Confidence in Crisis: An Investigation of Education

by

Natalie Romanow

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Department of Social Justice Education
OISE
University of Toronto

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Natalie Romanow
Master of Arts, Social Justice Education
Department of Social Justice Education
University of Toronto, OISE
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Abstract

In 2016, Ontario’s Ministry of Education unveiled their ‘new’ vision for the purpose of education with the 21st Century Competencies document: to equip students with ‘competencies’ “to solve messy, complex problems” of a “competitive, globally connected, and technologically intensive world” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3). In an effort to unpack the influences of this vision, I track how the standardization movement reshapes the influence of public emotion on the goals and purposes of education in United States and Canada. From this history, I consider why the public remains optimistic about an anxious education system when presented with evidence of its failure, and it further considers the price of this optimism. I conclude with a reflection on the potential of metacognition to not only alleviate anxious relations in education but also encourage truly “critical,” “creative,” and “collaborative” education practices encouraged in the document. (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3).

Keywords: 21st Century Competencies, optimism, anxiety, crisis, confidence, metacognition
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Introduction

In September 2017, the Toronto Star published an article titled “Ontario to Launch Review of How Students are Tested,” which details Kathleen Wynne’s desire to change the structure of EQAO testing in Ontario (Gordon, 2017). The significance of this shift cannot be overstated, given the public perception of the EQAO as a central litmus test for determining the health of varying schools in Ontario. From a strictly financial perspective, Ontario has invested roughly 1.4 billion dollars per year (30 million on EQAO testing, 77 million on Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, EQAO programming, and 30 million on Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership) of its estimated total budget of 25 billion in the EQAO test, about 6% of its yearly budget (Pearce, 2013; Metzger, 2015). This percentage might appear small but is a significant amount of money considering EQAO accounts for less than a month of a student’s entire elementary and high school career. In combination with the financial emphasis placed on EQAO testing, the Ministry of Education also created the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, an 80-employee organization which “works to boost student achievement by collaborating with school boards and schools to set targets, support boards in implementing secretariat initiatives, and foster a sense of goodwill and enthusiasm within the education sector” (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2009, p. 186). This addition is arguably more significant than the money spent on EQAO, as it causes schoolboards/schools to invest time and resources into both meeting with these program coordinators and implementing their advice. With this investment of time and money, the Ministry of Education creates an almost unilateral impression of the importance of EQAO testing, and this message partially defines a ‘good school’ and ‘good student’ as bound to performing well on EQAO tests.

Given that this test is one of the most significant validators of a functioning school in Ontario education, not to mention the time, money, and influence invested in the EQAO test, it is important to consider why Wynne would choose to disrupt this system. If I were thinking through this problem as an educator who most likely relies on print sources such as The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, or Professionally Speaking (the Ministry of Education’s magazine) for information about trends in Ontario education, it would seem reasonable to conclude that Kathleen Wynne’s desire to change EQAO testing in Ontario was primarily motivated by two
reasons: 1. The controversy surrounding the ineffectiveness of the EQAO in assessing student learning (Miller, 2003); 2. The inability for the Ministry of Education to produce desirable results (Ross, 2015). While this conclusion may be warranted given the access of information available to Ontario educators—it leaves many unanswered questions in regard to the Ministry of Education’s divestment in EQAO—primarily—why now? This question becomes even more poignant when considering the trend of Ontario teachers’ frustration with EQAO testing published in Professionally Speaking as early as 2003 (Miller). In her article, “Ensuring Literacy in the Age of Scrutiny” Miller states, “85 percent of teachers believe standardized tests demoralize students, 90 percent feel they do not improve learning and 88 percent think they do not track student success.” Again, given that teachers have been dissatisfied with EQAO testing for over a decade, it is crucial to consider what has changed in Ontario’s educational and political landscape that would motivate the Ministry of Education to make such substantial changes in province wide student assessment. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it is crucial to consider how this ‘new system’ would define and characterizes a “good school” or healthy education system in an era that relies on the standardized test as one of the most central markers for each of these categories.

One possible reason for this shift in Ontario education is a change in “vision,” or purpose, of education in Ontario as unveiled in the Ministry of Education document 21st Century Competencies (2016). This new vision entails a commitment “to prepare students to solve messy, complex problems – including problems we don’t yet know about – associated with living in a competitive, globally connected, and technologically intensive world” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3). This change in “vision” was released a couple of months prior to Wynne’s announcement about the move away from the current EQAO test (Winter 2016), and so, it is necessary to consider how a continued emphasis on the EQAO test deters success in the future world described above. As the standardized/standards-based test is often criticized for promoting rote memorization, individualization, and ‘teaching to the test,’ the 21st Century Competencies document appears to counter these criticism through “defining and developing measures for higher-order skills, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and entrepreneurship, or what can be called ‘21st century competencies’” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3). As such, this document and the documents released post-21st Century Competencies (Adolescent Literacy Guide 2016), provide background for what a 21st Century Competencies
‘good student’ would entail—primarily an individual who possesses the following skills and characteristics: having strong “critical thinking and problem solving” skills; being “innovat[ive], creat[ive], entrepreneur[al],” and “communicat[ive];” possessing a “growth mindset” with “metacognitive” capabilities; and having an engagement in “local, global, and digital citizenship” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 46). This document, while partially answering the ‘why now’ EQAO question, opens up a whole new set of questions—primarily, why does Ontario need a new vision for education, and when does an anxious focus on the “messy” and “complex” problems of a “competitive, globally connected, and technologically intensive world” become significant? And in probing this question further, where did the values of the ‘good student’ that is “critical/ problem solving,” “innovative/creative/entrepreneur[ial],” “self-directed,” “collaborat[ive],” “communicat[ive],” and “citizenship” minded come from?

To address the foundation of values for the 21st Century Competencies document, it would be easy to argue this change in vision and practice is the result of increasing neoliberalism in Canadian schools. As Ranu Basu argues in “The Rationalization of Neoliberalism in Ontario’s Public Education System, 1995-2000,” Ontario education adheres to the following trajectory:

First, a period of aggressive implementation whereby using a variety of techniques and strategies neoliberal reforms were introduced in areas of governance, finance and curriculum. Followed by a period of dissent and chaos to finally a period of quiet anticipation the neoliberal agenda was slowly secured in Ontario’s landscape (2004, p.623).

Given this trajectory, it would seem that the 21st Century Competencies document is primarily an extension of the neoliberal practice Basu highlights in his article—a realization of the “quiet anticipation” he characterizes as the future of Ontario education in 2004. This conclusion is further supported by the Ministry of Education’s citation of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation), P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Education), European Commission, and the U.S. National Research Council as primary influences of the document (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p.3)—many of which receive widespread criticism for their push of a neoliberal agenda (Epstein, 2005; Theodore & Peck, 2012; Sturges, 2015; Patterson, 2015). Additionally, when stating the goals of the document, the Ministry of Education unabashedly
declares the need to prepare students for the “competitive, globally connected, and technologically intensive” world (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3)—a similar paraphrase of Basu’s explanation of the rationalization of the implementation of neoliberalism in Ontario schools. In regard to the phenomenon, he writes that neoliberalism “was legitimized by a perceived need to remain globally competitive in a ‘knowledge based economy’ while at the same time maintain fiscal efficiency and accountability” (2004, p. 628). Basu, in his critique, and the Ministry of Education, in their justification, both recognize the implementation of said practices are connected to competition in a globalized economy. But with these conclusions about the increased implementation of neoliberal policies in schools, one is still led back to the “why now” question. If Wynne’s announcement is connected to the 21st Century Competencies, and this document is connected to neoliberal rationalities, how has the shape of neoliberal practices changed since the initial period of “dissent and chaos” to the “quiet” motivation for policy now?

Though it could be argued that the ‘why now’ question has lost its relevance among larger conversations about increased neoliberal practice, government induced “chaos” in education (Basu, 2004, p. 623), and destabilized definitions of the ‘good student,’ I would argue the significance of the ‘why now’ question emboldens these claims and enriches the significance of each of these topics. Further, in unpacking the ‘why now’ question, I am interested in illuminating the push and pulls put forth by a string of claims about the nature of “chaos” and crisis for the last twenty years (Basu, 2004, p. 6.23). In teasing out these threads of crisis, the following questions will accompany an investigation of the timing of 21st Century Competencies document to consider the way crisis and neoliberalism weave together and pull on the vision of Ontario education:

1. What does success in Ontario schools mean in a crisis-defined education system?
2. How does public confidence (a key aspect of Rasu’s analysis), or in contrast, a lack of public confidence influence these definitions of success?
3. How does ‘progressive’ education defined by “creative,” “collaborative,” and “critical” skills operate in a crisis-defined education system?
4. What kind of agency/ resistance is available in this crisis-defined system?
To address these questions, I argue the timing of the 21st Century Competencies document is predictable, given the largely unexplored investigation of how the media’s reporting on the “crisis of education” tie the United States and Canadian education together. For Chapter One, I investigate this reporting on the “crisis of education” parallels changes in policy in both the United States and Ontario after the standardized movement (2000-2016). To document this relationship, I track trends in public confidence in education with media coverage of education alongside major policy changes in both countries. By presenting information in this manner, I document how feelings about the state of education relate to both the goals and the practices of significant changes in policy over the last twenty years. Doing so allows for a more robust account of the network of values which contribute to the 21st Century Competencies vision, and it sets the groundwork for determining why crisis produces certain goals and constructions of agency discussed in Chapter Two. Ultimately, the purpose of Chapter One is to historicize both public confidence in education and the resulting policy trends, and it offers an explanation of where the goals and desires of Ontario education are located amongst a public consensus that Ontario education is either failing or preparing its students for the specific ‘future’ of whichever policy document is released at that time.

Chapter Two expands upon the previous chapter to understand how crisis produces the desire for successful competition in the global market as articulated in the 21st Century Competencies documents. In unpacking this relationship, the latter half of this chapter analyzes the cost of remaining attached to potential for neoliberal ‘skills’ like “critical thinking” “problem solving,” and “being creative” to also act as an avenue towards progressive practice (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3). Most critically though, it attends the cost of remaining attached to the potential of progressive practice with the 21st Century Competencies document for those with relatively limited amounts of agency in the education system—such as students, parents, and teachers—when positioned against the interests of larger forces of agency and control, like principals, school boards, and education ministries. Using Lauren Berlant’s Cruel Optimism (2011) to explore how a desire for progressive education within a globalized ‘vision’ is an instance of “cruel optimism,” whereby “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2011, p. 2). From this from this relation of cruel optimism, I apply Berlant’s theory of “slow death,” or the “collective physical and psychic attenuation” to analyze the mental health crisis attached to standardized testing. In connecting slow death to cruel optimism, I am able to
explore how the unattainable desires placed on education contribute to state’s control and management of students through biopower of the body and “busnopower” of the mind (Mayo, 2005, p. 357). Alongside Cris Mayo and Berlant, I argue that biopower/busnopower management also creates the expectation of sovereign agency that diminishes the kinds of choices students can make in an educational setting. This chapter ends with a reflection on Berlant’s turn to lateral agency as an option to address a reliance on sovereign agency.

Moving past Berlant, I track how the 21st Century Competencies’ operation as a response to both the anxious education system (identified in Chapter One) and the anxious student (identified in Chapter Two) complicates resistance to neoliberal tendencies within the document. Focusing on the pedagogical tool of metacognition, I perform a genealogical analysis of the term to argue that the change in definition from “thinking about your thinking” in 2012 (Ministry of Education, p. 24) to “a feeling of knowing” in 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 33) is a response to the two ‘crises’ identified above. After analyzing how this term functions in Ontario education both pre and post 21st Century Competencies, I turn to Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas “pedagogy of discomfort” (1999, p. 97; 2005, p. 174) to consider how to integrate the truly progressive practice of “inhabiting ambiguous selves” in a system focused on replacing feelings of unsureness with feelings of confidence (Boler, 1999, p. 197).

The following thesis, while ambitious in its scope, attempts to tease out the network of crisis, neoliberalism, and desire reflected in the 21st Century Competencies document. Detangling how the past twenty years of documents have contributed to the current vision of Ontario education takes work, and I am not suggesting that this thesis gives a complete or even comprehensive understanding of all the ties between these three concepts. Instead, it concentrates on how student, teacher, and parental relationships to education change when they perceive education to be in ‘crisis,’ and it considers the kinds of lifelines these individuals grasp towards when they feel increasingly unprepared or successful despite/in spite of their achievement in the current educational climate. These lifelines, while ameliorating feelings of crisis for students, teachers, and parents, may also further ensnare and strengthen the net that is holding down those who are already struggling. It is my hope that the process of combing out the difference allows for a shift in tension towards a less compromising lifeline for those struggling the most in our education
system—moving those who are “doggy paddling” towards survival to a “magnificent swim out
to the horizon” (Berlant, 2013, p. 117).
Chapter 1  
The Binds of Crisis in U.S. and Canadian Education Policy  

*The 21st Century Competencies* document represents a unique moment in Ontario education because it names the U.S organization, P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Education), as a primary influence for its new vision. As stated in the introduction, this vision prepares “students to solve messy, complex problems – including problems we don’t yet know about – associated with living in a competitive, globally connected, and technologically intensive world” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3), and it calls for “defining and developing measures for higher-order skills, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and entrepreneurship, or what can be called ‘21st century competencies’” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 53). This turn to P21 is significant because of the influence the organization had in shaping the U.S Common Core Standards Initiative in 2010. Historicizing the Common Core curriculum requires approaching the initiative as a partial response to the backlash of the No Child Left Behind Act, a standardized test-based act proposed by George W. Bush in 2001. While not adopted by all US states, the Common Core aimed to create consistent ‘college ready’ standards across the entire country. Arguably, the Common Core resulted in fairer standardized testing practices: each student, regardless of their school district, would have access to the ‘same’ education. One of the key players in shaping the values of the Common Core curriculum was P21, an organization whose mission to act as a “catalyst for 21st century learning to build collaborative partnerships among education, business, community and government leaders so that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in a world where change is constant” (P21). In conjunction with P21’s goal to partner businesses with schools, it also emphasized the need for their own version of 21st century competencies: having “learning and innovation skills; information, media and technology skills; and finally, life and career skills” (P21, 2011). These competencies “separate students who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in today’s world and those who are not” (P21, 2011, p. 2). The language of preparing students for increasingly “complex life and work” environments mirrors the desire to prepare students to solve increasingly “complex problems” in the *21st Century Competencies* documents (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3). Further, the competencies defined by P21—collaboration, proficiency in technology, and career/life skills—strongly resemble the
competencies listed in the Ministry of Education 2016 document. As such, P21 is not just an influence on the 21st Century Competencies but is a guiding structure for the future of Ontario education.

The turn to both the U.S education system and the U.S private education company P21 is confusing, given articles such as CBC’s “Canadian education ranked among world's best” (2010), and the BBC’s “How Canada became an education superpower (Coughlan, 2017),” which positions Ontario public education as superior to the U.S education. This turn to P21 as an influence is also questionable because of the widespread criticism of P21: which, as some theorists allege “is a veiled attempt by technology companies—which make up the bulk of the group’s membership—to gain more influence over the classroom” (Sawchuk, 2009). These allegations are not unfounded, as the organization is heavily connected to both the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Common Core (Standish, 2012, p. 54). About the partnership, Alex Standish writes, “[as] Microsoft was one of the founding members of P21, the NGA and CCSSO [Common Core State Standards Organization] both received significant backing from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation” (2012, p. 54). In addition to representation within the founding members, “the Gates Foundation has also financed two nonprofit organizations: Achieve Inc., to write tests aligned to the Common Core State Standards, and the Alliance for Excellent Education, to “grow support” for the standards.” (Standish, 2012, p. 54). Taking both Canada’s and P21’s reputations into consideration, why does Canada turn to the United States for their new vision of education?

Regarding current scholarship on the question, there is some information about the rise of U.S influence in Canadian education (Barlow and Robertson, 1997; Calvert and Kuehn, 1993; Von Heyking 2004); however, all of this research was written before the standards-based accountability movement and therefore cannot fully address the current relationship between the two countries. In an effort to provide some context for the significance of 21st Century Competencies document while addressing these gaps in scholarship, I will use Ranu Basu’s claim about the ‘crisis of education’ as an entry point to historicize how public feelings about the state of education have shaped both the U.S and Canadian education since the early 2000s (2004). More specifically, this chapter researches how either the public confidence or the public perception of education in crisis shapes the goals of education at that time. In order to make this
claim, this chapter analyzes statements from the Canadian Ministry of Education/U.S Department of Education, newspaper articles, and professional journals to map the relationship between reports of ‘crisis,’ or in contrast, ‘increased confidence’ to shifts in each country’s education system. From these reports, I argue that in both the United States and Canada changes in the ‘goals’ of education in each respective country are intimately tied to the public perception of confidence/crisis. As feelings about a system of education encompass stakeholders at many different layers (the academy, the general public, the education system (school boards, principals, teachers, students)), it is my goal to provide an overview of research that addresses the complexity of the relationships between these systems; however, it is of note that the methodology for identifying changes in feelings about education, though similar, is not exact across time periods. In presenting the history of educational policy leading up to the 21st Century Competencies document in this manner, this chapter not only presents the significance of this document in relation to past Ontario educational policies, but also details how the general public’s impression of ‘crisis’ (or lack thereof) orients student relationships to the standardized test, and in a more significant manner, mobilizes different ‘visions’ for the purpose of education that ties U.S and Ontario education together.

