

The Problematization and Reconstruction of Educational Life:

Lessons for Teacher Preparation from the Red for Ed Movement

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Like many teacher educators, I enthusiastically observed as teachers from across several states organized walkouts in 2018. I remember being particularly struck by participating teachers' demands to their state legislatures for increases in teacher pay and per pupil funding and how these demands provided an ethical account of the teaching profession. As an educator who approaches teacher preparation from a philosophical vantage, I also recall thinking that teachers engaged in what has become known as the Red for Ed movement were practicing moments of educative truth telling that enunciated how their lives are materially impacted by conditions of educational austerity. To me, the Red for Ed movement represented at once a critique of present educational "reforms" and an envisioning of a better educational future. Filled with enthusiasm, I set out to discuss this emerging movement with preservice teachers in the spring of 2018.

During these discussions, I was surprised by preservice teachers' lack of support for these walkouts as well as their willingness to accept low pay and poor working conditions as simply "part of the job." Paraphrasing these conversations, I was struck by comments like: "I would never walkout on *my* students;" and "Buying supplies is just part of being a teacher. Whenever Target has a sale, I make sure to buy stuff I will use in my future classroom." Frustrated by these initial discussions, I

recorded several interviews with teachers who participated in Arizona's Red for Ed campaign during the summer of 2018 and have since made these interviews part of the curriculum for my educational foundations courses. In brief, these interviews asked Arizona teachers what they thought preservice teachers should understand about the politics of education and what they wished they had known about educational policy prior to entering the teaching profession.

In addition to sharing Arizona teachers' voices, I also utilize a recently published timeline by the National Education Association (NEA) that describes the emergence of the Red for Ed movement.¹ Beginning in February of 2018 with a two-week organized walkout by West Virginian teachers, this timeline traces the spread of Red for Ed campaigns across six additional states, including Kentucky, Oklahoma, Colorado, Arizona, and North Carolina. Utilizing video clips of walkouts from these states, this timeline provides additional voices of teachers participating in this emerging movement. The NEA has also recently published a webpage dedicated to the Red for Ed movement complete with an interactive map for determining teacher salaries and per pupil funding in all fifty states and a resource that allows teachers to share receipts of their out-of-pocket

¹ Mary Ellen Flannery and Amanda Litvinov, "Why We Are Red for Ed: It's About Protecting Students and Public Schools," *NEA Today*, accessed

December 31, 2019,
<http://neatoday.org/2018/10/12/why-we-are-red-for-ed/>.

educational expenses.² Reflecting back on the past two years, bringing the voices of participating teachers into my educational foundations courses has impacted preservice teachers' opinions concerning the inter-relatedness of education, politics, and policy.

Many preservice teachers were simply unaware of the impact low salaries and per pupil funding have on teaching and learning; nor did they think critically about why teachers receive low wages, which they then must use to purchase classroom supplies. Perhaps most importantly, the voices of participating teachers communicate to preservice teachers both a truth about present conditions of educational austerity, while also calling upon these future educators to themselves become educational change agents. Turning to Arizona's Red for Ed campaign, the NEA shares a rally speech by organizer Noah Karvelis that inflects this dual process of critiquing the present and envisioning the future:

A lot of people think this movement was born out of one tweet and a Facebook event. That's not true. This movement was born out of decades of neglect. This movement was born out of years of living paycheck to paycheck. This movement was born out of the experience of looking into our students' eyes—that our state, the people who sit in this building do not fund their success. That's what started this movement. That's why we are here. And now here we are because our voices have still gone unheard.³

² "Red for Ed," *NEA Today*, accessed December 31, 2019, <http://neatoday.org/redford/>.

³ Flannery and Litvinov, "Why We Are Red for Ed."

⁴ Colin Koopman, "Genealogical Pragmatism: How History Matters for Foucault and Dewey," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 5 (2011), 533-561. Koopman extends this argument in *Pragmatism as*

Philosophical Intervention

The above pedagogical preface suggests how teacher educators can use teacher activism to create curriculum that connects the politics of education and the teaching profession. While sharing the voices of participating teachers has helped me make this pedagogical connection, relating education, politics, and policy necessitates philosophical intervention. If politics helps educational foundations pedagogically explicate the professional status of teaching, then philosophy helps politics bring together the dual processes of critique and ethical improvement. Karvelis' speech highlights this duality, that is, the mutually reinforcing process of *both* critiquing present conditions of educational austerity by citing a history of policy neglect *and* envisioning an educative future improved through Red for Ed political organizing. Philosopher Colin Koopman describes this dual process as "genealogical pragmatism."⁴

Koopman employs this term to argue that present problems require both a historical perspective that is attentive to asking how we arrived at our current moment and a forward-looking perspective that is attentive to ameliorating or improving the future. This makes genealogical pragmatism a form of immanent social critique that invites at once historical analyses or problematizations and sophisticated solutions or reconstructions. What results from this methodological admixture is "a conception of critical inquiry whose basic categories of critique are *problem* and *response*—as an alternative to

Transition: Historicity, and Hope in James, Dewey and Rorty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 195-235; and in *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 217-270.

position and negation or truth and error.”⁵

This method is well-suited for education given that present problems are often “born out of decades of neglect” and that teachers generally respond to problems by improving education. Genealogical pragmatism thus both problematizes policy effects preservice teachers take for granted—e.g., accepting low wages and poor working conditions as just “part of the job”—and asks them to work toward politically reconstructing education’s future.

