

STRIKING FOR THEIR LIVES: CLIMATE ACTIVISTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Mercurius Goldstein offers some reflections on why our students have become activists for the fight against climate change. He explains why teachers must ensure that our curriculum always includes discussions into such issues which directly affect the future of our students. . .

HERE BE ACTIVISTS

Conservative and reactionary political forces maintain, as an article of faith, that teachers, and public school teachers in particular, are subversive agents ever ready to imbue activism and revolutionary spirit among “impressionable” young minds. This is a frequently-pushed panic button for right-wing culture warriors, accompanied by broad-scale accusations of ‘indoctrination’, ‘brainwashing’ and, in recent years, the perverse and sinister charge of ‘grooming’.

A comprehensive corpus analysis of over 65,000 print media articles on education published between 1996-2020 provides a compelling survey of Australia’s unofficial national sport of ‘teacher-bashing’ (Mockler, 2022), and is available from the Federation Library.

But what most media, and politically-driven portrayals of education, tend to ignore or downplay is the mere, but crucial, fact that teaching is a **profession** and that teachers are professionals charged with the delivery of a government-approved curriculum and its accompanying syllabuses, (which are in turn devised by qualified experts and authorities with specialist understanding grounded in an epistemology of realism). Such truths are not to be found in the rhetorical projections and shibboleths of the reactionary right.

If anything, the state institutional framework that resources and maintains public education (with greater degrees of care or neglect as governmental policies come and go, and defended most strongly by teacher unions) is the great counterweight to the panicked fantasies of conservative forces. For the countervailing charge has been made for decades among academia that education is not institutionally oriented to be a social-critical endeavor,

and that the broad project of education affirms and maintains much if not all of the status quo (Zeigler, 1970; Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982). From this we face a giant *j’accuse* that even as the project of public education aims for broader equality and fairness among the population, it offers no systemic critique of imperialist, colonialist, classist, racist, sexist, nor nationalist foundations of modern society.

Media and political portrayals also tend to overlook the sustained experience across many decades that teachers as a group evidence only slight variation in political voting patterns compared with the broader Australian electorate, and that a steady one-third or so of the profession tend to vote with conservative parties in state and federal elections – and overwhelmingly so when one includes the centre-right and what passes for the centre-left in Australia.

A recent key finding, from arch-conservative US think-tank the Heritage Foundation, is that a plurality of teachers would be categorised as political ‘moderates’, and that “[t]he average teacher response was consistently more moderate than that of the average liberal in the nationally representative sample. We find little evidence that a large percentage of teachers are systemically imposing a radical political agenda in K–12 classrooms” (Greene & Paul, 2021). Relatedly, a UK study of the longer-term political effects of schooling concluded that as an individual student spent more years in late high school, this correlated to a significantly higher likelihood that they would vote for the Conservative party later in life (Marshall, 2016).

Even so, there is a kind of poetic justice to conclude that

the right may yet be half-right after all. For there remain still activists and subversives to be found in many classrooms – located among the young people sitting at their desks – also known as students.

THERE BE UNIONISTS

In a recent Eric Pearson study grant report *The #ClimateStrike movement and the future of unionism*, I had the opportunity to research the key experiences and learnings of student activists in the #Climatestrike movement, their notions of collective action, participation, and organisation to achieve their goals. I also looked at the strategies through which the union movement, in general, and education unions, in particular, might remain visible, viable and prominent in the cause of climate justice for a stable and viable future for working people and the cause of public education (Goldstein, 2021, pp.10-11).

My research on this topic found that among young people engaged in climate activism there is a convergence of experiences with earlier protest movements – a commitment to collectivism over individualism, and a capacity for intergenerational partnership, within an emerging mass movement largely comprised of, and led by, women (ibid. pp.42-45).

In 2018, global media attention was drawn to Greta Thunberg, the 15-year-old Swedish student activist protesting on the steps of her country's parliament house with her *Skolstrejk för klimatet* sign when she was supposed to be in school. It is worth noting, however, that the student-led climate activist movement began to form as early as 2006, in our very own country, with the Australian Youth Climate Coalition developing school-based action templates among and between student activists (aycc.org.au). This cue was in turn picked up in the USA by the *Rethinking Schools* student movement who launched their own climate activist school-based organising kit in Portland, Oregon in 2016 (Goldstein, 2021, pp.17,39).

