-21C

So why should anyone, in principle, adapt to the kind of “progressive” and “democratic” society that 21st century education presupposes? Moreover, what concept of justice does this form of social adaptation presuppose?

Each document invokes justice only once, associating it with extant social conditions. According to Trilling and Fadel, it is one of the many modern “themes” that 21st century education reform builds into otherwise antiquated school systems, such as “civic literacy (civic engagement, community service, ethics, and social justice)” (pp. 47-48). In its aforementioned mission statement, NB3-21C claims to prepare students for “a productive, just, and democratic society.”

Although Trilling and Fadel seemingly lament the negative effects of global capitalism, it is important to emphasize that their concept of universal economic success – “the future health, wealth, and welfare of everyone” (p. 152) – refers exclusively to the high-tech industry’s “knowledge” economies. They perfunctorily admit that these economies entail “increasing automation and the shifting of manufacturing (and its environmental impacts) to lower-wage, industrial-equipped countries such as China, India, and Brazil” (p. 4). They also make clear that only those “knowledge” societies that realize 21st century education have a chance of avoiding economic failure. (They do not explain how such societies apparently avoid the “environmental impacts” of manufacturing industries). In this sense, 21st century “justice” is a function of any society that advances and protects the interests of the private sector, notwithstanding the unequal forms of success that this expression entails. Tellingly, NB3-21C implies that New Brunswick is not yet a “knowledge” society. “Our challenge,” it claims, “is to
change our very culture: to take steps to ensure that New Brunswickers value learning, have heightened expectations for success and provide the opportunities that our students need to realize their potential” (p. 9). In the context of the document’s focus on education reform, this claim also suggests that the province’s education system is to blame for New Brunswickers’ apparent lack of cultural sophistication. Without 21st century education reform, it seems, the system does not do justice to New Brunswickers’ natural “potential.” In sum, “justice” in 21st century education is synonymous with ‘legitimating capital accumulation and, by extension, social contexts that guarantee it.’

9.5) Critiquing the model with reference to Plato, Dewey, and Freire

If it were possible to combine the respective insights of The Republic, Democracy and Education, and Pedagogy of the Oppressed into one critical framework sans their exclusionary dimensions, what critical, alternative concepts of “progress,” “democracy,” and “justice” might it yield as means of critiquing 21st century education? The first response that comes to my mind is that such a framework would genuinely regard life (human life in particular) as an end in itself, not as a means of technically empowering one socially constructed class of it, let alone as a means to demonstrably harmful ends such as capital accumulation for capital accumulation’s sake. The next thing to occur to me takes the form of three questions. How would Plato, Dewey, and Freire conceive of “progress” toward such a life-affirming, humanizing end? How would they conceive of a “democratic” social context in which such “progress” could occur? And how would they conceive of “justice,” in the sense of actual forms of living for life’s sake? To rephrase these questions as one: on critical Platonist-Deweyan-Freirean grounds, what is a truly
progressive, democratic, and just alternative to 21st century education’s presupposed meaning? To address this question, I will summarize each concept from the perspectives of each text and in terms of each text’s respective emphases on formal philosophy, formal knowledge of dominant society, and immediate experience.

i) “Justice” as philosophical, social, and experiential knowledge

It is plausible to imagine that Plato, Dewey, and Freire would begin with the question of “justice.” After all, each in his own way (within their original texts under consideration) reasoned that it is necessary for people to know in a concrete/actual sense what their goals are if they are to realize them. Originally, for Plato, “justice” at least provisionally meant, at the level of the individual, subjecting the desiring and spirited elements of the soul to the rational element and, on a social level, subjecting workers and soldiers to the rule of philosopher kings. For Dewey, “justice” or “morality” originally meant the biological interest of all human beings to adapt continuously to their environment by communicating with each other and the implicit ideal of liberal democracy, guided by its cultural products such as “modern” scientific knowledge, to share its material and cultural goods with all of humanity. And for Freire, “justice” originally meant the dissolution of actual oppressed-oppressor relationships by means of the pedagogy of oppressed people, as developed through dialogue with humanistic educators.