Central to genealogical pragmatism is a bridging of two rarely connected philosophical schools of thought—European critical theory and American pragmatism. The two thinkers who make this bridge possible are French philosopher Michel Foucault, who problematizes the present by mapping its historical antecedents (genealogy); and American philosopher John Dewey, who reconstructs the present by soliciting practical solutions (pragmatism). This combination results in a complementary philosophical method. Taken separately, while Foucault is helpful toward mapping the historical antecedents of present problems, genealogy is ill-suited for envisioning solutions; likewise, while Dewey is helpful toward soliciting solutions, pragmatism is ill-suited for understanding how problems emerge. Read together, then, Foucault and Dewey’s thinking refract onto education critical diagnoses of how problems emerge and practical transitions toward reconstructions intended to ameliorate or improve present limiting conditions by expanding possibilities of future educative growth.

Like the voices of participating teachers, Koopman’s philosophical method has helped me improve how I discuss the Red for Ed movement with preservice teachers. This emerging movement is an

example of how educational philosophy can be witnessed in practice and practiced in teacher preparation courses. Pedagogically, genealogical pragmatism motivates future educators to critically engage with present educational problems while also leveraging these problems as invitations for envisioning future improvements. While Koopman maintains that problematization and reconstruction are mutually reinforcing and not independently sequential, it is helpful to proceed by discussing these two aspects of genealogical pragmatism separately before bringing them together by way of conclusion.

Problematization

Karvelis’ opening critique of education policy is important because it demonstrates that we did not arrive at our current moment by accident; rather, the problems presently facing education occurred over decades. Philosophers refer to this way of interrogating policy neglect as genealogical because it does not seek to pinpoint specific origins for present problems, but works to problematize the present toward an understanding that our current moment is the result of historical policy maneuvers that define what constitutes the truth of the day. For Foucault, truth is not something that is absolute or whose opposite is error, it is something that is in the making through maneuverings like stereotyping education as a feminine or caring profession in need of policy surveillance or comparing American education to other countries and then equating, as was the case in the *A Nation at Risk Report* (1983), American education to an act of war as a way to justifying standardization. Mapping these and other policy maneuverings not only makes possible historical analyses of the present

⁵ Koopman, “Genealogical Pragmatism,” 558 (original emphasis).

but also critiques of how the truth of the day limits who we can be and what we can do.

Attending to the first half of genealogical pragmatism, it is worth noting that, with the exception of Colorado, each of the above states is a so-called right-to-work state. This includes 2019 Red for Ed organizing efforts in Indiana. Broadly understood, right-to-work policies preclude workers from having to join unions as a part of their employment in unionized workplaces. The locations of Red for Ed campaigns are interesting because organizing occurred despite prolonged legislative efforts to undermine union participation. That Red for Ed campaigns are occurring in states where teacher union membership does not correspond with being employed as a teacher demonstrates how to organize outside traditional avenues of organized labor and how social media can be utilized toward collective organizing. Right-to-work policies are also important because they are one component in a larger series of neoliberal “reforms” that have found increasing resonance across state legislatures over the past four decades.

In brief, neoliberalism can be conceived of as a governing rationality that extends economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of life.⁶ Education has been particularly hard hit by such “reforms,” including the freezing of teacher wages, the lack of state investment in educational infrastructure, the state- and district-level implementation of No Child Left Behind (2002) and Race to the Top (2009) in ways that often result in public schools being taken over by third party, private charter school consulting firms, the

increasing use of voucher policies to shift public education monies into private school corporations, the generation of teacher shortages through de-professionalizing standards and unmanageable teacher-student ratios, and the increasing employment of unqualified teachers through alternative route to certification programs.⁷ These “reforms” have resulted in the privatization of public education and the limiting of teachers’ voices despite their dedicated maintenance of a dilapidated public PK-12 American education system. It is from within this history of neoliberal “reforms” that the Red for Ed movement can be understood. That is, the market-based rationality of neoliberalism has produced conditions of educational austerity that the Red for Ed movement is telling the truth about or problematizing.

Market-based rationalities also tend to require individual improvement, whether of students, teachers, or schools, and assume a level playing field in which all students, teachers, and schools have equal opportunities to succeed.⁸ A second feature of neoliberal educational “reforms,” then, is an insistence upon an individualism that often pits teachers against students, teachers against teachers, and schools against communities. Increased standardization in combination with value added measures that equate teacher effectiveness to how well students perform on standardized tests produces mis-educative conditions within which teachers are incentivized to attend to students’ individual test performances rather than the collective growth of educational life and to understand their own educative value in competition with fellow educators rather

⁶ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

⁷ Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

⁸ Michael W. Apple, “Understanding and Interrupting Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism in Education,” *Pedagogies* 1, no. 1 (2006): 21-26.

than through shared efforts to produce living educative conditions.⁹ The Red for Ed movement is responding to this problematic genealogy of policy neglect.

