

## Hall-Dennis and the Road to Utopia: Education and Modernity in Ontario

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **Hall-Dennis and the Road to Utopia: Education and Modernity in Ontario**

by Josh Cole

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 291 pages

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#### **Reviewed by:**

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Josh Cole is a well-established education historian. His publisher's Twitter feed describes Cole's new book as a "groundbreaking examination of education politics in postwar Canada" (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021). Indeed, his book takes readers on an in-depth historical analysis of the Hall-Dennis Report – officially titled "Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario" – which was released in 1968. Cole analyzes the report and critiques the authors' proposal for a drastic and possibly utopian transformation of Ontario's school system. In my opinion, Cole's purpose in writing this book is to take his readers on a journey down "the road to utopia," while illuminating several pitfalls and roadblocks which have prevented the achievement of the "utopian dream" as described in the Hall-Dennis report, a half-century ago (Cole, 9).

In this review, I will describe the roadmap that forms the framework of Cole's book and link the shortcomings he identifies in the Hall-Dennis report to similar shortcomings in Cole's own analysis. Through my lens as a school administrator and an educator of 20 years, I will endeavour to answer the following question: Does Cole's use of the word "utopia" foreshadow the impossibility of the goal of transforming the schools of yesterday and the schools of today into global hubs of "discovery and inquiry" centered on children's individualized learning (p.9)?

Cole's immense knowledge of Canada's political, historical, and educational landscapes is evident as he weaves the intricate details of this famous report with current events from around the world. Cole's road map to the creation of Ontario public and private school systems guides the reader to reflect on how each piece of the journey is tied to the political angst of its time. The book begins by highlighting the big ideas of

the report. Knowing that solutions to transforming Ontario's school system were never effectively implemented half a century ago, it becomes somewhat difficult to read. How is it possible that some children are still sitting in rows, learning in rote, feeling completely disillusioned and in some cases excluded from participating in school activities when solutions to these problems were well outlined in the Hall-Dennis report? Of course, as Cole continues his analysis in the following few chapters, he outlines the various sections of the Hall-Dennis report, and it becomes clear that all things are never as they appear. Cole interprets Hall-Dennis's public consultations (Chapter 2), expert presentations and research reports (Chapter 3), the Ontario curriculum (Chapter 4) and the need for global classrooms (Chapter 5) with the political events of the time. With a few signposts from Cole, the reader discovers throughout these chapters that the conservative right composed chiefly of white, western men defended entrenched privileges, powers, and hidden agendas as they pushed for modernity within their province.

Hall, a judge of the Supreme Court of Canada, and Dennis, a former school principal, co-chaired a committee of 24 members tasked to modernize the Ontario public school system. As Cole makes it abundantly clear in Chapter 6 (Educational Modernity), Chapter 7 (The Passive Revolution) and Chapter 8 (The Demise of Utopianism in Ontario Education), the beautifully illustrated ideas of the Hall-Dennis report were portrayed in such a way to "dilute the strength of an attack by appearing to adopt the language of the enemy" (Katz as cited in Cole, 230). In other words, the committee said all the right things and compiled the best ideas from around the world to meet the needs of underrepresented youths, but in the end, they never addressed how some of these ideas would function at the school level in Ontario schools. The utopian dream in schools of yesteryear was in part an illusion created by those in power to silence blue-collar society. The positionality of the committee members appeared well-intentioned. However, as Cole travelled deeper into the report's analysis, it became evident that it was never really about the kids but more to do with giving the power to the most deserving and creating a world filled with blue collar workers ready to meet the demands of the ruling class.

In conclusion, Cole uses the word "utopia" to spotlight the shortcomings of the Hall-Dennis report and argues that the Conservative right, filled with hidden agendas, most likely made it impossible to transform the schools of yesteryear. On the other hand, the schools of today – or more likely, tomorrow – might be able to transform into global hubs of "discovery and inquiry" if dedicated and trustworthy stakeholders believed that utopia waits just beyond the horizon. At this stage, despite Cole's brilliantly articulated rendering of education in the post-war era of the 1950s and '60s, I would critique Cole using some of the same arguments he used against Hall and Dennis. He states that a "technical approach should have been adopted, capable of being "functional" in actual learning situations" (236). As I was nearing the end, I found it frustrating that he did not offer any solutions in creating better schools despite his own critique of Hall and Dennis for their "lack of realism [that] killed the project from the onset" (233). To be fair, Cole is a historian. His intentions were not necessarily to provide solutions but to pave the

road for those willing to use his history of Ontario schools to implement some solutions. I appreciate Cole's effort to bring back the Hall-Dennis report 50 years later and remind us that looking at the past is essential for preparing for the future. The journey to utopia might be easier if we travelled it together amongst those passionate enough to make a difference in transforming our schools to meet the needs of their diversity of learners.