At the same time, each philosopher in his own way did not merely identify “justice” in the abstract (albeit in concrete terms therein). They all recognized that it had to be advanced within existing social contexts that were not “just” on their respective
terms. Hence Plato sought to translate his philosophical concept of justice into the familiar sophist terms of his society. Hence Dewey sought to use his machine-like society’s actual resources as practical means of realizing its implicit yet otherwise overly abstract ideals. And hence Freire looked to actual people who were oppressed, within post-war Brazilian society for instance, for the “themes” on which to build effective literacy programmes, both in terms of the technical teaching and learning of basic literacy and the raising of critical consciousness.

What is more, each philosopher related his respective concepts of justice and his social means of realizing it to actual experience to one degree or another. True, Plato grounded his concept of justice in his philosophical theory of the “Form of the good.” But (as Dewey also observes) his philosopher kings were meant to study philosophy formally after years of experience in developing their “golden” natures. Although Dewey rejected the idea of abstract philosophical foundations, he nonetheless grounded his concept of morality in his formal understanding of science. Not unlike the hard-won knowledge of Plato’s philosopher kings, Dewey viewed the knowledge of scientists as the unfinished product of humanity’s long and arduous history. And Freire drew on a range of formal influences, notably Aristotle’s concept of humanization, Marxist concepts such as praxis, and liberation theology. In contrast to Plato’s imagined philosopher kings and Dewey’s liberal democratic scientists, oppressed people as Freire understood them were – and remain – humanity’s only hope of achieving its true telos by ultimately leading the (especially arduous) way from dehumanizing experiences to humanizing alternatives.

In sum, then, it follows that 21st century education is unjust for a minimum of
three reasons. First, its actual goals are classist in particular, exclusionary in general. Second, its goals are ultimately unsustainable socially and environmentally in general because they advance short-term classist, exclusionary interests to the immediate detriment of people and the overall environment and, therefore, at the expense of life’s long-term interest, namely to survive (healthily) for as long as possible. And, third, its goals are fundamentally irrational outside technical considerations, in the inferable sense that they cannot be translated into formal terms that are of interest to people who are informally interested in living well as individuals and as social beings. It also follows, then, that a just alternative to 21st century education that takes the model as a starting point must consist, in principle, of tangible goals that are: (1) neither classist nor generally exclusionary; (2) biologically and overall environmentally sustainable; and (3) intelligible and/or perceptible to any human being.

ii) “Progress” as philosophical, social, and experiential knowledge

It is one thing to outline “justice” as an abstract principle, another to advance it in practice, which leads to the question of “progress” as Plato, Dewey, and Freire might have collectively defined it (if they had followed my dissertation up to this point). Although Plato did not to my knowledge use the term “progress,” he clearly conceived of formal education as a temporal means of aligning human life with the “Form of the good.” Dewey explicitly regarded “progress” as any society’s ability to pass on, on purpose (i.e., through formal education) its best qualities to new members and to let its worst qualities die with the deaths of those who had been exposed to them. Similarly,
though Freire to my knowledge did not use the term “progress,” he clearly regarded formal education as a necessary condition for advancing humanization through praxis (both of which he outlined in formal philosophical terms).

Plato, as if anticipating Dewey’s strand of progressive education by millennia, organized his concept of formal education in a kind of proto-progressive manner (in terms of socializing students to existing social conditions while simultaneously developing their capacity to participate in the life of their society, as he intended it to grow in health) by first exposing young students to forms of education that he considered to be universally accessible (i.e., music and gymnastics) before having them “progress” to their respective social occupations, which first meant advanced studies for those deemed suitable for leadership. Dewey, of course, drew on biology and other socially dominant disciplines as he understood them to develop (1) a set of ideas about education that he deemed universally applicable (in the first six chapters of *Democracy and Education*) and (2) a second set of ideas that he deemed both complementary to the first set and necessary for advancing democratic education in particular (in the several chapters that follow his chapter on democracy as it existed and should exist in his view and before his final chapters on the generally humanistic goals of his concept of democratic education). And Freire described the pedagogy of the oppressed social class in terms of two stages: first, when the oppressed recognize and overcome their oppression on their own terms in keeping with the principle of praxis; and second, when they work to liberate the rest of humanity, using their experiential knowledge of oppression and liberation as guides.
Finally, Plato regarded the actual experience of “progress” in the above sense as a kind of turning-around of the soul for his cave dwellers and, ultimately, as the metaphorical ascension from the cave to the light of Truth. For Dewey, experiential progress occurred in any instance of genuine communication and in the discovery of formal knowledge that could be used to promote communication between people across socially constructed boundaries. And for Freire experiential “progress” in this sense was conscientização, or raised critical consciousness about social reality, involving the motivation to transform social reality with others in a humanizing direction.

