

When Care Becomes Cruel: A Phenomenological Perspective on Educators' Struggles Amidst Underfunding in Public Education

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Drawing on our empirical study engaging focus groups of highly experienced educators and stakeholders (n = 12) in Ontario, Canada, we examine the cruel refiguration of educational worker care under neoliberalism in public education. Austerity policies have degraded conditions in the schools such that educators are unable to fulfill their attachments to education as a public good. In addition, the neoliberal individualization of responsibility asks workers to address worsening conditions as individuals, collapsing structures of solidarity. In this paper, we explore the phenomenological aspects of how neoliberal individualism structures educator moods, examining educators' affective interplays of grief, rage, despair, determination, and exhaustion as they struggle to independently uphold or repair a system under duress. We argue that neoliberal conceptions of care are insufficient—and indeed Sisyphean—as singular efforts cannot address the current widespread systemic problems. Instead, we suggest educational workers should disavow individualism, refusing to bear personal responsibility for systemic issues, and should instead seek broader, collective organization against further neoliberal education reforms.

Introduction

The normalization of neoliberal ideas and policies over the past several decades has led to widespread erosion of public systems. Core to neoliberalism is the notion that individualized subjects should pursue entrepreneurial success to better provide for themselves and their families, instead of relying on collective means of organization or security. Neoliberalism also imposes a sort of “business ontology” (Fisher, 2009) on previously public endeavors, seeing it as “*simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business” (p. 17). In education, neoliberal ideology has “legitimated decades of privatization, de-regulation, and ‘responsibilization,’ in which the obligation to provide for social welfare shifts from the state to individuals” (Brooks & Mueller, 2024, p. 128).

Neoliberal educational policymakers pursue austerity, trimming funding deemed inefficient or unnecessary. Austerity damages quality public education systems, which require significant resources to function as intended (Tranjan et al., 2022). Austerity also encourages systems of direct or indirect

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supplementary privatization, as underfunding is stop-gapped through program fees and inequitable fundraising campaigns. Underfunding also normalizes the turn to supplementary private services, such as testing, tutoring, or extracurricular lessons, and provokes the flight of wealthy students to private schools (Winton, 2022). Neoliberalism frames government investments in well-funded public education systems as wasteful excesses that would be more efficiently distributed on the open market. Lost in this refiguration of education as a competitively pursued private good is the value of public education as an investment in a collective future, a gathering place that exposes young people to diverse experiences and ways of being, or a leveling ground that provides students with an opportunity to find their way in society, regardless of their inherent socioeconomic conditions. Reputational attacks on education as a public good, and the resulting withering of undersupported public systems, deprive students and education workers alike of needed resources. While families with means can supplement these shortfalls privately, lower-income families are often left without recourse (Winton, 2022).

Given these material conditions, there is a kind of cruelty to working as an educator amidst neoliberal values. Drawing on Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism,' or the "condition of maintaining attachment to a significantly problematic object" (2011, p. 24), Di Paolantonio (2016) identifies the cruelty at play in the individualized and marketized conditions of contemporary education. Though students and educators alike remain attached to the notion of education, its transformation in the neoliberal age leaves it oriented towards ends antithetical to those that formed these attachments in the first place. The "educational in education" (Di Paolantonio, 2016, p. 148), namely the notion of "passing on" (p. 148) a world that outlives our immediate lives, is today obscured by neoliberal educational "learnification" (Biesta, 2005) that prioritizes the endless improvement of individuals through the acquisition of knowledge. Cruelly, knowledge-centric schooling selling the neoliberal subject on education as a scavenging ground for credentials and skills needed in our desolate, precarious job market fractures previous notions of education as a place to pass on a surviving common world. As such, attachments to neoliberal education actively damage the broader and deeper social potentials for education.

Similarly, cuts to public education leave educators, who are often attached to ideals of education as a public good, in relations of 'cruel optimism' with their work amidst material conditions that no longer support those ideals. Depriving the public system of resources to adequately function leaves schools as scavenging grounds not only for students seeking knowledge acquisition, but also for educators straining to keep the system functioning as it has in past times. Educators often identify their work as a moral or ethical vocation (Hansen, 2017), or as a duty of 'soul work' (Berardi, 2009) in an age where individual worth and flourishing is deeply attached to one's field of labour. As such, educators are often compelled to express their care and attachment to education by bearing the brunt of a compromised system, scrounging for time and material supports that are less-and-less available. Lost in this situation are notions of 'passing on' an enduring and multi-generational education system, or of systemic educational cohesiveness oriented towards public good; as education supports deteriorate, the work of the educator becomes wholly oriented towards "sustaining [their] individual 'survival' and 'mere life'" (Di Paolantonio, p. 151) rather than attending to broader ideals and purposes. As discussed below, these cruel relations infect the phenomenological conditions for educators who, despite working within a system that is materially eroding, continue to connect closely to educators' senses of meaning and being in the world.

A Phenomenological Perspective

This paper contributes to philosophy of education literature that draws on empirical research (d'Agnes, 2016; Furman, 2020; Hansen, 2017; Santoro, 2015; Shuffelton, 2015; Wahl, 2019), with a particular emphasis on phenomenological approaches (d'Agnes, 2023). Here, our analysis is based on an empirical study, featuring two separate semi-structured focus groups conversations with eleven highly experienced educators, including seven teachers and four administrators, and one education stakeholder working at a

union (n = 12). Each of the educators worked in schools and most also held positions of responsibility within teacher unions or administrator associations respectively. Because the study emerged from our work as founding members of the Public Education Exchange¹, we drew from existing relationships with teacher unions and administrator associations to secure participants. Members of these groups were invited to share their experiences with underfunding and privatization in Ontario K-12 schools.² The discussions were enriched by two complementary facets. First, through their dual roles in school systems and as members of their unions/associations, the educators were able to offer not just their own personal insights but were also bearing witness on behalf of their collectives. A second facet, particularly relevant to phenomenological research, was that the Lead Researcher (Author 1) has firsthand experience serving in classrooms and as an administrator in the same system, which enabled a clearer perspective of the narratives and affects that were communicated.