In order to prove the connection between the United States and Canada via the structuring of feelings about education, I separate the chapter into four time periods, starting with a major change in public perception of education, which always occurs in the United States first and then moves to Canada, and then I analyze the subsequent change in policy as a result of this sentiment. The final section of Chapter One will only present changes in policy and public sentiment in Canada, as the United States has not updated their national education policy since 2015. With the exception of the final section, the chapter is broken down into the following time periods: (1) 1983-2002: Standardization and global competition in the United States and Ontario, (2) 2003-2009: Shifts in language of crisis, (3) 2010-2015: A call for confidence in U.S. and Ontario Education, and (4) 2015: A return to the language of crisis and the U.S turn in Ontario Education. Breaking down these sections further, each chronological category maps the following changes in education in the United States and Ontario: (1) shifts in public perception of education, defined primarily by a public understanding of education in ‘crisis,’ or in contrast, a highly ‘confident’ public perception of education; (2) a description of both the ‘goals’ of a policy document and the structural changes produced from that document. It is important to note
that in providing evidence for the public perception of education in each of the chapters, I will not engage with academic scholarship that evaluates the effectiveness of different policies. Though academic analysis provides valuable assessments on how and why a policy document works for some students and not others, the focus of Chapter One is to present information of how the general public receives changes in policy. For this reason, news sources directed at both the general public and teachers occupy the most central position of evidence in the chapter.

As a theoretical framework for this chapter, I rely heavily on Sarah Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and Megan Boler’s *Feeling Power* to consider how the Ministry of Education/Department of Education use emotion to orient the public’s relationship to education and produce changes in vision and policy. Alongside these two theorists, I argue that an ‘anxious’ and ‘crisis’ defined education system is not the result of individual feelings about the state of education, but rather it is the construction of larger structural forces that create an overall impression about education. Starting with the PISA test, I examine how news outlets, press releases from government officials, and Ministry of Education/U.S Department of Education policy and curriculum documents saturate the standardized test with emotion. From this saturation, I show how policy documents influence the public’s emotional perception of education as either in crisis or as operating confidently. The chapter ends with a reflection on how the Liberal Party mobilizes feelings of crisis and confidence to encourage associations with U.S education.

### 1.1 Cultural Construction of Emotion

As the *21st Century Competencies* document is imbued with anxious emotions of a “messy” and uncertain future, the history of the document is intimately connected to the mobilization of emotion since the beginning of the 21st century. As stated in the introduction of this chapter, central to my discussion of an anxious or ‘crisis’ defined education system is the recognition that emotions are not located within the individual but rather circulate between bodies to dictate orientation and action. In rejecting accounts of emotion as “individualized, ‘intrapsychic’ experiences” (Boler, 1999, p. 6), this chapter focuses on how emotions are structured by “forces of power (economic, political, and legislative)” (Boler, 1999, p. 6). Expanding on the distinction between interior and exterior conceptions of emotions, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions do not
presume an “inside out” model, wherein an individual has feelings which move “outwards towards objects and others” (ex. I feel love for you) (2015, p. 9), or an “outside in model,” wherein the individual is outside the “origin of feeling” (ex. the test makes me feel afraid) (2015, p. 9). Rather, this chapter considers Sara Ahmed’s understanding of emotions as an impression; in regard to this phenomenon, she writes:

I suggest that emotions create the very effect of the surface and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others (2015, p. 10).

Here, Ahmed suggests “surfaces” and “boundaries” are produced through an individual’s emotional reaction to said object (2015, p.10). While it is difficult to conceive of emotions influencing the ‘creation’ of objects typically devoid of emotions, such as a table, Ahmed’s conception of emotions is useful when theorizing about objects imbued with layers of emotions—such as a standardized test. As a result of this emotional ‘layering,’ the public’s emotional response to the test comes to “reflect linguistically-embedded cultural values and rules” and position emotions as “sites of power” (Boler, 1999, p. 6). As such, the standardized test not only produces certain reactions for students but also orients the public towards particular relationships with education.

1.2 Standardization and Global Competition in the United States and Ontario: PISA and the Need for Change (1983-2002)

In order to analyze how emotions create the “boundaries” and “surfaces” of the standardized test (Ahmed, 2015, p. 10), I will track the history of the different ‘eras’ of the standardized testing alongside their associated emotions. In historicizing trends in the public perception of education in both the United States and Canada, it is crucial to document the influence of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), “a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students” (OECD, 2018). This survey, despite its seemingly innocuous goals, is one of the primary tools
the media uses for assessing the ‘health’ of the public education system, and it significantly contributes to a public perception of education in crisis. In 2000, PISA identified the purpose of their test as “[a] unique collaboration between countries to monitor educational outcomes” (OECD, 2001, p. 2). Though PISA framed their test as a “collaboration” rather than a competition between countries, educational theorists associate the “monitor[ing] of educational outcomes” with a rise in “uncertainty” (Hartong, 2012, p. 748) and a “scandalization” of the education system when rankings are low (Gür et al., 2012, p. 7). In Canada’s case, consistently high performance on PISA tests produced a desire for “new accountability techniques” (Morgan, 2016, p. 49). These findings indicate that regardless of the results of the PISA tests, these tests have a strong hold on the public understanding of an education system ‘standing’ in the global economy, and this awareness often leads to changes in education policy.

In the U.S. context, PISA helped solidify a perception of a ‘broken’ education system by building off of the 1983 report, “A Nation At Risk.” With this report, the Secretary of Education confirmed the notion that “[o]ur once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The fear generated by the “Nation at Risk” report about U.S. performance on the global stage was justified by the 2000 PISA test: the U.S scored below the OECD average in Math and Science (OECD, 2001) and barely scored the OECD average in reading (OECD, 2001). These results, as addressed by the 2001 Education Secretary, Rod Paige were unacceptable: “In the global economy, these countries are our competitors—average is not good enough” (Zajda, 2005, p. 328). Paige’s words, along with the coverage of the PISA scores, left a clear impression in the general public’s mind—polls conducted in 2000 show a 9% drop in satisfaction over the “quality of education” kindergarten through grade 12 students receive (Calderon, Newport, & Dvorak, 2017). With this significant change in satisfaction, the United States mobilized behind the problems exposed by the PISA test to usher a new wave of reform that focused on an accountable, standards-based education system (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003).
1.3 No Child Left Behind Act

In 2002, George W. Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act* and addressed two pressing problems in U.S. education: the system was neither fair for students marginalized by race, income, or ability, nor globally competitive, as demonstrated by PISA scores. NCLB references the ideology of Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 and the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and it introduces a new system which held various stakeholders (school boards, principals, and teachers) financially accountable for all student performances on standardized tests.

Highlighting the goals of NCLB in their overview of the act, Jorgensen & Hoffmann cite Rod Paige’s statement from A “Nation At Risk” (1983): the purpose of the act was “to see every child in America—regardless of ethnicity, income, or background—achieve high standards” (2003, p. 2). Despite the order of concerns presented by Rod Paige, accountability, or the achievement of rigid statewide standards, eclipsed equity as the true focus of the act when implemented into schools.

From a structural perspective, this focus on accountability created a new state funding model and increased emphasis on student performance for statewide tests. Describing NCLB’s impact on state funding, Jorgensen & Hoffman write, “in exchange for greater accountability,” NCLB provided “states with far-reaching flexibility and control over how they use federal funds” (2003, p. 7). More specifically, this “flexibility” entailed revisions of the Title I funding program, an assistance plan for low SES schools implemented by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. With NCLB’s amendments of Title I funding, low SES schools received an initial boost in funds, but were made increasingly vulnerable by the requirement of adequate yearly progress (AYP); instead of assisting these vulnerable schools, “Title I funding served as the mechanism for the federal government to use NCLB to put pressure on all individual schools throughout the country to raise student achievement” (Ladd, 2017, p.461). This ‘pressure’ meant that if schools do not make AYP consecutive years in a row, Title I funding could be redistributed, and in more severe cases, schools could be subject to closure (Mcdonnell, 2015). NCLB funding, while initially allotted for low income schools, ultimately punished poor performance on standardized tests.

In conjunction with the changes to the funding model, NCLB also required all students to be tested. As Heather Ladd, Policy Professor at Duke University, elaborates, “Under NCLB, the
federal government required all states to test every student annually in Grades 3 through 8 and once in high school in math and reading,” and “set annual achievement goals so that 100 percent of the students would be on track to achieve proficiency” (2017, p. 461). As Ladd further explains, new achievement mandates were also set for varying demographics in the school, including economic, racial, and ability distinctions; while funding was not contingent upon AYP in each of the categories, there was an expectation for improvement in each division (2017).

With expectations for student success set at 100% proficiency, the ‘crisis’ of education is entangled with questions concerning who was able to create and benefit from a world where all children were expected to succeed.

PISA scores also pushed reform in Ontario; however, in contrast to the United States, the accountability movement in Ontario was centered on high, rather than low PISA test scores. Given this inversion of the testing outcomes, change in Ontario’s education structure was connected to larger questions about how to maintain a premier reputation on a world stage and prepare students for competition in a global economy (Stack, 2006). On one side of the discourse, the Ministry of Education released statements which argued PISA scores proved that Ontario education was ‘good’ but needed to be better to remain a global leader in education (2006); however, educational theorists argued that that relying on PISA scores as a primary indicator of success could produce an education system too influenced by a single standardized measure (Stack, 2006). This dichotomy was further compounded by varying messages in the ‘public’ (such as news outlets) vs. the ‘private’ arena of education (such as union meetings). Michelle Stacks, an educational theorist, explains how the Ministry of Education exasperated this dichotomy by their reaction to the PISA scores (2006). Stack explains that in discussing the scores to the media, Janet Echker, the 2000 Minister of Education, congratulates teacher’s work and dedication, declaring Ontario schools and teachers as successful; however, in addressing the Ontario Teachers Federation, Echker said, “This province was in serious need of renewal. Parents and taxpayers kept calling for fair and equitable funding, for up to date and challenging curricula with more rigorous standards, and for regular assessments of students’ basic skills” (Stack, 2006, p. 59-60). As Stack argues, this statement not only positions Ontario educators as “weak,” but also situates Ontario education as a ‘problem’ with the call for “up to date” and “challenging” curriculum (Stack, 2016, p. 59-60). Though Echker’s contradictory language did not necessarily change public confidence about the state of Ontario education, as polls show an
increase of 6% from 1999 (Hart & Livingstone, 2007), it laid a foundational desire for change in Ontario education.

1.4 Education Quality and Accountability Act

Reform in Ontario education followed a similar trajectory to the United States, combining PISA scores with past reports as evidence to implement a standards-based education system. As with U.S’s “Nation at Risk,” the Royal Commission’s “For the Love of Learning” (1994) detailed deficiencies in Ontario education and proposed a standards-based education system to “ensure that Ontario’s youth are well-prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century” (The Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 11). With recommendations from this report, the Ontario government passed the Education Quality and Accountability Act in 1996 and established EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office). EQAO’s main focus was “to monitor students’ achievement at key points in their learning” to ensure consistency for all students and “respond to the public’s demand for more accountability and clearer and better information about the quality and effectiveness of the province’s publicly education system” (EQAO, 2013 p. 5). As EQAO tests were modelled after PISA assessments, PISA testing had a direct influence on the content and testing structure of Ontario education (Morgan, 2016, p. 49). In modeling province wide EQAO tests on the values of PISA, the Ministry of Education was able to ensure Ontario’s position as a leader in education on the world stage. Practically speaking, this modeling took the form of the following EQAO administered tests: a Grade 3 and Grade 6 test of mathematics, writing, and reading; a Grade 9 assessment of mathematics; and a Grade 10 OSSLT literacy test (EQAO, 2013). While Ontario testing did not carry the same financial consequences for individual schools as NCLB, in 2002, passing the OSSLT literacy test became part of the Ontario graduation requirements (EQAO, 2013). Including OSSLT within graduation requirements not only emphasized the importance of EQAO testing for students, but it also solidified the alignment of Ontario education with the values of the standardization and accountability

1 It is important to note there is a stark difference in statistics between satisfaction in Ontario schools and confidence in Ontario schools. While satisfaction in Ontario schools is viewed as “an indicator of whether school performance is currently seen as adequate” (Livingstone, Hart & Davie, 2002, p. 9), public confidence in education is defined as “capturing something of public beliefs in the capacity of institutions to act” (Livingstone, Hart & Davie, 2002, p. 9). Confidence, rather than satisfaction, was chosen as the primary indicator of public feelings about education in this section because of its alignment with the Gallup’s U.S poll concerning public confidence in institutions cited throughout this essay.
Connecting the EQAO and NCLB through Ahmed’s conception of emotion, PISA marks a new era of education whereby the general public associates success on a test with the overall health of both their personal school board and their national ranking. With the PISA test, emotions stabilize or create what Ahmed terms “boundaries (2015, p. 10)” for how the public should relate to the globalization of their personal school system. As the public became more concerned about the health of their education system, the significance of standardized testing took on the same level of concern. Despite the fact that the EQAO or state standardized testing would not directly influence a student’s grade, parents and students understood the significance of the test. Although it cannot be overstated that the accompanying legislation that followed PISA tests also emphasized the importance of the test to parents and students, and I argue that it was the structuring of emotions that caused the public to approach the test with concern. With the EQAO and the NCLB Act, the Ministry of Education and the U.S Department of Education effectively use emotion to connect, or in Ahmed’s language “stick” (2015, p. 11), heightened emotions with standardized testing to encourage change. As the following section demonstrates, this association becomes further solidified when attached to the language of crisis.

1.5 Shifts in the Language of Crisis: The Swinging Pendulum of Educational Reform (2003-2009)

As the implementation of NCLB and EQAO extended the metric for student success and failure beyond performance on PISA tests, the attitude and language written about education by both various stakeholders in education and media outlets developed a more critical and anxious tone. This anxious tone was due in part to the contradictions produced from relying on unaligned markers of student success. For instance, if a child performs well in class, but performs poorly on the EQAO, what does this data really reveal about the child’s knowledge? Is this fault with the child, the teacher, or the school district? How far could these compounding test scores be extrapolated to produce blame? With these kinds of questions at the forefront of education, the perception of education moved from being “at risk” in the United States or “needing renewal” in Canada (Stack, 2006, p. 59-60), towards a further of denigration of public confidence (Miller, 2003; Martin 2009; Brown, 2009). While this section will not unpack the larger arguments about
whether or not the standardization movement is ultimately harmful or beneficial for students, it will examine how media reporting and public opinion of the structural changes in both systems created a need for a new ‘new’ direction in education by the end of 2009. This ‘newest’ direction was less concerned with globalized competition and more committed to a student’s immediate future—college and workplace preparation.

1.6 The Crisis of NCLB

After the No Child Left Behind Act was fully implemented in 2002, the ‘problem’ of U.S education developed into the discourse of the ‘crisis’ or ‘failure’ of education in media coverage. While this discourse of the ‘failure’ of education is partly due to the language of the NCLB Act (Farhi, 2012), which classified failing or passing schools based on AYP, this designation expanded into larger conversations about the ‘failure’ of the institution of education as a whole. In her analysis of media coverage of U.S education, Laurie Hogan surveyed 332 newspaper articles from The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today between January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2012 (the tenure of NCLB before Common Core’s full implementation) in order to chart the frequency of the words “failing,” “broken,” “ineffective,” “crisis,” and “reform” (2013, p.62). Hogan uncovered that “one of these words and/or another word or phrase with the same meaning was included in 79.2 percent of the articles” (2013, p.62). In conjunction with this language of crisis, the Gallup poll presents a steady decline in public confidence from 2003 onwards, with a small 5% spike in 2004, and then a sharp decline in public confidence until 2008, where it hovered at 33% (Calderon, Newport & Dvorak, 2017). The dissatisfaction with NCLB was further confirmed by the “Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act” (2004), where 156 organizations of varying agendas (from NAACP to the National Down Syndrome Congress) argued NCLB was ineffective for the following reasons:

- over-emphasizing standardized testing, narrowing curriculum and instruction to focus on test preparation rather than richer academic learning; over-identifying schools in need of improvement; using sanctions that do not help improve schools; inappropriately excluding low scoring children in order to boost test results; and inadequate funding (National Education Association, 2004).
Given the perception of public education as in a state of crisis and various marginalized groups arguing NCLB was inequitable, the strong ‘concern’ the public directed towards PISA test developed into a state of anxiety over NCLB.

