

What Does the “Fierce Urgency of Now” Demand of Philosophers of Education?

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INTRODUCTION

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood at the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his famed “I Have a Dream” speech. Far from buoying a post-racial colorblindness that later generations would read into his famous “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” line, King framed his speech within the broad context of American failures in the promise of democracy. He explained that, even one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, black communities in America still lived on an island of poverty “in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” while simultaneously suffering the “unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”¹ It was not a time to accept calls for gradualism in the long fight for racial justice and making real the promises of democracy, but, rather, to embrace an attitude of immediacy fitted to the historical moment, which he described as the “fierce urgency of now.”²

Nearly four years later, King used this same phrase in a speech at Riverside Church in New York City to explain his criticism of the Vietnam War. He provided several reasons explaining why he could no longer remain silent on American foreign policy, including the connection between the war and its devastating effects on poor communities, as well as the recognition that his message of nonviolence was undermined without a proper denunciation of “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today”—the United States government.³ In solidarity with popular movements against systems of injustice worldwide, King argued that it

had become necessary to recapture a revolutionary spirit which could no longer wait in the face of the immediate gravity of exploitation and oppression. He explained, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the *fierce urgency of now* [emphasis mine]. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.”²⁴ One year to the day following these statements, King was assassinated at the age of 39.

In this paper, I take inspiration from King’s words to draw attention to our own historical moment and to consider what, if anything, this time, that can only rightfully be described as fiercely urgent, demands of philosophy of education. Given its familiarity with relevant concepts of justice, freedom, democracy, and many others, it would seem at first glance that philosophy of education is well-suited to make significant contributions to public discourses concerning our most pressing social issues, if not at broad levels, then at least within more localized spaces such as universities, colleges of education, and public schools. Indeed, there are many pressing issues comprising our present, urgent reality to which I believe philosophy of education does have something quite significant to offer. However, after establishing these points, I will spend much attention discussing how philosophy of education in its current existence, not unlike other fields and, perhaps, even academia as a whole, is ill-equipped to respond to this moment that I will characterize as fiercely urgent. This will help set up the fundamental question of this paper: *What does the “fierce urgency of now” demand of philosophy of education?* In my view, the moment we currently find ourselves in, where existential threats to justice, society, and humanity have been thrust into the spotlight especially over the past year, offers significant possibilities in addition to the vast challenges that await. And, while I am hopeful that philosophy of education could in some way have something to do with facilitating a grasping of these possibilities, to once again evoke Dr. King’s words,

I am concerned that we will be too late.

THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

Before pursuing the questions that are central to this paper, it is important to summarize some of the most critical elements that illustrate the urgency of our current circumstances. While many have used related terms like “times of crisis” or “critical times” in an analysis of a myriad of contemporary social issues and injustices, I believe urgency is more apt due to its connotation of immediacy. Though I will focus on many events and themes that have occurred since the beginning of 2020, I also do not mean to imply that these things in isolation have made our times urgent or that things were not urgent before. It is only to suggest that the things we have all experienced or witnessed in some way, shape, or form, whether it be related to the pandemic, ongoing racial injustice, or a teetering democracy, have laid bare just how urgent our present reality is.

The ongoing pandemic has been the defining event of this volatile time. At the beginning of 2020, many of us were still flying maskless through airports as we heard of pockets of COVID-19 cases emerging in the United States and looking with worry at the public health emergency beginning in Asia and Europe. Nearly one million U.S. deaths later, coupled with overwhelmed hospitals and health care workers and an uncertain path ahead, every day rings urgent as federal and state governments struggle to vaccinate the population. The prospect of more deaths from potentially more contagious variants has left public health leaders in a race against time. And, yet, in many ways, the ongoing urgency of the pandemic has simply set the backdrop to more fundamental crises that have been spotlighted alongside, or even because of, the public health crisis. Though the United States is not the only nation to struggle with combating the virus, we might say one of the reasons its response has been so disastrous is because what is required to mitigate it runs counter

to prevailing American ideology. Rather than a robust public health infrastructure, an expansive social safety net allowing people to stay home through subsidized employment, and an acceptance of social responsibility over individualism, the pandemic in America has been met with a lack of necessary material resources for citizens and healthcare workers alike, while narratives of personal “liberty” and individual risk have long overtaken the initial thrust of social cohesion.

