



Fascists Fear Education

Why We Need Climate Justice Education Now

Higher Education
Education Policy
Illinois

I recently saw a young person wearing a t-shirt that read: “Fascists Fear Education”. My peal of laughter dispelled my feelings of dread and helplessness—but the respite was brief. The shirt was a bit too accurate in describing the current assault on higher education.

The United States has pulled back on her national and global commitments to addressing the climate crisis, simultaneously dismantling the Department of Education, rescinding grants and contracts to universities, and disrupting life- and planet-saving research across institutions of higher education. And yet, democracy and education are mutually inclusive (Dewey, 1916; Williams, 2017). The mere fact that we are here, in this particular moment in time, when America’s grasp on democracy is tenuous, is itself a failure of public education.

The “problem of sustainability” is “the problem of education” (Orr, 1994, p. 7). Within the United States, the climate crisis is discussed, often poorly, through science (Stoknes, 2014) in terms of earth systems and processes that explain the greenhouse effect or loss of biodiversity. However, the roots of the crisis, namely colonialism and capitalism, are historical and social in nature and linked to the economic, political, and cultural realms of humanity across generations. These complexities have been communicated even less effectively than the science of climate change and are thus not well-understood by the American public. In turn, this has created the conditions that have allowed the pseudo-debate around the climate crisis and its anthropogenic origins to persist. This is a uniquely American problem.

Our fellow global citizens have accepted that the crisis is not only human-driven, but that some of us are more responsible than others. Large, Western, and industrialized countries have

historical and contemporary carbon footprints that eclipse those of the Global Majority. And while the impacts of climate change touch every corner of this globe through the increased frequency of storms and wildfires, prolonged drought, and rising tides, these impacts are not distributed evenly across geographies, nor is their severity and the ability to adapt and mitigate. The poorest and most vulnerable communities, within the United States and across the globe, experience the impacts of climate change most acutely and bear the least responsibility (Bullard, 1983; Islam & Winkel, 2017).

As America abdicates her global leadership position, as well as her responsibilities and duties to other countries, education must fill this vacuum. The pace with which the crisis is changing our world is faster than initially projected. Our curriculum, from early childhood to higher education, must then evolve faster and be oriented toward a hopeful and just future. Our children and communities have the right to learn to live on a planet under pressure which requires that education be an instrument of democracy and free from fear. Those of us who teach must also bravely transform to meet this moment so that all citizens and species of Earth may flourish on a warming world.

Works Cited

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