1.7 Race to the Top and the Common Core

In 2008, Obama first proposed the Race to the Top grant in an effort to address the “crisis” of education produced by NCLB and to motivate states to adopt the Common Core standards. In a press conference about RttT, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared the purpose of the grant was to “incentivize excellence and spur reform” (Howell, 2015, p. 60). In addition to this rhetoric, Obama also argued that the ‘crisis’ produced by NCLB was a result of uneven, and therefore unfair, standards across states; as such, he used RttT to address this problem with the implementation of the Common Core Curriculum (Howell, 2015). RttT was not only framed as a response to the structural problems of NCLB but also positioned as the ‘solution’ to an education system in crisis.

Despite the fact that RttT shared many of the same values of NCLB, RttT shifted the relationship citizens and state officials had towards education. Speaking more specifically, RttT changed the system of education in two major ways: 1) RttT motivated reform by state competitions for federal funding, rather than legislative mandates (Howell, 2015); 2) RttT provided waivers for No Child Left Behind Act in an effort to enact new nationwide college and career ready standards, such as the Common Core (Howell, 2015). With this competition, the Obama administration granted states points based on their compliance with the various components of RttT, and these points dictated how much federal funding a state received (Lohman, 2010). As a further incentive for states to adopt his new standards, Obama designated Common Core standards with a high number of points (Lohman, 2010).

As the ‘choice’ to adopt Common Core made the most financial sense, the states had to ‘sell’ the Common Core as the answer to NCLB. With this type of ‘coercive’ change, the focus on the state of education intensified, and in 2011, the last year for eligibility for RttT funds, public confidence in education reached an all-time low of 29 percent in (Calderon, Newport, & Dvorak, 2017). This change in popularity was largely a result of news. As Paul Farhi, a journalist at the
Washington Post comments, “Just plug the phrase "failing schools" into Nexis and you'll get 544 hits in newspapers and wire stories for just one month, January 2012…Only 20 years ago, the phrase was hardly uttered” (2012). This RttT proved to be effective in creating reform, despite its circumlocution of more traditional legislative channels, as 45 states adopted Common Core Standards by 2012\(^2\).

In addition to positioning the adoption of the Common Core as the ‘end’ to the “NCLB” crisis, the vision of U.S education also shifted. Instead of preparing students to compete in a globalized economy, the math and English standards were designed “to prepare students for college and their careers” through outlining “key content” that emphasized “cognitive skills” to allow students “to apply what they learn and creatively problem solve” (ASCD, n.d). This short-term focus on student success coincided with a de-emphasis on standardized testing, and further aligned with Obama’s decision to grant states ‘waivers’ for bypassing the AYP set by NCLB. While standardized testing was still a significant part of American education, the Department of Education’s focus after 2012 was building confidence in a broken education system.

While Ontario education did not witness the same ‘crisis’ in education as the United States, the 2003-2009 era does mark a shift towards a negative media portrayal of Ontario education and a downward trend in public confidence. Ontario’s shift from an education system that was “good” with room for improvement (Stack, 2006) to a system that produced “at risk” students were first tied to changes in graduation requirements from EQAO testing (Miller, 2003). In 2003, the Professionally Speaking article “Ensuring Literacy in an Age of Scrutiny,” included the threatening headline: “As Many as 25 Percent of High School Students at Risk of Not Graduating” (Miller, 2003). Along with this threat, Miller also writes, “85 percent of teachers believe standardized tests demoralize students, 90 percent feel they do not improve learning and 88 percent think they do not track student success” (Miller, 2003). As the article continues, Miller details how Ontario plans to address these ‘at risk’ students (Miller, 2003). Although the overall article presents a well-functioning education system, articles such as Miller’s portrays a trend in concern over the state of Ontario education that continues until 2009. Some of the notable headlines about Ontario schools include: “Students struggling with the 3 Rs (Brown, 2003).
2009), “What happened to Canada’s education advantage” (Martin, 2009), “1 in 6 first-year university students won’t make the grade” (Freeman, 2009). Given this shift in media reporting, public confidence in education reflects the increasingly low opinion. According to an OISE poll conducted in 2009, “just over a third [of Ontario public polled] indicated that they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the public schools” (Hart & Livingstone, 2009, p.8). This percentage of confidence in education is significant, as the 1999 poll (pre-EQAO) placed the same level of public confidence at 54% (Hart & Livingstone, 2007, p. 10). The combination of statistics and articles indicate an overall disillusionment with Ontario schools that coincided with low statistics on standardized tests. Though not as extreme, in Canada, like the U.S, the hold educational statistics had on the overall opinion of education continued to grow from the first PISA test scores.

1.8 Student Success

The 2003-2009 era of Ontario education produced a series of reforms which primarily addressed the problem of ‘at risk’ graduation rates. Reform began with the three-part implementation of Student Success Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2003): “a broad, province-wide strategy designed to ensure that every student is provided with the tools to successfully complete their secondary schooling and reach their post-secondary goals, whether these goals involve apprenticeships, college, university, or the workplace” (Ungerleider, 2008, p. v). This goal produced the following structural changes that were implemented between 2003-2005: Phase 1 (2003) “revised Grade 9 and 10 applied mathematics curricula, the development of new locally developed compulsory credit courses, and the appointment of Student Success Leaders in each board” (Ungerleider, 2007, p. 12); Phase 2 (2004) “expanded the Lighthouse Initiative,” which were “programs that support students who need extra attention and help to stay in school” (Ministry of Education, 2018); Phase 3 (2005) passed the Learning to 18 Legislation (Bill 52) and provided funding for professional development and the Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM) program, which “focused on facilitating Grade 8 to 9 transition, expanded cooperative education programs, and programs with a focus on student success in rural areas” (Ungerleider, 2007, p. 12). In a similar, though notably earlier transition than the United States, Ontario also shifted its focus to graduation rates and post-secondary preparation rather than global competition with the Student Success strategy.
The years between 2003 and 2009 mark an era of education where the language of crisis solidifies the strong emotional response forged by the PISA test. In this era of education, the Ministry of Education/ U.S Department of Education’s use of PISA scores to aggrandize the significance of the standardized test morphed the public’s concern over the health of their public school system into anxiety over the ‘crisis’ of education. Speaking specifically about the boundaries anxiety creates, Ahmed writes, “anxiety tends to stick to objects” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 66). Thus, the object of the standardized test, previously mobilized to garner enough public concern to justify change, moves towards an anxious “gathering [of] more and more objects” (Ahmed, 2015, p.66). The objects or associations standardized test anxiety “gathers” is a conception of education as a failed marker of globalized success and competition. Relating this feeling of anxiety to the association of crisis specifically, Ahmed also argues:

declaration of crisis reads that fact/figure/event and transforms it into a fetish object that then acquires a life of its own… In other words, to announce a crisis is to produce the moral and political justification for maintaining ‘what is’ (taken for granted or grated) in the name of future survival (Ahmed, 2015, p. 77).

The standardized test took on a “life of its own” in this manner by the U.S/Ministry of Education’s returned focus on graduation rates and college preparation. Although these goals in education would seem to exist as the ‘bare minimum’ an education system would offer, the anxiety over the state of education positions these terms to be threatened and maintains “‘what is’ (taken for granted).

1.9 A Call for Confidence in U.S. and Ontario Education from 2010-2015

The 2010-2015 era of education marked a new ‘crisis’ of education in the United States and Ontario: the ‘crisis’ of confidence in public education. During this time, the vision to remain competitive in a global market remained overshadowed by the desire for high graduation rates and college, university, or work success. As such, both U.S and Canadian education focused on restoring public faith in the education system’s ability to prepare students for their more immediate future. Policy documents and media coverage between 2010-2015 directly addressed
this new ‘crisis’ of confidence, and this time period marks a notable increase in the language of stability and a focus on achievements, rather than failures in both mediums (Smith III, Turner & Lattanzio, 2012; Hammer, 2010). During this time period, the primary ‘issue’ with education is the perception of failure that was used to incite change in the previous time periods.

Despite the U.S Department of Education’s positioning of “RttT” and the “Common Core” as the answer to low public confidence in education, once the majority of states implemented the standards in 2013 public confidence in education further declined (Calderon, Newport & Dvorak, 2017). This ‘new low’ in public confidence inspired the following news headlines: “Florida superintendents revolt: We have ‘lost confidence’ in state’s school accountability system,” a Washington Post article about the state superintendent’s frustration with the Common Core (Strauss, 2015); “Public Schools: Glass Half Full or Half Empty” (Smith III, Turner & Lattanzio, 2012), an Education Weekly article that directly addresses the declining confidence in public schools; and “Americans are losing confidence in the nation but still believe in themselves,” The Atlantic article which includes education as one of the many U.S institutions performing poorly (Penn, 2012). In conjunction with articles addressed to the public, state education partners, such a MetaMetrics, published articles such as “A Crisis of Confidence: How Educator Can Restore Faith in Public Education” (Turner, Smith III, & Lattanzio, 2014). This text not only addressed the rise in media coverage of the ‘crisis’ of U.S education, but also offered suggestions for changing the negative perception of U.S education (Turner, Smith III, & Lattanzio, 2014). The ‘call for confidence’ era in U.S education forced policymakers to acknowledge the consequences of relying on an ever impending ‘crisis’ to create policy reform.

1.10 Every Child Succeeds Act

In an effort to build public confidence in education, Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). The press release of this act is unusual within the context of this time period—rather than acknowledging the anxious education system, Obama instead focused on the ‘positive’ aspects of U.S education. In a press conference on the act, he said, “today, high school graduation rates are at all-time highs. Dropout rates are at historic lows. And more students are going to college than ever before. These achievements provide a firm foundation for further work to expand educational opportunity and improve student outcomes under ESSA” (The White
The primary purpose of the act, like RttT, was for “all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and career” (The White House Press Secretary, 2015). ESSA also continued in the tradition of RttT and questioned the use of the standardized test as the primary indicator of an effective school. Although RttT waivers already deescalated a reliance on a rigid definition of school and student success for state funding, ESSA put direct legislation that challenged reliance on standardized testing itself.

With the reduced reliance on standardized tests as the primary measure of success, ESSA allowed for a more flexible definition assessment, funding, and achievement for students. This ‘flexibility’ created an opportunity for public confidence in education to rise. Alongside the ‘new’ public perception of education, the most meaningful structural changes to U.S education were the following: 1.) ESSA allowed for states to choose their own accountability measures, rather than comply with a national AYP standard (ASCD, 2015); 2.) ESSA challenged the use of traditional statewide test and encouraged alternate testing methods. For instance, the use of “national tests (SAT/ACT),” the use of “online testing,” and or the use of “innovative” tests that “aligned with personalized learning” were suggested as valid assessments (The Understood Team, 2015); 3.) ESSA removed the condition of yearly improvement for federal funding (ASCD, 2015) 4.) ESSA created broader definitions of a passing or failing school based on measures such as “graduation rates,” “access to and completion of advanced coursework,” or a lack of “chronic absenteeism” (The Understood Team, 2015). The widening of what ‘counts’ as achievement combined with a relaxed reliance on attaining state goals for federal funding issued a new definition for a functioning and healthy educational system. As a result, confidence in education continued to rise in 2017, reaching its highest point since 2005 (Calderon, Newport & Dvorak, 2017).

In the Ontario context, public confidence was a central topic in both news coverage of Ontario education and policy documents released from the Ministry of Education.³ Starting in 2010, the news emphasized a more successful image of Ontario schools. The Globe and Mail released

³ It is crucial to note that alongside reports about the ‘success’ of Ontario public education, news about the teacher strike in 2012, 2013, and 2015 as well as controversy surrounding the new sex ed curriculum also dominated. While each of these topics depict Ontario education in ‘crisis,’ news reporting on Ontario’s globalized academic standing presented Ontario education as functioning effectively.
headlines such as “Ontario School System Ranks Among Best in World, Report Says” (Hammer, 2010); The Toronto Star’s “Don’t undermine Ontario’s education advantage” (Mildon & Fournier, 2015); “71% of Ontario students meet Provincial standards” (News Staff, 2013); the press release from the Ministry of Education, “More Ontario Students Graduating High School Than Ever Before” (Office of the Premier, 2015). In conjunction with these headlines, formal goals for teachers to inspire public confidence first appeared in the School Effectiveness Framework in 2010 and continued in the School Effectiveness Framework and Great to Excellent: Launching the Next Stage of Ontario’s Education Agenda documents in 2013 Professionally Speaking also highlighted the “Inspiring Public Confidence Conference” which provided workshops and tools for teachers to live up to the “ethical” and “professional” standards entrusted by the public (Dolik, 2012).

1.11 Growing Success

As a result of this shift in attitude, structural changes first appear in Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools (2010). While the purpose of this document “was designed to guide evaluation between testing cycles” (Parker, 2017, p 52), it also dramatically shifted the goals of assessment practices in Ontario. Drawing from the ‘confident’ perception of Ontario education, the front matter of this document states, “[the government is] proud that our students regularly place among the world’s best on international standardized tests” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 1). The following are the most significant changes to teacher regulations:

1. The implementation of “Assessment for Learning (formative assessment)” and “Assessment as Learning” (metacognitive or peer assessment) that “are ongoing, varied in nature, and administered over a period of time to provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate the full range of their learning (H-WCDSB Policy Manual, 2010, p. 2)

2. Evaluation, or Assessment of Learning, will be based on “established performance standards” and accurately “summarizes” and “communicates” what “students know based on curriculum expectations” (H-WCDSB Policy Manual, 2010, p. 3)

Alongside these changes, Growing Success also allowed leniency for students to receive credit for incomplete or half-finished work as long as it successfully complied with the above success criteria. In doing so, the Ministry of Education ensured that graduation rates continued to rise, and in 2015, the board started publishing these rates for the public in the School Board Progress Report. Thus, like ESSA, the widening assessment procedures produced a greater number of ‘successful’ students in Ontario.

The 2010-2015 era of education marks another change in the public’s relation to education, whereby the public’s feelings about the health of the education system explicitly influenced policy documents. As such, policy not only addressed student success but also focused on ensuring confidence in said measures of success. As the standardized test functions as a sign of anxiety and crisis within the education system, it is unsurprising that both the Ministry of Education and the U.S Department of Education would disassociate from the standardized test. In order to reorient the public’s relation to education, the Ministry of Education/Department of Education instead allowed many assessments with more personalized achievement standards to represent the health of the education system. As a result of these more flexible standards, the definition of a successful student is not positioned in relation to global competition but rather tied to the philosophy of achieving a ‘personal best.’


The year 2015 marks a significant year for analyzing U.S and Canadian ‘use’ of crisis in education because the two countries encouraged opposite feelings during this time. While Canada has consistently lagged behind the U.S in both policy implementation and public perception of education, the year 2015 marks a divergence in how crisis is used to produce change. To begin, Obama argues that U.S education is strong during this time period while Ontario education returns to the language of crisis. As such, Canadian news outlets once again
began to focus on the failure of Ontario schools to perform effectively, with a particular emphasis on EQAO math test scores. Headlines released about education during this time including the following emphasis: CBC News’ “Only 50% of grade 6 students met the province’s math standard” (The Canadian Press, 2016), The Globe and Mail’s “Ontario addresses math score decline amid worry from parents, educators” (Alphonso, 2016), The Toronto Sun’s “Ontario’s low math scores suggest an education crisis” (2017). OISE polling of education also reflected a perception of Ontario education in crisis as public confidence was down from 42% in 2012 to 35% in 2016 (Hart & Kempf, 2018).4

Drawing back to the introduction of this chapter, I ask why Ontario lists P21 as a primary influence on the new vision for Ontario education. Given the history of emotions described throughout the chapter, the reference to P21 ties Ontario education to both the language of crisis associated with globalization and a then confident U.S education system. As Obama was winding down his presidency in 2015, his acknowledgement of the problems with education needed to be carefully framed when calling for ESSA. In contrast, Canada underwent a change from Stephen Harper’s Conservative government to Justin Trudeau's Liberal government. Although this change in political climate provided a reason to position Ontario education in crisis, I would argue that the reference to P21 was an attempt to temper the public’s overall impression of Ontario education. In aligning with P21, the Ministry of Education encouraged an association with the company that produced the ‘confident’ education system while relying on the language of crisis to instigate change.