Along these same lines, the fundamental issues of economic inequality, that had been driven to extreme levels from decades of devotion to neoliberalism prior to the pandemic, have exploded even further during the course of the pandemic. According to Oxfam, the collective wealth of the world’s billionaires rose nearly \$4 trillion between March and December 2020. To put that number into perspective, it would be enough to prevent anyone from falling into poverty due to the pandemic while also providing a vaccine for everyone on earth.⁵ In contrast, the economic relief measures under the Biden administration initially faced stiff opposition from Congressional leaders who believed that another \$2 trillion package (again, half of what people that were already billionaires have profited during the pandemic) was too expensive and unnecessary because most Americans already received \$600 in December 2020. At the same time, government leaders have bemoaned that growing numbers of service industry workers are not returning to minimum-wage jobs, with little to no benefits, while putting their personal safety at risk, all for the relative comfort of middle and high-income earners. While the rich get richer from the pandemic, the World Bank estimates that 100 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty and Oxfam reports that it could take more than a decade to reduce poverty to pre-crisis levels.⁶

The unsustainable economic crisis that has been exacerbated by the pandemic has also further highlighted the ongoing crisis of racism

and white supremacy. To begin, racial minorities have been disproportionately impacted in terms of COVID cases and deaths, with the COVID Racial Data Tracker reporting that, nationwide, Black people have died at 1.5 times the rate of white people.⁷ The CDC has noted that this discrepancy is the result of long-standing health and social inequities, including factors related to discrimination, access to healthcare, occupation, education and wealth gaps, and housing.⁸ At the same time that the pandemic began to ravage minority communities, the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others at the hands of both police and white vigilantes once again cast a spotlight on racial injustice. If the state-sanctioned murders of disproportionate numbers of Black citizens did not reinforce the continued effects of racism and White supremacy, then the differential responses to its protests surely did. A month after a group of armed protestors marched into the Michigan statehouse to demand the lifting of necessary public health restrictions, largely unarmed and peaceful groups protesting police violence were tear gassed in Washington D.C.’s Lafayette Square to allow for Donald Trump’s now infamous Bible-toting photo-op. And, only seven months later, armed terrorists fueled by various White supremacist and fascist groups were met with little resistance as they stormed the U.S. Capitol to prevent a democratically-elected president from being certified. Nearly sixty years after King’s Lincoln Memorial address, it is still clear that Black citizens simply existing are treated as a greater threat than actual White supremacists literally attempting to overthrow the government.

The January 6th attack on the Capitol vividly illustrated the fragile nature of American democracy. This event represented a culmination, rather than inauguration, of the flaws in America’s democratic systems, however. In 2016, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index downgraded the United States to a “flawed democracy,” while other democracy indices maintained the United States as a full democracy, yet

lower than many other industrialized nations. The EIU report stated that the democratic downgrade was due to historic lows in public confidence in government and its corrosive effect on the quality of democracy.⁹ These corrosive effects were felt every day of Donald Trump's transparently disgraceful administration, where the ongoing crisis of democracy has catalyzed a corresponding crisis of truth. The Trump administration infamously began with Sean Spicer publicly lying about the number of inauguration attendees in his first press briefing, with Kellyanne Conway's corresponding "alternative facts" quip, and tragically concluded with the deadly January 6th riots that were fueled by election fraud conspiracy theories. Indeed, in an NPR/Ipsos poll in December 2020, researchers found that over half of respondents believe that it at least might be true that "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media."¹⁰ If the images of a horn-wearing, self-described "QAnon shaman" spearheading an armed revolt on the United States Capitol didn't instill the urgency of the moment, then maybe nothing will.