In sum, 21st century education is regressive in principle for at least three reasons. First, it uses formal education as a means of advancing capital accumulation, instead of as a means of advancing social justice as outlined above. Second, its concept of foundational education (i.e., the “NB3” in NB3-21C) is ultimately indistinguishable from its concept of advanced studies (i.e., the “21C” in NB3-21C). As discussed, both elements of the model are virtually indistinguishable (yet in practice technically distinguishable) as malleable rhetoric that can simultaneously support capital accumulation, help to guarantee it contextually, and legitimate it. And, third, the model, if its terms are accepted, constitutes an unjust, machine-like, oppressive message, namely that the model should be accepted simply because people in positions of social authority have promoted it.

Thus, to shift “progressively” from the model’s regressive state to a more progressive one, the model would have to be used (against the logic of its actual form and content) as subject matter for a genuinely “progressive” philosophy of education (here, in a critically expanded Platonist-Deweyan-Freirean sense but not limited to it
necessarily). Such a philosophy, for instance, could outline a methodology (not unlike critical aspects of Plato’s noble lie, Dewey’s pragmatic use of existing society as a source of educational guidance, and Freire’s concentric circles) for using common experiences of the model as points of entry into discussion and more in depth forms of study and reflective action. It would also require, of course, an attendant theory, one constitutively open to internal and external criticism, consistent with the abovementioned, alternative notion of justice.

iii) “Democracy” as philosophical, social, and experiential knowledge

It is important to keep in mind, as John Wild among others have, that The Republic is not anti-democratic per se. Rather, it is an argument against sophist democracy as Plato understood it. Thus, the dialogue is in some ways conceptually consistent with liberal democracy (for example, in promoting socialization through formal education, guided by formally educated legislators), hence Dewey’s critical use of Platonism in developing his liberal democratic ideal in Democracy and Education. Although Freire invoked revolution throughout Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he clearly regarded education itself as inherently revolutionary, in keeping with Plato and Dewey, notwithstanding significant differences.

It is also important to keep in mind that Plato’s philosopher kings do not merely engage in formal philosophy. They are also duty-bound to return to the cave, so to speak, to pass laws that reflect their formal knowledge. This is another example of the similarity between Plato’s philosophical city in The Republic and liberal democracies, specifically to the latter’s constitutive mechanism for passing and amending laws. Dewey argued that
it was in the interest of liberal democracies to use this mechanism to extend material and
cultural goods to more and more people, both to strengthen social control by making it
less reliant on authoritarian measures (in making it more reliant on shared interests and
freedom of association) and to increase the pool of formally educated people who could
participate critically in social progress. For Freire, the mechanism for revolutionary
social knowledge was basic dialogue between people who could teach and learn from
each other, whether about thematic (and therefore formal) expressions of oppressive
social experiences or about related subject matter (such as literacy, legal rights, and so
on).

Finally, experience for Plato was “democratic” in the non-sophist sense (as he
understood sophistry) of rational, mutually-benefiting exchanges between rulers and the
ruled. True doctors in this sense, to use one of Plato’s examples, only rule over their
patients insofar as their medical knowledge is used to restore their patients’ health.
Similarly, true democratic experience, Dewey argued, occurs through consensus, which
he thought could be approached even within existing, effectively non-consensual social
structures by means of gradual reforms based, in large part, on his scientifically informed
premise of mental-neurological connectivity. In Freirean terms, a truly dialogical
democracy (or any polity) would comprise social experiences that engage the active
dimension of human language (e.g., its capacity for critical thought) as well such
dispositions as love, humility, faith, trust, and hope. Hence Freire’s distinction between
humans and animals (one that terminologically disregards the fact that humans are
animals too, biologically speaking, in order to emphasize the unique potential of human
beings to change their social reality through such self-reflective means as praxis and
dialogue). To quote Freire, “For animals, ‘here’ is only a habitat with which they enter into contact; for people ‘here’ signifies not merely physical space but also an historical space” (p. 99). In other words, true social experiences, for Freire, are ultimately historical experiences and, thereby, transformable along rational, creative, humanizing lines.