1.13 Conclusion

In providing a dual history of the changes in the United States and Ontario education since the first PISA test in 2000, I have shown how the United States’ standardized education system influenced Canada’s education trajectory. While Ontario media often positions Canadian education as superior because of their results on PISA standardized tests, this chapter demonstrates that Ontario often implements variations of American policy under a different name and, as such, has a less extreme version of many of the same problems as U.S education. Perhaps of more significance than the similarities in the language and values between the two

4 The 2015 OISE survey did not include public confidence and was therefore omitted.
countries’ education policy is that Ontario also inherited the United States’ relationship to anxiety about the state of education via the standardized test. This anxiety, while politically useful for creating change and orienting the public’s relationship to education, can develop into a larger problem if the public loses faith in the institution as a whole. Created on the edge of a time period focused on restoring public confidence in education while also arguing education was in need of change, the 21st Century Competencies document is structured on competing relations to emotions in education. At the end of this chapter, I am left wondering how this contradiction will play out for student relations in the classroom. Is there more hope for progressive practice because of the tension between crisis and confidence the document represents, or in contrast, will this tension produce a more anxious and therefore ‘more’ neoliberal relation for students in the classroom?
Chapter 2
The Cruelness of Crisis: The Price of Hope in a Crisis-Defined Education System

2.1 Introduction

Building on Chapter One’s connection of standardized testing and emotion, “The Cruelness of Crisis” considers how a crisis-defined education system positions progressive practice against the goals of globalized competition and evaluates the price of this tension for students, parents, and teachers—when positioned against the interests of larger forces of agency and control, like principals, school boards, and education ministries. In her promising take on the question, Lana Parker offers a critique of public support for the progressively worded neoliberal practice in the Canadian curriculum in her article, “Creating a Crisis: Selling Neoliberal Policy Through the Rebranding of Education.” After establishing which progressive practices in Ontario curriculum are thinly veiled neoliberal principles, Parker asks, “How is it that neoliberal education policies, often lacking evidentiary basis, come to be endorsed--often by the very people they alienate and marginalize?” (2017, p. 44). To address this question, Parker presents conclusions partially aligned with last chapter’s findings: she too is suspicious of how the accountability movement creates large quantities of statistical data that provide a scapegoat to politicians for their frequent calls for change (2017, p. 183). Despite her critical reading of the manufactured education crisis, Parker’s analysis falls short when she argues that “savvy marketing strategies” are the reason Ontario citizens offer “near unquestioning support” of education policies that work against their best interest (2017, p. 53). Parker argues that Ontario citizens become “seduced by the power of the word accountability, and hopeful that the choices they have made will result in a better life for the next generation” (2017, p. 53). Based on the downward trend of confidence presented in the previous chapter, I am unconvinced that Ontario’s public is “seduced” by the marketing of education or offer “unquestioning support for these policies” (2017, p. 53). I am, however, less skeptical of the hope in education to produce “a better life for the next generation” Parker points to in the concluding paragraphs of her argument (2017, p. 53). Expanding on Parker’s research, I consider why neoliberalism uses crisis to structure particular hopes in education, such as competing successfully in a global economy, and I then investigate the consequences of this
hope for a group of individuals who have become hopeless in education— parents, teachers, and students, whose anxiety related to standardized tests is a result of this structuring.

Investigating the structures and consequences of crisis in Ontario education, this chapter uses Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) to analyze why individuals believe success in education remains an avenue to the “good life” (or at the very least, a better life) when presented with evidence to the contrary. Building from Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” or a structuring of desire which causes the very thing a person desires to become “the very obstacle to [their] flourishing” (2011, p. 1), I consider how the rhetoric of crisis has created an impasse for students, teachers, and parents: they recognize the inherited “blueprint” of education might not live up to the reality constructed, but they might not have a way outside of this relation of cruel optimism (2011, p. 11). Drawing from Mario Di Paolantonio’s reading of Berlant’s in Ontario education, I argue that the 21st Century Competencies encourages a relation of cruel optimism because the desire for a ‘good life’ in the present and a “good world” in the future are posited against each other and subsequently perpetuate neoliberal rationality and globalized goals in education.

The second section of this chapter incorporates Berlant’s notion of “Slow Death” to consider how the crisis of education shapes the question of “whether cruel optimism is better than none at all?” (2011, p. 16). As a response to this question, I use “slow death,” or the mental and physical exhaustion of the subject under neoliberal conditions (2011, p. 95), to argue that the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns related to standardized testing is incumbent upon the relation of cruel optimism described above. Connecting this exhaustion to media reports on the subject, Berlant also analyzes how the public’s reaction to the process of slow death mischaracterizes the problem as a crisis and encourages unrealistic expectations for addressing the pace and scale of the slow death subject’s suffering. As a result, the media creates a desire for heroic and sovereign conceptions of agency and encourages the most vulnerable to feel even less powerful within the education system. As a counter to this form of self-advocacy, Berlant proposes “lateral agency” (2011, p. 18), which offers a more sympathetic understanding of the kinds of moves an individual can make in a world organized by the “wearing out” of certain populations (2011, p. 7). With lateral agency, an individual engages in moments of self-interruption, that allows a relief from the identity constructing practices of neoliberalism. As a
departure from Berlant, I argue that despite the double-bind of cruel optimism and slow death, education aspires to move beyond lateral agency because of the opportunity the school environment provides for the mutability of identity as more than just a relief of the everyday.

Despite the concluding section on lateral agency, this chapter does not provide an overly ‘hopeful’ analysis of the new vision for Ontario schools. While Chapter Three of this thesis considers possibilities of resistance within the 21st Century Competencies document, this chapter’s primary concern is how the feeling of crisis that permeates both news coverage and the goals of the 21st Century Competencies document produces a desire for a vision of education that, while outwardly progressive, enforces the same neoliberal and globalized relation it appears to address. Positioning education in ‘crisis’ has consequences for shaping the goals of education, the hopes and desires individuals attach to these goals, and the methods for achieving these goals. It is not as easy as creating a different goal, a new dream, a better way; rather, the perception of ‘crisis’ operates as a structure to which these three concepts are held. This chapter considers how crisis shapes these goals and hopes to consider the price of operating in a different way for those already suffering in the education system.

2.2 Cruel Optimism and the Impasse of Ontario Education

In her explanation of the contemporary subjects’ refusal to relinquish the Fordist “blueprint” to the ‘good life’ amidst an increasingly crisis-defined world, Lauren Berlant analyzes various post-1990 cultural mediums (books, film, news, etc.) and proposes a theory of attachment termed ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 11). With this form of attachment, an individual’s object of desire is the very thing that impedes their “flourishing” (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Connecting this object of desire to a ‘roadmap’ of how one lives and organizes their identity is central to understanding why a subject cannot simply recognize and relinquish their attachment. In fact, as a defining feature of the theory, Berlant argues that what makes a relation cruel, rather than “merely inconvenient or tragic,” is that a subject might not recover from losing their object/scene of desire (2011, p. 24). As a method to evaluate which ‘optimisms’ implicate a subject in this double bind, Berlant tracks a subject’s reaction, or “patterns of adjustment” (Berlant, 2011, p. 9), to an “impasse” that comprises a subject’s relationship to their particular worldview. Tracking these “patterns of adjustment” allows for a more robust understanding of what counts as agency,
what is worth holding onto, and what is left to hope for when an individual continually faces evidence of failure. In light of this failure, the concept of the impasse ties to the experience of “ongoing crisis,” or “crisis ordinariness,” which characterizes living in a neoliberal age (Berlant, 2011, p.101). Viewing cruel optimism through the lens of “impasse” and crisis ordinariness creates space for the recognition that these desires may hinder a subject’s ability to flourish, but also allow the subject to develop “skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on” (Berlant, 2011, p.8). Therefore, the project of identifying what ‘counts’ as cruel optimism via the encounter of an impasse allows Berlant the opportunity to consider how the subject is able to live on despite their failing blueprints of the good life. Looking for these patterns of adjustment as a strategy for “developing skills” protects the concept from a simplistic reading that “would turn objects of cruel optimism into bad and oppressive, and the subjects of cruel optimism into emblematic symptoms of economic, political, and critical inquiry” (Berlant, 2011, p.15). Tethering the line between hopeful and hopeless, the concept of cruel optimism presents a new lens for negotiating the productive and destructive aspects of desiring the Fordist conception of the ‘good life.’ While the ‘roadmap’ can lead individuals astray, it can also produce a combination of new routes or new definition of the ‘good life’ entirely. Alongside this optimistic reading of new roads and horizons, Berlant understands that for those struggling to merely ‘get by,’ the feeling of being lost, with no destination or no tools for movement leads to her central question: “whether cruel optimism is better than none at all” (Berlant, 2011, p. 16).

Applying Berlant’s analysis to education, Mario Di Paolantonio suggests that Ontario education is an example of cruel optimism because it drains what is ‘hopeful’ about education by positioning a desire to create a better world against a desire to create a better life. More specifically, Di Paolantonio argues, “There is a ‘cruel optimism’ in education that drives us to constantly work at improving ourselves; that is, we optimistically attach to things that promise us fulfillment but that actually perpetually defer any such fulfillment and rather end up impoverishing us” (2016, p. 148). Connecting these two desires to the concept of time, Di Paolantonio equates the present with the ‘good life’ fantasy and the future with a desire to use education to create a better world, a term he refers to as “passing on” (2016, p. 149). Linking hope and anxiety to the present and future implications of Ontario education, education is enveloped “in the fears and delimitations of a present that has no sense of its implications with
the larger significance of affirming our ‘passing on’” (Di Paolantonio, 2016, p. 151). For Di Paolantonio, this notion of “passing on” is central to what makes education “educational” (2016, p. 149), in other words, what creates a truly progressive educational relation is imbuing “the past and the present with ‘something more’ than itself, with something hopeful (2016, p. 150). It is important to note that while Di Paolantonio argues the balance between the “good life” and the “good world” makes Ontario education “cruel” (Berlant, 2011, p. 1), this relationship also sustains public confidence in the institution of education.

The double bind of the ‘good world’ future and ‘good life’ present appears on the first page of the document. While the Ministry of Education emphasizes “future” success (2016, p. 4, p. 5, p. 30, p. 47), the 21st Century Competencies title aligns Ontario education with the ‘problems’ and ‘crisis’ of the turn of the century. As the previous section analyzes in detail, the early 2000s marks the move towards accountability and standardization in both Ontario and U.S education; thus, it is unsurprising the Ministry of Education would choose to return to the early 2000s to help define the ‘new’ vision for Ontario education if it is positioning “surviving” the present crisis with future success. The double bind of the ‘good world’ future and ‘good life’ present also appears on the cover of the document. While most Ministry of Education documents presents a cheerful image of students learning, or a monochromatic representation of bureaucratic fonts and borders, the cover of 21st Century Competencies is futuristic and scientific: it portrays two faces in profile with rainbow colors protruding like sound waves from the heads, and in extension from the heads, a semi-abstract butterfly dissolves into what looks like bubbles or cells (fig. 1). This shift away from featuring real students to abstract artistic images gestures towards the kind of identity the document wishes to produce: a student who is not yet formed, with the ability to not only internalize the values of the education system and produce some unnamed future. The ‘empty’ heads are both hopeful, with butterflies transforming into cell representations of the future, and hopeless, as these bodiless images represent an unattainable future for any ‘real’ body in education. While the title and changing aesthetics of the document may appear relatively insignificant, when tied to cruel optimism these features gesture towards the notions that the 21st Century vision of the future means an emptying of the present self.
While the previous two examples gesture towards a relation of cruel optimism though largely aesthetic components, Di Paolantonio’s analysis also lends to the larger content of the document. In fact, his analysis of cruel optimism in Ontario education is specifically tied to a concept frequently repeated in the *21st Century Competencies* document—“lifelong learning,” or as Di Paolantonio argues the “guise” that individuals must constantly learn and improve in order to ‘keep up’ with the changing world. In his reading of lifelong learning, Di Paolantonio argues that ideology is a primary example of a seemingly progressive principal that forecloses the potential of Ontario education “passing on,” or creating a ‘good world’ future (2016, p. 148). In describing this relation of cruel optimism, Di Paolantonio argues that Ontario education “invites people to constantly innovate and improve themselves through learning (and ever more learning)” which ultimately leads “to a sense of ‘presentism’ and ‘privatization,’” (2016, p.148). While it would appear that a term like lifelong learning would necessitate a future orientation to fulfill its very namesake, Di Paolantonio argues that the anxiety which facilitates a desire for constant improvement creates a present so saturated with uncertainty that “it devours the future” (2016, p. 152). The anxiety of the present creates a world where survival is the primary focus for those inside and outside the education system: in this world, “we ourselves become exhausted by this nearsighted depiction of the future and come to feel that indeed there is no future, for there
seems to be no meaning” (2016, p. 152). For Di Paolantonio, lifelong learning exposes the way crisis destabilizes the balance between the present and the future, and within the current Ontario education system, “lifelong learning” means individual “accumulation” in preparation for a globalized economy, rather than a collective understanding of what the world the “good world” means.

The 21st Century Competencies document also invokes the concept of “lifelong learning.” However, the document’s positing of the survival of the ‘good life’ present against the creation of the ‘good world’ future is arguably more ‘cruel’ than in Di Paolantonio’s initial analysis. In addition to equipping “individuals with the ‘newest’ skills needed to pounce upon the ‘unforeseen developments’ brought about by the ‘new’ economy” (Di Paolantonio, 2016, p. 158), the 21st Century Competencies documents also aligns lifelong learning with global citizenship, personal health, and well-being. For instance, in explaining the importance of the concept, the Ministry of Education connects the term to learning and understanding "[v]alue systems that respect differences and diversity” for “personal and professional success” and “social cohesion” (2016, p. 17), and it also aligns the term with metacognition, which encourages the student’s “ability to pursue and persist in learning, and to organize one’s own learning including through effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 17). While Chapter Three analyzes the progressive potential of metacognition within Ontario education more broadly, within the 21st Century Competencies documents the connection between lifelong learning and metacognition/global citizenship/ and professional success is especially troubling given the relation of cruel optimism described above. Here, the production of a ‘good world,’ one that values diversity and differences, is in service of a ‘good life.’ The ‘good world’ is necessary for “social cohesion” that produces “personal and professional success” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 17).

The arguably crueler relation of lifelong learning in the 21st Century Competencies documents, in which the desire for a ‘good world’ future is in service of the ‘good life’ present extends to the overall goals of the documents as well. The 21st Century Competencies document cites Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel’s purpose for the document as fostering “problem solving and critical and creative thinking” that have “‘always been at the core of learning” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3). This focus on progressive principals is undercut by the preparation for “students to
solve messy, complex problems—including problems we don’t yet know about—associated with living in a competitive, globally connected, and technologically intensive world” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3). Like lifelong learning in 21st Century Competencies, progressive education is pitted against the anxiety to solve the “messy” and “complex” problems of the future. This relation of crueler optimism gestures towards why times of crisis emphasizes goals of globalization. With an education system positioned in crisis, the separation between the progressive principals and the neoliberal practice becomes increasingly entwined. As such, crisis produces a reliance on globalized values because the less likely individuals are at achieving success in their immediate future, the more likely they are to desire success in a larger, less tangible and less individualized future. Crisis and globalization are the darker side of the good world /good life optimism—the former two concepts tie the latter together and produce competition between the two. Crisis and globalization, in forcing harmony between the two concepts, turn ‘good’ optimism into cruel disappointment.

2.3 Slow Death and the Price of the Good Life Fantasy of Ontario Education

While the previous section ends with a reflection on why cruel optimism produces an emphasis on the goals of globalized success in anxious times, the following section considers the price, or material consequences, of this relationship. I argue that one of the material consequences of this attachment is an increasing number of students, parents, and teachers who experience anxiety related to the standardized test—a primary measure of globalized success. While Chapter One demonstrates the danger of using statistics related to education, it is useful to know that alongside The Washington Post’s claim that up to 20% of students experience test anxiety (Strauss, 2013), there are also multiple reports of the Common Core standardized test making children vomit and “wet their pants” (Chasmar, 2013). Although these facts and articles alone do not necessarily indicate a rise in physical and mental distress related to standardized testing or tie standardized test anxiety to navigating the relation of cruel optimism described above, they do indicate a trend in focus on student anxiety related to standardized testing. In an attempt to connect this trend to the tension of the good life/good world fantasy described above, the following section applies Berlant’s theory of “slow death,” or the “collective physical and
psychic attenuation from the effects of global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality” (2011, p. 95), to demonstrate how Berlant’s concepts of “biopower, ”crisis ordinariness,” and the media’s attention to the mental health crisis link to the cruel optimism of the 21st Century Competencies documents.