The corresponding crises of economic inequality, racial oppression, and assaults on democracy and truth, urgent though they are, say nothing of the looming threat of climate change. The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement set a limit of a 1.5-degree Celsius global average temperature rise compared to pre-industrial levels. Not even taking into account the criticisms that the Paris agreements do not go far enough, 2019 and 2020 reports from the Climate Change Performance Index indicated that no country has fulfilled the requirements needed to reach the limits set in the Paris accord (the U.S. ranked next to last and last among the ranked countries in the respective reports). Meanwhile, the EU's Copernicus Climate Change service revealed that 2020 tied 2016 for the warmest global temperate recorded, "making it the sixth in a series of exceptionally warm years starting in 2015, and 2011-2020 the warmest decade recorded."¹¹

A United Nations report at the end of 2020 explained that the world is projected by 2030 to double the production needed to meet the Paris Climate agreements, with one of the report’s lead authors explaining, “The research is abundantly clear that we face severe climate disruption if countries continue to produce fossil fuels at current levels, let alone at their planned increases.”¹²

The various events and crises summarized here are meant to illustrate the fierce urgency of our historical moment that has perhaps been reinforced by the volatility of the past two years. With this point established, I now move to the central focus of this paper: *What does the “fierce urgency of now” demand of philosophy of education?* Before considering some possibilities in this area, however, I will first suggest that, though there would seem to be clear linkages between the interests of philosophers of education and the urgent crises of our times, there are fundamental challenges that limit such interactions.

THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION IN RELATION TO URGENCY

The foundational issues of many of our present crises intersect with various concepts that philosophers of education spend much of their careers theorizing, debating, teaching, and researching. The ongoing assault on truth in public discourse and policy represents one striking example. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary word of the year was “post-truth,” defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹³ It was chosen, in part, due to the proliferation of the term in mainstream coverage and political discourse during the 2016 election that led to Donald Trump’s presidency. Public officials have exploited this so-called post-truth context to provide a dangerous voice for authoritarianism. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green, for example,

wore a “CENSORED” facemask while speaking on national television to blame media outlets such as Twitter for removing posts and accounts that furthered conspiracy theories which led to the Capitol attacks. The flouting of any relation to truth, where all truth claims are given equal weight under the guise of liberal principles such as “free speech,” by an increasing number of public officials has ushered in an epistemological crisis that calls for the wisdom of philosophers of all stripes.

For philosophers of education, in particular, the role of the school within this emergent crisis of public discourse would seem to be of primary concern. An example from a Wisconsin elementary school last summer illustrates how this particular crisis can play out in the context of education. A 4th grade teacher in Burlington, WI used the context of the Jacob Blake killing, and subsequent unrest in nearby Kenosha, WI, to teach about issues of systemic racism and the Black Lives Matter movement. After a parent posted images of the lesson materials on Facebook, a public uproar largely driven by parents on social media led to several tense school board meetings calling for the teacher to be fired and public vandalism of the school that included spray-painted racial slurs.¹⁴ So, in this instance, in the same moment that far-right extremism driven by conspiracy theories is given extended air-time in the halls of Congress, under the guise of “free speech,” (in fact, Marjorie Taylor Greene recently wore a “free speech” mask while trying to defend herself from being removed from committee assignments in the House) the school acts as a haven for sanitized teaching in the service of White supremacy. The extension of the epistemological crisis of a so-called “post-truth” era to the context of schools, including the role of schools and educators to combat misinformation in the name of democracy and justice, is just one example of an urgent problem that philosophy of education would seem to have much to offer.

Despite what I see as clear connections between the work of philosophers of education and the various crises that characterize the present, some fundamental problems prevent meaningful engagements between these two worlds. First, in many ways, the nature of philosophical inquiry does not lend itself well to urgent calls for action. Though philosophical perspectives may provide important frameworks that enhance understandings of particular problems, they do not necessarily fashion ready-made answers. In fact, in many instances, philosophy devotes itself specifically to the complicating of concrete practices by looking at them from the broad side of theory, rather than the narrow side of action. For example, in offering a philosophy of the science of education, Dewey argued that this would require *abstraction*, or detachment from practical experience into theoretical inquiry. A condition of this type of inquiry would be “to get away for the time being from entanglement in the urgencies and needs of immediate practical concerns.”¹⁵ I will return to Dewey later when considering potential contributions of philosophy of education, but, for now, it is important to note the fundamental tension between philosophy’s concern with the slow work of theoretical inquiry and the focus on immediate action in times of urgency.

