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Speculative Fictions and Curricular Futures: Envisioning Rural Educational Utopia

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Hope, futurity, and dreaming curriculum

The precarity of the current socio-environmental moment cannot be exaggerated. Some have articulated this moment as uncertain (Bauman, 2007), others as turbid and troubling (Haraway, 2016), and others still as crisis (Kumar, 2013). Perhaps the most compelling articulation of our precarity, and indeed the impetus for the current discussion, is Roger Saul's (2021) characterization of this educative moment as "the doorstep of dystopia." Saul points to the Cape Town water crisis and other contemporary moments in which modern society's infrastructure has failed to provide life's basic necessities due to climate change. For Saul (2021), and many others, these moments are becoming increasingly common and inevitable—as the global COVID-19 pandemic illustrates. Saul (2021) suggests these moments point toward a dystopic future marked by a collapse of the infrastructures of our post-industrial economy. Saul's (2021) unique contribution is to raise the question of how we can ethically move forward as educators at the precipice of dystopia. He is particularly concerned with the duplicity of continuing to promote education as a means to a secure future and the related conventional economic imperatives of education (i.e., if you work hard, you can go to university and get a decent-paying job) given the increasing likelihood that these futures cannot be guaranteed and that these ubiquitous economic imperatives may prove false.

Whether prophetic or fallacious, Saul's (2021) vision inspires us to think about the future, particularly through the lens of curriculum. We see curriculum as the space in education where competing understandings of the past and present work toward a statement of what will be of worth in the future. This is evident through the fundamental question of curriculum theory, what knowledge is of most worth, and the myriad other forms that question may take: whose knowledge is of most worth (Apple, 1979), what stories are most worth telling (Donald & Ng-A-Fook, 2020), what is worthwhile (Schubert, 2010), and what knowledge is of most worth *here* (Chambers, 1999)*?* Curriculum is, thus, a futurity, or a way in which particular visions of the future become knowable and intervene upon the present (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Here, we are interested in all these questions,

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particularly as they help us dream something beyond the curriculum as currently manifested in our shared place.

As alluded to above, curricular futurities are always contested and political in nature (see Wahlström, 2018). As Chambers (1999) suggested, they are also placed. In this paper, we are particularly interested in our local, shared place—the mostly-rural Canadian province of New Brunswick. Though New Brunswick is a small Canadian province, many of its characteristics resonate on a global level.

New Brunswick's geopolitical context is characterized by a shrinking and aging population (Jones, 2020). Indeed, New Brunswick is on the losing end of a population drain facilitated by the ongoing global process of urban migration (Holtman & Thériault, 2017). As a result, New Brunswick suffers from labour shortages in jobs of all skill levels. In 2019, New Brunswick assumed the title of Canada's most impoverished province and would begin receiving the most funding per capita from the federal government's equalization support program (Jones, 2019).

Urban migration, and the centralizing force of neoliberal capitalism that underpins it, are global phenomena. A more distinct, but by no means unique, feature of New Brunswick's socio-economic structure is the economic dominance of the Irving family. Irving family companies hold the majority of business in forestry, oil, gas, transportation, shipping, pulp, and paper production, and newspaper/media outlets in the province. The various companies privately owned by the family are estimated to be worth $10 billion (Moser, 2019). The Irving companies employ 1 in 12 people in New Brunswick (Livesey, 2016), but they have also been criticized for hiding wealth in Bermuda and avoiding taxes (Moser, 2019; Poitras, 2014). Regardless of one's view on the Irving family, it is impossible to ignore the role they play in shaping New Brunswick's socio-economic and geopolitical context.

New Brunswick is also the only officially bilingual province in Canada. New Brunswick enacted its first Official Languages Act in 1969, making both English and French the provinces two official languages. The Official Languages Act (2002) also recognizes the fundamental right for citizens of New Brunswick to receive services in the official language of their choice from the provincial government. As a result, New Brunswick has two public school districts: Anglophone School District and Francophone School District.

For education, the net effect of these geopolitical and socioeconomic features is a curricular futurity marked by the presence of neoliberal economic imperatives, and, in particular, a curricular focus on entrepreneurship (e.g., Government of New Brunswick [GNB], 2016, 2019a; see also Benjamin, Crymble, & Haines, 2017; Sears, 2018). Neoliberalism can be described as the ideological project of removing societal safety nets in the economy to facilitate growth in the free market (Kumar, 2019). The entrepreneur is the ideal worker of the neoliberal economy, as the individual assumes the risk and reward of labour. The precarity of entrepreneurial employment has been noted by scholars in the province (Benjamin, Crymble, & Haines, 2017), but entrepreneurial education is still claimed by many as a solution to the unique challenges of a rural economy (e.g., Hadley, 2018).

Though we feel it intimately in our local context, the prevalence of neoliberal ideological intrusion into curriculum is a global phenomenon—and it is not alone in its negative influence on education. Through a study of several national contexts including Brazil, South Africa, and India, curriculum theorist Ashwani Kumar (2019) identified three insidious influences of curriculum globally: the ideological, the neoliberal, and the (settler) colonial. Unsurprisingly, evidence of each of these influences can be found in most New Brunswick's curriculum documents and more widely in the province's school system. New Brunswick's current curricular futurity, then, is in no way responsive to the precarity discussed by Saul (2021). Indeed, it seems that the neoliberal economic imperatives of New

Brunswick curriculum serve only as a reification of the industrial and post-industrial manifestations of schooling that have directly contributed to the precarity of the current socio-environmental moment.