In order to demonstrate this link, it is useful to unpack the key parts of Berlant’s slow death theory. As Michel Foucault’s theory of biopower is central to Berlant’s conception of slow death, it is equally necessary to consider how biopower relates to the ‘good life’ fantasy. To theorize slow death, Berlant first begins by defining life and then moves towards a definition of the ‘good life.’ In outlining her concept of life, Berlant turns to David Harvey’s definition of the term within neoliberalism and considers his assertion that life is conceived as the worker’s ability to produce (2011, p. 96). Rooting “life” in the ability to work, Harvey emphasizes the importance of health and sickness—a ‘good’ healthy life is characterized as an effective and productive citizen (Berlant, 2011, p. 96). Expanding Harvey’s use of the quantifier ‘good,’ Berlant argues a ‘good life’ is not solely defined by labor but also provides agency to the individual to define oneself and his/her/their own path in the world (2011). With this conception of the good life, Berlant’s analysis is indebted to the concepts of agency and sovereignty, as questions of the ability to choose one’s path tie to the extent an individual can choose within neoliberalism.

To address this question, Berlant first critiques the concept of sovereignty as a theory fraught with complications; mainly, sovereign agency is an unrealizable concept, a desire leftover from sovereign rule (2011, p. 97). Berlant turns to Foucault’s conception of biopower to provide a more accurate model of the kind of agency individuals can enact in contemporary circumstances. Foucault argues that sovereign power “controls” life while neoliberal biopower “manages” life (Berlant, 2011, p. 97). Considering the implications of this change in power for agency, Berlant argues that biopower forces “living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways” (2011, p. 97). This endurance not only limits the choices an individual makes but also forces an individual to “endure” choices they don’t make. Connecting biopower, agency, and the ‘good life,’ Berlant argues that under neoliberal rationality, biopower focuses the “management of putatively biological threat posed by certain populations to the reproduction of the normatively framed general good life a society” (2011, p. 97); thus, under neoliberal rationality, biopower manages and maintains certain bodies in order to provide the opportunity of the good
life fantasy for others. Bringing this concept back to slow death, it is the desire for the fiction of sovereign agency that is partially responsible for the “attenuation” of the individual under neoliberalism.

Expanding Foucault’s conception of biopower to more accurately analyze education, theorist James D. Marshall, and later Cris Mayo, propose the term busno-power to account for the management of the mind rather than the body in educational settings. Quoting Marshall directly, Mayo writes, busno-power “is directed at the subjectivity of the person, not through the body but through the mind, through forms of educational practice and pedagogy which, through choices in education, shape the subjectivities of autonomous choosers” (2005, p. 357-358). While Mayo phrases sovereign agency as the autonomous chooser, both Berlant and Mayo are critical of the way biopower/busno-power creates a desire for autonomous choice and sovereign agency that maintains the fantasy that education can lead to the good life/ good world, and at the same time, sacrifices the health of the body of the worker or the mind of the student.

Speaking specifically about the standardized test anxiety, Mayo argues that the standardized test not only presents a choice for the student to enact certain social identities related to test taking (2005) but also helps stabilize the standardized test as an avenue to the fantasy of the good life. For Mayo, the standardized test presents a choice for the kind of student identity an individual will enact: anxious or healthy (2005). In describing this duality, Mayo writes, “‘test anxiety’ or poor test taking skills also bring with them norms of what good test taking ought to look like and that those norms in turn define particular forms of learning disability” (2005, p. 360). In this instance, health “itself can then be seen as a side effect of successful normativity” (Berlant, 2011, p. 106), as an individual suffering from anxiety can either choose to sacrifice their mental health and participate in the fantasy that the success on the standardized test will lead to the good life or inhabit the identity of the anxious student and ‘opt out’ of the test and function as the sacrifice of certain students for the survival of the good life present. With either of these options, the desire for sovereign agency or autonomous choice intensifies while the good life fantasy remains intact: the anxious student is made to feel further anxious because of their inability to present a ‘stable’ self to take the standardized test, and those unfit to take the test, or perform as the healthy student sufficiently, are made a casualty to the busno-power management of certain students.
The standardized test also produces a desire for autonomous choosers through the reproduction of the good world fantasy (Mayo, 2005). The two concepts connect through the desire for an idealized standardized test, one that is both equitable and accurately measures student achievement. Mayo addresses this desire in his reflection of racial bias related to standardized tests (Mayo). Here, busno-power creates an autonomous chooser whereby in the absence of an equitable assessment, students can ‘opt out’ in opposition to the failure of education to live up to producing a good world. About the phenomenon, Mayo writes, “they [students of color] ‘opt out’ of competition in what they understand to be a socially and politically dangerous apparatus” (2005, p. 360). Mayo reads the decision to ‘opt’ out of standardized testing as an example of what it means to ‘become intelligent” (2005, p. 360), a process he defines as turning the commodification of education “back on itself” (2005, p. 360). While this form of resistance certainly exemplifies the kind of “critical thinking” needed for progressive education (Ministry of Education, 2016, p.3), Mayo’s acknowledgment of the “high cost” for students of color does not do justice to unpacking the severity of consequences for this choice (2005, p. 360). Opting out of high stakes tests, especially a test like the SAT, means that these students are severely severing their ability to survive in the good life present. It is alsoconcerting that Mayo advocates for the most vulnerable to sacrifice their good life present for the possibility of a collective good world future. Here, the option of desiring a fair test only highlights that this choice of opting out does not present much of a choice at all.

2.4 “Crisis Ordinariness” and Ontario Education

In addition to positioning biopower at the center of slow death, Berlant also analyzes how crisis impacts slow death (2011). Unlike the first section of this chapter, which argues that crisis acts as a catalyst for forming relations of cruel optimism, “Slow Death” focuses on the way news and media interpretations of crisis warp the duration and scale of suffering. Rather than individuals undergoing exceptional experiences of adversity, Berlant positions slow death as a “disease of time” that hinges upon “ordinary” suffering to manage certain populations (Berlant, 2011, p. 103). Based on this recognition, Berlant argues reading the problem of obesity (and in my case

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1 Mayo highlights the Standford study which found “black students taking tests in the presence of white students did considerably worse than they previously had because the social dynamics of race differential outcomes was raised in their minds by the presence of whites who are ‘well known’ to do better” (2005, p. 360).
the rise of mental health concerns related to standardized tests) in the language of crisis misinterprets the ordinariness of suffering Berlant terms “crisis ordinariness” (2011, p. 101). In order to prove her claim about the misrepresentation of crisis, Berlant distinguishes between the experience of a traumatic “event” and the experience of living in an “environment” of slow death (2011, p. 100). With this differentiation, Berlant claims most of what gets classified as an event is “not of the scale of memorable impact but rather are episodes, that is, occasions that frame experience while not changing much of anything” (2011, p. 101). The separation of the event and the environment is important for two reasons: 1. it misrepresents anxiety related to the standardized test as an extreme and memorable episode, and 2. aligning slow death with crisis “event” positions their suffering as in the past. These mischaracterizations can have serious implications for those experiencing crisis ordinariness—if an individual’s suffering is positioned as a crisis event in the past, there is no longer a reason for the state to address the problem in the present.

2.5 Distortion of the Present in the Crisis of Education

Like the obesity crisis, writings about the ‘crisis’ of standardized test related anxiety follow a similar misidentification as traumatic events, with reporters/ scholars manipulating the time and habit of the standardized test. For instance, the Huffington Post published the article “Middle school suicides double as Common Core testing intensifies” (Singer, 2017). Given this inflammatory headline, it could be argued the standardized test represents an ‘event’ of trauma for the student, who takes the test, for the teacher/ principal, who is accountable for the test, and for the public, who interprets the health of their schools based on the result. However, this reading distorts the way the standardized test functions as a representation of larger issues in the education system. While this author does gesture to some of the larger issues surrounding the standardized test (globalization, limiting students’ creativity, and the mental health of students), his main focus throughout the article is the trauma the test itself presents, and he ultimately ends the article with the assertion that the standardized test is an example of “child abuse” (Singer, 2017). Here, Singer draws attention back to the trauma of taking the test, rather than the larger structures which contribute to the poor mental health described above. This focus on the event of the test distracts from the anxious environment created by the education system more generally.
This misrepresentation of crisis and the event also occurs when the ‘crisis’ is situated as something in the past that no longer holds a threat. For instance, Valerie Strauss’ *Washington Post* article, “Test anxiety: why it is increasing and 3 ways to curb it” is a stark contrast to the before mentioned the *Huffington Post* article. While Strauss’ article presents anxiety as more of a problem then a crisis, she does include incendiary language such as describing anxiety in students as “crippling,” “severe,” and increasingly prevalent (2013). Despite this language, Strauss, like Singer, positions test anxiety as an isolated event with no bearing on a child’s larger relationship to school. In contrast to Singer’s article, which presents standardized test related anxiety as insurmountable, Strauss writes that it is a problem that can “so easily relieved,” with just a couple of simple changes (2013). This misrepresentation is dangerous for students because the standardized test, like the anxiety that accompanies it, follows and manages a student’s relation to education throughout their lifetime.

In both instances, crisis positions standardized test anxiety as the ‘event’ of taking the test rather than focusing on the conditions which allow the standardized test to create anxiety in the first place. As the school environment encourages the standardized test to stand in for an avenue towards personal and possibly success on a larger national/global scale, it is the environment created by standardized testing, rather than the test itself that contributes to students’ mental attenuation. Further, a focus on the test as an event allows the school boards to address superficial representation of globalization, like changing aspects of the standardized test to accommodate student anxiety (such as Wynne’s desire to decrease reliance on the standardized test), while encouraging Ontario education to focus on a vision of globalized success, like in the *21st Century Competencies* document.

### 2.6 Heroic Agency and the Standardization Crisis

In addition to arguing crisis mischaracterizes suffering, Berlant also suggests the misclassification of crisis engenders an emphasis on “heroic agency” (2011, p.101). Berlant characterizes heroic agency as a “dramatic act” which names, categorizes, and works towards a complete solution for those suffering (2011, p. 104). Further, it saturates the slow death subject in emotion, giving them “attention, compassion, analysis, and sometimes reparation,” all of which organize how the public is able to conceive of and relate to slow death subject’s suffering
The desire for a ‘dramatic act’ alongside the public’s attention to the ‘crisis’ produces a reliance on the “militaristic and melodramatic view of individual agency” (2011, p. 96) and provides “an alibi for hygienic governmentality and justified moralizing against inconvenient human activity” (2011, p. 97). As such, heroic agency justifies the state arguing slow death individuals are unmotivated or beyond help because they do not fulfill the unrealistic expectations of heroic agency described above.

Elizabeth Green’s article “17 ways to take the anxiety out of school testing,” provides an example of heroic agency Berlant critiques. Beginning with “saturation” of emotion, Green writes, “Relentless testing of students threatens to replace education. Instead of young children learning through play and exploration and older kids being motivated to learn through failure, they are ranked and plotted on a statistical table” (Green, 2016). With this depiction of a student’s anxiety, Green inundates the reader with anxiety buzzwords like “threatens” “failure” and “ranked” to build sympathy for students. Ironically, the tone of this article pulsates with the same anxious buzz the article provides advice for avoiding (Green, 2016). More specifically, Green offers contradictory suggestions that undermine a child’s experience for dealing with anxiety. On the one hand, Green suggests the following: “avoid ‘rescuing’ your anxious child. This prevents them from learning through failure. It stops them growing strong emotional resilience. They need this told to ‘survive and thrive’ in a busy, anxious and digital world” (2016). The advice of avoiding “‘rescuing’ your anxious child” may appear contradictory to “heroic agency;” however, Green’s ‘unheroic’ advice is complicated by later suggestions in her article. For instance, Green suggests that children will learn “to cope with failure by picking themselves up and having another go will reap success” and further concludes “the assessment of core learning areas does not define your child – or you as a parent. It doesn't indicate the dedication and ability of their teachers. If you know this ...you are helping your child (Green, 2016). With these two quotes, the practical, unheroic advice given to parents is supplanted by the sweeping narrative that their child will be able to work hard and succeed (and if they don’t, as long as they are loved, they will be fine). This article demonstrates that although Green is careful to balance the amount of control a parent has over their child in a standardized testing situation, she ultimately suggests that their anxiety is something to ‘get over’ or a stage to ‘build character.’
At the beginning of the paper, I cited Lana Parker asking why individuals continue to support policies that marginalize and oppress them. Parker’s critique, while valid in many ways, fails to recognize crisis as more than a marketing ploy that ‘tricks’ citizens into supporting policies they may or may not recognize are ultimately harmful. As demonstrated with slow death, a focus on the media’s interpretation of crisis is important, not because it tricks citizens into bad policies, but rather it constricts their ability or desire to act differently. Students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in education either see anxiety related to standardized tests as a single concern related only to the test, or misrepresent the kinds of action parents, students, and teachers can take in their defined roles in the education system. Much like the previous chapter, which analyzes how different emotions structure the boundaries of the public, the standardized test produces slow death anxiety because of the cruel desire for the test to lead to the good life/good world.

2.7 Lateral Agency and Further Considerations

As a response to the slow death ‘desire’ for sovereign agency, Berlant proposes the theory of “lateral agency” (2011, p. 18). Departing from self-care’s tendency to heal or stabilize a fractured sense of self, lateral agency is “self-medication through self-interruption” (2011, p. 115). In regard to the obesity crisis, overeating, eating poorly, or eating out are examples of lateral agency because these actions violate “any definition of sovereign identity” (2011, p. 115); they are not necessarily life building, but rather interruptions from day to day routines. Berlant clarifies this form of agency is not likely to improve an individuals’ situation; however, it may be a more realistic and ultimately less harmful conception of agency for those who are already struggling to survive. For Berlant, lateral agency is “a relief, a reprieve, not a repair” (2011, p. 117). With lateral agency, Berlant offers a language for interpreting the actions of those suffering that may appear in opposition to the best interest of the individual; however, this conception of agency may ultimately engender, rather than hinder, the capacity of slow death sufferers to exercise choice over their life.

Despite the fact that the 21st Century Competencies document produces a relation of cruel optimism,” I am hesitant to advocate viewing student anxiety as an example of lateral agency. This hesitancy is rooted in a refusal to admit that relative comfort is the best outcome an
education system can offer a suffering student within neoliberalism. However, with this assertion, I am also resigning to the notion that cruel optimism might be better than none at all. Cris Mayo might also agree, as he proposes a similar, though more extreme reading of anxiety function within neoliberalism. He claims anxiety is a form of resistance against busno-power because the anxious student enacts a less stable identity and is therefore less susceptible to the mechanisms that reproduce neoliberal subjectivities (2005). As partially discussed earlier in the chapter, Mayo’s ‘elevation’ of anxiety as a form of resistance is tied to students of color ‘opting out’ of significant standardized tests, which severely decreases the choices students can make in both the present and the future. However, as both Berlant and Mayo emphasize resisting stabilized identities as a response to neoliberalism, I would end this chapter with questioning the extent to which students can occupy ambiguous identities without compromising their future. While placing hope in the ability of education to leave space for the ambiguity of a student’s future is what binds them to the cruel optimism of educations’ present, I believe understanding the potential of ambiguity is central to creating a conception of life beyond Berlant’s chilling conception at the end of “Slow Death”:

Is “having a life” now the process to which one gets resigned, after dreaming of the good life, or not even dreaming? Is “life as the scene of reliable pleasures located largely in those experiences of coasting, with all that’s implied in that phrase, the shifting, diffuse, sensual space between pleasure and numbness?” (Berlant, 2011, p. 117).
Chapter 3
Heading Towards Feeling in the Age of Crisis: An Evaluation of Shifting Metacognitive Approaches in a Post-21st Century Competencies Education System

3.1 Introduction

The end of the previous chapter questions the extent education can move beyond offering a comforting reprieve of a life organized by neoliberalism for all students, especially those suffering from the slow death of the education system, and it concludes with the necessity of ambiguity in education for the possibility of resistance against neoliberalism in a crisis-defined education system. As a result of this conclusion, Chapter Three investigates the potential of the destabilization of identity for both students, especially those not confident in the education system, within the confines of the 21st Century Competencies vision. With a specific focus on student experience and teaching practices, “Heading towards feeling in the age of crisis” detangles how 21st Century Competencies’ ‘solution’ to the anxious student via self-regulatory practices, or as Dinsmore et. al. defines, the “marriage between self-awareness and intention to act” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 478), may placate student anxiety while severing the possibility for the progressive practice described above. In 21st Century Competencies, the larger category of self-regulation operates as both the skill set of metacognitive behavior, whereby students “learn the process of learning” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 1), and self-directed learning, defined as “becoming aware and demonstrating agency in one’s process of learning” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.1). Aligning metacognition with self-regulation is important for unpacking the progressive potential of the crisis-defined education system because techniques of self-regulation are not only criticized as a tool for students to internalize late stage capitalism/neoliberalism (Vassallo, 2013), but in the case of metacognition, are also cited as a method to increase student self-esteem and confidence (Dragan & Dragan, 2014, Hermans et. al., 2003).