Thus, 21st century education is undemocratic in at least three ways. First, it helps to guarantee a variety of contexts (economic, legal, political, ideological) for capital accumulation, instead of promoting formal ways of thinking critically about such contexts. Moreover, it is an impediment to the development of formal modes of thinking like the kind of critical pedagogy that I desired as a BEd student intern. Second, it constitutes, in effect, a form of intrusion (i.e., de facto privatization) into social contexts, such as public schooling, impeding their potential for promoting social justice in practice. And third, in advancing its unstated purposes through deceptive, disrespectful rhetoric it promotes relationships between people—teachers and students in particular—that are effectively tyrannical/authoritarian, machine-like/non-consensual, oppressive.

Accordingly, democratizing the model on critical Platonist-Deweyan-Freirean terms would require: (1) a collective effort to analyze and critique the model from various formal disciplinary perspectives (e.g., economics, law, political science, history, critical theories, etc.); (2) collective efforts to transform social reality, particularly as it exists with public education systems, to make it more conducive to critical, imaginative interactions; and (3) efforts between people at local levels to communicate dialogically with each other, using common experiences of antidualogical media such as 21st century
education reform as points of entry into more interesting, transformative subject matter, such as critical alternatives to uncritically “adapting to a changing world.”

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have accessed the presupposed content of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick, using the rhetoric of progress, democracy, and justice (accessed from Christou’s historical analysis of a related discourse) as guides. I determined that by “progress,” “democracy,” and “justice,” the model respectively means supporting, guaranteeing contextually, and legitimating capital accumulation. I then critiqued these concepts using insights from my critical review of *The Republic*, *Democracy and Education*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In doing so, I concluded that the model is actually regressive, undemocratic, and unjust in principle, while also arguing that it can be used justly, progressively and democratically to advance a critical concept of justice that is discernable to one degree or another in the ideas of Plato, Dewey, and Freire: the critical use of formal thought, existing society, and immediate experience as three general (but, depending on context, not necessarily generalizable) means of accessing knowledge (in the falsifiable/criticize-able/re-imaginable form of knowledge claims) about how to live well for the sake of it.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have asked, “What is the meaning of 21st century education in New Brunswick?” The answer that I have arrived at is that model’s stated premise – that “education is about adapting to a changing world” – fundamentally refers to the uncritical promotion of “progressive” economic, “democratic” social, and “just” ideological interests of capitalists, specifically their class interests in material support for capital accumulation, guaranteed contexts for its continuation, and ideological support, especially in the form of legitimation.

Against what alternative, critical standard is it possible to advance, through public education, notions of progress, democracy, and justice that are not beholden to the class interests of a tiny percentage of the world’s population? I have identified three general points that, together, form my alternative premise.

First, education, broadly defined as healthy living, must in some sense draw on the formal thoughts of people who have worked their way to such thoughts and formulated them so that others may arrive at the same position with less difficulty. In terms of Plato’s cave analogy, one should listen to the testimony of people who not only claim to have seen the light but who can offer some guidance toward it. In Deweyan terms, one should listen to people who know how existing social structures function and therefore know how to make them function better (and know how to wind them down so that they can be replaced). And in Freirean terms, this point means that the thoughts of people who are in the actual process of working their way toward a better life – often against the grain of so-called experts and social authorities – are especially foundational to any genuine educational experience.
The second point on which my premise rests is that the best thoughts about education, if they are to be at all effective, must be about actually existing social problems, including problems that out of context may seem anti-social or asocial. From a Platonist perspective, this point means that one must think about the fact that people largely relate to the world in terms of their worldview; therefore, communicating formal knowledge often requires translating it into the language of another conceptual framework, just as Plato translates his philosophical knowledge of justice into the quotidian language of his day, represented by the sophistry of Thrasymachus. From a Deweyan perspective, this point means drawing critically on the material effects of the dominant view of the world in which one lives. For example, he looked to science and industry for direction on how to overcome their “machine-like” effects and to promote their good effects (e.g., scientific knowledge and machines that at least had the potential to make life technically easier for more people). From a Freirean perspective, this point means that people who are most harmed by existing social structures are in a unique position to testify to the real nature of such structures, as they actually exist beyond academic and socially dominant accounts of them. In turn it means that such testimony is the first step in the direction of a more humanizing society, one that is therefore less unjust, less “machine-like,” less oppressive.

