Confronting Education In a Time of Complexity, Chaos, and Collapse

A Manifesto

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Preamble:

> *"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.*
>
> *"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."*
>
> *— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring*

Over the last few years, I've been immersing myself in readings, research, and conversations about the "metacrisis," the many challenges that humanity faces as we enter the second quarter of the 21st Century. The growing consensus of those who track and think deeply about the complex changes the world is going through right now is that we are entering a very tenuous phase of life on this planet. The climate catastrophe is just getting started. Biodiversity is declining, as is the general health of the planet as well as the millions of species of life that inhabit it. We are increasingly disconnected from one another and Nature in general. And the window for "fixing" our problems to avoid the most profound impacts is closing quickly.

Engaging in these spaces and discussions about our near future has been extremely difficult. As the title of this piece suggests, complexity, chaos, and collapse are in the offing. And yet, what I've learned has also been both fascinating and compelling. It's taken me to places that I haven't necessarily wanted to go, creating a great deal of discomfort and sadness as well as inspiration and curiosity. It has changed almost everything about how I orient my existence in the world at this moment.

In that vein, this journey has also helped me clarify the work I want to do as I begin to wind down my career of over 40 years in education. In short, it is to create serious, supportive spaces and experiences for those who are ready to grapple with these complex and difficult new realities, to help build our collective

capacity for honesty, courage, and resilience, and to imagine together what we might do to prepare our students and ourselves for the difficult times coming at us.

What Do We Believe?

That work can't be done in a vacuum, however. It requires a clear articulation on the part of all of us of what exactly we believe about our current situation, especially in the face of so much uncertainty and disruption. Personally, it feels more important than ever to be clear about what I believe, to share those beliefs transparently, and to act in coherence with those beliefs. What do I believe about the state of the world right now? About the institution of education and schooling? About what kind of future is emerging? And how do I act accordingly?

I think it's important for each of us as individuals to grapple with these questions, but I'd argue it's equally if not more important right now for organizations to do so as well, school communities in particular. To put it bluntly, the vast majority of school communities around the world have been turning away from, ignoring, and/or actively denying the harsh realities of this moment. They have lacked the courage to fully unpack and interrogate the implications of these new realities on their legacy systems and practices. In doing so, they are leaving our students ill-prepared not just to negotiate what's coming, but to be equipped to mitigate the impacts. Full stop.

> *"The vast majority of school communities around the world have been turning away from, ignoring, and/or actively denying the harsh realities of this moment."*

So, I've written this personal manifesto for three reasons. First, to help me clarify my own thinking in this moment of such upheaval and confusion. Second, to serve as a model for other individuals and institutions to frame and share their own belief statements should they choose to do so. (And I hope many of you will.) And finally, to

introduce the discussions that I intend to provoke with small cohorts of "future serious" educators (and others) beginning February 2025. ([More details on that here](.).)

I've framed this manifesto in the broad context of "education," meaning all of those institutions and individuals who are engaged in helping our children be prepared for the future that awaits them. This, of course, means almost everyone, but I'm particularly interested in reaching those who work in traditional schools (as we know them in the Global North) as well as the parents of children in those schools and others in their communities. As much as education as we currently know it has contributed and continues to contribute to our challenges, the ways in which we choose to redefine education will be key to forging a healthy, relevant, and just response to collapse that feels more imminent each day. While living through this time will be difficult, it can also be an opportunity for us to rediscover what really matters in our lives: our relationships, beauty, purpose, and the deep care and love for one another and for all the living things that sustain our lives on this planet. This will be crucial to any chance of thriving in the future.

Feel What You Feel

I'm guessing for most of you reading, a certain level of privilege has done much to shield you from many of the negative impacts of collapse that are already occurring, as it has for me. Therefore, you may find these beliefs both difficult and distressing. These ideas may bring up a number of different emotions in you, as they have in me. You may also disagree with some or many of the conclusions that I've come to about the state of the world, the state of education, and our collective prospects for the future. None of that is a bad thing. In fact, I urge you to use those difficult feelings or disagreements as an invitation to go deeper into these ideas. My aim here is to share where I have arrived for now, and to provoke you into thinking about your own

beliefs and to examine the stances through which you do your work with the children you serve.

These ideas may be original in their phrasing, but they are the product of thousands of hours of conversations and reading of texts of various types that have informed my understanding of the world over the past few years. These profound voices include but are not limited to Vanessa Andreotti, Dougald Hine, Jonathan Rowson, Daniel Schmactenberger, Margaret Wheatley, Indy Johar, Bayo Akomolafe, Zac Stein, Julian Bleeker, Ruha Benjamin, adrienne maree brown, Roman Krznaric, Rebecca Solnit, Nate Hagens, Phoebe Tickell, Anya Kamenetz, Benjamin Freud, Rob Hopkins, Anand Giridharadas, Tyson Yunkaporta, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Carol Sanford, Janine Benyus, Ginie Servant-Miklos, and Seth Goldenburg. I thank them all for pushing my thinking and for their willingness to let questions, not answers, guide their work. And by the way, no AI writing tools were used in this process.

As always, your thoughts and reactions are welcomed. ([I've created this Padlet for your reflections](.).) But even more, I would love to read and share your belief statements about the world, education and schooling, and the future. To "stay with the trouble" and to be as effective as we can be at collectively learning our way through what comes next, we need both clarity of purpose and a shared understanding of our predicament. I'm hoping what follows might be a useful instigation in that work.