This work, which has care for the sustainability of public education systems underwriting the research project and the standpoint of the researchers, cannot help but to be concerned about the question of care in response to neoliberal regimes. As such, the focus of the research was to explore how experienced educators—educators who have a before and after window into the effects of growing neoliberalization of schools—experience the phenomenon of underfunding and concomitant privatization. In this case, we employed phenomenology not as rich description but to draw attention to the structures of care that underpin how teachers and administrators navigate materially worsening conditions. Sometimes the application of phenomenology in empirical research becomes a bit of a confusing or clumsy affair, with instrumentalizing categories, codes, and themes that elevate the descriptive experience of the phenomenon over the ontological, ethical, or epistemological foundations. This results, as Stolz (2023) notes, in a “kind of solipsist subjectivism” (p. 823). Stolz (2023) goes on to find that a more faithful approach to phenomenology refrains from foregrounding the contents of the subjects’ experiences, with a focus instead on the structures of the same.

If phenomenology requires attention to structures, then a useful point of departure for this study is Heidegger’s (2001) existential analytic, which offers a premise for what it means to encounter the world. Heidegger’s work furnishes an ontological premise in a challenge to Cartesianism and Kantian essentialism alike. He focuses on how one comes to care (*sorge*), which includes concern (*besorgen*) for things and solicitude (*fürsorge*) for others. Heidegger (2001) determines:

phenomenological interpretation is accordingly not a way of knowing those characteristics of entities which themselves are [*seiender Beschaff- enheiten des Seienden*]; it is rather a determination of the structure of the Being which entities possess. But as an investigation of Being, it brings to completion, autonomously and explicitly, that understanding of Being which belongs already to Dasein and which ‘comes alive’ in any of its dealings with entities. Those entities which serve phenomenologically as our preliminary theme—in this case, those which are used or which are to be found in the course of production—become accessible when we put ourselves into the position of concerning ourselves with them in some such way. (pp. 95–96)

This approach to phenomenology, then, is less concerned with the description of things as they are, than with what reveals our intentions for those things (Richardson, 2012)—the complex web of relations that we call on our sense of being “in-order-to” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 98). The study of this intention is neither the analysis of theoretical and given ends, nor of a conscious process of thinking; rather, as Richardson (2012) clarifies, Heidegger’s “phenomenology is essentially related not just to its topic—trying to figure

¹ The Public Education Exchange (www.pexnetwork.ca) was founded by a national team of Canadian researchers in response to shifting (and expanding) effects of neoliberalism in K-12 and higher education systems in Canada. The network invites multi-disciplinary engagement with the question of public education, with an explicit mandate to advocate “for public schools that are equitable, accessible, publicly funded, democratically governed, and in pursuit of the common good” (PEX Network, 2023, About section).

² All data have been anonymized. Transcripts have been lightly edited for clarity, with all meaning preserved.

it out—but to an audience it aims to bring into the truth about this topic” (p. 75). The bringing in of the audience relies on words—*logos*—“breathing affective life” (Richardson, 2012, p. 76) into what is otherwise stultified in thought. Richardson (2012) also finds that the study of intention is perhaps most clearly revealed when something breaks down—such as, in the case of this study, when the systems of public education devolve under fiscal constraints. He notes that the Heideggerean project of phenomenology is the disclosure of how we frame the facts of what we uncover within a “network of possibilities” (Richardson, 2012, p. 85).

At this juncture, it is relevant to draw attention to the way Heidegger’s structure of care, a person’s intention towards things and others, is shaped by a spatiotemporal interaction between three *existentialia* (Critchley & Schürmann, 2008). The first, thrownness, brings the force of historical circumstances to bear on a person’s life, inflecting their everyday engagements and their mood amidst these conditions. The second, projection, reveals the thoughts that guide a person toward their future. The third, discourse (or talk), surfaces in the idle talk of the present moment—a present which is forever emerging from a thrown past and toward a projected future. What becomes important for our study is not the analysis of emotion as denoted in Heidegger’s work on anger and angst (as in, for example, d’Agnese’s (2023) study of teacher affects during Covid-19). Rather, we are concerned with highlighting the *umsicht* or circumspection, the “in-order-to” (Heidegger, 2001), of how the educators encounter responsibility for their schools through the prism of neoliberal individualism, and how that understanding structures their experiences of thrown conditions and resultant attunements. As such, our argument in this paper is threefold: first, with Heidegger, that mood is an ontological *existentialia*—a fundament of being—and that thrown conditions are inherently mooded; second, that neoliberalism sets the stage for thrown conditions that foreground hyper-individualism in a manner that effects attunement; third, that educators’ ontic expressions of mood are experienced in relation to their being-amidst increasingly underfunded school systems.

Finally, we have purposefully engaged Heidegger here, rather than phenomenologists and philosophers whose work is more overtly political or more directly concerned with how individual reflexivity can disrupt the influence of social factors in subject formation. We believe that arguments for self-reflection (as noted later in the paper in our brief critique of Ball’s (2016) argument for teacher reflexivity) don’t do much to shift the responsabilization of education’s material breakdown away from individualism. Our focus is on the way that neoliberalism has enclosed the individual educator in a responsabilized loneliness. We are aiming our recommendations not at how the educator might evolve as an individual or how their moods might be re-formed through criticality; rather, we will suggest that at the interplay of eroding (thrown) material conditions and mood, material conditions need to change. In addition, we read Heidegger as someone who offers a perspective on the phenomenal effects of material conditions as he is concerned about being in-the-world, amidst others and with the things and entities around us. With a more Marcusian reading of Heidegger, we can see the potential for better perceiving the entanglement of material conditions, ideological pressures, forces of idle talk, and the normalcy of falling through life in a mostly inauthentic state. The Heideggerean lens is further relevant to our paper because of his important emphasis on the relationship between mood and thrown conditions, which is integral to our forthcoming analysis.

