Mid-Atlantic Education Review

Special Issue: Public Education in the Age of Trump
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Special Issue: Public Education in the Age of Trump

This Special Issue provides a collection of scholarly essays written in the span between the election and subsequent inauguration of Donald Trump. The editorial board felt the need to take action, and as educators and scholars we did this in the way we know how: we asked our colleagues to join in a reflection on where we are and where we might be going. There was a sense of danger, and with it, a great need to talk to each other and to understand experiences with which we are not familiar. Each of the essays in this issue speaks in that way, in that spirit, from a different perspective.
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If one of the greatest ideological achievements of the Civil Rights Movement was to make “racist” an ugly word (Marable, 1991), and one of the triumphs of Black Power activism was to begin to define racism as structural (Taylor, 2016), the greatest danger in Trump’s America is that words, policies, and practices that actually are racist are being actively redefined as not being so. This is not exclusively a problem of language—Trump’s America comes with physical threats to those he considers non-normative. The safety of women, people of color, queer and gender non-conforming folk, people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, immigrants, and religious minorities, among others, is at stake. But I believe that words have been central to the institutionalization, under Trump’s campaign, of what critical linguist Teun A. van Dijk (1992) has called the “denial of racism.” Denial of racism has important reproductive potential: it allows white folks to escape the cognitive dissonance that they experience in a society that professes equality, while simultaneously thriving on the preservation of a racist social hierarchy. It follows that any sort of anti-racist practice, most importantly one engaged in by educators, will have to listen to, understand, and push back against these denials successfully.

“Denial of racism” takes several forms: denial of the act of racism, denial of racist intent, denial of purposefully saying or doing something racist, and denial of racism as an end goal (van Dijk, 1992, p. 91). This denial comes from the social desire to put forward a positive image of self. Here, we can simply listen to Trump’s own words as he attempted to explain his allegations regarding the criminality of Mexican immigrants: “I don’t have a racist bone in my body. I’m just exposing things that everybody knows is happening but no one wants to talk about” (Hee Lee, 2015). He uses a language of morality, with “bad people” doing “bad things.” In this sense, he claims to be not racist, but rather, morally right, which appears to remove his opinions from the sphere of racism and place them in the sphere of morality. Denial of racism is often accompanied by mitigations—downplaying a comment, for example, or detaching one’s own view from the view of others with whom one might be judged collectively (van Dijk, 1992, p. 89). We can see this in broadcast interviews, memes, tweets, and thought pieces. This mitigation is present whenever Trump voters cry: “Just because I voted for Trump, doesn’t mean I’m racist,” separating themselves and their decisions from (liberal) perceptions of their favored candidate. The liberal Twitterverse provides a pithy corrective: “Not all of Trump’s supporters are racist, but all of them decided that racism wasn’t a deal breaker” (Gaba, 2016).
Denial of racism takes concrete form in public education policy and practice. These denials have emerged at the national level with Trump’s appointment of anti-public school advocate Betsy DeVos as head of the Department of Education. Hers is denial wrapped in color-blind, market-driven politics. DeVos’s destruction of public schooling under the banner of “school choice” effectively unhinges choice from its historical context as a racist tactic that surfaced in the decades following Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954. Choice, in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, allowed individuals and public school districts to side-step integration efforts. Moreover, much of what we know about “choice” indicates that it destroys valuable public institutions and can reproduce inequality in ways that structure the unequal distribution of public goods, often to the detriment of poor communities and communities of color. Critiques of DeVos focus on her spotty civil rights record, her lack of experience, her ideological opposition to public education, and not on racism, per se (Weingarten, 2016). But her prioritization of market forces—with no plan to insulate those most vulnerable or to acknowledge the sociohistorical impact of choice—acts as a denial of racism itself. While DeVos’s policy prescriptions might be able to deny charges of racist intent, they embody a dangerous colorblindness that holds intent as being central to racism. This understanding of racism discounts the mobilization of institutional power in the service of whiteness.

So, what can we do? How do we name these denials, especially given that they are everywhere we look, institutionalized in Trump’s cabinet picks and the policy agenda stated in his tweets and speeches?

At the classroom level, we need to continue to historicize contemporary struggles and to identify racism in all of its permutations. If we allow the political right to define racism in ways that hinge on conscious intent only, then the disparate effects of seemingly neutral policy will never be open to interrogation. But, it seems that merely calling Trump supporters “racist” is a tactic that, during a Trump presidency, might be less than effective. One way that we as educators can do the work of publicly defining racism is to create classroom spaces that are truly accountable. At a meeting with undergraduate activists, one student urged us to move past our preoccupation as instructors with creating “safe spaces” (a conversation that misses the mark, I believe) and instead try to create “spaces of accountability” (Truit, 2009). Meaning, if we ask students and friends, colleagues and family members to explain what they mean when they say something problematic, and to provide evidence, we can hold them accountable for their words, they can see that we do hold them accountable. If we can help young, particularly, white folks, actively understand racism as a question of institutional power and name it when they see it, we might be able to contest this dangerous component of a Trump presidency.

We also need to take our commitment to equitable public education to the streets, to the extent that our individual privilege allows us to engage in activism and protest politics. Knowing that activist spaces can often exclude vulnerable populations, and that the consequences of public actions are mediated by individuals’ race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, religion, and immigration status, we should be mindful of how to create inclusive, democratic spaces (Zaikowski, 2016). Pedagogy might get us part of the way there, but it is no substitute for direct collective action for those who can take that action. To these ends,
I see the labor movement as a place that is keeping public education safe and is continuously questioning barriers to access.

But unions are only as powerful as their rank and file membership, and they alone cannot stop the privatization of education. They can, however, when pressured by their members, take up progressive causes and put their organizing capabilities and resources to work. Rutgers’ faculty union, the AAUP-AFT did this when it listened to the post-election concerns of its membership and provided material support for the sanctuary campus movement spearheaded by Movimiento Cosecha. The sanctuary campus goal is to make Rutgers and other universities institutions where students, regardless of immigration status, are able to attend free from the fear of deportation. One of the demands of the movement is that universities pledge not to cooperate with ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), should Trump choose to make good on his promise to deport over 3 million undocumented Americans (Davis & Preston, 2016). At Rutgers, over 1,000 students, staff, and faculty participated in a walk-out on November 16, 2016 to put pressure on Rutgers President Robert Barchi to declare Rutgers a sanctuary campus (Kent, 2016). On December 9, 2016, President Barchi responded to protestor demands and Rutgers joined the ranks of Columbia and Penn as a campus that would refuse to give ICE access to sensitive student records without a subpoena (Hughes & Kumar, 2016). Barchi’s response affirmed the power of protest to shape the educational institutions in which we work and learn. At Rutgers and across the country, student activists, community leaders, and faculty and staff are showing up. And I believe, only through showing up to defend public education as a good that should be available to all, on equal terms, can we match the volume of Trump’s and DeVos’s racist denials.

References


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The Journal

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