Mid-Atlantic Education Review

Special Issue: Public Education in the Age of Trump
The Mid-Atlantic Education Review

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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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Defending “all this Diversity Garbage”: Multidimensional coalition-building in the age of Trump

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Now that our man TRUMP is elected and republicans own both the senate and the house - - time to organize tar & feather VIGILANTE SQUADS and go arrest & torture those deviant university leaders spouting off all this Diversity Garbage

— a flyer posted on bathroom windows across a Texas State University campus (in Jervis, 2016, para. 7; formatting and grammatical errors in original)

It is not surprising to find racism, sexism, religious prejudice, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia within American politicking and policymaking. They have been driving forces in American political and educational discourse for generations (see Anderson, 2015; Blount, 2000; Bonet, 2011; Eskridge, 2011; Graves, 2013; Lugg, 2003). What has been shocking is the rash of bias-laden harassment, much of which is accompanied by the citation of the President-elect or his political platform as “support” for wielding these longstanding threads of oppression.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has captured reports of bias-motivated harassment and intimidation surrounding the 2016 presidential election. They report over 1,000 incidents were filed in the month following the election. The most common forms of harassment and intimidation appear to be motivated by anti-immigrant, anti-black, anti-Muslim, and anti-queer bias, respectively (SPLC, 2016). In Massachusetts, a military veteran of Puerto Rican descent woke up to “Trump” and “Go home” scratched onto his family car (Yan, Sgueglia & Walker, 2016). In Maryland, “Trump Nation: Whites Only” was spray-painted on a Spanish-language church banner (Jordan, 2016). Clearly, some Americans are finding legitimation in the stated policy aspirations of the Republican Party’s political head.

And so are some students. Black, Latin@ and queer students have reported being followed by peers chanting “Trump” (Pressler & Weissman, 2016). Latin@ students have reported being told to prepare to be sent “home,” often alongside references to President-
elect Trump’s stated plans to build a wall between Mexico and America, and then deport undocumented residents (see Euse, 2016). Over 20 students at a high school in Missouri turned their backs to an opposing school’s (majority black) basketball team while waving Trump-Pence election signs (Frumin, 2016). Students at a high school in Texas chanted “build that wall” at an opposing (majority Hispanic) volleyball team while holding Trump signs (Yan, Sgueglia & Walker, 2016). And teachers are reporting that racist epithets and symbols have recently become more commonplace amongst their students (Costello, 2016; St. George, 2016). Put simply: The bias which has risen to the surface of public political discourse is similarly present in U.S. public schools, alongside unequivocally direct references to the President-elect’s stated political objectives.

I wish to highlight two aspects of these discursive shifts in U.S. politicking. First, diversity as a public good, and consequently as an educational aim, is overtly demonized. Each of the examples provided above normalize white and Christian identities as “American” and otherize difference along lines of race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, amongst others. This is clearly evidenced in the poster cited at the beginning of this essay. The authors of said poster imply “diversity garbage” – or socially just orientations toward difference – is their problem (Jervis, 2016, para. 7). Second, references are made to Trump and the Republican Party to “legitimize” bias-driven harassment. The oppressive threats and insults carved into property and hurled at people are now represented in the highest levels of federal government. Candidate Trump’s disavowal of “political correctness” “legitimizes” claims that valuing diversity is a waste of time because it was made by the Republican Party’s nominee for president during a presidential debate. Taken together, political discourse in the age of Trump disavows difference as a valuable social good while the institutions that have historically been used to alleviate discrimination (or worse) are being populated by those with plainly oppressive agendas.

How should we, as educators and school leaders, respond? Many educators avoid addressing these shifts in U.S. political discourse with their school communities. Fears that teachers might lose control of their classes during heated in-class discussions, and fears of upsetting parents or administrators, inform teachers’ decisions to avoid discussing these developments with their students (Costello, 2016). Some administrators have asked parents and students who face harassment and intimidation to remain silent about their experiences (Pressler & Weissman, 2016). While not all educators are avoiding or erasing recent political developments (Blad, 2016; Costello, 2016), avoidance and erasure are not new schooling strategies for dealing with politics of difference. Queer scholars, for instance, have long documented the harms to entire school communities associated with erasure (e.g. Blount, 2005; Harbeck, 1993; Lugg, 2016). Avoidance flies in the face of what we know to be helpful forms of educator intervention.

I argue that the very diversity being overtly stigmatized is one of the most influential tools educators can use while teaching in the “age of Trump.” The remainder of this essay briefly grounds a case for multidimensional coalition building in queer and social justice scholarship, presents two examples of such anti-oppression work, and concludes with a frank discussion emphasizing the importance of multidimensional coalition building for educators working amidst the often-toxic discursive politics that are presently at the surface of political discourse outside and inside public schools.
“[A]ll this Diversity Garbage” is a resource for social justice

As oppressive threads within American politics become resurgent, it is vital that we, as educators, revisit the foundational assumption at the heart of (social justice) education: that teaching is inherently a political activity (see Freire, 2008). Educators and scholars of education must be proactively oppositional to oppressive discourses like those we are seeing in U.S. politics and schools (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Kumashiro, 2002; Theoharis, 2007). It is the job of educators to resist oppressive regulations and practices. The social justice literature (e.g. Capper, Theoharis & Sebastian, 2006; Kumashiro, 2004) and queer scholarship (e.g. Brockenbrough, 2012; McCready, 2004), amongst others, include calls for advocacy that specifically addresses the ways multiple differences shape persons’ experiences with oppression. Further, educators are not only called to proactively resist multiple dimensions of oppressive discourse and regulations—for instance, obstructing harassment grounded in both homophobia and perceptions of one’s academic abilities (McCready, 2004)—but to do so with frameworks that address more than one dimension of difference simultaneously (Capper, Alston, Gause, Koshoreck, López, Lugg & McKenzie, 2006).