Neoliberalism and the Erosion of Human Care

Neoliberalism is a particularly corrosive iteration of capitalism, eroding community and elevating a moralistic individualism. Though neoliberalism is itself a “loose and shifting signifier” (Brown, 2015, p. 20), taking on different forms depending on the place and time in which it manifests, one commonality across its permutations is a tendency to individualize responsibility and to cast meritocracy as moral. These tendencies are best evoked in an interview given by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1987), a champion of nascent neoliberalism, who stated:

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand “I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!” or “I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!” “I am homeless, the Government must house me!” and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. (para. 106)

Neoliberalism’s conceptualization of the individual does not simply produce a loss of care for the wellbeing of other in a broader society. It is, instead, a categorical repudiation of care-for-the-other’s worth. A meritocratic framing of responsibility fails to recognize that neoliberal capitalism is deeply embedded with systems of inequity that disadvantage certain groups. Policies of responsabilization and austerity are materially ruinous to these disadvantaged populations, presenting conditions which make it impossible for these groups to thrive (or survive) in accordance to expectations of enterprise (Brown, 2015).

This neoliberal conceptualization of humans as atomized, self-interested parties has had damaging effects on worker organization, breaking structures of collective care. The erosion of worker collectivism takes place, first, at the level of deliberate assaults on formalized labour organization. Neoliberal leaders including Thatcher and Ronald Reagan targeted union and labour power in the early 1980s, significantly hampering the ability for workers to collectively bargain (Harvey, 2005). In Ontario, Canada, Mike Harris’ 1997 provincial government ushered in neoliberal reforms that were aimed at reducing labour power. Bill 160, a benchmark shift in labour-government relations, cleaved principals away from the teachers unions, prohibiting unionization of education administrators and undermining labour organization in our schools (MacLellan, 2009). Beyond political assaults on labour organization, neoliberalism presents a more covert internal disruption of care between workers; it conceptualizes work as a pathway to security and wellbeing fought for through competition against others. This prefigures labour relations as inherently adversarial, encouraging workers even within larger organizations to compete against fellow workers to demonstrate superior competency rather than caring for them (Bromley & Meyer, 2021). This collapses notions of common good and inter-worker solidarity.

Education workers see increasing pressures to demonstrate their educational competency through individual actions, even as their institutional supports falter. As Ball (2003) notes, neoliberalism has co-opted the way that educators are evaluated for their work, away from responsiveness to students and towards performance-based, standardized measures. Educators are expected to meet targets—whether they be student achievements on standardized tests or budget management and fundraising goals for the school. In this way, care becomes tethered to performances of obedience and compliance. To compound these issues, the growth of performance metrics and individualism in public schools is emerging in tandem with mandates to underfund and privatize. In these contexts, both expected systemic ‘care’ for performance excellence and more deeply engrained attachments to ‘care’ for the public system are often unattainable, as material conditions prevent teachers from fulfilling internally and externally held commitments.

Ingrained neoliberal notions of personal responsibility can cause educators to attribute difficulties in public schooling to personal shortcomings, rather than systemic issues; this is, as Norris (2010) writes, a way of obscuring “the extent to which private problems may only have political solutions” (p. 118). Educators sometimes extend themselves far beyond what is reasonable or humane, as their attachments to these broken systems compel them to persevere. In these instances, we see the cruelty of attachments to public education in the neoliberal world: though neoliberalism cares not for the public, it still expects the public worker to ‘do their job,’ transferring responsibility for systemic failings onto the individual.

In the following two sections, we examine these cruel arrangements, analyzing the structures of care that underlie educator responses to underfunding and privatization in public education. In the first, we reveal how educators encounter the worsening circumstances of public schools in Ontario, Canada

through the fore-structure of neoliberal individualism, in a complex affective interplay of grief, rage, and despair. In the second section, we illustrate how these educators are also navigating a tightrope of determination and exhaustion. We conclude with a discussion of what possibilities exist for the caring educator in a system under strain.

Grief, Rage, and Despair

Care is comprised of attunement and intention, a turning towards the world. For educators serving public education systems, care becomes fraught. On one hand, educators experience a love for what is beautiful, just, and good in education. On the other hand, they are called to bear witness to worsening material and ideological conditions. That is, teachers and administrators in the public education system are noticing that their ready-to-hand encounters with the structures of education are not working in the ways that they should. They are still, however, striving to make the system work with their intention turned towards positive outcomes for their students and families. Compounding the issue is a sense that educators have internalised a neoliberal expression of care as a kind of hyper-individualism. As a result, these educators are caught in conflict, unable to meet the towards-which of their goals because of the impoverishment of their tools, and unable to develop communities because of the neoliberal tendency toward individual responsibility. The affective manifestations of this conflict lie just beneath the surface of their stories, showing up variously as grief, rage, and despair.

