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Education and Violence: Editor’s Introduction

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Education is often treated as a social good to be maximized. And yet it is often apparent that, across contexts, schools do not actually function as a simple social good. When educational systems are shown to be both ridden with inequities and core to the reproduction of social inequalities, when children are harmed physically and psychologically within and by schooling, when teachers are subject to state repression, when schools function to legitimize and shore up cultural and linguistic dominance, practitioners and scholars must seek to understand: what went wrong? There are two types of responses. The first is that education’s “failures” to act as a social good are either technical failures or failures of corruption, and that we must try to make education live up to its normative promise. The second is that education was never a social good at all, that such problems are not examples of a system that is failing but are rather part and parcel of what education in fact is. Such a response generally takes the scholarly form of critical deconstruction, which is often difficult for a broader public to access.

The authors in this issue look at education through violence, as well as the various forms of resistance to which violence gives rise. It is our hope that this approach, viewed comparatively, might provide an alternative to both technocratic and critical deconstructionist approaches, helping educators, scholars, and citizens to focus on the human stakes of what goes on in and around educational institutions and policies.

The origin of this issue of LoV occurred in an Anthropology seminar focused on “Activism for Educational Justice” in the fall of 2012 at UMass Amherst. This seminar was designed to start with what students brought with them. Some of the students arrived in the seminar intent on studying how schools often fail to recognize students’ home language and culture. Others brought and developed interests in teacher labor organizing in Chicago and Mexico, as well as student organizing against austerity and privatization in Chile, Detroit, and Quebec. In this seminar as well were several graduate student activists working together against the privatization of teacher education (in conjunction with Barbara Madeloni—see Nygreen and O’Brien, this issue), who were struggling to articulate a moral vision of education against an institution that considered education a technical enterprise. Over the course of the semester students also interrogated the roles of diverse non-state entities that affect the lives of educators and students, such as corporations, drug cartels, philanthropists, and development NGOs. Ultimately, we moved as a group toward investigating how a range of activists negotiates such an ideologically fraught field, one organized by particular and complex politics of education along one axis and by particular social/political/economic structures along the other.

While we were focused on the contexts and conditions of educational activism, much of our learning revolved around uncovering narratives of the intersection of violence and technocracy that characterized the field of education across every context we investigated. We found each conversation returning to how social and political structures are mediated through state schooling in ways that shape diverse local experiences of violence—poverty, drug wars, immigration policy, racism, erasure and disrespect of subjugated languages and dialects, legacies of slavery and
colonialism, and on and on. Violence was a perpetual, initially under-articulated, theme, which slowly became a lens for making sense of the stories of suffering and resistance we encountered. Anthropology graduate student Ashley Sherry, at the time an editorial assistant of this journal, advocated and laid the groundwork for an issue of Landscapes of Violence that would be dedicated to exploring the ways violence shapes diverse educational landscapes, and the ways that educational institutions interact with existing landscapes of violence.

So what is gained by crossing the interdisciplinary field of violence studies with the interdisciplinary field of critical educational studies? I would suggest that this intersection gestures toward a helpful conceptual apparatus that is much needed in a field often polarized into technical and critical approaches. Violence enables a focus on the human narratives and stakes of education in a way that reveals instead of obscuring the technical, structural, and ideological dimensions. Ashley brought the idea for this issue to our seminar in a way that was premature for our semester-long work together but I hope the reader will agree, quite fruitful in the end.

This issue represents research and practice related to the relationship between violence and schooling. In some of these articles, schools are a site where the violence of the state is negotiated. In others, schools are a site where violence is used to negotiate state and civic ideologies. And in yet others, educational institutions serve as both a context of violence and a political site of activist negotiation or mitigation of violence. The articles span across five national/transnational contexts. Settings studied range from classrooms to national school systems, legislatures to corporations, philanthropies to public city centers, and community centers to activist meetings. People whose experiences form the focus of these articles include teachers, students, parents, community and national activists, police and military, philanthropists, and policy makers. Ultimately, each of the articles in this issue looks through violence to tell a story of how people struggle over meaning making in and around educational institutions. It is this notion of education as an integral site of struggle centered on meaning making that is revealed when we look through the lens of violence.

In Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière’s article, we encounter teachers’ counter-narratives of the Algerian War of Independence. Ferrière uses a combination of historical documents and interviews to reveal a landscape of war that placed teachers between the state of which they were supposed to act as functionaries and a professional vocation that demanded they help students—in the case of Algeria during the war, students whose families were fighting for independence from colonization by this very state—to make sense of their realities. This narrative reveals the school as a site of keen interest to the French military, for the state certainly understands the ideological function of education. The surveillance and threat of violence against Algerian Muslim teachers that Ferrière documents during the war demonstrates how education becomes an overtly fraught site of struggle during times of political conflict, and reveals in a new light the particular salience of violent conflict for seeing the “middling” position that many teachers must negotiate between state power and subjugated communities.

Lavanya Murali Proctor’s article focuses on corporal punishment by female teachers against male students in India. The article reveals the school as a site of struggle over ideologies of gender, youth, and state authority, showing how such struggle often takes place through acts of direct violence.
within the school itself. Proctor’s account—in some ways similar to Ferrière’s—speak to the
contradictory position of teachers who both carry out and contest contradictory state and civic
ideologies. The accounts of student sense-making around the frequent corporal punishment they
experience and witness are particularly revealing, providing insight into how violence truly becomes
a vehicle, and education a site, for testing and negotiating shifting ideologies of gender and authority.