Systems, such as schooling, can be notoriously resistant to change. Yet, within the hegemonic spaces of curriculum and schooling, individuals have agency, and can—and often do—mobilize that agency toward change with varying degrees of success. We would not begin this article by over-generalizing the curricular and educational spaces in New Brunswick as irredeemably damned by the above named ideological, colonial, and neoliberal influences. Indeed, there are pockets of resistance everywhere, but in this province particularly within early childhood education and First Nations (Indigenous) education. Yet, we must remain realistic about "the trouble", as feminist scholar Donna Haraway (2016) names the myriad forces that have led to the environmental collapse, economic precarity, and social inequality that mark the current post-industrial moment—and of which the current COVID-19 pandemic is clearly a part. Haraway asks us to stay with the trouble in order to foster a sense of response-ability, defined as "a praxis of care and response" (Haraway, 2012, p. 302). Response-ability, for us in this moment, is found in speculation and dreaming. We take inspiration here from Haraway herself, who draws on science fiction and speculative feminism in order to dream a future beyond the confines of what exists today through her "Camille stories" (Haraway, 2016)—a science fiction narrative where symbionts of human-animal/human-insects hybrids physically represent the possibilities of becoming-with our more-than-human others.

Speculation is often criticized in Western philosophy as a less than rigorous modality of thought (Fairfield, 2015), but many contemporary writers defend it as a part of theoretical creativity (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016). We view speculation as a form of envisioning or dreaming a future informed by particular understandings of the present. Our speculation and dreaming here responds to the ongoing conversation in curriculum studies around speculative fiction as a source of inspiration for theorizing. Historically, we think of Cynthia Chambers (1999) as a crucial voice in this conversation, drawing on Canadian literature to make a case for a uniquely Canadian curriculum theory—a call to which this article attempts to respond. More recently, we think of the *Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies* and their two recent issues engaging speculative fictions (e.g., Appelbaum, 2019; Weaver, 2020).

We expect the current, ongoing relationship between speculative fiction and curriculum is due to their mutual emphasis on the future. Like curriculum, speculation is a futurity, but unlike curriculum, speculation is not necessarily invested in the infrastructure of post-industrial capitalism. Rather our speculation here—our envisioning, dreaming, or writing of speculative fiction (terminology we use interchangeably henceforth)—is meant to speak back to that infrastructure and move beyond it toward an articulation of our individual and collective educational utopia.

We use utopia here as a direct response to Saul's (2021) use of dystopia. Indeed, dystopia seems rather ubiquitous in the current Western social moment as evidenced by best-selling books like *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline, 2017) and Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, not to mention the endless train of films and TV shows that depict socio-environmental collapse (e.g., *Black Mirror*; *World War Z; The Walking Dead*). Our emphasis on utopia is not meant as an escape from the cultural fixation with dystopia, nor as an enactment of the uncritical optimisism Saul (2021) condems within the school system, but rather as a search for possible responses to the actual through considerations of the impossible. Zygmunt Bauman (2007) reminds us that utopia, given Sir Thomas More's initial treatment of the idea in the sixteenth century, is informed by "*two* greek words: *eutopia*, that

is 'good place', and *outopia*, which means 'nowhere' [emphasis original]" (p. 95). Utopia, then, is an impossibility—a nowhere (see also Zamalin, 2019). Education will always be flawed, complex, and messy by virtue of the inherent humanness of the endeavour. Nonetheless, Bauman suggests that for centuries after More's introduction of utopia to the collective consciousness, many believed that "a society without utopia is not liveable, and consequently a life without utopia is not worth living" (Bauman, 2007, p. 96). Despite the unlikeliness of complete educational revolution, we maintain the value of envisioning spaces beyond the current state of affairs in education as a counter-cultural act of theorizing. Educational utopia may not be *possible*, but that does not mean dreaming it is not *productive*. We see our speculative educational utopia—our dreaming of an education and a curriculum beyond the post-industrial capitalism, neoliberalism, heteropatriarchy and sexism, settler colonialism, racism, and ableism of the current education system—as a form of response-ability and maintaining hope.

We are not alone in New Brunswick in seeking hope through speculation about the future. Beginning in May of 2019, *NB Media Coop*—a small, volunteer-run, news outlet aiming to cover local stories not covered by the government-run *CBC* or the other local news outlets, which are monopolized by Irving-owned companies (Livesey, 2016; Poitras, 2014)—began publishing a series of letters from the future of New Brunswick.[2] These letters dealt with climate change, universal basic income, and gender equality from the perspective of fictitious authors from an imagined future. In this way, we see our current project of envisioning a curricular future as speaking both within a global conversation around speculative fiction/futures/feminisms (i.e., SF; see Haraway, 2016) in curriculum theory, but also in a local conversation around the future of our shared place. At both levels, we look to the future with hope.

Many write of hope, but, to us, none speak so loudly against the gloom of dystopia and the effect of hopelessness as Paulo Freire. Freire (2002) characterized hopelessness as a loss of agency and showcased that disadvantaged groups who believe their destinies are inevitable can lack the willpower to alter their world's trajectory. They accept their world's path as fixed and remain in a state of self-inflicted dormancy. Their inaction further exacerbates challenges, as they make little or no effort to change their world but stand by awaiting the inevitable. Indeed, the authors collectively note an exhaustion with nanoracism (Mbembe, 2019), microaggressions, as well as larger systemic manifestations of oppression. Yet, we maintain our hope because hope is a mechanism by which transformation can occur. Freire (2002) viewed hope as the driving force that motivates marginalized and disadvantaged groups to take proactive stances in shaping their destinies—thus our communal presumption that envisioning a brighter future through hope stimulates action towards making dreams realities. Through our utopic visions, we keep our own hope alive and mobilize it in the direction of our dreams.

This paper unfolded over the course of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. We each began by separately responding to the prompts: "described your educational dreamworld" and "tell the story of your educational utopia". After the initial writing, we gathered in person and digitally to discuss the themes and resonances from the writing. In March 2020, just before the pandemic hit New Brunswick, we presented some of our discussions at a local environmental education conference, where we received valuable feedback. Throughout the remainder of the year, we discussed, wrote, and re-wrote our visions and the surrounding paper. The result has been a rich, dynamic, and complicated conversation about the future of curriculum, both locally and globally.

Having outlined our justification for this paper, the process of writing it, as well as our theoretical dispositions, sensitivities, and concerns, we now share a collectively-authored

speculative fiction that represents some of the themes, tensions, resolutions, and complexities of a dreamed educational utopia. In what follows, we each share an individual speculation on the future of education in New Brunswick bound together within a single narrative. After sharing our narrative, we offer a discussion based on those themes that have resonated most with us. We conclude this paper by returning to the notion of dreaming and calling for a collective revisioning of our global and local education systems. Before asking you for your dreams, however, we first offer our own.