As we talked with participants, one of the affective leitmotifs threaded through the discussions was a feeling of grief. The educators described circumstances that evoked grief over the loss of what was once possible in education; their stories were also inflected with a nostalgia or longing for a remembered goodness. Here, the passage of time, the educators' long histories of life in schools, came to bear as a way of grappling with what has been lost. When discussing school programming, especially special needs supports and arts education, they frequently spoke with reference to the past ("in the old days, we used to have...," "I was head of a special ed department, and during those times, when your students needed support... we would be able to access resources,... Now it is getting longer and longer and longer, so our students can't get the right type of supports," and "we can gradually see the erosion of public education over the years. This is my 30th year in public education and I've seen it happen over time and it's now accelerating."). They characterised their struggle to make do with fewer resources using words and terms like "devastating," "heartbreaking," "so frustrated," "cruel irony," privatization that is "pernicious," "distraught," and "It makes me want to scream and cry all at the same time." They also shared stories that tied their grief to how vulnerable students and communities were losing access to important learning opportunities. For example, one educator in the first focus group described the loss of the school's music program after pandemic budget cuts:

There are hundreds of kids in our neighborhood who have never had a music teacher, right? And they're going to go through, now, to high school. So, who gets that music education? It's going to be those that can sign them up for private lessons, right? So that's just a small example of how access to resources can have an impact... All of those things do have an impact down the line. But who's left behind? The answer is always the same. The first ones that will feel the pain are those have come from marginalized communities already. Those who need additional support.

Another participant, in the second focus group, raised a nearly identical point, expressing a similar affect of nostalgia for what used to be possible and grief over the current circumstances:

[There is] an erosion of the diversification of experiences, and what I mean by that is when I was in public school, it was the opportunity to try out everything. You know you could try out basketball, you could, you could try out, even downhill skiing. You could try out art, you could... music, like I love music. I remember walking into Grade 7 music, and it was like, what instrument?

It was every instrument under the sun. What do you want to learn to play? We had all these experiences. We had all this opportunity to try on all these diverse experiences, and now what we're seeing is a price tag attached to those experiences. And so obviously that disadvantages students who are coming from homes where they don't have the disposable income for things like that.

Through both discussions, what became clear was that underfunding was not simply a budget line issue and not simply a cognitive exercise of creative accounting and fundraising. Rather, these changes have resulted in a mood of deep grief amongst those charged with the neoliberal ethos of 'making do with less.'

As they told stories of the effects of underfunding and increased privatization, educators also expressed anger. The participants' anger can be understood as a natural consequence of helplessness in neoliberal individualistic times: if a school or classroom is under-resourced, then it must be the fault of the educator in charge. The educators also conveyed their rage at their increasing sense of impotence when faced with conditions that create and exacerbate inequality. For example, participants revealed their anger on behalf of parents who are losing services for their children and who are being asked to shoulder more costs. One participant conveyed her anger while discussing a slash in program funding for a Special Education programming, which would result in additional costs for parents and would produce "devastating" harms for students. While this educator was upset at the injustice of the rising costs of programs, she was also revealing a level of frustration that these system-level changes will produce harms at the school level, where an administrator or teacher will have to stretch their efforts to try to meet these students' needs. This anger was also evident in another participant's remarks. Echoing the neoliberal mantra to 'do more with less,' this participant noted that "[educators] are being asked repeatedly more and more every day to continue to deliver infinite demands with more finite resources day after day after day." Some of this personalization, and the anger and helplessness it produces, are also evident in another educator's anecdotes about how schools losing both programming and physical infrastructure (in this case, school stages for performances):

[I] would go a little deeper into that whole issue around the haves and have nots... When you have a school council that is able to raise the money to allow these [extra-curricular] activities to happen, or you have a school that can run an international trip every year, or two trips every year, because of the community that they're in, what you end up with is parents saying "That's the school I want. I don't want my kid going to the community school that doesn't run any of that." The whole thing of the have and have nots is also in our schools... The school I was at before going to [my Association] was in a fairly affluent area and had very active alumni. So, when the board came through and said we have to shut down all of this school stages that have a fly system, I had alumni that raised \$140,000 and said, "Hey, we're going to fix that." There are still schools whose stages are closed because they're never going to be able to find the money to do that. So, even being in a school like that is challenging, because you see all of the benefits that these kids are having, and you know that they're going to get those in the community also, whereas down the street, [a similar] group of students are going to miss out on all those opportunities.

As this educator reveals, anger exists whether the school can raise funds or not: on one hand, the educator at the school without funds feels anger, impotence, and guilt that they cannot provide these resources to students; on the other hand, the educator at the school with privately-raised funds feels anger at the unfairness of the system that will deprive students living only a few blocks away. As the ready-to-hand of the system has begun to fracture, these educators are also losing the frames for making meaning that they once used to navigate the system, which results in both anger and disorientation. For example, one educator talked about how government consultations with the Ministry of Education had become a performative exercise, rather than a truly consultative process:

I happen to be also in the ministry initiatives committee. There were like 44 educational stakeholders, including all the unions, and they will often bring up topics that are already decided upon, but they will go through the exercise of making it look like, “Oh, we want to [consult], we’re just at the beginning of this policy.” They did that with de-streaming. They did that with everything, and they say, “We want to get some initial [feedback]. We’re going to take that back.” It’s so fake, and the staff you can see we are being told to do this fakeness. It is just so ingenuine. And I do remember a time when I was teaching, when I was a teacher leader, how authentic it was that they were getting feedback from children in schools, and using that to inform major policy.

Here, the educator draws on her previous understandings of how Ministry Initiatives Committees are meant to work; she is upset at the perceived lack of integrity as new policies are pushed through the system without meaningful community feedback. In this situation, not only is the educator called upon to act as an individual (policy enactor) once the programming is brought into schools, but they are also asked to become individually complicit in the performance of authentic care for the community through what the educator understands as a sham consultation.