Thanks for reading,

Will

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Belief 1: We are living in a time between worlds. Driven to the brink by an unsustainable narrative of "progress," traditional institutions and ways of living on the planet are collapsing; their replacements are emergent.

Collapse has already happened to billions of long-suffering people around the world, but it's now starting to become increasingly apparent in more developed parts as well. As change speeds up, and as our challenges become more existential, long-held narratives that frame progress and success are beginning to break, especially as they apply to economics, media, politics, and the environment.

Democracies are in retreat. Devastation due to catastrophic climate events are on the rise. By some estimates, biodiversity on the planet decreased by over 70% between 1970 and 2020, and another six million animal and plant species are projected to go extinct, according to some estimates, due to climate change over the next 50 years. Economic disparities are growing. The physical, mental, and emotional health of people in developed countries is getting worse year over year. Fast-advancing new communication technologies are making it increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction, and lies from truth. Trust in institutions worldwide is at all-time lows. Importantly, none of these trends are abating; in fact, all are accelerating.

To be blunt, many of these challenges stem from our addiction to a narrative of "success" that has been perpetuated over centuries, one that centers on economic growth and the accrual of individual wealth and power with little regard for the impacts on others and on the planet. It's a narrative of violence and extraction, one that is arguably coming to an end as we are reaching the limits of the natural resources required to sustain it.

In addition, many of these challenges stem from our inability to gauge the longer-term consequences of the "solutions" we have employed in the past. In "[Development in Progress](#)," Daniel Schmachtenberger of the Consilience Project writes:

> *"The vast majority of the most consequential and difficult problems we face—climate change, nuclear war, species extinction—are the unintended outcomes of humans attempting to solve other problems. For many of our greatest problems, at some point in the past we designed technical solutions to address them, and in the time since the solutions have had other effects that we either did not predict or did not mitigate sufficiently in advance. The problems the world faces today are not caused by our inability to achieve our goals—they are a direct result of our success. They are a result of how destructive we are in the pursuit of our goals."*

Social media is a powerful example of this. I was among those early on who cheered the potential for connection, for "town square" conversations, for creating and sharing and learning in networks. We didn't foresee the problems with online addiction, bullying, the spread of mis- and disinformation, and the negative effects on teen's self-image (among other ill effects.). Yes, we are still more connected, and those original affordances to learn and share still exist, but the costs have been greater than I think most of us early adopters anticipated.

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Not Fit For Purpose

Arguably, as they are tied to this conception of "progress" as well, our narratives of education are also on the brink of collapse. Schools as we know them were created for a time that no longer exists, a time when knowledge, information,

technologies, and teachers were scarce. Today, all of those things are accessible in abundance via the Internet. In addition, long trusted paths to "success" via higher education are becoming less and less viable. The idea that the primary aim of education is to train the next generation of workers to grow the global economy is now being confronted by the urgent need to develop skills and dispositions that prepare students to navigate increasing complexity as well as restore and regenerate an ailing planet. And finally, new and emergent technologies driven by artificial intelligence are redefining what it means to write, to read, and to be functionally literate.

In this way, schools and our conception of education are increasingly not fit for purpose. As Zac Stein writes in Education in a Time Between Worlds:

> *"Schools have been built largely to control and channel populations, disseminate what counts as 'official knowledge,' and socialize new generations into particular economic and social structures. Broadly speaking, national school systems are not and never have been predominantly 'for the people'; schools are and have been predominantly for the existing national economy and social system. When social systems are in periods of rapid transformation the role of schools becomes contradictory. They teach knowledge that is no longer relevant, socialize individuals into roles that no longer exist, and provide the mindsets needed to continue ways of life that are rapidly disappearing" (85).*

Those few educational institutions that recognize their "in-between-ness" are now engaging in the difficult work of identifying and hospicing systems and practices that no longer serve their communities, and they are actively seeking to birth emergent new ways of working in the world that are more relevant, just, healthy, and regenerative to meet the many

challenges on the horizon. The unfortunate reality, however, is that most schools are nowhere near acknowledging the new realities and challenges of a world in profound transition. And even if they are acknowledged, many governments and societies are creating roadblocks to any real transformational change. Just tweaking the status quo is the safer response.

I'll admit here that my own sense of impending collapse is fueled by my growing lack of belief in the abilities and determination of our collective humanity to solve these problems. As Gus Speth, former dean of the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies at Yale, said:

> *"I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy..to deal with those issues we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists do not know how to do that."*

I'm not sure any of us do. Frankly, it may actually take collapse to bring that about.

Belief 2: Challenges like climate collapse, mis- and disinformation, state conflicts, political dysfunction, increasing inequity, and others are not "problems to be solved" by politics, technology, or even education; they are symptoms of much larger relational disconnects with one another and with all living things in nature. (The "metacrisis," or the set of root problems behind all our major crises.)

None of our current difficulties will be resolved until we focus on the root causes that stem from our increasing separation from one another and from Nature. In other words, the truly transformative changes we need to ameliorate our challenges

and to aspire to a better future will only occur if we are willing to look inward and transform ourselves first.