This means that educators should nurture relationships with guest speakers who can testify to the multiple dimensions of our identities that oppressive politics stigmatize. This also means university centers and single-issue K-12 clubs should form alliances. Just as individual school leaders should not be expected to continue social justice work in isolation from one another, neither should school initiatives. Rutgers University’s Cultural Center Collaborative is a good example of just such a merging of social justice efforts. It combines four group’s efforts on African-American issues, Latin@ issues, Asian-American issues, and queer issues, respectively, towards a broader mission for valuing difference on campus.

Importantly, building effective multidimensional coalitions that can successfully resist oppression demands that we collaborate alongside agendas with which we may not be fully aligned (see O’Malley & Capper, 2015). For example, Brockenbrough (2012) found that black queer male educators who did not come out at their schools found themselves well-positioned to serve as critics of black masculinity politics because they remained closeted. Avoiding queer visibility (which is rightly a policy goal for many queer scholars) afforded these black and queer educators intersectional agency they would not otherwise have had access to. More specifically, they were able to engage pedagogical agendas that worked against white supremacist and homophobic arrangements in their schools only because students and colleagues did not identify them as queer. The resulting efforts of these black queer male educators suggest that social justice work can presently address multiple dimensions of oppression, albeit messily. The mess is that their work was possible only so far as the educators remained closeted, a reality that perpetuates queer erasure in school faculties, and especially with faculty of color. So while remaining closeted goes against queer efforts to disrupt anti-queer oppression in schools, progress interrupting racist and homophobic practices in these educators’ schools was made possible by collaborating across agendas that, in this instance, were not always fully aligned with one another.

School curricula and organizational supports should also draw on the histories of marginalized groups’ resistance to oppression in order to inform social justice work in
public schools. Notably, heterogeneous coalitions have successfully empowered communities to resist oppressive educational politics and policymaking. In Newark, NJ, teachers, administrators, community leaders, scholars, and students collaborated to resist neoliberal educational policy reform that threatened to further separate the community from how the community’s schools are run (Murphy, Strothers & Lugg, In press). In particular, students’ activism adapted critiques from scholars and educators to social media, circumventing Newark’s near-absent traditional media, the work of these students was instrumental in raising awareness and support for the community’s resistance efforts – support which eventually resulted in the state-appointed superintendent’s resignation.

Lastly, professional organizations have an important and influential role to play in multidimensional social justice advocacy. History suggests that support from professional organizations like the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA) has a very real impact in schools and school policy (e.g. Blount, 2005; Lugg & Murphy, 2014). On November 21, 2016, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) – an advocacy group working against homophobic and transphobic discrimination – collaborated with nine major educational associations¹ in a call to action. This call was paired with a co-constructed resource outlining activities that principals, superintendents and school board members can use to resist oppressive politics in their own schools. The call’s diverse support affirms the importance of diversity for making schools safe and inclusive—a far cry from “diversity garbage.”

The practicality of heterogeneous coalitions for socially just education

As the work of heterogeneous activist efforts in Newark and GLSEN’s work alongside professional organizations illustrate, scholars’ numerous calls for intersectional and multidimensional advocacy against oppression is quite practical. And, as students’ and citizens’ experiences continue to be documented, this social justice work has the promise of being quite impactful.

This means agendas that address only one aspect of difference will not and should not remain one-dimensional. This means our collaborative efforts must be constructively critical. But this also means every group’s capital, and varied histories of navigating oppressive cultures and institutions, are resources to be shared! Only with diverse expertise were the citizens in Newark able to galvanize support for their resistance. Only with diverse standpoints and agendas were their messages powerful enough to push out a state-appointed superintendent.

¹ The nine professional organizations that signed onto GLSEN’s call to action are: the School Superintendents Association (AASA), American School Counselor Association (ASCA), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National School Boards Association (NSBA), and the National Parent Teacher Association (National PTA).
“All this diversity garbage” is not an empty allusion to political correctness. Diversity is both a theoretical and practical resource for resisting oppression. It is a resource that can tell us not just that oppressive politics can be resisted, but is a tool for constructing creatively disruptive and effective resistance to oppression in U.S. public schools. Diversity is a resource we should consciously tap in our classrooms, in our schools and in our professional organizations as we work toward social justice.

References


Defending “all this Diversity Garbage”: Multidimensional coalition-building in the age of Trump


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The Journal

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