In the interstices between grief and anger, educators revealed despair at their global sense that public education is becoming fractured beyond repair. While their grief was backward-looking, and their anger was directed to harms arising in the present moment of school, their despair seemed oriented at the future. Here, we heard uncertainty about what would be left for future generations, whether the public knows about how school systems are straining under financial pressure, and how to navigate the obstacles they anticipate will multiply over the years. In some examples, the educators contextualized their despair for education as one manifestation of a more broadly floundering system of public goods. One participant said:

There's just sort of this general loss of faith in public services as a good, and there's a group in the US called In the Public Interest that I know has done some work on this, trying to remind people that it's OK to talk about the government doing good things. That just because it's the government doesn't mean it's a bad thing. This is a huge struggle that we face, and we know that that there are provincial governments across the country who like to do things like call public education “government run schools,” you know, just as a sort of quiet slander.

This educator reveals that the phenomenon of underfunding is not isolated to education, and that there are entire systems that are purposefully being eroded in order to appease calls for less government or lower taxes. Perhaps the sense of despair here is most evocative of the David and Goliath imbalance of power that individual educators feel in resisting large, social and government-led neoliberal movements. Other participants noted that despite how difficult it is to work in and manage underfunded schools, there is almost no public outcry in defense of education as a public good that merits high levels of monetary investment. Again and again, the participants noted that people, the public, parents, do not have sufficient insight into the struggles that schools are facing. One participant noted that the erosion of the public school system sets the stage for growing inequalities, stating:

The reality is, is that the rich can get richer and the poor can get poorer. The advantaged can become more advantaged, the disadvantaged more. So you can literally purposely or accidentally create self-perpetuating cycles that then diminish other aspects of the cycle. And then they just repeat. Rinse, lather, repeat.

Yet another participant voiced their concern for the future when thinking about the crisis in staffing and the retention concerns for teachers:

There are no band aids left, so the public is about to find out what really is happening, if they don't already know. I think that we are in a position where we don't even have people that want

to enter classrooms anymore. Like, when has that ever happened? This has always been a job that people love, and they want to work with kids, and they want to do all of these things. We can't recruit enough people now, and people who have their teaching certifications are saying "not interested." So, I think that we are seeing exactly what we saw happen to healthcare... We're there. It's about to fall apart, I think.

In a similar vein, another participant wondered about newcomers to Canada, noting "the public who are coming from different countries, they may not actually know what the public system was once, right? So you have new audiences who just can't compare it to anything else." The despair, then, is often edged with worry for the future and some sense that what is currently on offer cannot be sustained without a significant boost to funding and without a commensurate shift in political values around public goods. The despair, we noted, seemed to accompany a growing realization that the neoliberal conception of care as individualism is faulty. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the closing comments in the second focus group, where one educator captured both their neoliberal tendency to view care through the lens of individual effort and the disturbing realization that that approach was destined to fail:

The type of person who thrives in education... You are a go-getter. You are a get-up-at-5-in-the-morning-and-can't-wait-to-go-tackle-the-day kind of person, and you just want to do the best job you can do. You cannot sleep at night if you didn't give your best effort, if you didn't go to sleep with a full heart knowing you did everything you could for kids that day... And so that is almost our own worst enemy. The system has been Band-Aided together and is being held together on the goodwill of the educators within the system, and we have self-perpetuated that by just finding more band aids. Get it done. Get it done. We can't let little Timmy be impacted. We can't let that happen. We have to find a way. And we've just done it over and over and over and over again. It's: (a) become the norm; (b) it's expected; and (c) nobody knows we're doing it. It is the dirty little secret in education... [But now] we can't find another Band-Aid. It's not fair to little Timmy. We can't do it anymore. We're now hurting Timmy by Band-Aiding it... We have to stop keeping everyone's dirty little secrets. The public doesn't know how bad [it is].

These longtime educators offer a window into the impossibility of carrying a fraying system on one's shoulders. Their despair relies on their historical lived experiences in schools, but gestures forward into the fears they have for the next generation.

Determination, Exhausted

While the educators we spoke with were despondent, they were also, in flashes, determined and strategic. In the interviews, these moments of energy often appeared in reaction to an earlier moment of anger and, at other times, in response to a colleague's hopeful remarks. Participants used language of action ("actively working," "really trying," "get it done," "keep pushing"), resistance ("can't let that happen," "resisting," "pushing it"), and necessity ("there needs to be," "make sure") when expressing affects of determination.

The educators expressed determination in two valences: the first was in response to a particular set of needs; the second, in response to a larger sense of responsibility for the system. Systemic underfunding has often manifested as specific needs in the schools that educators addressed—at least partially or temporarily—through drawing on resources outside of the regular purview of public education. One educator described a tension between underfunding issues and the determination of educators to meet specific student needs:

The dichotomy of all of that... inside our buildings, we care about kids. We care about making sure that we get to all of them. As educational professionals... we worry about those kids [who are struggling].

Another educator talked about education workers using personal resources to supplement shortfalls in funding in schools, saying, “I can guarantee everyone in this call has bought someone a jacket, has bought someone a pair of shoes, has bought hundreds and hundreds of meals for people.” The same educator also explained that teachers had personally purchased the instruments needed to sustain music classes in the school:

Every single musical instrument in the school was donated or paid for by one of the educators in the building to try and keep offering the service... That school still has 45 guitars in it, it still has 15 drum sets, it still has a bunch of keyboards and pianos, but the public doesn't know teachers paid for it.

Here, the educator is expressing a determination that education must offer rich music programming, even as supports wither under funding cuts. The educators also expressed determination in response to meeting the needs of students with special needs. One administrator mentioned “I see [a student is] in crisis right now, and the wait list to see our social workers like six months, so I'm asking [parents if they] have private benefits, or have enough to see somebody out of pocket.” Another mentioned trying to trim waitlists by asking “parents about whether they can seek accessing their psycho ed assessment privately.” In these instances, educators are determined to prioritize resources for those in need, with an awareness that some students seeking help privately will, at least temporarily, free up spaces for other students.