Author Bayo Akomolafe describes our [predicament of separation](#):

> *"The usual assumptions no longer hold: we are not separate from ecological forces, nor are we immune to the influence of microbes, plants, and technological disruptions. The world has changed, and we exist as part of an unstable posthuman reality. Leadership can no longer be about human mastery alone, nor can it rely on simple solutions or conventional progress markers. What if the way we respond to the crisis is the crisis? What if the anxious solutions to our enduring crises are not enough? What if our conventional solutions are not enough? What if a different posture, a critically decolonial gesture, a different approach, one that critically rethinks our relationship with the more-than-human forces that shape our world, is needed?"*

Right now in the United States, lifelong prisoners get, on average, more time outside than school children do. Numerous studies have shown that we are lonelier, more isolated, and have fewer close friends than at any time in the recent past. Growing political divides in many countries around the world are creating even greater separation within communities and even families. We are addicted to consumption with no understanding of how what we're buying is made or the impacts it leaves behind. And evolving social media and artificial intelligence technologies and tools are creating a multitude of mental health

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challenges as they distract us from the human-to-human experiences that have been central to our existence.

Nature as Kin

As the planet becomes less and less viable, it's no surprise that the overall state of human wellness is in decline. We are, after all, a part of nature. Yet even the earliest Biblical scriptures trumpet humans' dominion over Nature, and especially since the Industrial Revolution, we have seen Nature as a resource, not as a relation.

In a presentation to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, designer, architect and Harvard lecturer Indy Johar [describes these disconnects](#) as:

- A view of reality as composed of separate, divisible objects rather than entangled wholes.
- A perspective of human dominion and mastery over nature, treating the natural world as resources to be exploited.
- Belief in endless economic growth and material expansion without regard for environmental impacts
- Anthropocentric values that only recognize intrinsic worth in human beings rather than the broader ecological world.
- Linear, reductionist modes of thinking that fail to account for complex interdependencies

He suggests that "A new worldview recognizing humanity's embeddedness within nature and prioritizing mutually beneficial relationships is needed to overcome these challenges." For many, this suggests a return to Indigenous ways of living on the planet, holding "seven generations" close in our decision-making, and seeing Nature as kin, as teacher, and as home.

Unfortunately, current practices of "education" contribute to the deepening separation we're experiencing. "Success" is based primarily on individual accomplishment, and occurs in a culture of competition over co-operation. Students are sequestered indoors with only brief (if any) excursions outside, and Nature is studied as something "out there" rather than as deeply entangled with human life. And whether tacitly or explicitly expressed, the primary purpose of schooling conveyed to constituents is to prepare students for "success" by going to college in order to get a "good" job and become a contributing member of society (read: make lots of money and accrue individual wealth.) Individuality, competition, and separation are features, not bugs, of schools.

The increasing interest and creation of "regenerative education" is an emerging response to these separations. The emphasis is on "restoring, replenishing, and rethinking" in terms of all of Earth's living systems. The [Woodleigh School](#) in Victoria, Australia is a powerful example of this shift.

> *"Regenerative Learning is an approach to education that focuses on cultivating a deep connection between individuals, communities, and the natural world. What does this mean? It means that we understand that the development of knowledge, skills, understanding, and purpose are interrelated and emerge from the relationships that we have with ourselves, others, and the places where we live. Regenerative Learning practices emphasise real-world learning, social-emotional development, community engagement, intercultural understanding, and sustainability literacy."*

Other examples of schools that have expressly articulated our state of separation as a starting point for reform or reimagination are very, very few, however. Until that changes, the effectiveness

of "education" to move us toward a healthier, more livable future will be impossible.

Belief 3: Right now, education is not "in conversation" with these new realities. In fact, the way education (and other institutions) is responding to the "crisis" is the crisis.

The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report for 2024 lists the top 10 challenges we face in the next two years and in the next 10:
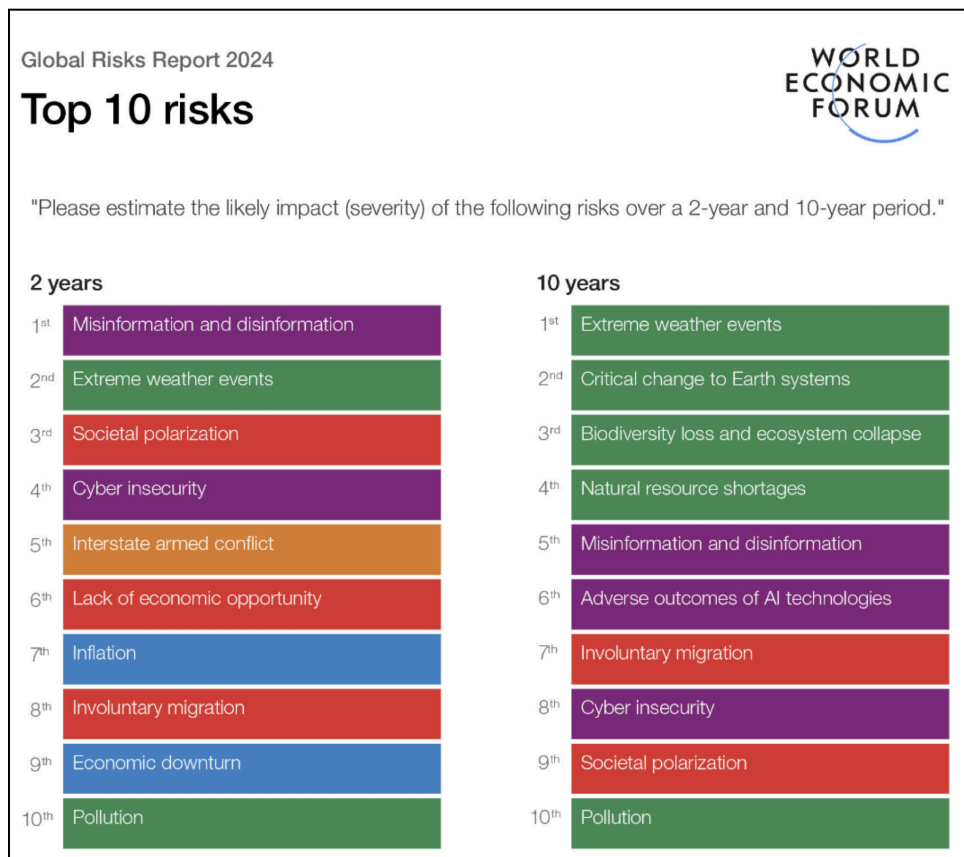
It's relevant to ask where does relevant learning about risks such as societal polarization, cyber insecurity, involuntary migration, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and adverse outcomes of AI technologies (and the others) show up in the typical school experience?