Rosie's day: A narrative speculation

It was Rosie's sixth birthday, and she was very excited because today she would begin her education. She had already learned many things from her parents and her family. She could read books, write stories, and run fast and free. But today was different. Today she would begin her "formal" education.

Rosie knew that many children her age attended places called schools. Rosie, however, had chosen something different. Rosie had heard stories of school systems of long ago, where everyone was made to attend schools—where strict practices, learning methods, and expected outcomes were handed down from district offices and students were expected to follow homogenous activities and evaluations regardless of their differences. She was happy that she was given the choice to decide the mode of formal education she wanted to pursue. Rosie knew she could change her mind at any time, and whether learning in a building or by interacting within her community, she understood that her learning would be equally valued and acknowledged.

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Rosie began her day with a hearty breakfast. During the meal, she asked her mother, Annette, to tell her about education. Although they had had many conversations on this topic, Annette obliged.

"Well Rosie, today your formal education begins!" She started, eyes lighting up as she spoke. "Today, I will take you down to meet the community Elders, and they will tell you a long story about this land and the people who were here before us."

"Who are the Elders?" asked Rosie between bites of oatmeal.

"They are people who have lived here for a long, long time, and who have been trusted with the responsibility of making sure you know the story of this land," replied her mother.

"Is the story scary?" asked Rosie.

Annette thought for a second before responding, "some parts of it. But you're big now and being big means we have to think about scary things." Seeing that Rosie was uneasy she added, "trust the Elders, Rosie. They will never tell you anything you can't handle."

This seemed to appease Rosie, and she finished her meal without comment. As they were getting ready to leave, Rosie asked her mother, "What about tomorrow and the next day? What will we do then?"

Annette smiled, "what would you like to do, Rosie?"

Rosie thought for a minute, "I think let's worry about tomorrow tomorrow."

Annette nodded her assent, and they began their journey out the door.

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After hearing the story of the Land, which took several hours, Annette noticed Rosie was restless, and after telling her what she saw, she asked Rosie what she might like to do next. Rosie responded that she might like to go for a walk.

Annette said that sounded nice, and they walked around town, eventually arriving at the library. At the library, Rosie asked the librarian, Idris, to help her find a few books. Idris

asked what Rosie might be interested in. Still thinking deeply about schooling, and what her education might look like, Rosie suggested they find stories about different sorts of schools.

Idris helped Rosie find a few books on schools. One was particularly interesting as it contained an excerpt from a student's journal. Rosie and Idris read the book out loud together.
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The year is 2020, and Scout has been given the opportunity to enroll in a new high school education system. This high school education system is being trialed in New Brunswick for the next four years, allowing any local high school student to attend. Scout attended a traditional high school in grade 9 and then made the switch to the new high school for grade 10. Below, Scout shares their experience in their new school.

There are a lot of differences between the old school system and my new school. Firstly, the school system incorporates inter/multi-disciplinary teaching and learning. I like this because it supports students who struggle in certain subject areas. For me, this means that I can learn my weak subjects, such as Math and Science, through my strong subjects, such as the Arts and Humanities. This way of learning has made me more engaged in the learning process. I used to hate going to math and science class, but now I enjoy it because it is tied to subjects that I am good at. Whenever I struggle in subjects, I feel less anxious because I know I can use the time during my stronger subjects to reinforce the concepts. I am currently taking an Art-Science class, which allows me to receive a credit for both subjects while learning them simultaneously. I am also enrolled in a Music class that incorporates Math into our learning. Likewise, this allows me to receive credit for both subjects. There are many other students in my classes who also benefit from this learning style and are all excited about and interested in pursuing a future in the Arts and Humanities.

I am enrolled in a self-paced learning program. The self-paced learning option allows me to control the amount of time I spend towards specific classes. Each class has 20 units, and we are given two units at a time. Once we hand in our two units, we are given the next two units. Lessons by teachers and the community are conducted weekly and recorded so students can watch them again if they forgot or missed something. I like this way of learning, as I can get through my Art-Science courses in 10 weeks but can spend 30 weeks focusing on Music-Math. Homework is dependent on how much I want to work on my units at home. If I want to finish a course before the end of the term, I can spend more time at home working on my units. Every other week, we have a flex day, which is a day where we do not have any classes. We are still required to go to school on flex days and work on whatever we want during that time. I spend this time working in our school library, where I can spend the entire day researching and writing my history essays.

Our courses are all community-infused, where teachers are responsible for their classrooms, and the community is encouraged to contribute and collaborate. In my music-math course, we have had units led by our community Newcomers Society, an Indigenous Elder, and some people from the Chinese Heritage Society. We are also expected to spend one day a week out in our community, volunteering and learning from different groups of people. This past week, my friends and I went to the community garden to learn about growing food and sustainable living. This encouraged us to think of a plan to bring community gardens to our school. Each grade could have its own community garden, and we could grow enough food to help provide more food for students and other community programs, such as our homeless shelters. As well, we're going to plan a clothing swap at our high school for any staff or student to participate in. Each person can bring an item of clothing to donate, but it is not required.

At my new school, there is less focus on gender. All of our sports teams and extra-curricular activities are gender-neutral, and the school only has single person washrooms. We

also have robust health lessons, where we learn about gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, and sexual health. We participate in lessons twice a month where health professionals from our community teach us about these concepts. Last week, a group of medical students came to our school and taught us about consent. Next month, the LGBTQIA2 Community Group will be coming to the school to teach us about sexually transmitted diseases.

The halls of my school have been designed to allow the students and community to contribute to the physical image of their school. Some students have chosen to contribute culturally significant items and artwork, which we incorporate into our social studies and history classes. In these classes, we learn about the "secret" history of Canada. We've learned about topics such as the 200 years of slavery in Canada, the forced labour of interned Ukrainian-Canadians in building Banff, and residential schools. It has been eye-opening to me to have learned about this dark part of Canada's past, but I know that it is important to acknowledge and recognize these events in order for Canada to embrace truth and reconciliation.