The third and final point on which my premise rests is that true education in theory and practice must reflect purposes to which the human beings involved consent. In the abstract, from a Platonist perspective, this point means that the real, unchanging, ideal form of education must reflect the best expressions of (human) nature and reject the worst. From a Deweyan perspective, it means that abstract educational standards must
reflect the best possible expressions (and reject the worst) within a given social context, which should therefore change progressively toward such standards. Finally, from a Freirean perspective, this point means that education’s purposes are first and foremost the purposes of actual human beings, as distinct from academic and socially dominant accounts of humans’ actual purposes. Under dehumanizing conditions, this point means that the ideal form of education already exists wherever people work together toward overcoming oppression, taking direction primarily from people who know from experience what it means to be oppressed.

So how do 21st century education’s three foundational concepts measure against the threefold standard that I have just outlined? First of all, one can conclude that it is a bad idea in principle to limit the meanings of progress, democracy, and justice to the economic, political, and ideological interests of capitalists. Even if, as 21st century education effectively claims, the interests of capitalists were really the interests of the entire species (if not all of its members individually), 21st century education still does not even try to make a rational case for this claim, except inadvertently, by appealing to people’s rational tendency to submit to threats while under pressure, in the absence of identifiable alternatives. Moreover, the model does not sincerely appeal to people’s and peoples’ rational tendency to defer to formal authority when it is actually in their personal and/or collective interests to do so (e.g., when passengers on an airplane defer to the captain’s and crew’s professional authority). At most, after subjecting the uncritical model to criticism using its own terms, it merely offers the opinion that educated people are simply means of accumulating capital, securing political contexts in which unobstructed capital accumulation is legal, and cultivating a worldview in which capital
accumulation is deemed the best of all possible human achievements. Thus, while it is true that 21st century education reduces the concept of being educated to being a means to these capitalist ends, the concept itself is false. As Plato, Dewey, and Freire argue in their different ways, it is harmful and therefore wrong to use human beings as means to non-human ends, in this case the accumulation of capital to the immediate detriment of most human beings, not to mention the overall environment and life in general.

In a sense, there is nothing more to add to the above critique of 21st century education. Given that the model’s underlying ideas are bad, why should anyone care in principle whether or not they are effective? In principle, what does it matter if people find them believable? The answer to these questions, of course, is that effective bad ideas tend to get in the way of good ideas; false beliefs are by definition incompatible with the truth. With these points in mind, a couple of related questions arise. Why is 21st century education as effective as it is in advancing capital accumulation (e.g., private profit for the high-tech industry), the political interests of capital, and its unstated neoliberal values in general? Why might people who suffer under neoliberalism literally buy into the model’s uncritical premise?

While the latter questions are worthy of further research, my alternative framework offers a few provisional answers. The first has to do with the fact that authority is not inherently bad. Indeed, humans appear to have a natural need for authority, or guidance, on how to live well. As Dewey observes in the hierarchical language of science:

The young of human beings compare so poorly in original efficiency with the young of many of the lower animals, that even the powers needed for physical
sustentation have to be acquired under tuition. How much more, then, is this the case with respect to all the technological, artistic, scientific, and moral achievements of humanity! (p. 4)

The flip side of this point is that humans are by nature vulnerable to false forms of authority, to misguidance that presents itself as guidance. The very fact that 21st century education contains the purportedly authoritative seal (or logo) of the New Brunswick Department of Education and the logos of post-secondary institutions such as the University of New Brunswick is therefore extremely problematic. This fact, based on my premise, is at least one cause of the model’s effectiveness in spite of the conceptual inadequacies that lie beneath its uncritical rhetoric.

A related cause of the model’s effectiveness that I can identify is its purportedly authoritative appeal to social realities in New Brunswick today that are actually unappealing, and which can detract from the province’s actually appealing traits. For examples, one need only turn to the local news.

