Dr. Richard C. Mitchell
Professor
Brock University
Department of Child and Youth Studies

As a researcher and educator, my insights have most often skewed to those whose voices I do not hear directly, those whose experiences are not accounted for in any given piece of law, research, policy or advocacy. Thus, for my analysis of the STM Reports on UNCRC Article 2 and discrimination towards children and young people in Canada, I reflected deeply on my responsibilities as an academic ‘mover’; that is, as an adult in authority, a public intellectual and CRAN affiliate, and a post-secondary researcher tasked with creating and disseminating new knowledge in my investigations, my academic and policy publications, in my teaching and service. In this brief submission, I posit that researching the myriad complex challenges related to climate change is the single most pressing discrimination against all children in this or any future generation. Elsewhere, I have argued that both research and activism on climate change requires a transdisciplinary approach (Mitchell & Moore, 2015a).

My academic career spans a quarter-century, and throughout, I have built upon the great 20th century Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) with gradual but steady evolution towards an understanding of our shared ‘planetary citizenship’. For me, this evolution has always included the seminal human rights treaty, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). However, recent assessments from the United Nations also assert that changes underway in our shared planetary biosphere are threatening social institutions in all regions of the world, and moving humanity beyond our capacities to provide peace, global stability, well-being, and even secure food supplies at an increasingly unsustainable pace.

As I reflected on the first two quotations from the November, 2018 STM (Ottawa), I related these to the unwritten, unspoken, yet common ground for two missing voices in that Report, and I contend these two discourses of discrimination are interconnected - those most impacted by ‘climate change’ and those young people most impacted by ‘Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls’ in Canada. I will briefly unpack these connections herein, but below are two relevant quotes from young people in the STM (Ottawa) event that I contend are also illustrative of these interconnections.

I’m not a future leader; I’m a leader now. I put down future leader as who I am not because right now I’m a leader—I don’t need to be someone in the future. Adults will always say you’ll be something in the future and I’m someone now.

And…

The common theme here is our acceptance to learn things and we have common values to try and change the world and ‘shaking the movers’ and we want to shake the future and foresee these rights and make the future right for you and other people.
The absence of any references in the Report to Canada’s Indian Act (RSC 1876/1985) and the odious, yet repetitive scandal of how Canadians have come to accept ‘missing and murdered’ Indigenous women and girls perplexes me, although as I stated, I believe these complex issues are connected to the degradation of our beloved planet Earth (‘rape’ is the harshest though increasingly appropriate metaphor I’ve read in numerous environmental papers and the media). The industrial-age, factory-furnace extraction and exploitation of our shared Earth’s resources that has taken place during our lifetimes, everywhere, is now being understood as the planet’s sixth great age of extinction known as the Anthropocene, whereby the destruction of our planet along with thousands of species takes place before our eyes (UN IPCC, 2018). During my brief panel submission at CRAN’s AGM, I proposed our collective research endeavours in future be employed to inform these processes directly through the perspectives of children and young people as the recipients of our intergenerational transmission of failure. During our lifetimes, the development of traditional academic ‘environmental sustainability’ research has also been critiqued by social scientists for operating as little more than research assistance for multi-billionaire extractive industries throughout the world (Mitchell & Moore, 2015b).

Indeed, as our Child Rights Academic Network (CRAN) AGM concluded, mass school walkouts over climate change were being organized by Swedish teen and climate change activist, and have resulted in the Belgium environmental minister resigning her portfolio over patronizing and false public comments. While students across Europe and the United States prepare for nation-wide student walk-outs on March 15, 2019, I find it encouraging that there are some Canadian young people also willing to take up this challenge to planet Earth, and our collective intergenerational responsibilities with similar, brave activism. When journalists asked Greta Thunberg if she found it acceptable that tens of thousands of school children were cutting classes throughout Europe and North America, she suggested, that while adults might be traumatized they somehow accept the banality of climate change like sheep, similar to Davos Conference participants treating her contributions as some sort of entertainment. She succinctly replied: “You have to stop destroying our future.” This paternalistic complaint that children should not be skipping school has also been soundly rejected by 13 year-old American activist Alexandria Villasenor who follows Thunberg’s example by organizing and walking to the United Nations in New York each Friday. “If we are not going to have a future, there’s no point in going to school”.

Collectively, we appear entranced as ‘deer in the headlights’, and I see both ontological and epistemological linkages revealing the majority of Canadians - teachers, students, researchers, politicians and citizens - have come to blindly accept how the Indian Act and our inherited, collective trauma resulting in ‘missing and murdered’ women and girls cannot yet be spoken of in academic contexts. I found it not only baffling but familiar that the most important Article 2 discriminations that Canadian young people are facing went unmentioned - the environmental catastrophe related to climate change and our political, historical and cultural contexts relative to ‘missing and murdered’ young women by the hundreds across all regions of this beautiful nation. Many discriminatory events described by the STM young people (such as episodes to do with race and class, disability, employment, and education) are directly interconnected with the destruction of our biosphere and Mother to us all - our only planet Earth. A final poignant piece of poetry at the end of the Report, to my mind, underscores these two (unspoken) crises:
Looking at the world today
I just want to shout
Can we right these wrongs”
I sometime doubt
We all have problems
Discrimination abounds
But when we hear from the youth
The answers are found
They have voices and rights
Ideas galore!
So when we give them our ear,
We’ll only learn more.