There are two final aspects of my school that I am enjoying: our mentorship program and outdoor learning opportunities. My school has a mentorship program, where we are matched with a student from each grade to create a group of four students. The four of us check-in with each other throughout the year and act as an extra support system for one another. It helps to get advice from the upper-year students who have already taken the courses that I am currently taking. I also like working with the grade 9 students, as I can offer them advice or guidance on their courses. Lastly, we get to spend a lot more time learning from nature compared to my old school. Different community groups come to the school to lead outdoor sessions, where we can learn a variety of subjects. My favourite subject to participate in outdoors is gym/physical activity.

I can see myself feeling fulfilled and happy at my school for the next three years. While I know that there are some flaws in the new education system, I believe that this is a positive step in the right direction for the future of education in New Brunswick. My classmates are more supportive of one another, more engaged with the topics in classes, and my teachers seemed less stressed out than before. My grades have been higher than average, which I believe is because I can spend more time on assignments or courses that I am not as good at. I also can tell that I am building many positive relationships with my community.

Sincerely,

Scout

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At Lunchtime, Rosie was so busy reading with Idris that she didn't notice when her Grandpa came in and Annette left for work. When she finally lifted her head out of her books, her Grandpa had a snack ready for her. As she ate, Grandpa asked Rosie many things about what she had read, and Rosie told Grandpa all about Scout.

"Can we read another one?" Rosie asked her Grandfather.

"Sure," he replied. "I have a favorite I think you'll enjoy."

Rosie's grandpa pulled an old book out of his bag and began to read as Rosie ate.

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As I walked alongside my niece, I could sense her enthusiasm and pride. I could not say no to the pleading voice that woke me from the bed earlier this morning. "Aunty, can you please, please, please, take me to school today?" It is not often that relatives from abroad can visit her family in New Brunswick. She just could not wait to show me the school that has dominated most of our telephone conversations. Admittedly, I too was happy to spend every moment in her company as this was the first time in two years that we were together. She

firmly clutched her handmade model ecosystem. Her creative work formed part of her class project to raise awareness of the importance of New Brunswick's natural resources' sustainability. I was not alarmed that her school facilitated such activities. I recalled perusing a brochure on the airplane that highlighted New Brunswick's ability to maintain near-pristine environmental conditions accredited to their efficient education system.

Upon seeing her classmates, a huge smile came across her face. She tugged me along as she hurried to introduce me to her peers who wore congruent grins. I was pleasantly surprised to observe the bond they shared regardless of her noticeable differences. The group hurried inside as it was nearing the start of class. As if startled back to reality, Kyra left her friends to give her father and me huge hugs before dashing into her classroom, excited for the day ahead. My brother, Rekayi, and I slowly followed.

Upon entering the building, the first thing that caught my eye was the sign that displayed the school's vision. Rekayi explained that the vision was not composed behind closed doors among school staff members, nor was it handed down from the district's office. Instead, this vision was created via purposeful and meaningful discussions among educators, administrators, community members, students, and other stakeholders. The vision reflected the hopes and aspirations of both school and its community. Rekayi went on to explain that the students were all cognizant of the vision and its significance. The vision was instilled in the schools' culture, practices, and pedagogies as educators, students, and parents alike took equal ownership and responsibility in ensuring school practices are akin to their vision.

We entered the doorway that Kyra had disappeared into not too long before. The class teacher immediately walked towards us. Rekayi introduced me as his sister and Kyra's aunt. Krya was already engrossed at one of seven activity tables spread throughout the room. The teacher explained that activities, instructions, and evaluations were flexible and tailored to capitalize on each student's diverse strengths while providing remediation for weaknesses. Like all other students, Kyra received instructions based on her distinct pace and needs. The class teacher and two teaching assistants diligently helped students explore their full potential by exposing them to various activities from diverse subject areas. The absence of high-stakes exams and constant summative assessments permitted teachers to help students reach self-realization—the full and free actualization and externalization of the individual's powers and abilities—rather than preparing them to be successful in examinations.

At the school, students were not listeners but co-investigators. The roles of teachers and students were often reversed as they relied on each other for knowledge. The class teacher expressed that he was always willing to learn about his students' experiences and opinions to facilitate their learning. Students were encouraged to become creative and critical thinkers as they take proactive roles in guiding their knowledge. They were encouraged to critically consider each piece of information and reflect on the ways their knowledge impacts their lives. Students were urged to partake in critical discussions about sensitive topics such as social justice, inclusion, marginalization, and privilege. During these discussions, students were encouraged to explore their position and roles in this continually evolving world.

As Rekayi and I left the classroom and walked further along the corridor, I could not resist peeping into a nearby classroom. A teacher's voice caught my attention. She was inviting a student to take his place at the front of the class. I was astounded to hear the teacher call the student by name—a name that was difficult to pronounce by the average Canadian as it had its origin in another country and language. I was certain it would have taken much determination for the teacher to learn the correct pronunciation. Rekayi confirmed my suspicion that all staff members and students ensured that the student's name was pronounced accurately to illustrate respect for his individuality. The student stood in front of the class and with pride and presented a poster that contained information and pictures of his home country

and customs. At the end of his presentation, he was asked to display his poster on the classroom wall among other posters depicting various information from varying countries. These posters were all made by students who, on previous occasions, shared with the class their unique contribution to their diverse classroom. Each country represented the homeland of the class's student composition. I could sense the pride students possessed as their classroom mirrored ethnic, racial, social, physical, and academic diversity and inclusivity. The multicultural composition of the class, and by extension the province, is recognized and celebrated. Students learn the histories and customs of all people who have contributed to the province's ethos. All ethnic groups were endorsed as equal contributors to the development of the province. Through various school projects and activities, students were educated on all groups that have impacted New Brunswick's rich cultural history. Through these activities, students gained a sense of civic identity and stimulated patriotism that fostered effective citizenship.