Ashley Sherry’s article also makes central the agency of teachers, but in a much more explicitly
antagonistic relationship to educational policy. Sherry astutely describes the direct repressive
violence of the neoliberal, militarized Mexican state as she accompanies teachers in their struggle
against the structural violence of neoliberal education reform policies. Educational policy, Sherry
reveals, is a site of struggle between a corporatized state and a significant cadre of resistance, as
teachers refuse to be the handmaidens of structural violence. Sherry’s deft combination of the
anthropology of policy with violence theory enables her to find in the ethnography of the CNTE
movement a method for “studying through” violence. Through Sherry’s analysis, not only the
interpretation of the present policy struggle but also the meaning of the past becomes part of what is
at stake in teacher resistance. And violence becomes not simply an outcome of struggle but also a
key driver of change.

In Melissa Fellin’s article, we encounter youth within an educational institution who are
struggling to make sense of, and to mitigate, the effects of media representations of Somalis in the
aftermath of 9/11. Fellin reveals the mainstream media’s gendered construction of Somalis as
alternately violent and victims, and its symbolically violent construction of the United States and
Canada as saviors of and experts on Somali lives. But she goes beyond critical media analysis by
entering schools, where Somali youth are making sense of these media narratives as they are played
out in both dominant and counter-cultural ways. She reveals educational institutions as sites of
struggle over the meanings of refugee lives in the context of a global landscape of war.

Deborah Keisch and Tim Scott make an expansive case for the structural violence and racism of
corporate education policies in the United States. Their analysis takes readers from school discipline
to high-stakes testing to charter schools to austerity. They use audio narratives from various
educational policy researchers, activists, and advocates throughout their analysis to reveal a tapestry
of reforms that are both structured by, and that structure, the violence encountered particularly by
black and brown youth in U.S. public schools. The authors’ analysis of corporate education reform
as a is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s (1989) description of habitus, another taken-for-granted force, as
“structured structures predisposed to serve as structuring structures.” Keisch and Scott show us
both the way reform structures are structured and the ways that they structure the violent
experiences of schooling to which youth of color are subjected.

My own article in this issue takes the U.S. political context of education that Scott and Keisch
describe as the background for exploring anti-neoliberal professional white progressives’ activist
desires. Such desires, while sometimes (and, perhaps, in the long run) resulting in powerful
movements, are more often within the everyday landscapes of school systems manifest through
fraught and frustrating activist meetings that do not articulate with the community organizing
methods and movements that have shaped grassroots change affecting poor communities and
communities of color. This article uses fieldwork in what I call “un-organized meetings” over the past eight years, during which activism against the violence of corporate education reform in the United States has definitively taken root. My research highlights the micropolitics of everyday, in most moments unsuccessful, white progressive activist efforts to make sense of their role in contesting the highly racialized violence of the U.S. education system, in an era when such violence also began to affect white children as well. The micropolitics of white-led activist meetings reveal some important challenges of multi-racial organizing in the particular historicized, mythologized, and shifting racial landscape of nonviolent activism in the United States.

Included in this issue are also three (non-peer reviewed) educational practitioner narratives: “A View from the Field.” Dani O’Brien’s annotated interview with teacher activist Jesse Hagopian, with an accompanying photo-essay, describes the first whole-school boycott of a standardized test in the United States as a struggle against testing, which Hagopian considers the lynchpin of the violence of corporate education reform. Kysa Nygreen and Dani O’Brien’s annotated audio interview with Barbara Madeloni, a former professor of teacher education and current president of the 110,000-member Massachusetts Teacher Association, explains the multi-faceted structural violence of the privatization of education, emphasizing the dehumanizing effects of contemporary educational policies on both students and teachers. Martha de Jesús López Aguilar, a teacher and activist heavily involved in the unionized resistance movement that Sherry (this issue) chronicles, provides a first-person teacher narrative and analysis of the violence of state education reform and the importance of resistance in Mexico, also emphasizing the need for re-humanization through education in the face of a dehumanizing political-economic regime that is re-colonizing that space. Together, these three educator-activists reveal educational institutions and policies as locations in which the structural and symbolic violence of the state and society are on full and heart-rending display. These educator-activists each describe a depth of meaning in their nonviolent resistance that gives credence to the core tenet of violence theory: that violence is productive, not merely indicative. Furthermore, each of them also, importantly, finds the seeds of liberation, humanization, and hope within the landscape of education. Their voices are nuanced, clear, and compelling testaments to the power of activist sense making to be read alongside critical academic discourse.

The true test of a conceptual apparatus is its ability to open up space to think differently, to surface and articulate tensions and contradictions, to prompt us to see the component concepts in a new light and to be able to imagine new possibilities for both thought and action. Structural violence is the conceptual apparatus through which Scheper-Hughes and Sargent (1998), and Scheper-Hughes in other work (especially Death Without Weeping in 1996), managed to make visible a global neoliberal political economy that holds “women and children last,” and that does so often not despite but actually through development policies ostensibly designed to save lives. For the field of education, the salience of the concept of violence as a conceptual apparatus may prove equally important. By examining education through the lens of violence, what comes into sharp focus are the diverse and complex meaning-making relationships that take place between the state apparatus and the bodies and minds of its subjects.

Looking through violence at the field of education may have the potential to do for education...
what a focus on “social suffering” has done for critical studies of health (see Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1998). By looking at education, as the authors in this issue do, through war, repression, beating, racism, dehumanization, structural exclusion, and nonviolent resistance, we see an institution that is, first and foremost, a site of struggle. This approach certainly requires a critical rather than technocratic treatment, but goes an important step farther by beginning and ending with human experiences of the core experiences of education that involve coercion, domination, power meeting—often within the same institution, event, and even actor—the will toward liberation, progress, and transformation.

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Jen Sandler, PhD
Guest Editor
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