The short answer is that in most traditional schools, these topics are addressed superficially if at all. In many cases, they have become too political, too uncomfortable, and too complex to fit within legacy curriculums and pedagogies. And the implications are obvious. If these are the realities that our children will be facing but we are unable to contextualize them or help them understand them at a deep level, we are not preparing them to thrive in the world coming at them. In other words, we are adding to the crisis.

Our Denials

To take that even a step further, we in general, and education in particular are in denial when it comes to the fundamental truths upon which our current ways of life are built and the crises we are facing. In her powerful book Hospicing Modernity, Vanessa Andreotti, the Dean of the Faculty of Education of the University of Victoria, articulates four profound ways that most of us in the Global North deny about our current ways of living on the planet:

- The denial of systemic violence and complicity in harm (the fact that our comforts, securities and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriation and exploitation somewhere else),
- The denial of the limits of the planet (the fact that the planet cannot sustain exponential growth and consumption),
- The denial of entanglement (our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than "entangled" within a living wider metabolism that is bio-intelligent), and
- The denial of the depth and magnitude of the problems that we face: the tendencies 1) to search for "hope" in simplistic solutions that make us feel and look good; 2) to turn away from difficult and painful work (e.g. to focus on a

"better future" as a way to escape a reality that is perceived as unbearable).

Before we can even get to a relevant discussion about what a future experience of education might look like, we each must grapple with these denials on our own, personal terms. (See Belief #2 above regarding transforming ourselves first.)

"Education's inability to escape the deeply embedded narratives and expectations that have driven the experience for centuries will only perpetuate the crises."

It follows that traditional forms of education and schooling that were created for a world that no longer exists must be fundamentally rethought and redesigned. Tweaking legacy systems and practices will not create the mindsets and conversation spaces required to design the radical changes that are required to center the difficult work of meeting these imminent challenges and confronting our denials about how the world operates and the limits of our current ways of life. Education's inability to escape the deeply embedded narratives and expectations that have driven the experience for centuries will only perpetuate the crises.

What would be some starting points for constructing a healthy response from the education community?

First, some radical honesty about the state of the world right now. It's incumbent upon the education community writ large to acknowledge the challenges, confront our denials, and bring wider audiences into the questions around what to do next. In other words, to be in deep conversation with reality as it stands right now. As Andreotti writes:

> "*What if we knew in our bones, not just in our heads, that what's comfortable, convenient, and pleasurable today in our lives will not be viable tomorrow because we have reached the limits of the planet, and the planet cannot sustain the levels of violence, consumption, and waste production that are required for these pleasures, comforts, and convenience. Then what would we be collectively doing if we could respond? What would those born today, in 30 years' time, look back and say that we did that was helpful?*"

That's a great starting point for the work.

And second, while in the process of thinking about and discussing "radical transformation" to the future school experience, school communities might begin by taking lists like the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report and doing an audit of the current school experience. How much do students know about these topics upon graduation? What kinds of skills, literacies, and dispositions to deal with these crises have they developed with us? And how are we as individual educators "in conversation" with the real world?

Without "going there," the crisis will surely get worse.

Belief 4: In addition, education is contributing to our collective challenges by denying the inherent incoherence and larger negative impact of its own legacy practices. In these ways, education is complicit in amplifying the disconnects and thus the challenges we currently face.

It's not just that education (along with most people in general) is in denial about the multiple crises we face in this moment. It's also that education denies the dissonance and disconnect of

legacy practices and pedagogies when it comes to the ways in which humans naturally learn.

In a must-read study titled "[Weaving a Colorful Cloth: Centering Education on Humans' Emergent Developmental Potentials](#)," lead author Mary Helen Immordino-Yang of the USC Center for Affective Neuroscience, Development, Learning and Education writes:

> *A wide range of evidence from across disciplines…reveals how many of the most tenacious beliefs on which our modern education system is founded are at odds with current psychological and neurobiological evidence. What's more, these beliefs are deeply rooted in cultural and historical perspectives that recapitulate a reductionist view of learning and a deficit-oriented perspective of the capacities and potentials of young people. When educators hold these beliefs, they define learning in very narrow ways, in relation to performance on tests disconnected from thinking in other domains and situations, and by achievement levels (e.g., A-F grades; lock-step age groupings) in schools and classrooms where the work does not reflect the interdisciplinary, acculturated, emotionally driven, collaborative and dynamic nature of motivated, generative thinking. In each of the issues described above, we see how these problematic beliefs constrain human development and flourishing, and preclude systems from accommodating the variable histories, contexts, cultures and trajectories of development that intertwine in any complex social setting or institution. Too often, the beliefs on which educational decision-making is based, such as the belief in meritocratic achievement, conflict with current understandings of the science of development; they do not represent why and how humans actually learn.*

Our standard educational systems and structures leave young people unprepared to inherit custodianship of civil society and the planet– including many of those young people whom we consider to be 'high performing' in the current system– because these systems and structures are generally not designed to prepare students, teachers and educational systems to operate or meaningfully innovate within evolving civic, cultural, or technological domains."