1 Although some scholars would argue against placing metacognition and self-directed learning as a subset of self-regulation, I am choosing to do so in accordance/agreement with Avi Kaplan’s assertion that metacognition, self-regulation, and self-regulated learning theory are “subtypes of the same general abstract phenomenon of self-regulated action” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 483) While differentiating the two concepts is useful within the field of educational psychology, for the purpose of analyzing the internalization of neoliberal values (addressed later in the paper), aligning the two concepts is appropriate because both fulfill similar roles in Ontario education.
The combination of these two ideas is especially troubling, because the very “skills” which make the education system appear anxious and unstable are also the method for addressing anxious students. Reading between the lines of the 21st Century Competencies document, the new vision for Ontario includes a student who is not only academically successful, but also a student who feels confidence in both present and future success. Much like the initial citation of neoliberal companies as a primary influence on the documents, the turn to metacognition does not appear to hold much potential for truly creative, critical, and problem-solving practices that encourage ambiguity for the purpose of creating a more equitable world. However, given the findings of last chapter that opting out of an anxious education system is likely to damage the student more than hold the potential to create a better world, it is crucial to investigate how confidence and resistance influence each other in the post-21st Century Competencies education system.

Although a direct focus on student confidence represents a shift in Ontario education, attention to students’ mental awareness and thought process have been a feature of Ontario education since the beginning of the standardization movement. Given this history, it is important to ask, what is really ‘new’ about metacognition in the 21st Century Competencies document? And, moreover, does this this ‘new’ form of metacognition hold the potential for creating ambiguous identities while resisting the damaging effects of cruel optimism and slow death described in the previous chapter? In order to address these questions, I first give a partial history and genealogical analysis of the self-regulated learning theory’s relationship to metacognition using the 2012 and

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2 While Self-Directed Learning is the larger heading of the 21st Century Competencies document, the skill of metacognition is more frequently associated with lifelong learning and building confidence in students. Given the focus of this thesis on the aforementioned topic, an analysis of the relationship between self-directed learning and metacognition/ self-regulation will not be discussed at length. However, as a brief aside, some major differences between self-regulation and self-directed learning lies in the difference of origins between the two concepts. While self-directed learning is primarily associated with Adult Education, self-regulation originated as an offshoot of cognitive psychology (Saks & Leijen, 2014). As a result of this difference, a self-directed learner sets his/her own goals and formulates a plan for fulfilling these goals. In contrast, self-regulated learning involves a co-construction of goals with the teacher and is primarily concerned with “task execution” rather than addressing larger goals (Saks & Leijen, p. 192, 2014). It is not surprising, given the focus on globalization, that self-directed learning would be emphasized, as it aligns with larger goals of education, rather than short term personal goals (such as college or university).

3 Although self-regulation appears in Ministry of Education documents since the early 2000s, like metacognition, the term peaked in use in 2010 appearing in both the Growing Success document and the Arts curriculum document.
2016 Adolescent Literacy Guide (pre and post 21st Century Competencies).4 From these guides, I argue the purpose of metacognition changes from using self-regulation to create an ‘efficient,’ ‘expert’, and ‘flexible’ student identity in 2012 to metacognition using emotion to create a confident student in 2016. Given the incorporation of feeling into the 2016 definition of metacognition, I turn to emotional education scholars, Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas to help analyze how and why the post- 21st Century Competencies documents encourage emotional metacognition. While their analysis of emotion in education pertains to the emotional literacy curriculum in their respective time periods (1999 and 2005), Boler and Zembylas offer an analysis of how the program relates to crisis and standardization. Next, I turn to Steven M. Bialostok and Matt Aronson’s “Making Emotional Connections in the Age of Neoliberalism” (2016) as an explicit example of how metacognition and emotion function in the classroom pre-21st Century Competencies. Bringing these ideas together allows me to characterize how emotion functions within a post-21st Century Competencies document in order to argue that the later form of metacognition can provide a hopeful (used cautiously) prospect of progressive practice as it allows ambiguity to hold space in the classroom.

While I have previously defined a progressive education with the language of 21st Century Competencies as “critical,” “creative,” and “collaborative” in service of creating a more equitable world, the inclusion of emotions, alongside the conclusions of Chapter Two, refines this definition to include an emphasis on ambiguity (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3). Therefore, this chapter ends with a reflection on Megan Boler and Zembylas’s use of a “pedagogy of discomfort” as a counter to the problems of the metacognition (1999, p. 97; 2005, p. 174). With a pedagogy of discomfort, I consider how students are able to “in-habit positions and identities that are ambiguous” without costing them too much (Boler, 1999, p. 197). As the work of inhabiting ambiguous identities while unearthing emotions such as “anger” and “fear” works counter to the purpose of creating confident students in the classroom (Boler, 1999, p. 197), a pedagogy of discomfort is a more rigorous interpretation of the call for progressive education than 21st Century Competencies proposes with metacognitive strategies.

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4 These documents were chosen because they are an example of teacher best practice (with accompanying videos), that were released pre and post 21st Century Competencies document and contain a significant focus on metacognition.
3.2 Self-Regulated Learning, Metacognition, and the Subjugation of Post-Fordist Identity the Ontario Curriculum

Before arguing metacognition is an extension of self-regulated learning, it is useful to explain the history of the two terms. The concept of self-regulation was born out of the early 20th desire to have psychology operate as a science (Zimmerman, 2002). While self-regulation theory is first accredited to Albert Bandura, Barry Zimmerman is most often linked to self-regulation in education. Zimmerman expanded upon Bandura’s theories to argue self-regulated learning is “the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills” (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65). With an emphasis on using “mental abilities” for academic success, the concept of SRL established educational psychology as a major influence on curriculum policy in both the United States and Canada moving forward.

Metacognition is another term in educational psychology developed around the same time frame as self-regulated learning by theorist John Flavell (Livingston, 2003). Flavell’s definition of metacognition was “one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them,” and it was primarily concerned with cognitive knowledge independent of behavioral modification (Brown, 1978, p. 4). From Flavell’s definition, Ann Leslie Brown expanded the function of metacognition to include metacognitive skills, wherein the child is able to apply metacognition to problem solving and critical thinking (Brown, 1978). With Brown’s expansion of the function of metacognition to include more behavioral modification, the term ‘metacognition’ became a frequent synonym for self-regulated learning.

Although demonstrating the differences between self-regulated learning and metacognition may appear somewhat arbitrary, this connection has serious implications for students, given critiques that self-regulation is a tool for subjugating students into neoliberal identity. In “Critical Pedagogy and Neoliberalism: Concerns with Teaching Self-Regulated Learning” (2013), Stephen Vassallo is one of the first theorists to offer a significant criticism of teaching SRL amidst overwhelming praise and support of the theory. Vassallo’s article demonstrates how the school system uses SRL to produce identities that are not only “ideologically narrow,” but also work to privilege the middle-class values of individualization, goal setting, and personal achievement (Vassallo, 2013, p. 573). Vassallo ends his article with the suggestion that if SRL is
not used to encourage individualized “self-betterment” but is instead focused on collective goal setting practices “fixed on transforming the world to mitigate inequality” (2013, p. 576), it can in fact be used as an effective tool for encouraging critical consciousness in the classroom. In light of my previous chapter’s exploration of the way hope for a better world can lead to relations of cruel optimism combined with the 21st Century Competencies focus on collaboration for the purpose of “social cohesion” in workplace settings (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p.16), Vassallo’s overall conclusions about self-regulated learning may reinforce the same problems he critiques. However, despite the problems of Vassallo’s conclusion, he nonetheless highlights some of the key issues with self-regulated learning in schools.

While it is unusual for the Ministry of Education to mention self-regulation in tandem with metacognition⁵, this does not necessarily mean that the two terms are separate. As the language of self-regulation is similar to Brown’s definition of metacognition, one way to track the association between the Ministry of Education and self-regulation is through references to Brown in curriculum documents. While it is unusual for either Brown or Flavell to be directly cited in the majority of Ministry of Education documents⁶, educational theorist Arthur Costa, who relies on Brown’s definition of metacognition in her own work, is one of the most frequently referenced metacognition scholars in Ontario education. Given the frequency of Costa’s citations,¹ it is reasonable to conclude that self-regulation is a significant part of the Ontario education system.

In conjunction with direct or indirect references to Costa’s and Brown’s metacognition, the definition of metacognition in Ministry of Education documents also points to a connection between self-regulation and metacognition. For instance, with metacognition’s introduction into

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⁵ Although self-regulation is explicitly mentioned in a few Ministry of Education documents (The Arts (Ministry of Education, 2010a), Canadian and World Studies (Ministry of Education, 2013a), Social Studies/History and Geography (Ministry of Education, 2013b), Social Science and Humanities (Ministry of Education, 2013c), Think, Act, Feel (Ministry of Education, 2013d), Growing Success (Ministry of Education, 2010c)), all of these documents separate self-regulation from metacognition. This separation is most likely a result of the Growing Success document delegating self-regulated learning a learning skill.

⁶ Flavell is cited as the founder of metacognition in EduGAINS’ Adolescent Literacy Guide in 2008, and Brown is cited directly in What Works? Reach into Practice: A special edition of What Works? Research into Practice produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (Ministry of Education)

Ontario education via the *Interdisciplinary Studies* curriculum (2002), metacognitive “skills” encourage students to “evaluate [the] efficiency of their learning” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 36). The inclusion of “skills” related language to perform said evaluation—a term that is not only reminiscent of Brown’s definition of metacognition as “metacognitive skills”—also implies the use of self-regulation when situated under the larger curriculum expectation of “Implementation, Evaluation, Impacts, and Consequences” for the purpose of improving one’s “interdisciplinary products and activities” (2002, p. 36). The ‘masked’ connection between metacognition and self-regulated behavior continues as the popularity of the term increases in a variety of Ministry of Education documents. Reaching its peak usage between 2010-2012, the term appeared in the *Arts: The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9-10* (Ministry of Education, 2010a), *Health and Physical Education: The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8* (Ministry of Education, 2010b) curriculum documents, the new teacher induction programs, the literacy best practice in the *Adolescent Literacy Guide* (Ministry of Education, 2012a; Ministry of Education, 2016b), and most substantially, as a portion of *Growing Success* (Ministry of Education, 2010c)—the restructuring of assessment procedures for grades K-12—during this time. In these documents, metacognition is most frequently defined as “thinking about thinking” in the *Adolescent Literacy Guide* (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 24), *Growing Success* (Ministry of Education, 2010c, p. 13), *Physical Education and Health Grade 1-8 Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2010b). This central definition betrays its ‘innocuous’ language by insinuating self-regulatory action in the 2012 *Adolescent Literacy Guide*. This document presents two conflicting functions of metacognition on the first page of its subsection: its popular “thinking about thinking” definition (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 24) leads to “students taking active control over their thinking process so that they understand themselves as learners, they understand a given task, and they understand a variety of strategies and how to use them in a variety of situations” (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 13). “Taking active control” ties metacognition to self-regulation in practice because it expects students to alter their behavior from their reflections.

Although the previous few paragraphs tie self-regulating to metacognition, it is equally necessary to unpack how metacognitive practices encourage the internalization of neoliberal/post-Fordist values. As the *Adolescent Literacy Guide* includes both written information on the definition, purpose, function, and strategies of implementation for metacognition and Ministry of Education approved videos of teachers using metacognition in the classroom, it is a key medium for
understanding metacognition in practice. The 2012 Adolescent Literacy Guide prepares students (and later workers) for post-Fordist/neoliberal labor by encouraging the following identities: 1. the lifelong learner, who tirelessly pursues more knowledge and understanding in order to ‘better’ him or herself; 2. the ‘expert’ identity, with a strong understanding of their skill set; 3. a ‘flexible’ identity who is able to apply information to multiple areas of their life. These skills are important in the post-industrial / neoliberal economy because of the stress it places on “knowledge, communication, and aesthetics [being] the most important inputs and outputs of the economy” (Liagouras, 2005, p. 32). With the skill set of flexibility, lifelong learning, and expert knowledge, the student is better able to perform the responsibility of creating ideas, rather than having a more procedural relation to work.

One of the ways the 2012 ALG produces the identity of the lifelong learner is through the refusal of ‘not knowing’—or, more specifically, not being able to locate yourself on a ‘level’ of understanding. For example, within this framework, a student is ‘allowed’ to not know the full or correct answer; however, it becomes unacceptable to not understand why you are unable to understand, or to not have a goal to work towards understanding. Rather, the teacher has a list of suggestions, found in the subheading “Metacognition in the Classroom” in the ALG, which asks students, “What strategies am I using? What strategies do I need to use? (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 27), and it directs students towards a more acceptable answer than “I don’t know.” As such, metacognitive discourse prohibits the student who is unable to articulate their ideas or lack of understanding from thriving within the classroom. In this instance, the ‘bad’ student, the one who is not metacognitive, becomes the unteachable student because of their inability to locate their own misunderstanding. In contrast, the good, lifelong metacognitive student is able to enact the post-industrial ideal—they can locate, learn, and implement their knowledge, or lack of knowledge, in a more efficient manner.

This focus on lifelong learning and the progression of knowledge also influences how teachers structure their lessons. For instance, the ALG directs teachers to “ask students to write down the strategy they used after successfully completing an activity, especially if it was in an area in which they had not previously succeeded” (Ministry of Education, 2012a, p. 154-155). Positioning metacognitive reflection after the lesson/unit/assignment has been completed, rather than before or during the lesson/unit/assignment, reiterates to students that their knowledge is
completed or captured based on their personal narrative of understanding. The student’s successful ‘capturing’ of this knowledge is further assessed by a teacher, who grades a student’s ability to reflect on their own learning experience. This relationship to knowledge fixes a perception of knowing on a linear scale (e.g.: “before I didn’t know this; now I know because of these reasons”), which is, again, useful for the post-industrial worker, who is expected to sell and self-promote knowledge like a good or service.

Moving away from the document towards classroom use, the EduGAINS video about the different features of metacognition frequently calls for students to “own their learning” and become “experts” in different areas (Ministry of Education, 2012b). After their identification as an expert, the student shares their information with a designated group. As detailed in the previous paragraph, this understanding of owning knowledge is similar to the lifelong learner; however, in contrast to the lifelong learner, the EduGAINS video characterizes the expert as a more fleeting identity—a position in the classroom a handful of students pass to another group based on their personal assessment of a skill set. Despite the ‘momentary’ nature of the expert, this identity can lead to more lasting perceptions of an individual’s place in the classroom. If students consistently shy away from/ or own the expert identity it is likely they will internalize these self-evaluations. Further, while traditional letter or number grading systems provide both the student and the class with a perception of ‘rank’ in the classroom, the self-identified expert identity further publicizes and solidifies these ‘ranks.’ This relationship to metacognitive self-evaluation is especially pertinent for ALG’s target of adolescent learners, an age bracket that does not have the same ordering systems as secondary schools (academic, applied, locally developed). As a result, students in this age bracket already come to high school with an understanding of where they fit in the educational hierarchy. Connecting this ranking system back to the post-industrial/neoliberal economy, the expert identity not only understands his/her/their rank in the classroom, but he/she/they is/are also able to explicitly communicate their knowledge and implicitly communicate their position to the other students.

In connection with the expert identity, metacognition also encourages the internalization of the flexible learner who has a type of learning style, such as visual, kinesthetic, tactile, etc. (Ministry of Education, 2012a). The emphasis on “types” of learners is significant for two reasons. The first is that the video argues that if students understand their “type” of learning style, they are not
only more likely to extend their learning “beyond the parameters of the classroom” (2012b), but students are more likely to take risks with their learning. In reference to their learning style, one student on the EduGAINS video remarks, it can “take you out of your comfort zone...because I was pushed into different directions I wouldn’t have tried before” (2012b). While it is not my intention to undermine this student’s growth, it is important to note that applying or displaying information in new contexts is determined as ‘risky’ in this classroom space. This controlled risk-taking ties back into the flexible expert who is able to master a particular skill and use that skill in multiple different contexts. While the language of getting students “outside of their comfort” zone is intriguing, especially in reference to critical or difficult subject matter, this understanding of risk becomes dangerous when it only goes so far as the superficial internalization of adopting a prescribed learner identity.

3.3 Shifts in the purpose of Emotion from Emotional Literacy to Metacognition

While the previous paragraph details the relationship between self-regulation, metacognition, and the flexible/lifelong/expert learner in preparation for post-industrial economy, the 21st Century Competencies document produces a more complicated portrait of the purpose of metacognition given its focus on building student’s confidence. In this document, the language of metacognition shifts from “thinking about your thinking (Ministry of Education, 2012, p.24,) to “a feeling of knowing” (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 33). Given the breadth of definitions for metacognition discussed earlier in the chapter, one could easily dismiss this alteration as a change of writers on the publication team or a slight update in citation. I however, do not believe this shift in definition is the result of a ‘slight update,’ but rather it is an indication of a larger turn in Ontario education towards a focus on feeling and emotion as a result of the anxiety crisis detailed in Chapter One and Chapter Two of this thesis. This change in Ontario education also mirrors a larger trend in metacognitive research which shifts the focus from the skills of behavioral modification to the regulation of affect and emotion (Bialostok and Aronson, 2016). Although the integration of metacognition and emotion may reflect a newer understanding of the purpose of metacognition, this ‘new’ system strongly resembles an older paradigm in education--emotional intelligence and emotional literacy, whereby the “discourses of science and skills” are
“mobilized to regulate morality, emotions, and education” (Boler, 1999, p. 54). The addition of metacognition to include emotional regulation begs the question: given the similarity between the language and goals of emotional intelligence and metacognition, why is metacognition functioning as an extension of emotional literacy in the 21st Century Competencies and the Adolescent Literacy Guide (2016)? Further, and perhaps more importantly, can metacognitive practices operate as a strategy of resistance for anxious students?