Beyond registers of determination associated with specific areas of school need, educators also expressed determination to organize and act in defence of education as a public good. One educator spoke about the need to better position the value of public education as an investment, which they believed had been underemphasized in discourse around funding:

We have as a system, as a province, as a government, spent a lot of time focusing on the expense of education, of focusing on the monetary aspect, and that's really easy for people to grasp onto. The cure is to make people realize that education is not an expense. It's an investment. It's an investment in the well-being of society. It's an investment in economic success of the future.

On the same topic, another educator noted that discussions about privatization and underfunding need to emphasize the value of public education rather than the negatives of privatization, noting, “You can't fight privatization by fighting privatization. We have to try and find ways to bolster public education to make sure that it's evidently clear that this is the best way forward.” Another educator commented, “we realize the time is now to actually be transparently, fully honest about the state of affairs in schools, because even the talk we're having now, it's worse than everything we just talked about.” In the above examples, educator determination was grounded in their attachments to the education system's worth as a public good, and educators evinced optimism or hopefulness that these values would be shared by the public.

This kind of hopeful determination also appeared when the educators talked about emerging solidarity among associations and unions. As the topic of organizing and solidarity opened up between the participants, a new shared affective energy seemed to appear. One educator stated, “we have to pick [up organizing efforts] a level to make sure that we have all the key players” to fight funding and privatization issues, while another emphasized that “the advocacy work has continued and will continue, but it is now more dire than ever, and it really is about uniting and showing a united front to the public.” Educators discussed how the difficult conditions in schools are strengthening coordination between various education groups, with one noting, “one of the favorable outcomes of the way the system's been going for the last 5–6 years is this has brought all the education partners together, and there is now a collective [sense that] enough is enough.” They explained that organizations “are now actively working with political parties in the background, actively seeking to influence members of Parliament, writing letters, [and] no longer keeping [conditions] secret. We have joined forces.” What is notable is that this momentary hopefulness, an affective lightening of mood that was perceptible in the atmosphere among

participants, only occurred when educators discussed how their organizing power might act to disrupt current conditions.

Finally, and despite determination to meet needs of the system through specific acts and broader inter-organizational collaboration, a countervailing sentiment of exhaustion emerged on the edges of our conversations. Though educators felt determined to fight for public education, they signaled a waning energy in the face of constant setbacks and worsening conditions. Participants admitted that educators are “done,” “overworked,” and “all exhausted.” They expressed that they “can’t keep up.” were “fed up,” and had been “stretched to the max.” They mentioned “crisis” multiple times. Discussing the backlog in Special Education testing, one participant discussed the Sisyphian task of trying to help students, stating that “always the list is way longer, we [know] that last year’s list was never completed, and maybe the list from the year prior wasn’t even completed.” Another educator described her sense of fatigue as efforts to fundraise seemed insignificant when compared to wealthier schools nearby:

Fundraising like crazy in a small, economically challenged school, [we] went crazy to make sure we had buses for field trips at the end of the year, and then [I watched] my own kids, who went to a different school in the community, board coach buses to travel to the science center... I thought “they have so much money in their fundraising accounts, they put kids on coach buses,” and we were scraping the barrel to make sure we could pay for school buses.

In public discourse, educators felt that narratives of teacher/administrator inadequacy were exhausting people fighting to maintain the public system. One noted, “But now,... principals, vice principals, teachers are everybody’s whipping boy, like everybody is after something, and to [another participant’s] point, I think the result is [educators] are done.” This educator then described the loss of exhausted education workers, explaining:

We are seeing early retirements. We are seeing an increase in sick leave. We are seeing mental health concerns. We are witnessing people just fall apart as part of the job, and that was never the case... [Potential education workers] see what people are going through, and they think “Why would I want to do that?”

Here, the educator indicates a clear limit to how far feelings of determination can translate into individual action to support the public system. As these educators cycle through the moods of grief, rage, despair, and determination, they become exhausted, losing the capacity to independently fight for students and work through and against these systems. As fatigue gains traction as a mood amongst educators, there is a risk that, over time, educators will not be able to muster the sensorial energy needed to feel anything in response to the prevailing conditions. Fatigue, then, can numb. It can paralyse action and increase the risks of both burnout and complete acquiescence. These oscillations between determination and exhaustion reveal an energy to resist systemic issues, but also the limits of individual care and action. The affective interplay suggests that while educators remain committed to public education, they cannot endlessly sustain the individual labour and affective energy needed to address systemic issues.

The Moods of Conflict: Caring as a Neoliberal Educator

While there has been some literature that draws attention to the affective dimensions of educator care in neoliberal systems, much of the writing has concentrated on higher education (e.g., Heyes, 2021; McKenzie, 2021; Moffatt et al., 2018). Philosophy of education literature has tended to centre questions of student affect (Boler, 1999; Lee, 2022; Roberts, 2016; Ruitenberg, 2015) or to offer critiques of how concerns about student affect are often divorced from critiques of social conditions (Means, 2013; Saltman, 2023). More rarely, there has been research on the educative role of emotion in neoliberal times

(Roberts, 2012). Scholarship is very limited in addressing educator affect in response to the neoliberal phenomena of underfunding and privatization.