As we ventured to the back of the building, Rekayi was elated to show off his contribution to the school. He had been a proud farmer back in our homeland. In New Brunswick, he could now use his skills and experience to assist the students with agricultural projects. He confessed that his active contribution to the school stimulated his sense of ownership as he felt obligated to work toward the school's development. He explained that this situation was not unique to him as the school always encouraged strong school-community ties and has successfully capitalized on the strengths of parents and community stakeholders. By so doing, the school has become the cornerstone of which both the school and community can work to achieve environmental goals.

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As I sat on the airplane watching the beautiful natural ecosystem that I was leaving behind, I could not help but reminisce on a school that reflected an embodiment of cultural and civic identity. In the 22nd century, education still demonstrates the province's true forefathers' ideologies—the Indigenous people who valued the natural resources that sustained their lives. While the world grapples with the inevitable influences of globalism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, New Brunswick's education system has successfully maintained the Indigenous environmental ideologies in a modernized world.

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After he was done reading, Rosie told her Grandpa there were some things she didn't understand about the story and asked a few questions. Rosie wanted to know why the author said that Kyra was noticeably different from her friends. Grandpa answered with a smile, explaining that Kyra was Black. He went on to describe a previous time when New Brunswick's education curriculum excluded Black Histories and recognition of the numerous contributions Black people provided to the province's development resulting in students, like Kyra, feeling alienated, lonely, and marginalized. Rosie was relieved to learn that today, Black histories, cultures, and contemporary contributions formed a major part of the curriculum, and racism—though never completely gone—was always diligently, vigorously, and relentlessly taken up by teachers when presented itself in schools.

After they finished talking, Rosie asked grandpa if they could go see Mia, Lila, and Cyrus—three of Rosie's closest friends who lived nearby. Grandpa agreed, and together they sent messages to Mia, Lila, and Cyrus's respective guardians. Eventually, through their guardians, the friends agreed to meet outside at the park near their house. Rosie's Grandpa volunteered to play with all four children, so that the other guardians could do other things.

At the park, the four friends played in the trees near the playground. They found all kinds of interesting plants, animals, and insects that Grandpa helped them identify. As they started to get excited, they started speaking loudly, but Grandpa reminded them that the forest

isn't their home and they are guests, and that their loud voices might disturb some of the other residents. From then on, they spoke in whispers until they got back to the playground. There, they started a game of tag and ran and played until they got tired and asked grandpa to go home.

After saying goodbye to her friends and seeing them all home, Rosie and Grandpa went back to Rosie's house where Rosie's entire family was back from work. Annette, Rosie's biological mother greeted Rosie and asked her what she and Grandpa did with their afternoon. Rosie talked about the books she read, the time she spent with her friends in the forest, and the game of tag they played. While she spoke, Rosie's other parent, Jane, listened attentively while her Uncle Ellis and older brother Bernie listened with one ear while making dinner. The next day was Jane's day to spend with Rosie, so they asked Rosie what she would like to do. Rosie wasn't sure yet.

Finally, they all sat down to eat together. Rosie was exhausted and very much willing to sit back as the adults did the talking. That night she fell asleep in her chair at the dinner table, and Jane lifted her into her bed.

Just as Jane was about to leave, Rosie called out asking for a bedtime story about schools. Jane was happy to oblige and began reading a story written by a teacher.

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"Does everyone have everything they need?" I called out to the group of young people spread out around me. I could see that Bo was still sorting through the contents of their backpack, which included snacks we had spent the previous two days planning, shopping for, and preparing together, water, sunscreen, bug spray, a sketchbook and pencils, a change of clothes, and a swimsuit, just in case. You never regret packing a swimsuit. Uzo was bent down tying Ari's shoe, while the rest of the group stood chatting and chorused "Yes" to my question. As Ari and Uzo straightened up, I looked at the assorted young people standing in front of me.

Three or four times a year, I offer a two-week session focused on living responsibly in our communities. Youth of all ages can sign up as part of their education program. This group features folks from the ages of 5 through 23, although I have had younger and older participants as well. These kinds of programs are offered by community members all year round, on an endless variety of topics tied to the interests and passions of those community members. I am always amazed by the array of offerings—from sports and recreation, to environmental conservation, to art history, to knitting, to social activism, to traditional humanities or STEM topics—that our young people can engage with, providing an incredible swath of experiences. The programs are subsidized by the government to give folks like me time off from their day jobs and to provide financial support for some of the group's activities.

My program is very open concept, but many are more structured. I like to bring together a group of folks who share a common interest in being responsible citizens. We start our two weeks by getting to know one another and finding out how we might need to support each other to spend the next two weeks together. For example, some of the older participants fell easily into care-taker roles for the 5-year-old participant, allowing their parent to leave after a few hours the first morning of our session, and as we moved into the planning stages of our conversation, we all spent some extra time thinking about spaces that would be accessible for the group member who uses a wheelchair. In those early conversations, we came to a consensus that one way we wanted to become more responsible citizens was by learning about the local river ecosystem and how different parts of the community are involved in caring for it. We spent a couple of days researching who those stakeholders were, arranging outings to visit them, and to see the river.

During those planning days, we also shared reflections on our relationship to the river, and ideas and opinions we had heard voiced in our community. We were heading out today to spend our time with the local Salmon Association's executive director and would be taking a bus upriver tomorrow to visit with some university students who are bringing a two-eyed seeing (*etuaptmumk*) approach to caring for the river. We would end our three days of outings with a Mi'kmaq Elder, who would share stories of the river and an overview of their current outlook on the way the river is being used and treated. The final days of our session would be spent reflecting together on the experiences we had shared and helping each participant develop a plan of action that they would undertake once the session ended. In the past, I have had participants decide to continue their relationship beyond the time I was able to facilitate, working together on large-scale community projects. Others carried their time with me forward on their own, either taking up a public or private action.