Focussing as it did on the implications of the emerging #Climatestrike events for the broader union movement, the report posed the question “whether our movement has a future without #ClimateStrike activists choosing to join our ranks as they begin their working lives over the years to come”. The report concluded that “[w]hen young

people can experience the union movement as being tangibly linked to their future wellbeing and pursuit of a safe, stable global climate, they have a vector through which they can perceive purpose and relevance to joining and becoming active members of their union...” (Goldstein., 2021, pp.20,52).

WHERE BE TEACHERS?

But the #ClimateStrike report also offers a professional challenge to classroom practitioners and non-school based teachers alike: how should we properly and ethically undertake our professional duties in the context of a student population whose literal future survivability is at stake? For the world heads for global average temperatures in their lifetime most likely to exceed the 1.5°C above pre-industrial averages, and well into a perilous global range of 2°C+ by 2100 according to accepted international climate projections (IPCC, 2022).

My suggestion is that teachers as always should return to our curriculum and syllabus documents for guidance on how best to proceed. In doing so, we should remain mindful that curriculum is an ever-contested space that itself is subject to attempts at political interference which it is our collective professional duty to guard against.

On 24 December 2021, the then federal Education Minister Stuart Robert vetoed an Australian Research Council (ARC) recommendation for academic study into the very topic of my own report – climate activism amongst students (Hurst, 2021). A private member's bill in the Senate (Faruqi, 2018) to amend the Act to remove ministerial veto of ARC grants was referred to a Senate Inquiry which reported on March 2022 and recommended that the Act **not** be so amended but called for an independent review of the ARC including its governance and research funding processes (EELC, 2022). As of July 2022, those powers still remain in the Australian Research Council Act of 2001.

Supporters of academic freedom and enquiry in education would be well advised to remain vigilant on government intervention in research grants and urge for repeal/replacement of ministerial “discretion” which amounts to political interference in the academic grants process. All that said, it is...

“...hardly a new phenomenon whereby politicians have attempted to suppress topics of great importance to future generations by denying their teaching in schools. Across the decades whether the topic is evolution, civil rights, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, health education including sexuality, contraception, drugs, and communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, one rarely has to look far for a politician insisting that such matters are not to be brought to the attention of students...

...It is sadly all too easy to imagine a world in which children are denied education about their own physical and psychosocial development, their gender, cultural needs, health needs, and the health of the planet. What greater threat to children’s freedom could be the denial of knowledge on such critical matters to their future?”

(Education Quarterly, Issue 1, 2022, pp.26, 27)

Thus, I argue that it falls to educators – teachers and principals – to ensure that the curriculum remains an edifice which promotes understanding, engagement, and enlightened criticism on matters of great consequence for children’s life trajectories, the whole of society, and for the ecosphere of which we are all part (ibid. p.27).

For these reasons, I urge specialists in all Key Learning Areas to scrutinise our respective syllabuses, to perceive the ways and means in which our pedagogical content knowledge (Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987) relates to the climate activist projects that students themselves have undertaken on their own initiative.

For whether the realm is scientific, mathematical, geographical, historical, sociological, whether in literature, artistic, agricultural, industrial, health, and even sporting pursuits, there is much to be learned **and taught** from our current syllabuses to equip students with the knowledge they need to pursue a safe, stable global climate.

In doing so, teachers are supported by the cross-curriculum priority area of *Sustainability* embedded in the Australian Curriculum, which includes statements that cover the applicability of environmental content for every learning area (ACARA, 2022).

And for the many teachers whose educational careers and aspirations include dipping our professional toes into the

pond of curriculum consultation and development for future syllabuses, there is considerable scope for ensuring the needs of the global biosphere and its concomitant role in sustaining our students, whose very lives and futures depend upon it, are given due priority.

The extent of economic and societal reorganisation that might be required to achieve all this remains where it has always been – in the hands of the rising generation. But their capacity to do so depends crucially on the readiness and willingness of those charged with their education to teach them that which will make it possible for them to assess their world and society, and to undertake such repairs as they find necessary.

The status quo is one that delivers our students a distinct prospect of environmental, and thus societal, collapse in their lifetime. Against that prospect, we must conclude that some enlightened subversion is warranted after all.

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