In a 2008 article for the Telegraph Journal, “Être ici on le peut: In New Brunswick goodness, simplicity, truth and greatness,” David Adams Richards reminds New Brunswickers “that not a slogan invented for this province can come close to the majesty of its people” (p. A1). The need for the reminder is a unwarranted sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the world beyond the province, which Richards expresses as follows:

I have fished the same water Marilyn Monroe fished. She came here a long time ago. With her then husband Joe DiMaggio. Probably as a guest of Ted Williams. Of course there is nothing startling in this, except for the fact that two minutes after I was told I was fishing the same stretch of water as Marilyn Monroe once
did I had for the most part forgotten all about her. This is said not to show disrespect, but she was not the reason I was there. I was there to fish along the stretch and have a salmon come for my fly. . . .

Which brings up an interesting observation.

We overcompensate with others.

We seem to think that the river is great because celebrities like Marilyn Monroe or Prince Charles himself came here to fish. We don’t seem to realize that the reverse is true. They came to fish because the river itself is great. And the river, like the great land it runs through, does not care who they are. (p. A1)

Richards goes on to suggest that people in New Brunswick are torn between two natural tendencies. On the one hand, we tend to try to live up to external (but illusory) standards of greatness. On the other hand, we cannot help but be true to ourselves. “We want our people and our land famous and known,” he writes, “but our greater and more gentle nature dissents against this kind of exhibition” (p. A1). The fact that New Brunswick is not one of the most famous places in the world, he suggests, is one source of our false feelings of inferiority – false because such feelings only exist insofar as we believe in the false standards of the exhibitionist. “That is,” to quote Richards once more, “we sometimes measure ourselves using criteria that is set against us from the start” (p. A1).

Recall that the slogan to which Richards refers appears at the end of the Department of Education’s YouTube video on 21st century education, which calls on teachers and students to adapt “to a changing world.”

Recall also that NB3-21C states that one purpose of 21st century education reform is to “change our very culture: to take steps to ensure that New Brunswickers value
learning, have heightened expectations for success and provide the opportunities that our students need to realize their potential” (p. 9). If in fact Richards is right – and there is a certain propensity for feeling inferior among people in this place officially called New Brunswick – it is fair to say that the province’s policy makers and supporters bear a degree of responsibility for this social fact, especially when the policy in question presupposes that the very people who are supposed to realize it are too culturally inferior even to have access to the purposes that they are effectively told to fulfill. Compounding this fact, in the case at hand, is the fact that the actual purposes of 21st century education are “set against us from the start.” In the language of Plato, Dewey, and Freire, it is unjust, unnatural or “machine-like,” and oppressive to expect any human being to live up to imposed standards; it is doubly unjust, unnatural, and oppressive when the standards reduce human beings to what Dewey calls “tools for the [artificially] higher culture of others” (p. 98).

Among the most obviously unappealing social realities to which 21st century education reform refers are the high rates of unemployment and underemployment in the province (which are unappealing not because employment under present economic conditions is ideal, but in the sense that unemployment and underemployment entail varies forms of suffering). One need not invoke philosophers of education to know that people will appear to accept bad ideas that they know in the abstract are bad when they cannot perceive better practical alternatives. One such bad idea is the stated promise of 21st century education reform that it would make students more employable upon graduation, that businesses would therefore take more of an interest in investing in the province’s economy, and that everyone would live relatively happily ever after. It is
possible that people give countenance to such ideas out of desperation for employment, just to pay the bills. I know because during my student internship, when I still hoped to find employment in the public school system, I felt compelled to incorporate the precepts of 21st century education into my lessons plans, notwithstanding the fact that I did not fully understand, for instance, the rhetorically educative point of using digital technology uncritically.