Young people sign up for programs like these as part of their compulsory education. In New Brunswick, education becomes available to all at the age of two, although many families can provide education in their own ways until the age of five, when compulsory education begins. At that time, students may be enrolled in education centres, which have a very low ratio of students to teachers, and which follow a child-led curriculum. Many of these education centres exist in outdoor spaces, with access to the indoors for bad weather and bathroom breaks. Parents may also take advantage of programs like mine for their children. As learners grow older, they begin to participate in more and more programs per year rather than attend their education centre. Because the community is so invested in the education of our young people, there is a lot of support for learners to follow through with projects conceived in the program, and learners can pursue those projects to completion before embarking on the next one. Some learners will continue to spend time at their education centre for the entirety of their compulsory education, accessing support and structure that helps them learn best, while many learners find their passions in projects in the community and often begin to spend more time with particular organizations or mentors to begin specializing their knowledge and their interests. This means that by the time students finish their education, they have engaged with members of their community from all walks of life, have learned from and with other learners of diverse ages and experiences, and have a well-rounded view of the community, its needs, and the ways the community can continue to serve them.

For now, I turn back to my group so that we can make our way out into the community. The next few days will hold lots of learning for the young folks in my group and me. I wonder how my experience over the next few days will shape the next program that I offer and my relationship with my community.

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Twelve years passed, and Rosie's 18th birthday arrived. Having spent the last 12 years learning at her own pace, based on her own interests, and in community with those around her, she decided to continue her education in a more formal capacity at a university nearby. Around 15, Rosie became interested in French literature and the post-1968 French philosophy movement. Since then, she had read works by Kristeva, Foucault, and Deleuze. Having become a passionate intellectual, Rosie had even started writing for her local newspaper and published several opinion pieces in academic journals. All of her supporters agreed that the university was the best fit for Rosie.

Rosie's friends, Mia, Lila, and Cyrus had all had similar epiphanies during their teenage years. Ever the animal lover, Mia had become extremely interested in veterinary medicine, and had spent the last two years interning at a local vet's office. Shortly after her 18th birthday, a few months later than Rosie's, Mia joined Rosie in the nearby town where

Rosie's university was located. Lila, who was the most physical of the bunch, had taken to organizing local sporting events for and with her younger peers, and although she had not yet decided on a career path, she was content with her current role in the community—as was the community. When Cyrus was 12, he had broken his leg while playing soccer with his friends (to this day, he jokingly claims that Lila pushed him, which she categorically denies). During the summer while his leg was healing, he spent a huge amount of time with his computer, and although his guardians were worried at first, it quickly became apparent that he had an aptitude for programming. For the past year, Cyrus had been supplying his services as a freelance coder to the government and was happy that he would be able to stay where he was for the foreseeable future.

Although the friends were splitting up, they made promises to see each other often and to stay in touch. Rosie's initial transition into university life was difficult as she had never before been expected to maintain a schedule, but she quickly learned the skill; and when Mia joined her two months later, Rosie felt comfortable with her new life.

Without Rosie and Mia around, Lila and Cyrus became more invested in each other and each other's worlds. Lila learned to code from Cyrus, and Lila helped Cyrus stay active. Together, the two eventually used money earned from coding to invest in youth sports infrastructure in their community—a new basketball court, gym equipment, and an outdoor pool were all eventually added because of Lila and Cyrus's commitment to youth athletics.

Discussion: Making sense of rural utopia

While each author initially wrote their own vision of the future, toward a narrative cohesion, we eventually brought them together in a single story with distinct parts. As such, some elements of the narrative above are in tension with others. We think these tensions are illustrative and productive. We are different people with different perspectives (one Indigenous and three non-Indigenous; one Black and three White; one male, two female, and one nonbinary; one teacher and three academics), and our experiences of schooling and curriculum elicit different responses. Some of the narrative's tension will be left to linger unresolved, and we will not comment on every nuance of our dream(s). There are, however, a few themes emergent from our writing and subsequent discussions that we consider worth highlighting.

Schooling is, unfortunately, never just about schooling. The school's diverse responsibilities go beyond instruction. This is especially true in rural areas, such as New Brunswick, where schools are a cornerstone of community development. Rural education scholars, such as Schafft (2016) and Schollie et al. (2017), highlight schools' roles in sustaining livelihoods, fostering social interactions, and serving as one of the major institutions that assist communities in addressing their social challenges. One way of contextualizing this is through the social determinants of health (SDH) framework (Raphael, Bryant, Mikkonen, & Raphael, 2020). SDH are conditions in which people grow, live, work, and age that directly affect their health. While education is its own social determinant, for students currently in the public-school system, school also offers a space in which to address other health inequities students experience. For some, schools are a source of food stability in breakfast and lunch programs. For others, they are places of social inclusion and security. Indeed, the modern school system does much more than educate.

Each of our visions in some way addresses SDH, and the collective effect is toward a shared desire for those determinants to be met *before* entering into the idea of institutionalized learning. Without those basic needs being met, learning cannot happen—and if it is the responsibility of the school to provide beyond learning, policy, funding, and teacher workloads ought to reflect that.

As suggested in Rosie's overarching narrative, work is something of a problem within the current model of education in that schools are designed to mirror the industrial structure of adult work. Despite the movement toward more flexible forms of capitalism in the pre-pandemic era, the school remained rigid, and the resilience of that school structure, even during the pandemic, is often explicitly linked the smooth function of the adult world (e.g., D. Cardy in GNB, 2021, 19:32). This problem of work is a persistent issue for Utopia. Nalo Hopkinson (2012), a Jamaican-born Canadian science fiction writer, has said that the problem that must be solved in utopia is precisely that of work—who will take on the menial, less-than-desirable tasks required to make a society function? Some writers solve the problem through technology or magic—an imagining of something beyond what exists that resolves the need for menial tasks (e.g., robots or enchanted helpers). Others 'solve' the problem through firm social hierarchies or through slavery (e.g., George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* series). These latter forms do not solve the problem as much as hide it among the lower classes, and in that these imaginings are perhaps less utopic than realistic.