As a partial answer to this question, it is useful to consider the function of emotional intelligence and emotional literacy in its initial inception and implementation in the late 1990s. Like metacognition, emotional literacy connects to the language of crisis; however, while metacognition is a response to an education system in crisis, emotional literacy focuses on the students in crisis who need the school to protect them from the violence and harm of the outside world (Boler, 1999). As a solution to “youth in crisis” (Boler, 1999, p.86), Boler argues that the education system implements emotional literacy programs so that students learn to self-regulate for the purpose of social harmony (Boler, 1999, p. 89). In doing so, the emotionally literate student can address serious crises such as “[w]ar, domestic violence and wife battering, corporal punishment in schools” (Boler, 1999, p. 89), without the needing more expensive resources (counsellors, security guards, decreased class sizes, etc.) (Boler, 1999, p. 87). Perhaps more insidious than failing to invest in proper resources to protect students from the crises listed above, emotional literacy also capitalizes on the “idea that schools must provide moral guidance where families are failing. Each program reflects strands of American discourses of a humanist model of cooperation and democracy, and the ideology of neoliberalism and self-control as the seat of virtue” (Boler, 1999, p. 91). Ultimately, the emotional literacy framework uses self-regulation as a method for addressing which emotions are appropriate for each classroom (and later work) situation.

While emotional literacy provides some insight for the way “a feeling of knowing” operates within Ontario schools (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 33), it is important to note that emotional intelligence and emotional literacy, along with Boler’s analysis, were conceived before the standardization movement. With this change in the structure of education, the way self-regulation operates through emotion has changed as well. Extending Megan Boler’s analysis of emotional intelligence into the post-standardization era, Michalinos Zembylas argues that
emotional intelligence uses self-regulation as a mechanism for how students should “perform emotions in appropriate or normal ways” (2005, p. 162) in a postmodern education system that values “efficiency, cultural assimilation, moral control, and normalization” (2005, p. 162). Zembylas’s conception of emotional literacy, while drawing heavily on Boler’s analysis, differs in both methodology and focus. In regard to methodology, Boler argues that emotional self-regulation is an example of governmentality and pastoral power, whereby the individual policies “his or her emotions in the interest of neoliberal, globalized capitalism” (Boler, 1999, xix). In contrast, Zembylas combines Foucault’s concept of governmentality with his theory of “technologies of the self,” such that “individuals experience, understand, and express their emotions in ‘appropriate’ ways, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of purity, wisdom, or perfection” (2005, p. 169). This focus on “purity, wisdom, or perfection” is similar to Boler’s assertion that emotional literacy regulates morality (1999); however, Zembylas’ use of this morality functions as a roadmap to self-actualization alongside the social harmony both he and Boler are critical of in their analysis.

In comparing the two authors, both are critical of the way the education system uses emotional control to produce competitive workers in a globalized and neoliberal world; however, Zembylas’s focus on “normal” or correct emotions within the school environment makes sense alongside the increasing reliance on statistics to define “normal” achievement in schools (2005, p. 162). In addition, Zembylas’s focus on technologies of the self to use appropriate emotions to achieve “purity, wisdom, or perfection” aligns with the impact of standardization movement (2005, p. 169). As I demonstrate in chapter two, when students become increasingly anxious about the education system and their place within it, they are more likely to desire the cruel relation of an education system that can create “purity, wisdom, or perfection” for the purpose of a better world (Zembylas, 2005, p. 169). Additionally, “purity, wisdom, or perfection” closely aligns Zembylas’s reading of emotional literacy with the 21st Century Competencies’ version of the metacognition for the purpose of “self-regulation skills and ethical and emotional awareness” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 16). However, what separates Zembylas’ analysis from metacognition is that emotional literacy does not mention the language of confidence and anxiety.
In comparing how Boler and Zembylas help explain metacognition’s function in Ontario education, Boler’s analysis of emotional literacy is useful for understanding how emotion functions in response to crisis and Zembylas’ analysis of performativity in emotional literacy more accurately responds to changes in education brought on by the standardization movement. Despite the overlap between these theorists, neither fully address the relationship between how the emotions of anxiety and confidence operate in the globalized and neoliberal classroom. This gap in scholarship gestures towards why metacognition partially engulfs the function of emotional literacy in Ontario curriculum; emotional literacy programs explicitly teach/reflect on specific emotions for the purpose of social harmony (Boler, 1999) or “purity, wisdom, or perfection” (Zembylas, 2005, p. 169), while metacognition implicitly ‘harnesses’ the emotions produced by the standardized education system to prepare students for solving the anxious and “messy” and “complex” problems of a globalized world (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3).

3.4 Anxiety, Confidence, and Metacognition

In their article “Making Emotional Connections in the Age of Neoliberalism” (2016), Steven M. Bialostok and Matt Aronson partially address the beforementioned gaps in scholarship by analyzing how metacognition transforms ‘negative’ emotions (e.g. sadness, grief, confusion) into ‘useful’ knowledge in neoliberalism. In this article, Bialostok and Aronson make claims about the function of metacognition similar to Boler and Zembylas’ arguments about emotional intelligence— all three theorists argue that emotions do not originate in the individual (as further addressed in chapter one) but rather operate as a source of control to produce neoliberal workers. Separating Bialostok and Aronson from Boler and Zembylas is their focus on the implicit way metacognition is modeled (rather than explicitly taught), and their demonstration of how metacognition negotiates negative emotions (such as confusion, sadness, and grief) to produce students who are “active, empowered agents in their own development—people who learn and people who feel” (Bialostok and Aronson, 2016, p. 101). Understanding metacognition’s ability to encourage working through negative emotions is key to understanding the difference between emotional literacy and metacognition. While Boler and Zembylas’ analysis demonstrates how the classroom excludes certain ‘negative’ emotions, Bialostok and Aronson’s ethnographic analysis shows how a “nationally recognized” teacher consultant uses metacognition to transform the emotions associated with death to teach her kindergarten classroom reading strategies (2016, p.
For example, during the teacher’s ‘think aloud’ reading, the teacher cries while the story to her own personal experiences:

[student] TANYA: Why are you crying?

TEACHER LIZ: Why am I crying? That’s a really great question. Because you know why?

CHILD: It’s sad.

TEACHER LIZ: It was sad, and you know what? When you make connections with a book like I just did —

CHILD: It’s sad.

TEACHER LIZ: It is sad. CHILD: I made a connection too.

TEACHER LIZ: But you know what? When you make a connection with a story and it reminds you of something really, really special in your own life, it helps you to understand that story much better. And you know what? When I look at this picture right here I know—

MILES: What it feels like.

TEACHER LIZ: —what it feels like, exactly Miles. I know. (2016, p. 110)

Here, the teacher mobilizes grief into productive connections to the text. This use of metacognition aligns Liz with the 2012 ALG definition of metacognition, in which the flexible, lifelong learner is able to know and identify their emotions and connect this knowledge to understand the book more completely. Here, emotions—like the subject matter—are knowable and usable.

Within a post-21st Century Competencies context, Bialostok and Aronson’s analysis of the function of metacognition becomes less comprehensive. While Bialostok and Aronson are critical of the way metacognition transforms negative emotions into ‘expert’ neoliberal/post-Fordist knowledges, they do not address the dual function of metacognition in 21st Century
Competencies as a mechanism for producing confidence from anxiety. Further, while they are careful to note that the article is written before the Common Core, this assertion is primarily tied to the freedom that Liz is granted in the classroom. They locate the potential problem of their reading of Liz in the post-Common Core era as one where she does not have the flexibility to determine her own curriculum, not in the fact emotions operate differently in the post-Common Core era of education. On another slightly different track, Bialostok and Aronson also fail to recognize the gendered, classist, or racist assumptions that accompany emotions in the classroom. While Bialostok and Aronson are careful to detail Liz’s transition from an affluent neighborhood to her current classroom in “a school where 93 percent of the children receive free and/or reduced-price lunch” (2016, p. 101), they do not go so far as to analyze how emotion operates differently as a result of this position. Although the main focus of Bialostok and Aronson’s article is to detail their concerns with metacognition in the classroom, the ultimate purpose of this chapter is to detail if there is potential for students to inhabit ambiguous identities for the purpose of creating a better world. As such, the Bialostok and Aronson’s “Making Emotional Connections in the Age of Neoliberalism” proves a transformation of emotions via metacognition, but it does not fully address the way metacognition functions in the post-21st Century Competencies documents.

3.5 Post-21st Century Competencies and the Adolescent Literacy Guide 2016

At the end of the previous section, I argued that the way metacognition operates in a post-21st Century Competencies documents is fundamentally different than the world Liz, Bialostok and Aronson address—not because of the changes to curriculum brought on by the Common Core, but rather changes in the way emotion operates in the classroom in a post Common Core/21st Century Competencies education system. While the 2016 Adolescent Literacy Guide still incorporates self-regulation for the purpose of preparing students for the post-industrial economy, it replaces a focus on risk taking with an emphasis on assisting the academically struggling student. For instance, when talking about why teachers should integrate metacognition into their pedagogy, Kim Crawford, the featured teacher in the EduGAINS video, states, “If I were to give students just one way to get to where it is that I’m hoping they’ll go, I would check
out if I was the learner” (Ministry of Education, 2016c). The focus of metacognition on the “checked out” is also made evident by the subject of the EduGAINS video—a grade 9 applied English classroom (Ministry of Education, 2016c). In targeting ‘struggling’ learners instead of the ‘risk taking student,’ the focus of metacognition shifts to address the anxious system outlined in chapter one and two.

Another way metacognition operates differently in the new literacy videos is the focus on self-advocacy. In regard to this concept, the teacher states, “the more a student understands about how he or she learns the strategies that work for that particular student, the more that they can identify that, um the better they will be able to advocate for themselves in any situation” (Ministry of Education, 2016c). This focus on learning strategy is different from the one suggested in the previous video—while 2012 ALG suggests identifying learners as types, the 2016 guide suggests strategies for being more metacognitive. The purpose of this strategy is not to “know themselves,” but rather to be a “self-advocate” (2016c). This language of self-advocacy relates to the transformation of an anxious student to a confident one through metacognition practices because it does not expect the ‘expert’ student to learn information to disseminate to the class, but rather encourages students to transform their feelings of anxiety into a more productive strategy. Here, the focus is on moving away from a position of helplessness. In this instance, the 2016 version of metacognition is closer to Boler and Zembylas reading of the function of the U.S Department of Educations’ use of emotional literacy to minimize or exclude certain emotions from the classroom; however, in contrast to the emotional literacy curriculum, in which negative emotions are addressed and then minimized and excluded from the classroom space, metacognition bypasses the ‘conversations’ of these feelings and redirects students to a more confident position.

Another significant difference between teacher practice in 2012 ALG and the 2016 ALG is the way time functions in each of the documents. While the 2012 highlights the need for teachers to give proper wait time to students to reflect on their work, Kim Crawford continually asks students, “What is your next step?” (Ministry of Education, 2016c) Forward thinking, rather than reflection on past work, is a significant change from the 2012 function of metacognition. As emotion relies on past associations in order to make connections to future relations, this language connected to feeling is especially troubling. In this case, a “a feeling of knowing” more
accurately entails a disassociation of an anxious relation (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 33). This focus on moving forward rather than looking backwards is in line with the Kim Crawford’s student’s comment at the end of the video, “I’m going to continue re-reading because I’m getting better and better” (Ministry of Education, 2016c). This emphasis on getting “better and better” is different from the lifelong learner identity of 2012 in that it does not encourage learning more and more new information, but rather encourages building on information one already knows. This difference is slight and does not mean to suggest that in implementing metacognition students should not learn new things. Rather, I am suggesting that with this new form of metacognition, knowledge acquisition always leads back to self-improvement, as opposed to knowledge acquisition in 2012, where metacognition was used to lead towards new understanding in new contexts. This orientation towards continual improvement alongside quick, forward focusing improvement does not leave time for students to feel anxious about their work, and therefore they must be getting “better and better” (Ministry of Education, 2016c)

3.6 Resistance against Neoliberalism and a Pedagogy of Discomfort

Both Megan Boler’s *Feeling Power* and Zembylas’ “Subverting the Myths About Emotional Literacy in the Post-Modern Era” end with a call for a “pedagogy of discomfort” as a counter to the use of emotions in the classroom for purely market purposes. For Boler and Zembylas, a pedagogy of discomfort works against emotions being “reduced to an individualized phenomenon” that “functions as a mode for continued social control” (Boler, 1999, p. 83). Although Zembylas’ definition of a pedagogy of discomfort includes a reference to Foucault’s call to resist normalization (2005), the function of a pedagogy of discomfort for both theorist is almost identical. In both defining a pedagogy of discomfort and outlining its purpose, Boler writes:

> I begin by defining a pedagogy of discomfort as both an invitation to inquiry as well as a call to action...An ethical aim of a pedagogy of discomfort is willingly to inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self. My hope is that we are able to extend our ethical language and sense of possibilities beyond a reductive model of “guilt vs. innocence.” (1999, p. 176)
Summarizing these ideas further, Boler argues that “what we stand to gain” from a pedagogy of discomfort are the following ideas (1999, p. 181): bearing witness without “static truth or fixed certainty” (1999, p. 186), “avoiding the binary trap of innocence and guilt” (1999, p. 187), engaging in “collective self-reflection regarding the reasons for our emotions” (1999, p. 191)--especially when these emotions inhabit more ‘difficult’ emotions, such as anger, and finally it offers a method for inhabiting “positions and identities that are ambiguous” (1999, p. 197). With a pedagogy of discomfort, both students and teachers are asked to suspend traditional understandings of their role in the classroom as well as question their beliefs to create an education system that resists neoliberalism.

One of the things that is most intriguing about a pedagogy of discomfort is that it subverts the use of emotions as a tool to produce neoliberal workers and instead repositions emotions as a gateway to critical conversations and social change. While I have a strong desire for metacognition’s emotional turn to operate in the same critical capacity, I am weary of suggesting that a pedagogy of discomfort can address the shortfalls of metacognitive practices in the same manner as emotional literacy. The first, and perhaps most obvious difference between the two pedagogies is that metacognition is a tool of self-regulation while emotional literacy is a program for teaching students to think through their emotions in the classroom. While Zembylas and Boler are critical of how “emotional literacy” is co-opted into self-regulatory behavior when put into practice, both are confident that emotional literacy has the potential for enacting a pedagogy of discomfort within the curriculum of their respective time periods (1999, 2005). Since metacognition is a tool for students to learn more efficiently, teachers do not have this same flexibility to interpret the use of metacognition as emotional literacy. Zembylas argues that the vague nature of emotional literacy is partially why he sees potential in its critical capacity (2005). In contrast, documents like the ALG provide prescriptive use for metacognition. In order to encourage a pedagogy of discomfort within metacognition’s prescriptive usage, perhaps it is necessary for a teacher to combine a medium in which a student feels comfortable expressing their ideas, with discomforting or challenging subject matter. While a ‘comforting’ learning strategy may become ‘discomforting’ based on the subject matter it is applied to, a discomforting strategy could also work as an entry point to work through difficult/challenging subject matter. Regardless of how this relation operates in a teacher’s particular class, the very acknowledgment of the relationship should preclude implementing a pedagogy of discomfort into the classroom.
Emotional literacy and metacognition also differ in their relation to assessment practices. While Boler argues in implementing a pedagogy of discomfort in conjunction with “emotional literacy,” students should not be “graded or evaluated on whether or how they choose to “transform” (1999, p.199); however, metacognition cannot be separate from assessment practices because of its role in “assessment as learning” in the Growing Success document (Ministry of Education, 2010c, p. 27). Despite not including “assessment as learning” as a separate formal mark, a metacognitive component is often attached to summative assessment and influences a student’s overall grade based on their ability to articulate their transformation and progress to the teacher. In order to align metacognition’s function in assessment practices with Boler’s intent to exclude “transformation” from a formal marking scheme, perhaps it is necessary to consider metacognitive reflection only on assignments with a ‘creative’ or abstract component, one where “better and better” is more difficult to define (Ministry of Education, 2016b). Within a math or science context, it could mean having students reflect on problems where there is not a ‘neat’ answer (whole number, single solution, etc.)—a notoriously ‘discomforting’ problem for students in this specific classroom space. In an English classroom, this could mean attaching an artistic component to represent different aspects of their understanding of a semester long reflection on opened ended question. As artistic representations make it more difficult to argue something is “better” but rather emphasize change, this tool could be useful in disassociating traditional understandings of progress and transformation in a neoliberal and standardized education system. Using metacognition for student’s reflection on the emotion of discomfort, change, or uncertainty, rather than their resolutions to this feeling, may allow for the implementation of “creativity” and “messy” aspects of the 21st Century Competencies documents to function progressively without being usurped for the edict of continual improvement under neoliberalism.