In other words, education, at least at the K-12 level, is not helping our children develop the skills, dispositions, and literacies they need because we refuse (or are unable) to innovate and evolve in relevant ways that track changes in the world.

The "Double Bind"

Additionally, education places a narrow emphasis on "success" based on outcomes that are the most easily measured (test scores, college acceptances, grades, etc.) despite knowing that this emphasis has many negative downstream effects. In his book At What Cost? school psychologist and author David Gleason powerfully unpacks what he calls education's "double bind," the fact that we put huge pressures on students to do whatever is necessary to "achieve" to excel at standardized tests and get into a "good" college, all the while knowing that the associated pressures and expectations make many of our children, stressed, anxious and depressed.

"However, when our young students actually enroll, against our best intentions but driven by our own fears, we overschedule, overwork, and sometimes overwhelm them. We set them up for frustration and failure when we expect them to think and act like adults long before they have actually developed those capacities. We reward high achievement over effort, and most of all, we overfocus on

the college process almost from the moment they arrive"
(Kindle 39).

Specifically, schools that Gleason worked with admitted that if they didn't apply this pressure on students to "succeed" in the expected ways, they feared they would be seen as being unrigorous and intellectually "soft," that they would lose their reputations in their communities, that the value of their diploma

> *"Many current practices and pedagogies act in direct opposition to the ways in which humans actually learn."*

would plummet, and that they might lose enrollments. So, despite knowing the harms that "high performance" generates, schools chose to continue those practices anyway. It's no surprise, then, that students in high-achieving schools have now been named an "at-risk group by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine in the US.

Even more blatant, however, is education's denial of the obvious ways in which many current practices and pedagogies act in direct opposition to the ways in which humans actually learn. Over the last 15 years, I've been asking educators, parents, and others from around the world to name what they consider "conditions for deep and powerful learning" in their own lives. Not surprisingly their answers have been incredibly consistent, and they likely align closely to your own answers to that question. They include:

> *Safe learning environment, personal investment, real-world application, fun, relevance to their lives, social, interesting questions, failure, positive learning environment, belonging, real audience, passion, teachers/mentors, feedback, autonomy and agency, challenging, cross-disciplines, not time constrained, flow*

But here is a list of answers that I never, ever hear:

Sitting in rows, 45/60/88 minute blocks, discrete curriculum, one subject area focus, age grouped co-learners, no real-world application, teacher controlled, someone else's questions, standardized assessments, emphasis on grades, carrots and sticks, no choice/no agency, lack of relevance, "handing it in", limited access

Collectively, we know what powerful learning requires, and yet the conditions created in most schools seem to ignore those truths. If we believe that the ability to navigate complexity is paramount for our children to thrive in the future, then we need them to be powerful learners. Yet right now, most practices in most schools work against that goal.

Finally, in a [2022 report](#), UNESCO concluded that

"Despite advancements in some segments across the world, education policies have unintentionally exacerbated inequality, establishing new forms of elitism and a mindset focused on individualism. The present focus on human capital (literacy and numeracy skills) is not optimal for human flourishing. Education policy and practice focusing on academic performance rather than balancing it with social and emotional competencies has led to a decline in human and societal flourishing."

In all of these ways, current practices deepen our disconnect from one another and to Nature, ignore the growing crises we face in the world and, in fact, contribute to them by leaving future generations unprepared to meet those challenges in effective and healthy ways. Education's devotion to long-standing success and progress narratives that are unsustainable on a finite planet is increasing, not ameliorating, harm to the planet and to one another. How many will admit that?

Belief 5: It's clear that traditional approaches and practices of education are no longer fit for purpose. Yet, we cannot fundamentally "reimagine education" until we deeply interrogate the "why" of education and schooling for liminal, complex times. We must ask, and honestly answer, the question "What is school for now?"

As we move further into this "in-between" time which promises to be deeply complex and chaotic, what is the purpose of bringing together children and adults in a place we call "school"?

It's arguable that we need a wholesale rethinking of the ways in which adults and children come together to do "education" as well as what the intended outcomes of that experience are. As mentioned above, traditional "success" outcomes are increasingly unhealthy both for our students and for the planet. The knowledge we impart to children is increasingly irrelevant or unuseful. The experiences we create are incoherent and disconnected from the way kids naturally learn. While there is still great value in the relationships that can be nurtured among adult teachers and students, it's increasingly hard to defend the ways we've conceived and carried out the "education" part of school.