Rosie's story engages the problem of work by restructuring the divisions of labour and the nuclear family unit. Similar to and inspired by Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Rosie's family comprises four adults and an older brother, and each takes on a unique responsibility in Rosie's care and education. In addition, community members, such as the Elders and Idris, the librarian, play a role in educating Rosie. While in the current narrative we have kept the team dynamic to the familial unit, Piercy's image of a futuristic society showcases teams of unrelated community members taking turns "mothering" children. Haraway (2016) has made calls for a similar restructuring of the family, shifting not only traditional gender roles but also the boundaries between species.

Time has passed in the writing of our visions, and none of us can deny the way the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted, tested, and reformed our think-dreaming about education. In his statement dated April 2, 2020, New Brunswick's Minister of Education, Dominic Cardy, said "No one's ever tried to run a modern education system without schools" (D. Cardy as cited in Poitras, 2020). We were struck by the statement, as our visions all tried to reimagine or decenter schools from the idea of educational utopia. In these visions, however, we also counted on the community to create new learning opportunities for students. In the current global pandemic, families have had to retreat from community, and our communities have had to reconnect in new ways—through renewed service to vulnerable populations and digital means. In April, many education professionals hoped to see families take a renewed role in their young learners' education by including children in family decision-making, household work, and other activities in daily family life. We wondered if the time spent at home would renew families' value of learning and teaching together, but we also wondered, "How will communities step up to provide educational opportunities for learners?" As teachers continue to put lessons online and to support families in learning from home, how will the wider community fit into this vision? These questions still linger.

Entangled with this idea of community involvement in education is the notion of time. The pandemic has brought to the fore how the idea of work shapes time. The 40-hour workweek is an obvious example—one which has remained in place despite generations of technological advancements that were expected to make work less demanding and give us more free time (Snyder, 2016; Weeks, 2011). Another example is what some are calling capitalist accelerationism—the relentless quickening of capitalist economic structures (Braidotti, 2019). Before the pandemic, our experiences in education echoed this phenomenon through what some feminist curriculum scholars have named "the curriculum of busy" (Kurki, Herriot, & French-Smith, 2018), where the busier one is, the more successful one seems. Despite counter-cultural movements toward "slowness" (Honoré, 2009), there remains

an obsession with business in Western society, and particularly in education (Kumar & Downey, 2018).

In the era of the pandemic, we see the liquidity of post-industrial capitalism and the flexibility demanded of its workers (Bauman, 2007; Sennett, 1998) more acutely manifest in education. The rigid structures of the industrial model of schooling have given way to the "flexibility" of online learning. Learning has become more accessible, but it has also become more precarious, unstable, and unpredictable—not to mention often mediated by machines and networks to which access is systematically inequitable, particularly in rural settings. Moreover, the responsibility for this neoliberal vision of learning has shifted from a collective system to individual teachers and individual students, forcing both to continually make the exhausting choice to engage (Braidotti, 2019). Pandemic-time is always in flux. There are no bells, no lines, no recesses and lunch breaks. For teachers, the temporal barriers between work and rest have become blurred—a phenomenon that has been present in higher education for almost a generation. There is a stillness to lockdown that education ignores. Rather than forced downtime in the face of first, second, and third waves of COVID-19, we continue with online learning—something that, for many of us, demands more time and different sorts of expertise than we have traditionally been asked for.

Our visions seek slowness and gentleness with our bodily rhythms. There is a generosity in repetition (Prendergast, 2019), and we see the idea of a self-paced curriculum likewise as generous. In some ways, the slowness, gentleness, and generosity of self-pacing subvert the temporal expectations of education—the tyranny of clock-time (Rose & Whitty, 2010). Yet, in the current era, we must be cautious. Flexible capitalism is notoriously adaptive, consumptive, and appropriative toward ideas and actions originally intended to be subversive (Liboiron, 2019). In education, the self-pacing of curriculum speaks back to the well-worn critique that the pre-pandemic system was (and is) something of an assembly line that assumed normativity and conformability on the student's part. A self-paced curriculum breaks apart the assembly line and, in an ideal world, restores the status of the skilled teacher as a central linchpin of the educational economy. Self-pacing, however, does hold the potential to be gobbled up by neoliberal capitalism as a practice suited to the interests of a "streamlined" education by putting too much emphasis on the individual student's responsibility for education without maintaining proper support structures (i.e., skilled teachers). This is another reason we opened this discussion section by highlighting the significance of social structures outside the school, and another reason our visions took those social structures as a given—certainly a utopic idea.

This dystopic Randian model of education, where content is created by private industry (commissioned or permitted by the state) and each individual is responsible for their own engagement with that content without any kind of safety net or support, seems increasingly real. A utopic curriculum is marked by freedom, but freedom supported by the state. The self-pacing of curriculum, then, should not be read as a vision of everyone for themselves, but rather a vision of everyone at their own pace, in their own way, with a spirit of genersoity, and in community with others.

Being in community with others, for us, extends beyond the human. It takes a profoundly interconnected network of agentive actors—human, more-than-human, and non-human inclusively—to help children learn their multiple embedded and embodied subjectivities, and the capacity to read their own interconnectedness. We are informed in this thinking by those who write in posthuman literacies and early childhood education, who find ways of working-with(in), while speaking back to, the status quo of neoliberal schooling (Davies, 2014; Kuby, Spector, & Thiel, 2019). Here we think of Rosie's time in the forest with her friends, first observing and engaging, then being reminded that they are a guest in the

forest, and not to disturb their co-present others/neighbours. We can imagine that on another day in the forest, she and her friends may have found an animal's corpse and been introduced to the myriad ways that life continues after death (Harwood et al., 2018) and that "death is a necessary partner in life" (Rose, 2012, p. 127). We imagine that this time in the forest is replete with moments of interconnect and mutuality—of being affected and affecting (Davies, 2014). Within those time-spaces, we also envision learning the traditional names of those more-than-human neighbours and the teachings embedded within the Indigenous languages of that place (Armstrong, 1998; Styres, 2019). Within our vision, the muchness of the world displaces the restrictive infrastructure of the school.