My alternative conceptual framework points to a third general explanation as to why people may support 21st century education in practice, even though it is a bad idea to do so. In addition to the possibility of being actively misled or coerced from external sources of nominal authority, it is possible to internalize or otherwise accept in practice false forms of misguidance and coercion. For example, in retrospect, my ill-fated attempt at self-marketing (by attempting to be employable as both an ELA and science teacher, which only added to my difficulties as an intern in a market-oriented system) exemplified the kind of “critical thinking” that 21st century education promotes. Moreover, rather than actually thinking critical about my prospects as a teacher during a period of austerity, I unwittingly acted in accordance with the logic of austerity by overestimating my abilities out of desperation for a job that in all probability did not exist because of ongoing cutbacks. If I had known the unstated purposes of the Department of Education, I probably would not have entered the BEd programme in the first place; at the very least, I would have been more prepared psychologically for what I was about to experience. The point is that I thought that the degree would give me a real chance of secure and meaningful employment as a high school teacher – and all the improvements to life that such employment entails – when it did not. My larger point is that the neoliberal
ideology that 21st century education reflects does not depend entirely upon explicit
direction and pressure from nominal sources of authority in one’s immediate context. As
Plato, Dewey, and Freire argued from their different vantage points, the particular form
of one’s society (comprising its nominal and effective standards and individuals’
experiences of them) can leave an indelible mark on one’s way of being.

So far, the conclusions that I have reached in this dissertation may appear to be
mainly negative, in the sense that they provide a critical explanation of 21st century
education reform in New Brunswick (and some of its empirical implications, such as a
continued emphasis on digital technology, especially in the context of public education)
but that they do not offer a fully worked-out alternative. While the latter also exceeds the
focus on this dissertation (i.e., the twofold effort of accessing and critiquing the model’s
presupposed concepts), the abovementioned explanations of 21st century education’s
effectiveness in spite of its conceptual flaws do suggest a three-pronged way forward that
reflects the alternative concepts of progress, democracy, and justice to which my critical
analysis has led.

First, my alternative concepts constitute a direct challenge to active proponents of
21st century education reform, whether or not they acknowledge it. Indeed, the original
point of my approach was to critique the model’s stated premise using its own
presupposed concepts, in order to show that it is not above criticism, contrary to the
implication of its uncritical framework when accepted on its stated terms. In doing so, I
have come to the conclusion that the model’s rhetoric is both supported and unsupported
by its presupposed concepts. It is supported in the sense that its blatant contradictions
and falsehoods are technically rational when understood as rhetorical contributions to the
unacknowledged pursuit of capitalists’ perceived economic, political, and ideological interests. Its rhetoric is unsupported in the sense that the latter interests are decisively uneducative through the lenses of progress, democracy, and justice as understood through my combined, critical reading of *The Republic, Democracy and Education*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Thus, the ball is in the court of the model’s active supporters. In the event that they do not hit it back, my conclusions are at least available for other researchers to consider vis-à-vis the topic of 21st century education reform in New Brunswick and related topics (e.g., neoliberalism, education, and so on).

Second, the very act of questioning a rhetorically unquestionable policy of the New Brunswick Department of Education may inspire others to do the same, irrespective of the formal strengths and weaknesses of my approach and conclusions. In this regard, the particular content of my dissertation is beside the point, namely its formal effect, not unlike the meat in the T. S. Eliot analogy that Tremblay uses to explain the distracting quality of neoliberal policy rhetoric under Shawn Graham’s premiership. The difference, I hope, is that any technical distraction that my musings may induce will be in the direction of critical inquiry, not away from it, whether or not into the topic at hand. As I have tried to show, even the uncritical, distracting rhetoric of 21st century education can be a source of critical insight when its form and content are considered as effectively entwined. In sum, while I am far from the first to question official policy, the fact that I have questioned it constitutes a potential source of inspiration and/or insight for others, particularly with respect to the critical analysis of seemingly vacuous rhetoric, but, again, not limited to it.
Last but certainly not least, I see my dissertation as one more (among many) sources of encouragement to people in extant positions of subordination vis-à-vis public education systems in particular to express their concerns and views no matter how marginalized or incompatible they may be from the perspective of socially dominant discourse. Although in many respects I have critically analyzed 21st century education from a position of socially privileged authority (e.g., as a PhD student in a province that at least nominally privileges formal education over personal experience in many instances), I have tried to do so without relying on the power that attends such “authority.” Hence I have taken direction from my authoritative experience of imposed powerlessness as a student intern who was expected to meet 21st century education’s stated standards without access to their unstated meaning, let alone a critical view of it. Having done so, I recognize that I was not entirely powerless as a student intern. During my internship, I tried, with very little self-evident success, to work around the model’s uncritical promotion of digital technology and other purportedly essential features of education in the present century; furthermore, to some ipso facto extent, I embodied the oppressive power of 21st century education by completing my internship under its rubric in the absence of a sustained critical approach to it. Thus, having turned my particular experience of imposed powerlessness into the central problem of this dissertation, I hope not only to encourage others to affirm the educative authority of their experiences but to make some amends for any failure on my part to do so as a student intern.