Zac Stein offers a great framing for the task ahead as we think about "education" in the future:

> *"Those preoccupied with 'fixing' the existing system of school do not stop to ask questions about what schools are for, who they serve, and what kind of civilization they perpetuate. As I have been discussing, our civilization is in transition. Across the planet, major transformations are underway – in world system and biosphere – that will decenter the core, reallocate resources, recalibrate values,*

the economy, and nature itself. This is the task of education today: to confront the almost unimaginable design challenge of building an educational system that provides for the re-creation of civilization during a world system transition. This challenge brings us face-to-face with the importance of education for humanity and the basic questions that structure education as a human endeavor" (87).

Well-meaning educators around the world regularly engage in discussions on how to make school "better." Three and five-year strategic plans are a staple of the desire for improvement. But rarely do these conversations go beyond a tweak to the existing experience here or there. Nor do they account for the inherent uncertainty of the moment; change rarely follows a script. And it's often difficult for even the best intentions articulated in mission and vision statements to be lived fully in the day-to-day grind of the school year.

Emerging Designs

All that said, there are a number of schools emerging that are taking Stein's "design challenge" to heart, building upon the aspects of the current system that are worth saving (relationships, community, real-world activities and experiences, etc.), and hospicing or evolving out those that aren't (high-stakes testing, homework, age and subject groupings, an emphasis on career over connection, etc.)

Take [Big Picture Learning Schools](#) as a primary example. With over 275 (and growing) networked schools around the world, BPL schools are innovating a new model for schooling as a mix of classroom and real-world apprenticeship learning. The focus at these schools is on personalized, interest-based learning where students and adults create customized learning plans, on learning through internships where students gain real-world

experience, on project-based learning, authentic assessments and exhibitions of learning, and an emphasis on whole-person development. They have moved away from many traditional structures like bell schedules, subject-based classes, age-segregated grades, standardized curriculum, competitive cultures, and traditional homework. And yes, students can and do attend highly respected colleges and universities upon graduation if they choose to do so.

And there are a growing number of schools that are moving away from traditional structures and practices as well as rewriting the very emphasis of schooling away from job preparation and participation in the current, increasingly problematic economic narrative of "success" as the accrual of individual wealth. Schools like [Springhouse](#), [OneStone](#), [The Flight School](#), [Agora](#), and a small but growing number of [Green Schools](#) around the world, among others, are focusing on relationships, connection to Nature, emotional and physical health, and imagination. These schools are breaking new ground and reframing how we think of the school experience, focusing on relevance for the world our children will inhabit, not on perpetuating past practices that are leading us to the brink.

> *"These schools are breaking new ground and reframing how we think of the school experience, focusing on relevance for the world our children will inhabit, not on perpetuating past practices that are leading us to the brink."*

And to push the "Why School?" question even further, it's interesting to consider Vanessa Andreotti's thoughts in a recent "The Great Simplification" [podcast](#) with Nate Hagens:

> *"Instead of seeing education as something that addresses ignorance, it's about how we can see education as something that addresses denials or socially sanctioned*

ignorances…What are the anchoring denials that we have reproduced through education?"

That last question is profound, and if we are really intent on designing a curriculum and an experience that prepares students for complexity and potential collapse, don't we need to start with making sure we're clear how current practices and beliefs about education have helped bring us to this difficult moment? What if education was about unpacking the systemic violence and harm that our comforts are built upon? The increasingly obvious limits of the planet? Our inseparability from nature and one another? Or the depth and magnitude of what is on the horizon? And on the ways in which education has worsened each of those?

As difficult as that feels, that is a profoundly different answer to the "What is school for?" question, one that feel much more relevant for this moment.That would really be a "reimagination."

But even more, however, we must be willing to ask whether or not the idea of "school" as we know it is a viable starting point for these discussions. What if we were to think of "education" without the legacy constraints of a traditional school? What might that look like?

Belief 6: An education must now center on preparing our children (and ourselves) emotionally, physically, and spiritually to navigate complexity, chaos, and collapse, and to place a deep emphasis on repairing our relationships with one another and with all living things.

All of the above leads me to this belief about the purpose of education today. Obviously, this is a much different mission from what most schools articulate as their current purpose.

To frame education in the context of preparing for collapse is extremely difficult, I know. But again, the signs are all around us. Collectively, we have put more CO_2 into the air each year since the Paris Climate Accords were first signed in 2015, and it shows no signs of slowing down. Billions of people in the developing world are already experiencing increased food and housing insecurity, regional wars, and climate catastrophes, and all those things are now being felt more acutely in the Global North by the day. As global biodiversity continues to fall, as farmland becomes increasingly toxic from "forever chemicals" found in fertilizers, as supply chains come under more and more stress due to war and weather…I could go on, but you get the idea.

Facing Reality

Yes, there have always been challenges. And that's not to say that there aren't some things improving in the world. But it's hard not to argue that what we're facing right now is literally existential, not just to a particular group in a particular place, but to all humans and life forms on the planet. And we need to prepare ourselves and our kids to learn our way through it as best we can regardless of the eventual outcome.

No one has articulated what we face more powerfully and succinctly than Margaret Wheatley in her book <u>Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity</u>.

> *"We can no longer stop the forces of harm and destruction that have been set in motion by decades of denial, ignorance, greed, oppression, and indifference. Systems that are failing now will continue to collapse. Uncertainty, confusion, and fear will continue to grow. People will withdraw further into self-protection and strike out at those different from themselves. Corrupt leaders will intensify their false promises, and fearful people will subjugate*

themselves to their control. And the elites will frantically grab for everything they can, not matter the consequences to people and planet" (9).

As I write this a week after the 2024 US presidential election, I can't tell you how much that resonates.