The hierarchies constructed between human beings and the natural world, and the separation of those two always-entangled entities, are mirrored in human social relationships. Achilles Mbembe (2019) has written about the way that communities thrive when there is an 'other' to which they can react. Indeed, Mbembe (2019) traces a history of Western democracy's violent "making other" of racialized peoples. We can see traces of this making other within our shared place. We also see traces of Mbembe's idea of the necropolitical—that biopower is not indifferent to race, but an active participant in the destruction of racialized bodies. Where biopower "lets die" those precariously positioned within society, racialized bodies are acted on with necropower—the power to "make die".

Within the rural context of New Brunswick, necropower is particularly evident through the erasure of racialized voices in curriculum and beyond. Canadian rural education scholars Michael Corbett (2016) and Cooke and Petersen (2019) have critiqued policymakers' simplistic views of rural communities as homogenous, close-knit, and lacking diversity. Their sentiments are echoed by the numerous minority groups that co-exist within New Brunswick (Yamoah, 2020). New Brunswick is far from homogenous. In addition to the Wabanaki nations indigenous to this territory, like other Atlantic provinces, New Brunswick has recently experienced a steady increase in international and visible ethnically diverse populations. This is mainly attributed to the various immigration initiatives aimed at attracting foreign workers to the province to stabilize its aforementioned depleting population (GNB, 2019b). While these economic incentives potentially offer better living standards to provincial newcomers, the scope of these programs is often limited to economic development, rather than including a consideration of new residents' holistic well-being, particularly in the face of daily systemic racism.

Despite the growing need for education and community practices to adapt to the evolving population composition, there is still hesitance to acknowledge and address shortcomings that covertly and overtly discriminate. In June 2020, New Brunswick's government turned down a call by Indigenous leaders for an Indigenous-led inquiry into systematic racism within the province (O'Donnell, 2020). Indigenous leaders' plight is echoed in calls by the province's Black advocacy groups to address systemic racism and the erasure of Black histories and influences from the school curriculum. As in many North American schools, inclusion seems to be New Brunswick's preferred framework for engaging with issues of diversity—despite the limited scope that framework offers. AuCoin, Porter, and Baker-Korotkov (2020) highlighted notable advancements made by the province in its commitment to provide equitable and meaningful education to all residents via inclusion. However, the authors also found that the notion of inclusive education present in New Brunswick's schools lacked reference to visible differences (e.g., skin colour). As Fortunato, Gigliotti, and Ruben (2018) asserted, inclusive education must include an inclusive racial environment.

Racial incidents, or nanoracism (Mbembe, 2019), continue to be phenomena for minority groups in New Brunswick, and these incidents are prevalent in schools. Baker,

Varma, and Tanaka (2001; see also Varma-Joshi, Baker, & Tanaka, 2004) and Massfeller and Hamm (2019) conducted research decades apart that recognized similar racist instances in the province's schools. These researchers identified that racist incidents directed toward minority students were and are often ignored or dismissed as harmless by school administrators, normalizing racist practices. As Baker et al. (2001) emphasized, these seemingly mundane occurrences can have long-term adverse effects on victims who do not perceive their degradation as harmless (see also Varma-Joshi, Baker, & Tanaka, 2004). Massfeller and Hamm (2019) described the province's migrant students' feelings of alienation, loneliness, and marginalization as they grappled with their schools' dominant culture. Despite office acknowledgment of the various shortcomings in the province's curriculum (Yamoah, 2020), true inclusivity is still fictitious—indeed, seemingly utopic. As Freire (2002) emphasized, dominant groups' admission of wrongdoings is meaningless without action toward transforming practices that disadvantage some groups while favoring others. The province has yet to witness significant implementations towards dismantling systems—including education—embedded in racial hierarchies that prejudice some groups over others. Hamm (2019) and Sears' (2017) findings that students of the province's Anglophone schools demonstrate a limited understanding of ethnic diversity cannot be disregarded. Educators within these systemically racist spaces must be willing to continually reflect on and adapt their curriculum and pedagogies to fit all students' needs, adopt culturally relevant practices that reflect the institution's diversity, provide learning activities that foster knowledge of difference, create an environment of respect for cultural differences, and challenge actions that gloss over racial discrimination. Crucially, teachers also need the time and space to be able to do this within a system that actively works toward their disempowerment and alienation from the macro processes of education (Giroux, 2002; see also Rogers, 2018). Only then can our vision of a radically inclusive education system be realized.

Dreaming: A conclusion

As four educators and researchers actively engaged in antiracist and social justice advocacy and pedagogy within New Brunswick, we cannot help but name and lament those political forces that actively work against our visions. Yet, there is hope in our dreaming. We began the process of writing this article in January of 2020 and submitted the first draft for publication a little more than a year later. In the time between, we saw our personal worlds and the wider world change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At times it felt as though the dreams we wrote were no longer as relevant as we had originally intended. In other moments, it felt like they were needed now more than ever.

In a long overdue meeting just before putting the finishing touches on the paper, we reflected collectively on the work, and we were each struck by how far we still have to come to realize these visions. COVID-19 seemed, at times, like an opportunity for sweeping societal and educational change. Yet, here and now, we see the same rigidity and movement toward neoliberal economic imperatives that have historically marked public education since the 1970s (Kumar, 2019). Thus, after envisioning our utopia, a question haunts: How might our engagement need to change to facilitate a utopic educational experience?

We have ideas. We have thoughts. We have dreams. But ultimately, the question lingers as do the structures and links between education and the economy—especially here in the rural province of New Brunswick. Yet, we continue to engage—continue to try to make changes in our spaces. Most significantly, we continue to dream. We have shared our dreams with you, dear reader. Now it is your turn. Speak your educational utopia into being, leave it to linger in silence or demand it provoke cacophony, but do share it because "only the archaic

definition of the word 'dreaming' will save us: to envision, a series of images of unusual vividness, clarity, order, and significance" (Morrison, 2019, p. 69).

Notes

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[2] See the following for more details: https://nbmediacoop.org/category/letters-from-new-brunswicks-future/

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