Reconstruction

In addition to helping conceptualize problematization, Karvelis' speech is also suggestive of how the Red for Ed movement practices the second half of genealogical pragmatism—reconstruction. If the educational problems being critiqued by the Red for Ed movement occurred over time, so too did the movement's organized responses. Social media posts helped participating teachers share their frustrations with low pay and poor working conditions while also providing a platform for organizing community-based walk-ins that preceded organized walkouts. These moments of collective solidarity, during which teachers walked into schools together wearing red, provided opportunities to tell parents and students the truth about how low teacher pay and per pupil funding effects learning. Initial organizing efforts are important for two reasons: first, they evidence participating teachers transgressing the limits imposed on their profession by decades of neoliberal "reforms" that worked to depoliticize teaching through policies aimed at producing high teacher turnover; secondly, they refute policymakers who hope teachers will leave the profession before politically enunciating the truth of their lived experiences.

Enunciations of lived experiences help to bring problematization and reconstruction together. First, Foucault helps theorize such enunciations as *parrhesia* or free and frank speech.¹⁰ *Parrhesia* highlights both the risks involved in teachers walking out and how sharing the truth of their lived experiences binds teachers to their utterances in ways that change who they are professionally while also inviting new understandings of their profession. For the 75,000 Arizona teachers who walked out of their classrooms from April 26 to May 3, 2018, not only was the quality of their own lives and the educational lives of their students at issue, but the teaching profession itself was also at stake. Arizona teachers leveraged their problematization of educational austerity toward a reconstructed vision of education that demanded the following: (1) a twenty percent salary increase; (2) competitive pay for all education support professionals; (3) an annual salary structure; (4) restoration of educational funding to pre-recession levels; and (5) a prohibition on tax cuts until per-pupil funding matched the national average.¹¹ These demands evidence the difficulty teachers have in maintaining a quality of life that is respectful of their professional status as well as the debilitating educational conditions within which they labor and from which students are expected to learn.

In addition to being sophisticated solutions, these demands offer a lived ethical account of the teaching profession,

⁹ Isabel Nuñez, Gregory Michie, Pamela Konkol, *Worth Striking For: Why Education Policy is Every Teachers Concern (Lessons from Chicago)*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983*, eds. Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, Allesandro Fontana, Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010); and Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and*

Others II. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984, eds. Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, Allesandro Fontana, Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2011).

¹¹ Joseph Flaherty, "Arizona Educators Want to Be Paid Like Teachers in Neighboring States," *Phoenix New Times*, March 26, 2018, <http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/redford-arizona-teachers-seek-20-percent-raise-10279545>.

which Dewey's philosophy of experience helps to theorize.¹² In demanding policy changes, teachers articulate teaching as a profession deserving of a living wage and themselves as highly trained professionals who require more per-pupil funding in order to produce educative learning conditions. Against individualizing neoliberal "reforms," the Red for Ed movement represents a collective solidarity that participating teachers describe as a home space, a communal location where they have found others like themselves. The demands made by Red for Ed campaigns across state legislatures reinvigorates education with a vital energy full of possibilities. The Red for Ed movement is thus an example of how education can be simultaneously problematized and reconstructed through enunciations of lived experiences that redefine the living possibilities of education. This application of Dewey's educational thought offers renewed insight into his adage that education is not preparation for life, but is life itself.

Curricular Coda

Living educative possibilities are evident in the collective solidarity practiced by participating teachers and in how preservice teachers respond to these teachers' voices by critically moving through present problems toward shared realizations that reconstructing education requires understanding how education, politics, and policy are inter-related. Karvelis' closing pronouncement of a continuing commitment to improving educational conditions moves preservice teachers toward this understanding. More helpful though are the voices of participating teachers who describe both a political awakening and a renewed pedagogical commitment facilitated by their involvement with the Red

for Ed movement. Such enunciations communicate to preservice teachers why learning about policy is foundational to education. The voices of participating teachers thus not only tell the truth about a profession that has too long been understood through idyllic public images of apolitical educators, they also make possible new shared political visions of educational life. Finally, the voices of participating teachers show preservice teachers that they are not alone in their professional journeys because there are collective ways to respond to problems.

The Red for Ed movement offers an alternative democratic and ethical account of neoliberalism's market-based logics and are suggestive of how to talk, think, and teach against educational austerity. The Red for Ed movement not only shows preservice teachers how neoliberalism effects the teaching profession but also demonstrates how educational philosophy can help reconstruct the limits imposed on their future professional selves. This emerging movement is a teaching moment given its capacity to show preservice teachers how American education has been made over time by decades of neoliberal "reforms" and to tell future educators the truth about what it means to live as a teacher. Where neoliberalism insists teachers provide care regardless of debilitating circumstances, the Red for Ed movement redefines educational life as something that can be collectively improved. Genealogical pragmatism helps in this redefinition by critiquing present problems and soliciting preservice teachers to become educational change agents who can collectively reconstruct the living possibilities of education toward future conditions of educative growth.

¹² John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).