The first step is for each of us to acknowledge and grapple with the real possibility of collapse and then come to some shared beliefs around that in our school communities. How we prepare ourselves and our children will not be found in a textbook or an app. We will need to adopt a mindset of deep inquiry and of unflagging care and support for one another as we learn our way through whatever is on the horizon. And so how we think about and articulate this moment is crucial. In his book <u>At Work in the Ruins</u>, Dougald Hine makes two claims that speak to the seriousness of what we are facing (5):

> *"[First,] the end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world, full stop. Unless we can inhabit that distinction, we will end up defending the world as we have known it at all costs, no matter how monstrous those costs turn out to be. Think of the desperate schemes for geoengineering already being drawn up. Think of the walls being built to defend against those already displaced by changing patterns of sea, rain, and heat. How we name what is at stake will determine what we are prepared to do.*
>
> *[Second,] the end of the world as we know it is also the end of a way of knowing the world. When a world ends, its systems and stories come apart, even the largest of them: the stories that promised to explain everything, the systems that organized all that could be said to be real. It's not that those stories had no truth in them; it's not that there was no reality in the description of the world those systems offered. It's that they couldn't hold. The things*

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they valued betrayed them; the things they left out came back to haunt them."

Just because our time-worn stories of how to live on this planet are breaking doesn't mean that beauty, joy, and happy moments will cease to exist. But it does mean that we will need to face confusion, discomfort, and loss more frequently in ways that build our resilience and connect us more deeply to one another and all living things instead of surrendering.

And once we have faced the realities all around us, we must focus on being present and in care of one another as we work to learn our way through the disruptions, identify and move away from those practices that are deepening our crises, and be attentive to what is emerging that might signal a path to something new and, hopefully, better. This is all a part of being "educated" now.

So, what are the skills, literacies, and dispositions that might guide us in this work? One starting point is the [Inner Development Goals](#), which is an initiative created to help build the "inner capacity to deal with our increasingly complex environment and challenges." The IDGs 23 skills for growth include self-awareness, an inner compass, sense-making, long-term visioning, humility, mobilization skills, courage, and perseverance. We might ask the extent to which we ourselves are adept at these goals and then use them as a lens to think about the experiences we create for children.

Reframing the goals of education in this way is no doubt extremely challenging for anyone who has been "educated" in traditional ways. But given the circumstances, how can we not be willing to go there?

Belief 7: To have any chance of overcoming our many crises and reaching the aspirational futures we want to live in, we need to imagine harder together. Much harder.

While the work ahead of us is not so much to fix the "problems" as it is to first fix ourselves, there is no question that being able to imagine and embody a world that we want to live in is an important part of the work. We need to articulate aspirational, "irresistible" futures for ourselves and for our children that we literally yearn for in ways that motivate us to actually achieve them.

Yet one of the barriers to this work is the fact that our individual and collective abilities to imagine have atrophied. Our educations have prioritized knowing over dreaming, and we've ceded most visions of the future to movie studios, politicians, and billionaires, all who have agendas that may not align with the kind of healthy, just, and regenerative futures that we need. As the science fiction author Ursula K. Leguin said:

> *"The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the ways things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary."*

Which is why for the most part, many schools, districts, and communities do everything they can to temper students' and teachers' imaginations and, instead, train them for compliance within the school box.

Many benefits accrue when we are deliberate about collectively imagining futures that we want to live in. In her book Speculative Futures, Johanna Hoffman writes:

> *"When imagining different futures becomes a collaborative process, the results augment our adaptive capacities.*

Developing shared visions requires and builds trust, cultivating the kinds of connections that help societies weather the unpredictable…Proactively imagining the future in personal ways ultimately increases our resilience. When we engage with what could be, we grow psychologically stronger."

But it's not just important that we activate our collective imagination muscles more regularly. It's also important that we frame those conversations in what activist Phoebe Tickell calls "moral imagination." Among other things, that means we center this work in the idea that nature is a shareholder and stakeholder, that we consider past and future ancestors, that we move away from competition to altruism and reciprocity instead, and that we move our mindsets from "We can't" to "How could we not?"

> *"We center this work in the idea that nature is a shareholder and stakeholder, that we consider past and future ancestors, that we move away from competition to altruism and reciprocity instead."*

Futures Orientation

In education, few are the number of schools or individuals that I've been able to find that have a stated commitment toward building futures-oriented cultures in their communities, where the future is an ongoing topic of conversation and study and an evolving frame and context for daily decisions. The best may be the Mount Vernon School in Atlanta. Some schools do "scenario planning," (and some, like Atlanta International School, do that very well.) Others infuse some "futuring" into their three or five-year strategic plans. But the vast majority of schools that I've come into contact with in my 17 years of meeting educators around the world are confronting the future as it happens. In a moment where so much is changing so quickly, that's not a winning strategy.

So, the operative question is this: "What does a system or structure for educating children look like with an emphasis on regeneration, justice, wellness, and relevance if (when?) humanity succeeds in responding to the major contemporary challenges we face, and, importantly, how do we get there?"

Right now, we need to imagine harder to articulate these aspirational, irresistible futures…together.