Here, we are less concerned with emotion as theorised in psychological literature than we are with a Heideggerian affect *qua* moodedness (Crosswhite, 1989; Elpidorou & Freeman, 2015; Freeman, 2015)—that is, emotion as an equiprimordial facet of being, working in tandem with understanding (or cognition) to frame one’s intention (Richardson, 2012). To get a better sense of the true density of the concept of mood, it is useful to note that the German term Heidegger uses is “*stimmung*,” which can be originally translated more closely to tuning, as is done with a musical instrument (Heidegger, 2001). Attunement, state-of-mind, or mood, then, are the interrelated terms that can be used to express Heidegger’s *existenziale* more robustly. If we accept the phenomenological contention that mood is always about something, a reaction to being thrown amidst the world, then we can begin to perceive the rich phenomenal grounds it offers for education research (Brinkmann et al., 2021).

In this study, mood operates as a fundament of care in reaction to the conflict created between caring for-the-other while conceptualizing care through a neoliberal individualist hermeneutic. That is, educator mood is profoundly influenced by the pull toward being a caring (neoliberal) subject who can individually surmount obstacles and the impossible conditions that that same neoliberalism cultivates. As such, our findings resonate with other work that has looked less at emotion and more broadly at educator *care* in times of neoliberalism. Quek (2022), for example, highlights the story of a single, veteran teacher to illuminate the conflict that a caring educator experiences in neoliberal conditions. Quek (2022) describes several examples of the individual teacher being tasked with overcoming the limits imposed by the constraints of a neoliberal system, including working long hours to grade papers, tutor students one-on-one, and meet with parents. As with the core argument of our paper, Quek (2022) finds that the neoliberal emphasis on individualism (and individualized labour) is especially troublesome, writing “Tasking teachers to take on more than their fair share of caring obligations, amidst budget and staffing cuts, coheres with the neoliberal view of exalting independency and self-sufficiency as the ideal qualities of a worker” (p. 159).

Ball (2016) finds that neoliberalism results in a kind of performativity that cleaves from authentic modes of care:

At the centre of performativity, and indeed neoliberalism, is the emotional individual who on a daily basis must live up to and manage ‘the contradictions of belief and expectation’... with which they are confronted often without recourse to others. Performativity individualises and fragments, and leaves us, most of the time, to struggle alone with our doubts and fears. In other words, it produces new arenas of struggle: struggles over practices, struggles over subjectivity and a politics of identity and self-worth. (pp. 1055–1056)

Here again is a conflict or tension, pulling care away from its roots in care-for-the-other, and towards a performance of care-for-the-other that inadvertently aims at upholding the expectations of the system. Unlike Ball, however, we do not agree that respite and repair for care emerges out of teacher critical reflexivity; we suggest despite the educators in our study demonstrating remarkable awareness of the system’s problems (though they did not use the term neoliberalism), they were still not able to overcome the conflict inherent to it.³ We return to this point in the final section on solidarity.

³ Here, we highlight Ball’s (2016) analysis of the effects of neoliberalism and its reforms on individual educators, and his exploration of how these effects precipitate the deterioration of the education system and the fracture of worker solidarity. We would like to thank one of our reviewers who drew our attention to Ball’s more recent work, which argues that the current form of institutional, public education is not worth defending (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2021; 2025). Though Ball’s later work adopts a Foucauldian lens that does not square entirely with our position (see Means’s [2024] thoughtful critique of the Foucauldian framework and of what Means calls ‘epistemic exodus’ rather than true engagement with material and political conditions), our argument is not altogether incompatible with his. Ball and Collet-Sabé (2021) argue “researchers and social and political movements seeking

Zembylas (2021) determines that neoliberalism is inherently “an affective event, as collective affects emerging from neoliberal policies and practices (e.g. fear, anxiety, anger) are inextricable aspects of the sites, networks and flows of neoliberalism in societies” (p. 212). His analysis, which foregrounds the affects associated with resistance and critical pedagogy, echoes our argument that neoliberalism is historically woven into present-at-hand and ready-to-hand meaning-making. That neoliberalism inflects the *befindlichkeit*—the mood and thrown conditions of one’s existence—is both expected and inevitable. He notes that teachers and students often experience a tension related to the performance of compliance, including fear and anxiety. This tension would not exist if what teachers (and students) cared about aligned fully with neoliberal ends. Once again, we can perceive how a conflict in the intention of care—care’s direction—produces an affective push and pull. What is also notable about Zembylas’ (2021) argument is his contention that what is of most importance is not the affective state of the teachers or students, but rather the way in which affective transitions take place. Put another way, Zembylas notes the “it is precisely the power of bodies to affect and be affected that carries the transformative potential of resistance... [away from] the ‘individual’ to the terrain of affective politics” (p. 217). To some extent, then, affect guides action by rending the status quo intolerable over the long term. Something has to give.

Possibilities for Resistance Through Solidarity

Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul. (Engels, 1895/1969, para. 32)

Underfunding and privatization may be ideologically permissible, or even desirable, in a neoliberal model of schooling. A consequence of decades of this approach is that the material conditions in public schools are worsening, creating a break in the ready-to-hand functioning of average everyday classrooms. If, as we argue here, one of the central mechanisms that cultivates conflict within this system—and attendant moods of grief, anger, despair, and determination—is the neoliberal understanding of the individual as a bulwark against failing systems, then this becomes one prospective site of respite or recourse. In this vein, we foresee three possible paths forward for educators: first, to continue to encounter care through the prism of neoliberal individualism; second, to give way to nihilism, ceding ground on what can be conserved in public education from one generation to the next; or, third, to reconceptualize care as the repudiation of neoliberal individualism, which guides a different set of responses to the phenomenon of underfunding.