Presently, I will conclude with an example of what my alternative concepts might look like in practice. Before I do so, I should note the main limitations of my approach as I see them, which are three.
First, to a certain extent, its conceptual focus by definition makes related dimensions of 21st century education reform appear out of focus, or excludes them altogether. For example, I do not explore its historical context in detail. Dale observes that the form of state bureaucracy has a significant impact on the particular problems that policy addresses in a specific context. Thus, the model’s apparent emphasis on supporting private accumulation through digital technology promotion may say more about the form of New Brunswick’s Civil Service than the immediate direction of neoliberalism as a whole. I also do not look at competing interests among capitalists.

Second, I deduce that the model supports private capital, etc, but do not provide much empirical evidence. Three examples come to my mind in the form of three questions. First, to what extent does the model’s rhetoric actually support capital accumulation? Second, what legal arguments, if any, already exist or could be made against the principles of “inclusion” that the MacKay Report outlined? Third, in what ways have people actually responded to the model, beyond the few examples that I have discussed?

Finally, I do not fully explore why I found the model’s conceptual problems to be the most problematic in the first place, beyond the fact that its rhetorical premise confused and insulted me. I experienced it as a real problem; but was this experience overly subjective in any sense (e.g., was it at all ‘fallen’ in the sense Althusser discusses)? A qualitative study could explore the extent to which my approach does or does not resonate with others. Does my “form” truly invite criticism in effect or (contrary to my intent) shut it down at all? I have focused on the model’s impact from my perspective as a student intern. But what was/is its impact on public school students,
particularly students whose experiences are marginalized or occluded by official policy? What was/is its impact on public school teachers and administrators, faculty members, civil servants, politicians, English and/or French speaking New Brunswickers, Acadians, the Wolastoqiyik, the Mi’kmaq, the Peskotomuhkati, women, men, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants, migrants, religious people, agonistic and atheistic people, capitalists, workers, the unemployed, and/or others whom I have left out?

Space does not allow for a full critique of *Moby Dick*, but it can be read, I think, as an example of my critical alternative. (If, like the speaker in my introduction, one has not yet read Moby Dick, be forewarned that I am about to discuss how it ends). The Pequod, whose official purpose is commercial, is in a sense analogous to a classroom under 21st century education reform, with the exception that the ship’s paid crew at least technically agrees to the arrangement, whereas students’ attendance is compulsory. But rather than adapt uncritically to the commercial purpose, Captain Ahab, realigns it with his goal of pursing the great white whale. In doing so, he also redirects the social arrangement that he already has with his crew, galvanizing them with a promise of a gold reward for the sailor who brings him the white whale. Thus, he democratizes the ship’s de-facto society in seeking collective support for his goal, albeit problematically (through the promise of a reward) and without regard for any dissenting minority. As Harold Bloom (2001) puts it, “their choice was free, though only refusal as a group could have deterred Ahab” (p. 236). Although their pursuit ends in an apparent disaster (killing all of the crew save Ishmael), it metafictionally becomes, through the retrospective narration of Ishmael, one of the foundational stories of American literature and modern novels in general. Analogously, experiences between teachers and students in the classroom risk
one form of technical disaster or another, even when they depart from inherently disastrous goals, such as the uncritical use of digital technology, especially when they pursue alternative goals without the full consent of everyone involved. Hence there is wisdom in Ishmael’s experienced-based belief that it is better to be a sailor than a captain, lest one abuses one’s socially constructed authority over other people. In more practical terms, it is better to be a captain-sailor, someone in a position of social authority who is nonetheless open to instruction from people in socially subordinate positions, or a sailor-captain, someone who is willing to instruct social authorities whose positions may appear to be above any form of criticism. Of course, in the context of public schooling, experiences between people who may be teachers-students in one moment and students-teachers in another may not be recognizable in official, often binary terms. Their educative effects may not even become apparent until years later, when the point of a good lesson may finally click (an outcome that no 21st century education rubric can capture), just as it has taken over half a decade for my experiences as a student-teacher to transform into this contribution to the field of education research.
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