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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When I was in sixth grade, our teacher walked us out of the building and up Revonah Hill Road until the concrete turned into gravel and then, gradually after another half mile, we were walking through high weeds upon the hard-packed earth. We reached a pond and we spent the afternoon collecting crayfish, sampling the water and testing the pH, examining the muck for tadpoles. That year, we spent a month learning about where trash goes and who decides it—we discussed landfills, incinerators, city council meetings, the scarcity of land—our teacher called this the economics of solid waste. And then there was our insect unit: I remember my best friend, Arielle, refused to collect the ten bugs on moral grounds, and so she collected twenty wildflowers instead. I caught a giant water beetle and installed it on the front sleeve of my binder, and when that season had passed, I put the binder on the living room mantel to remind myself of September.

It was a good year for science class, but it was not atypical, at least as far as primary school went. We did this sort of stuff every year and, by design, it fostered in me an appreciation for this planet and all its life. The problem, as I see it now, is that my teachers seldom connected the dots. I learned to love nature and to condemn pollution, but I did not learn how or why a large community of people who cared about and feared the consequences of climate change could be silenced by a small cadre of elites. There I was, thinking I could save the world by recycling my Mondo bottle. There I was, rolling my eyes at my mother because she labored on about the gas company that put traces of arsenic in the town’s water. It’s just a gas company, Mom. Nothing we can do about it.

Today I cannot decide if it matters anymore that environmentalism was never really a partisan issue. Just like American imperialism. Just like racial inequality, anti-blackness, the slaughter of indigenous peoples and the desecration of their land. The point is that back when I was learning to be a good citizen of the earth and that violence was not the answer, I was not learning, say, about how the U.S. military receives 74 times the amount of funding per year than the EPA (around $600 billion to around $8 billion in 2015; see Environmental Protection Agency, 2016; Gould & Bender, 2015). I was not learning about how the EPA exists as a formality and that executives consistently act to undermine its nominal charge: for example, Bill Clinton’s refusal to raise taxes on coal, oil, and natural gas (“It’s the economy, stupid!”) (Wapner, 2001), George W. Bush’s attempt to block climate science data and censor discussions of climate change (Goldenberg, 2009), and Obama’s complicity on major growth in coal, oil and gas exportation, shale drilling, and the...
Canadian tar sands industry (Stangler, 2014). My education was humanitarian, or moral, whatever that means, but it was never critical. In the latter grades, when the tests rolled in, we stopped even going outside. I could fault my teachers for this, but they were merely doing their jobs.

My reductive reading of the 2016 U.S Presidential Election is that the banal racism and misogyny fundamental to Trump’s campaign may have unwittingly hastened the end of our species. This says a lot about our need to begin dialoguing with our neighbors on the other side of the fence, but I think even louder it screams the need to name and fight the massive, ominous elephant that has lurked outside our window for a century and now creeps into the room. After its meeting in Morocco in November, 2016, the World Meteorological Organization reported that 2016 was on track to be the hottest year on record, eclipsing the record set the previous year. In that year, global sea levels rose at five times the rate that they had been rising in the last decade of the 20th century. Annual average carbon dioxide concentrations reached 400 parts per million for the first time, and sea ice measurements at the North Pole after the end of the melting season were the lowest on record (World Meteorological Organization, 2016). Many climate scientists saw this election as the most important in the history of the planet, as only radical policies designed to immediately begin reversing these trends, implemented by the wealthiest countries in the world, could avert cataclysm. While Donald Trump has nominated a climate change denier for the head of the EPA, and the CEO of a multinational oil company for U.S. Secretary of State, precipitously rising ocean levels, brutal droughts in east Africa and west Asia, and volatile shifts in the Asian seasonal monsoon, threaten to trigger a human refugee crisis beyond anything that we have seen in these past several decades of transnational flow. The massive displacement along the coasts and in the newly formed deserts will likely incite more global political conflict, and in our increasingly weaponized, nuclear society, we all might be exterminated before the ice caps even finish melting.

U.S. citizens who elected Donald Trump did so despite his stances on environmental issues (to be fair, those who voted for Hillary Clinton did so despite her being bankrolled by fossil fuel industries or her silence on issues like Standing Rock). Environmental issues were not on these voters’ minds, while “social” issues (e.g., whether or not it is okay to brag about sexual assault) also appeared to be irrelevant. In the end, sixty million voters were never challenged to explore the possible environmental ramifications of this election. This was not only facilitated by the press and the news stations that broadcasted three national debates without a single question about environmental policy, but by educators who were hardly encouraged to get political in their practice. The study of the environment has always been touchy-feely, tree-huggy, and yes, scientific; meanwhile, the business of government is business, and the two subjects have rarely been set in dialogue with each other in our classrooms.

This is not an indictment of science educators. We are all science educators now—at least in the science of the climate. And if we are responsible science educators, then we must not simply spell out the impending disaster, but dare to show how we could fight to prevent it, which is to say that we will need to invite political conflict into our educational spaces, and we will need to seek conflict outside of those spaces. Maybe this is a big leap: Schooling in this society veers away from conflict and toward “success”, which is to say it
does not stop to think, it does not pause and notice the silences. Schooling, when its aims are muddled with economic priorities, cannot dramatically alter the world. And yet educators show up to work, intent on sparking change. If we want to be anything other than pawns in the political game of extraction, stratification and ultimately self-destruction, we will need to start engaging power and disrupting it in the questions we ask.

No matter how much the rampant, big-moneyed misinformation and public schools’ decontextualization of real truths has intoxicated U.S. citizens, educators cannot be expected to save the world from staggering injustice and the forces of privatization, deregulation, state violence, and corruption that abet it. Politicians have long made a habit of scapegoating educators. The schools are not to blame, as much as the talking heads, the morally righteous, and Betsy DeVos think they are.

But we educators still exist, we still show up for work, and we somehow still have enough legitimacy to convince an affluent white eleven-year-old that dinner-table current events are not important because they aren’t on the school curriculum. Indeed: I was educated about the importance of nature while I was miseducated about the place of politics in the science curriculum and in the process of learning writ large. The curriculum must become political. In the educational project of my life, the dead beetle on the front of my binder is no longer an aesthetic embellishment, a surer way to good grades, and fond memories, but a symbol of political engagement. Now it is time we decided for whom we work: Are we working because we want to build “skills” and “competency,” or are we working because we want to survive? Do we teach because we want our youth to grow up to become successful, or do we teach because we understand the destructiveness of the success a few citizens have enjoyed at the expense of most everyone else? Perhaps we teach now because we are drowning in, are asphyxiated by, all the success we’ve enjoyed. For whom do we work? It is time we really asked.

References


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**The Journal**

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