

# RADICAL TEACHER

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*Teaching Note*  
Hegemonic Wellness: A Post-Covid Assault on  
Teachers and Teaching

by Roger Saul



MAYDAY MARCH BY JOSH MACPHEE VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

Most years, I teach a graduate seminar called Dismantling Educational Discourses. My students at the University of New Brunswick – a midsize university on Canada’s East Coast – are schoolteachers and administrators working toward Master’s degrees in Education, and our course prompts them to question what passes for truth and knowledge in schools. We think together about how and why schools elevate particular curricula, codes of conduct, relationships, and presentations of self. And we try to elevate notions like critical consciousness and emancipation from oppression in considering the work of teaching and learning. In past years, we’ve read and discussed works by bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Marie Battiste, and Henry Giroux, among others.

I tend to choose our readings year-to-year based on two intersecting criteria: the first based on whatever happens to be exciting me in my own reading life, the second concerned with choosing materials responsive to the times. So much has happened on the school scene in the few years since the onset of Covid-19. Discourses diagnosing competing crises proliferate. They recount issues like presumed knowledge gaps resulting from the accumulation of missed school days, growing student and teacher mental health challenges, online learning fatigue, emboldened government overreaches into schooling issues and practices, and an ever-widening gulf between advantaged and disadvantaged students. In this past year’s version of the course, I wanted to think more resolutely with my students about how they’re negotiating all of this and more. To this end, I came across an edited collection of essays, published in 2022, called *Critical Pedagogy for Healing: Paths Beyond “Wellness,” Toward a Soul Revival of Teaching and Learning*. I made it our primary text.

Edited by Tricia M. Kress, Christopher Emdin, and Robert Lake, the volume takes up an array of issues, but one of its innovations stands out. It offers readers a language for thinking about care, community, and healing in ways that do away with the kinds of wellness discourses that, as I’ll try to substantiate in a moment, are all the rage on the school scene today. It does so by proposing an intellectual path I’m not accustomed to seeing, suggesting that critical pedagogy – an orientation usually put into practice as a means of dismantling (and at times reimagining) dominant school discourses – might have something crucial to offer on opposite grounds, as a language of healing.

To hear many of my students describe it, discourses of well-being in schools have been overrun by allegiances to market-based notions of ‘wellness’ that elevate individual responsibility and bury institutional accountability in supporting their mental health. These discourses are bolstered by an array of murky terminologies and practices – amorphous notions like self-care, pausing, journaling, contemplation, breath work, mindfulness – and mandate that educators understand and negotiate their well-being in relation to them.

In the view of many of my students, teacher mandated wellness messaging seems to go something like this: if you’re dissatisfied with teaching or struggling to keep up with the job’s demands, the onus is on you to change your

thoughts and actions to help you feel better about your circumstances. This functions as a convenient arrangement for schools. “Don’t question our policies and practices, nor our structures and expectations,” they seem to say. “Instead, just work on yourself.” *Critical Pedagogy for Healing* locates to this emerging phenomenon and its tools on offer as a “marketplace” of healing (p. 2).

Student responses to our textbook and to each other in our various conversations over the semester was like nothing I’ve ever experienced in my teaching career, so much so that I’ve felt compelled to write about what I’ve learned here. The course, always inquiry based and conversational in past years, took on a confessional ethos this time around that to my mind revealed both a profession in crisis and a public that misperceives its depths. Beyond the common and significant challenges that always tend to come with the job of teaching, our course – comprising thirty or so teachers, spread out over two graduate seminar groups, delivered online to participants in geographic locations across Canada and beyond – revealed a staggering number of them struggling in deeply personal ways: with PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, health anxiety, sleep disorders, depression, panic, secondary trauma stress, invisible chronic pain, and more. Many such issues were a consistent presence in our conversations, conditions that for them had become inextricable with a life of school teaching.

Some teachers shared that they’d admitted as much to their school administrators and colleagues and had received affirming responses from them. Others kept their struggles secret for fear of stigma, judgment, or reprisal. Yet an aspect that stands out as most interesting to me has to do with how the perceptions of their struggles – whether personally disclosed or broadly inferred – are being accommodated. A common historical complaint among teachers is that the demands of their work often go unseen or are misunderstood. Our conversations added a nuance. For these teachers, and presumably many more, the ways in which their challenges are being newly seen and addressed – through commercialized notions of healing – are proving to be as much of a challenge as the fact that they’re being seen at all.

In what follows, a definitional essay, I want to propose a concept and then work to define it as a means of capturing some of what I’ve learned from the teachers I’ve worked with. I’ve taken to calling it *hegemonic wellness*. It refers to an emerging school movement aimed at positioning neoliberal wellness discourses as the most socially valued means of making sense of an educator’s workplace health. Derived from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (2011), hegemony operates not simply through practices of overt domination, but through a misdirection, by coercing people to consent to their own oppression. As such, *hegemonic wellness* refers to the systemic tendency to re-imagine educator notions of healing and care as radically individualist pursuits, deeply anti-communitarian in theory and practice, which are positioned to better serve existing power structures rather than to contest them. The purpose of defining *hegemonic wellness* is therefore to offer educators a language for naming and contesting its operations once perceived.

## Hegemonic Wellness

What is hegemonic wellness and how does it operate? Taking my cues from the teachers I worked with, I've found it helpful to think through its meanings, operations, and effects on educational life through the lens of five tenets. I name, define, and critique of each of these tenets below, expecting that educators may find there a language of recognition, affirmation, and contestation that can come to bear upon their own practices.