Another challenge to address when approaching the 2016 iteration of metacognition through the lens of a pedagogy of discomfort is its emphasis on encouraging an “ambiguous and flexible sense of self” (Boler, 1999, p. 176). Despite their cooption into neoliberal ideology, both the 2012 iteration of metacognition and Bialostok and Aronson’s depiction of Liz’s classroom provide space, however limited, for ambiguity through their focus on new knowledge acquisition and “risk taking” (Ministry of Education, 2012b). As the 2016 version of metacognition focuses on “self-improvement,” the ‘building’ of the self-aligns more accurately with the passive “self-
reflection” that Boler warns against, as it runs “the risk of reducing historical complexities to an overly tidy package that ignores our mutual responsibility to one another” (1999, p. 177). In order to address this component of 2016’s metacognition while remaining faithful to the intent of a pedagogy of discomfort, I would argue that a teacher must rethink their approach to goal setting practices. If a teacher were to spend time at the beginning of the year on collective and critical goals for the entire class, such as addressing a semester long question like the one suggested in the previous paragraph, the teacher will be able to subvert some of the problems of the 2016 version of metacognition. In undermining metacognition’s intended function to assess personal growth and achievement towards an individual goal, a teacher may encourage a classroom environment where feelings of success were not limited to individual merit.

While each of these differences between the 2016 version metacognition and emotional literacy present a challenge for incorporating a pedagogy of discomfort into a metacognitive framework, they do not touch on the more significant problem of implementing a pedagogy of discomfort within a post-21st Century Competencies crisis-defined education system—addressing the dual function of the metacognition to not only encourage more efficient learning practices, but also create confident students in the classroom (arguably, as a result of an anxious education system). Further, in addition to addressing anxious students in the 2016 ALG, metacognition is proven to help students marginalized by race, learning ability, and low achievement succeed in the classroom (Rampp & Guffey, 1999; King 1986; Black & Williams, 1998; Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002; Shamir & Lifshitz, 2013). Therefore, even if incorporating a pedagogy of discomfort into metacognitive pedagogy may lead to changing the structures which oppress these marginalized students in the first place, what does it mean to ‘discomfort’ the strategies which allow marginalized students to feel more comfortable and confident in a discomforting environment? Phrased differently, is the cost of integrating Boler and Zembylas’ “pedagogy of discomfort” with metacognitive practices too high?

One way to consider if a pedagogy of discomfort is asking too much is to reflect on the intended audience of pedagogy of discomfort in relation to the demographic of students in a particular classroom. While Boler indicates that a pedagogy of discomfort is directed towards all students for the purpose of deconstructing the binary between “guilt vs. innocence” (Boler, 1999, p. 187) via honoring the “relation to others” and their “personal and cultural histories and material
conditions” through developing “genealogies of one’s positionalities and emotional resistances” (Boler, 1999, p. 178), the audience of a pedagogy of discomfort is more often directed at discomforting privileged (e.g., rich, white, male, heterosexual) identities in a university setting. This argument is further supported by Boler mentioning the destabilization of white identity five different times throughout her piece (2005, p. 176, p.178, p. 185, p. 186). Thus, although the desired outcome for this pedagogy is deconstructing binaries, I would argue that Boler implicitly advocates more privileged students being more ‘discomforted’ than other more marginalized students. Pointing out the direction of Boler’s article is not intended to critique her focus on white identity in constructing her pedagogy of discomfort, rather, it is to draw attention who can pay the price of being discomforted in the classroom.

While the aim of a pedagogy of discomfort is more often directed towards privileged, white identities, this does not necessarily indicate that a pedagogy of discomfort is not ‘worth’ the cost for all students in the classroom. As both a pedagogy of discomfort and lateral agency argue that inhabiting ambiguous or interruptive identities is at the heart of resistance to neoliberalism, I strongly believe that questioning how to incorporate ambiguity that engages with confidence is central to fulfilling the potential of the “critical,” “creative,” and “collaborative” skill set identified in the opening pages of the Ministry of Education’s new vision (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3). However, I think that there needs to be a middle ground between the comfort self-interruption offers in lateral agency and the anxiety a pedagogy of discomfort can create for students. Boler gets close to discussing this tension in the final pages of her text. She writes,

It matters a great deal how the educator invites students to engage in collective witnessing. It may be that an educator needs to “share” the suffering and vulnerability to explicitly discuss the pedagogies of one’s own emotional challenges. How we speak, how we listen, when and how to “comfort” one another matters a great deal. To further understand a pedagogy of discomfort, we need analyses of the “politics of listening.” One fear I have is that we don’t, systematically, learn to listen very well to one another. Thus, we risk creating pain within the pedagogical process, layered on top of what is already a difficult and vulnerable enterprise. The best antiracist and antisexist work I have studied and seen in action is not about confrontation but rather a mutual exploration (1999, p. 199).
In light of this advice for educators implementing a pedagogy of discomfort, metacognition may be used as a vehicle for listening to students differently and alleviating a student’s personal anxiety for the purpose of allowing collective discomfort to hold space in the classroom. While the suggestion of listening to your students for the creation of a classroom community may appear to position this concluding section with the generic advice of almost every teacher book, when incorporated with a 2016 version of metacognition and a pedagogy of discomfort within a crisis-defined education system, listening takes on a different role. In this instance, metacognition can ‘listen’ to a student’s private understanding of their own confidences and anxieties without having the teacher make assumptions about their comfort/discomfort.

At the end of the chapter two, I suggest that we must believe that Ontario education can offer more to students than a “reprieve” from slow death (Berlant, 2011, p. 117). While metacognition can be a very dangerous pedagogical tool if implemented uncritically, I believe the potential for it to encourage ambiguous and creative goal setting techniques and its ability to create opportunities for listening to students’ anxiety is a step towards this better education system. If it is too much to expect individual students to hold discomfort on their own, perhaps the reason why we can remain hopeful about a 21st Century Competencies education system is because of the space it offers for educators to encourage students to function as a unit or classroom community for collective, rather than individual growth, in a way that the outside world cannot expect.
Conclusion

This thesis draws attention to the tensions within Ontario’s new vision to prepare students to solve unknowable “messy, complex problems” in order to ‘compete’ in a “globally connected, and technologically intensive world” (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 3). With explicitly neoliberal language such as “competitive,” “globally connected,” and “technologically intensive” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3), it is unsurprising that the document references companies such as P21 and OECD as its inspiration, as scholars critique both organizations for their alignment with neoliberal values (Epstein, 2005; Theodore & Peck, 2012; Sturges, 2015; Patterson, 2015). However, what is unusual about this document is that its suggested skill set appears to counter the goals of neoliberalism. Instead of advocating for pedagogy rooted in individualism and competition, the document instead argues for students to possess strong “critical thinking and problem solving” skills; to be “innovative, creative, entrepreneurial,” and “communicative;” to have a “growth mindset” with “metacognitive” capabilities; and to engage in “local, global, and digital citizenship” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 46). With the exception of “entrepreneurial” skills, the collaborative nature of these competencies appears to hold the potential for a progressive education untethered from neoliberal influence. The discrepancy between the two sets of values connects to another tension in the opening statement—expecting students to occupy confident, higher level thinking skills (critical thinking, problem solving, innovative), while operating in response to an anxious vision to solve “messy” and “unknowable” problems of the future (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 3). This relationship between progressive vs. neoliberal and confidence vs. crisis is at the heart of this thesis, and like a rope pulled in four directions, loosening the slack on any of the four concepts will destabilize the other three. This imagery is in service of thinking about the way opposition between these ideas are mobilized in the new vision of Ontario education via the public’s impression or feeling about the current state of education. While these ideas have been held in tension since the beginning of the standardization movement, the 21st Century Competencies document reflects a new relation towards these sets of oppositions because of its increasingly skewed reliance on anxiety as the primary structuring force in education. Although anxiety and crisis have been used to instigate change in education much longer than the 21st Century Competencies (Basu, 2004), this document’s relationship to anxiety is unique because it is
woven into Ontario’s new vision—a feature which influences the purpose of education for all stakeholders.

In my first chapter I introduced the connection between anxiety and education to argue that public confidence shapes the goals of the education system in both the United States and Canada. This process is intimately connected to how the public feels about student success on standardized testing during different times over the last twenty years. As such, the standardized test creates boundaries for how the public should relate to the education system as a whole. Connected to the relationship between public emotion and success on the standardized test is another trend in U.S/Ontario education: as public confidence increases, the Ministry of Education/Department of Education produces documents which focus on ‘short-term’ success for students in either post-secondary education or the workplace. In contrast, when the education system is positioned ‘in crisis,’ the Ministry of Education produces documents that focuses on success in global competition. When applying this relationship to the U.S turn in Canadian education as illustrated by the 21st Century Competencies document, I argue that the Ministry of Education integrates U.S companies such as P21 into their vision in order to create the conditions for change (engendering an education system and world in crisis), while relying on the ‘confidence’ of the U.S education system in 2015.

The first half of Chapter Two investigates why a crisis-defined education system produces goals focused on globalization and considers how the tension between progressive and neoliberal aspects of the curriculum help shape this relationship. In this chapter, I integrate Mario Di Paolantonio’s analysis of how increased competition in schools creates an anxious relation of cruel optimism (2016), whereby a person’s desire for something—in this case personal or national success—is the very thing that keeps them from achieving it (Berlant, 2011). As an anxiously competitive Ontario education becomes increasingly ‘cruel,’ or put differently, as Ontario increases pressure on students who already feel concern over public education’s ability to produce the ‘good life’ for them, the desire for national success in the global market increases as well. Although I don’t mean to suggest that there is a one-to-one relation between the two concepts, the pull of an anxious education creates a desire for globalized ideas because the collective and vague success of the distant future produces relief from an individual’s failure in the more immediate present.
In the second half of Chapter Two, I investigated the material consequences of the relationship of ‘cruel optimism’ described above. Using Berlant’s reading of the obesity crisis a model for arguing certain bodies are ‘sacrificed’ in capitalism to maintain the good life fantasy, I argued that the Ministry of education engages in a similar relation by sacrificing the minds of certain students (Mayo, 2005). This relation operates through the Ministry of Education’s emphasis on autonomous choice, such that students desire to have complete control over their educational career, despite neoliberal rationality severely limiting their future options. This management of student populations through “buropower” becomes even more concerning when connected to the media misrepresentation of a student’s suffering as an extraordinary crisis, rather than an ordinary discomfort or “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant, 2011, p. 101). Related to crisis ordinariness, I use Berlant’s reading of the media’s function in crisis to argue that student agency is further diminished by the disproportioned ‘crisis’ because it calls for ‘heroic’ or dramatic actions of agency. This form of response crisis creates a dangerous set of relations for those who are already marginalized by the school system. The chapter ends with a partial rejection of applying Berlant’s concluding section, “lateral agency” (Berlant, 2011, p. 18), or the action of suspending identity to counter the suffering of slow death. As lateral agency suggests that the best a student can hope for is merely getting by, I question if students can partially invoke lateral agency by occupying ambiguous identities, while still building towards a future they actively desire.

With a focus on the possibility for students to inhabit ambiguous identities within crisis- defined 21st Century Competencies framework, Chapter Three analyzes the impact of the document on classroom practice. As metacognition is a prominent component of education both before and after the release of 21st Century Competencies and a term connected to building confidence in the classroom (Dragan & Dragan, 2014, Hermans et. al., 2003, Spada, Georgiou & Wells, 2010) I use this pedagogical tool as an entry to make claims about Ontario education’s ability to foster ambiguous identities in the classroom. Given metacognition’s ties to increasing student confidence, I consider how this relationship factors into the differing definitions from 2012 to 2016: “thinking about your thinking” (Ministry of Education, 2012) vs “a feeling of knowing” (Ministry of Education, 2016b). With this change in definition, I investigate the similarities of the new definition of metacognition to an older invocation of emotion in education—emotional literacy. The latter half of chapter three considers which aspects of this new definition of
metacognition allow for a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler, 1999, p. 97; Boler, 2005, p. 174) a progressive answer to the neoliberal implications of the emotional literacy curriculum. Paying special attention to the way discomfort could disrupts feelings of confidence for those marginalized by the education system, I end the chapter with a reflection on the tension between lateral agency not asking enough of students in education, and a pedagogy of discomfort ‘costing’ students too much.

After summarizing each of these chapters, I am left wanting to return to Kathleen Wynne’s desire to divest interest in EQAO testing (Gordon, 2017). If we could get rid of the EQAO, a conceivable suggestion given Wynne’s announcement, could we also get rid of the desire for standardized measures of knowledge, and encourage a wider, albeit more ambiguous, version of success? This formulation of education would certainly ease tensions over the ‘amount’ of ambiguity students can bear at the heart of the conflict between a pedagogy of discomfort and lateral agency (Berlant, 2011, p. 18). Given Chapter Three’s conclusion to focus on creative and collaborative goal setting practices, would it not just be easier to divest focus on definable and measurable ‘end goals,’ as they are perhaps the true deterrent to the progressive aspects of the 21st Century Competencies document? Put simply, is this the solution to the anxious crisis-defined education system we have been searching for?

This conception of education, while intriguing, is complicated by the way standardized testing over the last twenty years has shaped our desires for how education should function. Even if Wynne (had she remained in office) dismissed the EQAO test entirely, she would still have to contend with the anxiety and desires attached to the standardized test that have shaped the education system since the inception of the standardizing movement. As the PISA test redrew the boundary of public access to education, alongside changing expectations about the purpose and function of the education system, our current educational system must attend to these changes with or without a physical standardized test. While the public might collectively recognize that the standardized test is an outdated assessment practice, they are not ready to let go of the notion that there is an assessment practice that can ‘truly’ assess student progress and give all students a chance for success.
In many ways, the 21st Century Competencies document is a negotiation of the public’s reaction to the failure of standardized testing to fulfill two different promises for students in education: 1. The failure of the test to perform a fair assessment that would not only mitigate inequality in the education system but also reestablish Western education’s preeminent status on the world stage; 2. The secondary failure of the response to the problems of the standardized testing system (NCLB or EQAO) to capture an authentically personalized representation of a student’s work without compromising the rigor of standardized education. While it could be argued that standardized and personalized assessments are polar opposites—whereby uncompromising standards are positioned in opposition to flexible and personal definitions of success—anxiety ties all large-scale testing procedures, regardless of the form or score, to increasing globalization and competition. This is not necessarily to suggest that anxiety is the only component of education that turns authentic, rigorous, and fair assessments for the purpose creating a more equitable education system into examples of busnocratic management and slow death suffering; however, I will suggest that anxiety over the state of education is partially what allows progressive principles like creativity and critical thinking to turn into prescriptive skills for the post-Fordist worker.

The standardized test has created a desire for conflicting educational assessments—a large scale test that is fair, rigorous, standardized, flexible, and personalized—and as a result, these desires are now a fundamental part of today’s educational landscape in both the United States and Canada. As such, an educator has the responsibility to understand that it is not as easy as merely switching from a focus on standardized testing to a focus on ‘critical’ and ‘creative’ thought in the classroom. As Berlant shows us, students endure slow death to hold on to the contradictions inherent in the standardized test for the possibility of education leading to both the good world and the good life.

The recognition of this tension centralizes pedagogical tools like metacognition in the 21st Century Competencies framework because of the possibility it offers to ease a pedagogy of discomfort into an already uncomfortable classroom setting. While Berlant argues that we cannot expect those who are “doggy paddling” towards survival to give up their blueprints for success (Berlant, 2011, p. 117), metacognition may be able to ease the transform towards a new relation in education without encouraging anxiety to transition progressive practice into a desire for
neoliberal markers of success. Thus, an optimistic reading (perhaps cruelly so) of the 21st Century Competencies document is that for all its problematic neoliberal implications, it also appears to address the fading blueprint of the 20th Century education system—one where a high school diploma and a post-secondary degree meant a stable career—alongside the public understanding that the education system is partially responsible for failing to prepare students for an alternative ‘post-industrial’ future.
References

Introduction


Chapter 1


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Chapter 2


Chapter 3


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Conclusion