Some final thoughts: "Facing Our Shit Together"

Obviously, Vanessa Andreotti's book Hospicing Modernity has had a huge impact on my worldview. And I think it fitting to end with this amazing quote which captures so much of what I have tried to articulate above:

> *"In education, we tend not to talk about the hidden violence and costs of the promises of the current system because it is neither easy nor convenient to do so. Talking about it is uncomfortable and frustrating, can prompt feelings of hopelessness and anger, can make us look in the mirror and see something we don't want to see, and can make us enjoy less the things that are pleasurable if we don't think about where they come from and at what and whose expense. Indeed, if given a choice, many people would choose to continue not to think about these things and to keep enjoying their pleasures and comforts uninterrupted. However, when these pleasures and comforts may be affecting the very possibility of the continuity of life on the planet, we need to consider our responsibility toward future generations of human and non-human lives.*
>
> *Part of us already knows we are in a huge mess, but because we do not know what to do or how to sit with this knowledge, we tend to avoid thinking about it. We prefer to*

*avoid facing the facts out of fear that we will feel
groundless and overwhelmed with anxiety and grief.
However, unless we find a way to face this systemic shit
together and learn to compost it collaboratively and to
transform it into new soil, we will drown in it collectively.
While guilt, shame, and worthlessness are traps to be
avoided, if we want to address the violence and
unsustainability of modernity, there is no way around
facing our complicity in social and ecological harm (84)."*

This all depends, of course, on what we believe…about the
world, about education, and about the future. There are no "right
answers" for any of this, but what we do next depends on how
we "face the shit" together.

Again, that starts with being clear on what we believe in this
moment, as individuals, and in the context of education, as
school communities. I urge you to begin that articulation now.
For our collective efforts to gain a livable future for our children to
have the impact we want, a shared, coherent belief system is a
requirement. Sincere best wishes in that work should you decide
to take it on. ([And please share the results if you do](#)!)

What's Next? The "Confronting Education" Cohorts

So, where to from here?

As you have guessed by now, there are no easy answers to
these difficult questions. To me, that's both a challenge and an
opportunity.

To that end, I invite you to **[join our first cohorts of educators
who want to dive more deeply into the topic of "Confronting
Education" starting in February](#)**. We'll explore many of the
themes laid out in the manifesto in more depth, but the focus will

also be on supporting your own journey into complexity, chaos, and collapse. I promise a safe, nurturing space for those of you who are ready to "face the shit" with others on the road to figure out the best path forward in these challenging times.

I'll be providing curated readings, facilitating live discussions, and helping you clarify and articulate your own beliefs in ways that will guide your decisions moving forward. The six sessions over three months will no doubt leave you better prepared to "confront education" in your contexts more fully and with more relevance.

Ultimately, it would be great to assemble an alliance of "future serious" educators, parents, students and others who imagine and design what comes next for this thing we call "education" and who continue to support and provoke these conversations well into the future. But for now, I sincerely hope you'll consider signing on to these inaugural cohorts as we get the wheels turning. (Seats are limited.)

[Find all the info and steps to register here](). I'm looking forward to learning with you.

About Will Richardson

A former public school educator of 22 years, Will has spent the last 18 years developing an international reputation as a leading thinker and writer about the intersection of social online learning networks, education, and systemic change. Most recently, Will is a co-founder of the [Big Questions Institute]() which was created to help educators use
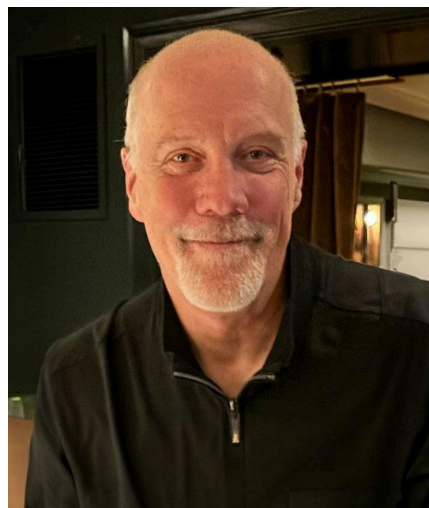
"fearless inquiry" to make sense of this complex moment and an uncertain future.

In 2017, Will was named one of 100 global "Changemakers in Education" by the Finnish site HundrED, and was named one of the Top 5 "Edupreneurs to Follow" by Forbes. He has given keynote speeches, led breakout sessions, and provided coaching services in over 30 countries on 6 continents. (Come on Antarctica!) He has also authored six books that have sold over 200,000 copies worldwide, and given TEDx Talks in New York, Melbourne, and most recently Vancouver.

In addition to his focus and expertise on classroom pedagogies, learning theory, and emerging technologies and trends, his current interests include the use of Design Fiction, Speculative Design, and Regenerative Design to help schools and districts envision potential futures.

Will has two adult children, Tess and Tucker, and lives in rural New Jersey with his wife Wendy.

Suggested Readings:

Hospicing Modernity by Vanessa Andreotti
At Work in the Ruins by Dougald Hine
Who Do We Choose to Be? by Margaret Wheatley
Education in a Time Between Worlds by Zack Stein
The Good Ancestor by Roman Krznarick
Pedagogies of Collapse by Ginie Servant-Miklos
Teaching at Twilight by Ahmed Afzaal
Flourishing Kin by Yuria Celidwen
Generation Dread by Britt Wray
Imagination: A Manifesto by Ruha Benjamin
Staying With the Trouble by Donna Haraway

Breaking Together by Jem Bendell
Ways of Being by James Bridle
Combining by Nora Bateson
From What Is to What If? by Rob Hopkins
Emergent Strategy by adrienne maree brown
Development in Progress by the Consilience Project