### 1. Individualizes well-being

Hegemonic wellness, born of the liberal humanist, meritocratic, and capitalist relations valued in schools and mirrored in the dominant values of the societies that administer them, prizes individualism. Of course, our well-being is an individual matter, but is it only that? In its cultivation of inner focused activities for dealing with workplace stress and well-being, and in its resource allocation toward the same – in countless workshops, professional development, and textual materials on various corporatized 'wellness' movements of the current moment – hegemonic wellness creates an overdetermined language and matching set of practices for radically individualizing one's sense of well-being. Many teachers I spoke with saw these presumed solutions to their stress as convenient for their administrations, who often supported these (see Tenet #3), yet disrespectful of their actual experiences. On the other hand, teachers often wondered about the seeming disappearance of communal approaches and supports in view of their anxieties, approaches they longed for and, in many cases, viewed as much more consequential: the affordance of time within their busy schedules for better connecting with students and parents; the facilitation of intellectual spaces to jointly consider big issues like collective goals and visions as a way to offset the overwhelming weight of day-to-day minutiae that most often tended to occupy them; concrete policy protections for workplace well-being; or, even just the foresight to enable teachers to realize thriving out-of-school lives where they might pursue various issues and experiences that matter to them. All of these were viewed as needed, not to mention mentally, emotionally, and spiritually satisfying in the very ways that hegemonic wellness promises toward the same often felt empty.

### 2. Privatizes struggles

A consequence of individualizing well-being is that it signals to teachers that their health struggles should be kept private and perhaps even secret. How could it be otherwise? To encourage personalized solutions to social problems is to privatize them. Yet why should a teacher be pushed toward retreating to privacy when experiencing systemic struggles? Why could it not be possible to envision a scenario in which teachers feel comfortable putting those struggles into professional and public discourse, without fear of repercussion? The teachers I worked with suggested that repercussions in their schools most often came in the form of doubt about their professional competencies (often these

doubts were couched in discourses of sympathy), which in turn affected their ability to do their best work. On the contrary, in our course together, where teachers made space for each other to publicize rather than privatize their struggles, there was a stated sense of suddenly not feeling so isolated and alone, of healing through membership in a teaching community that was able to recognize and support each other through the sharing of its collective struggles. This was seen as a circumstance hegemonic wellness doesn't allow for.

### 3. Sustains inequitable arrangements

Hegemonic wellness's ascendancy facilitates organizational exploitation in schools, offering a pathway for a mode of administration that more easily disregards the voices of teachers. It does so because it contains a built-in ethical justification for enacting policies, practices, and decisions that result in teacher dissatisfaction. If such policies and practices prove unpopular, unsatisfactory, or even unhealthy for teachers, the onus is on teachers to retreat to their private wellness practices. As per earlier, this becomes an incredibly convenient mechanism of organizational exploitation, a justification for preserving the system as is, in which teachers are invariably asked to consent to their own dispossessions rather than to change the structures that create them. Many of the teachers in our course felt trapped by this circumstance: trapped in the sense that perceptions of their well-being rarely led to talk of issues like altered workloads, more flexible teaching arrangements, better resourced classrooms, smaller class sizes, or otherwise. Rather, perceptions of their well-being were reduced to ways they might fix themselves.

### 4. Hinders community building

It will not come as a surprise to anyone acquainted with school teaching that a common complaint among the teachers I worked with is that they were perpetually overwhelmed by the relationship between their expected responsibilities and the time needed to properly achieve them. Many of the teachers I worked with came to believe that this condition was no accident, that teachers purposely kept busy had less time to organize and protest. The discourses of hegemonic wellness likewise came to be understood within this formulation. Its suggested practices of personalized self-care were seen as just one more set of things they were being asked to do, a latest addition to an already in-progress project of disciplining their bodies and minds. On the same note, our conversations also turned to how this new emphasis on hegemonic wellness – a new demand on their time – further precluded the kinds of community making many more aptly sought. Drawing on their collective experiential memories and supported by research, they were quick to recognize that good teaching, good schools, and, ultimately, their own well-being, rely on a communitarian ethos where efforts and supports are pooled (physical, mental, emotional, intellectual) rather than hyper-individualized.

## 5. Damages relations of trust

The offshoot of much of the preceding is that it creates mistrust between teachers and their leadership. In a context where teachers perceive the vocabulary for understanding their challenges to be pre-determined and agenda driven, it can be expected that there'd be little faith in confiding these challenges to those in positions of power. Worse, perhaps, is the possibility of an attendant lack of faith in the teaching profession itself. The latter was a definite subtext for several teachers I worked with in our course, who confessed to looking beyond teaching as exasperation continued to set in about their perceptions of the increasingly difficult demands of their jobs, as well as their attendant feelings of isolation in negotiating these demands. For sure, these difficulties are multi-sourced and multi-faceted – inextricably linked to a variety of intersecting and inequitable social arrangements that critical scholars know many schools to perpetuate rather than solve – yet opportunities for repair are jeopardized with hegemonic wellness's ascendancy.

## Conclusion

Many educators would attest to the fact that new educational enthusiasms bloomed against the backdrop of Covid's onset. Although it now seems paradoxical just a few years later, in my school community, for many of the teachers I worked with over the past year, and for countless others, Covid's forced school cancellations provoked widespread discourses of possibility: What might a school look like when unmoored from the strict disciplines of time and space? How might existing relations of exploitation be subverted – particularly those dispossessing the most vulnerable students and teachers among us? And how might educators organize accordingly? These questions, or rather the enthusiasms that undergirded them, now seem quaint. In many North American jurisdictions, the opposite has occurred. Governments have addressed the uncertainties prompted by Covid's school interruptions by creating school policies and practices at once more technocratic and inequitable. The educators I work with continue to resist these, as do countless others. They will better be able to do so by recognizing the functions of hegemonic wellness as a newest language of domination in their schools.

## References

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