For educators whose working lives have paralleled growing neoliberal ideologies, it is difficult to encounter the world without the tendency to individualize both success and failure. Even the literature which maps resistance to neoliberalism sometimes calls for individual educator action, as is the case with arguments for teacher critical reflexivity (Ball, 2016) or classroom critical pedagogy (Zembylas, 2021). While these approaches are pedagogically and ideologically necessary, they have not been sufficient to stem the force of deteriorating material conditions in schools. As such, if an educator continues to frame

to reform or improve the school [face] submission to a constant cycle of hope and despair, of progress and defeat, of challenge and incorporation” (p. 987). We agree that, ultimately, individualist attempts to reform the school fight a losing battle against deeply ingrained systems, as do moderate political movements that are not seeking to fundamentally overhaul the way that education and teacher work is conceived in the neoliberal age. In our view, Ball’s recent critiques do not suggest that the broad idea of education is not worthwhile, but rather that we ought to reject the modern school reflective of “a rickety combination of pastoral power, confession, accounting, military organisational forms” (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2021, p. 992), and strive to conceive of something different and better. Though our position may not be entirely compatible with his later writing, and while we are much more closely aligned in our thinking with Means’ (2024) response, we consider Ball’s (2016) earlier work valuable in and of itself.

the intention of their care by drawing on hyper-individualist tendencies, there can be no effective transformation of the politics that make neoliberal austerity possible, nor any respite from the tension that juxtaposes care-for-others against the limits of an uncaring neoliberal system.

If one cannot recognize non-neoliberal and non-individualistic possibilities for care, then the second path—one of nihilism and the extinguishment of hope—becomes likely. Individual care leads to exhaustion, and exhaustion is accelerated for those inheriting an already fractured system. The educators we spoke with had been in healthy system at one time. Despite the system’s flaws, the schools they once attended and worked in were richer. They are, nonetheless, on the edge of giving up. For new educators, the runway to nihilism is shorter, especially when contextualized against the global crises of capitalism, climate change, and the disintegration of democracies.

The third path is, in our view, the only way forward that serves to nourish care and to facilitate actions toward improved material and ideological conditions. The care-for-the-other that calls educators to responsibility is not the same as the compulsion of guilt that bends them against their will into impossible contortions of coping. Given the context of the real, tangible erosion of material conditions, and the demands to ‘make do with less,’ perhaps the only way forward is to engage with the true confines of the system and expose the gaps that these limits impose on public education. One way that educators might repudiate the individualist conception of care is, ironically, an individual gesture of disobedience or at the very least restraint. This path acknowledges that lone educators, despite working in associations or unions, are alienated in their labour (and often isolated in their geographies within classrooms and school offices). It recognizes that their “cramped, complex relations [within capitalist systems] offer no easy or inevitable way out” (Thoburn, 2001, p. 91). Rather, from their crouched individualized stances, their option may be to withdraw their own labour, and to honestly speak aloud the gaps, limits, and realities of an eroding public good. As one of the participants noted, this would likely mean that educators both stop ‘Band-Aiding’ the shortfalls and stop keeping the system’s ‘dirty, little secrets.’

Another, more powerful, way to subvert the individualist paradigm and to reveal the cruelty of underfunding and privatization is for educators to act in solidarity in both, their communication of the system’s challenges and in their refusal of labour. In this, educators may draw support from Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser’s (2019) work, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*. Arruzza et al. (2019) offer a timely rationale for a noisy refusal of labour—a general strike—that explicitly disowns individualist neoliberal approaches to equality. The authors argue that previous movements for equality were guided by a version of feminism that cultivated individual meritocracies—for example, by way of more women in CEO roles—that often produced more harms than benefits. Arruzza et al. (2019) write:

[T]he most dangerous trap for feminists lies in thinking that our current political options are limited to two: on the one hand, a “progressive” variant of neoliberalism, which diffuses an elitist, corporate version of feminism to cast an emancipatory veneer over a predatory, oligarchic agenda; on the other, a reactionary variant of neoliberalism, which pursues a similar, plutocratic agenda by other means—deploying misogynist and racist tropes to burnish its “populist” credentials. (Postface section, para. 4)

If we substitute the role of feminists here with the role of educators in a public education system, it becomes clear that adhering to the neoliberal conception of care is not simply misguided, but rather that it functions as a *de facto* buttress for existing inequalities. It also becomes apparent, in the *Manifesto*, that withdrawal of labour is the most effective means of speaking directly back to the heart of capitalism, rather than engaging solely with its phenomenal outgrowths. In this vein, teachers have a history of using strikes to draw attention to the harms of diminished public funding and can look to historical precedent to encourage strong participation and to plan ahead for potential obstacles (Blanc, 2019; Givan & Lang, 2020; Uetricht, 2014; Ware Stark et al., 2022). Finally, and of use to educators everywhere, is Arruzza et al.’s (2019) robust advocacy for seeking solidarity across industries, disciplines, and ideologies. For public system educators, then, there are opportunities to liaise and find solidarity with workers not simply in

public positions (or even only those in legal strike positions), but to seek a more broadly conceived solidarity that refutes unfair labour conditions and the attendant inequalities these produce.

Concluding Thoughts

The study of the development of care in neoliberal conditions reveals the cruelty of its moralistic individualism (Di Paolantonio, 2016). Public education systems are inherently public: that is, they are of and for communities of people. These systems cannot be saved through the efforts of heroes, though that is often what the neoliberal education literature on grit and resilience would have us believe. Rather, the conditions for the expression of care, our intention as educators, must be recalibrated toward solidarity. There is no hope for change if one educator attempts the Sisyphean task, waking up at 5:30 each morning to call substitute teachers and staying online till midnight answering emails. There is no singular effort that can make schools better for kids. While it is important that the current generation of educators—the neoliberal shoulder generation—bear witness and tell stories of what was once good in education, it is equally important that they refuse to extend their efforts beyond what is feasible. The most generous expression of care, then, may be the most counterintuitive: to clearly denounce the individualistic tendency to ‘do more with less’ and to—in solidarity with one’s colleagues—withdraw labour as an act of responsibility in defiance of a worsening status quo.

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