This fundamental tension often leads philosophers of education away from the concreteness of practice where the urgency of society’s most pressing problems is felt. But we must also consider how the institutionalization of education as a professionalized field also creates detachment between philosophers of education and the urgency of educational problems. From a historical vantage point, Lagemann’s history of education research indicates that the very emergence of education as a professionalized field of study in the early 20th century was driven, in part, by a desire for academic status which led to an institutionalized rift between theory and practice. She writes, “Increasingly . . . as differences in perspective were institutionalized in a hierarchical ordering much like

that already evident between doctors and nurses, a segmentation came to characterize relationships between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ in education.”¹⁶ More contemporarily, while “urgency” may be a familiar feeling within the colleges and universities that house philosophers of education, that feeling of urgency is often not directed toward the pressing problems of schools, much less their underlying social conditions. The urgency we are directed toward is often that of the institution itself and its status within the broad context of a technocratic audit culture. Research institutions are increasingly governed by narrow metrics of scholarly output which do not necessarily incentivize collaborative work with educators and the community alike. At teaching institutions, like those where I work, much of our time is devoted to the incessant production of new programs to enter new “markets” to generate more enrollment, more registration, more revenue, and on into eternity. Thus, in addition to the fundamental tensions between the need for immediate action and the work of philosophical inquiry, institutional hierarchies and pressures create further barriers to philosophy of education’s potential contributions to our urgent present.

The same governing logics that create these institutional urgencies continue to shape schools in ways that lead them further from the core interests and concerns of philosophy of education. As critics such as Harvey and Brown have written about the predominance of neoliberalism, concepts such as “freedom” and “democracy” have not so much been eliminated, but rather “economized,” such that they are only understandable via principles that align with capitalism.¹⁷ The neoliberal assault on education repositions schools as markets rather than sites for public engagement and democratic deliberation.¹⁸ Pinar explains that the school has been reframed according to a business model within the era of what he calls “school deform,” as schools are increasingly shaped by corporate interests that allow private firms to profit from subjecting students and teachers to increased management.¹⁹ The infiltration of corporate control

of school curricula and business logics of accountability which govern teachers shapes the training of teachers in higher education as well. The possibilities afforded by the relative autonomy of higher education have been severely diminished due to the rising influence of corporate interests and pro-business legislation in both teacher education programs and accreditation bodies, perhaps best exemplified by Pearson Learning’s administration of the EdTPA.²⁰ Increasingly, prospective public school teachers are less likely to fashion a philosophically-informed perspective of teaching or semblance of intellectual identity and much more likely to be trained to produce teaching scripts. As the preparation of teachers has become more aligned with the technical logics of business, propelled by corporate interests, the relative influence of philosophy of education, or related fields such as social foundations of education, has dwindled.²¹

The increasing technicism and corporate control of both public schooling and teacher education has led some philosophers of education to reconsider their role in relation to schooling. While many have called for renewed relationships between philosophers of education and schools, teachers, etc., others have considered whether philosophy of education should look more to establishing its intellectual and philosophical relevance rather than hoping to have an impact on schooling, considering that the interests of philosophy and contemporary education may be fundamentally opposed.²² It is not just the technical rationality of public schooling that undermines the potential of philosophy of education, of course. The very idea of a “philosopher of education” as a stable identity is complicated by the governing logic of higher education as well. The framework of academic capitalism increasingly commodifies research and teaching such that many of us find ourselves in spaces where data production, assessment/accreditation reporting, and other bureaucratic mechanisms form identities just as much as scholarly interests in philosophy of education.²³ Further, the nature of much academic work often

cordons off scholars from others such that, when proper philosophical work is done, it can be a site of isolation and fragmentation both within and outside the academic structure. As I will discuss in the next section, such a lack of collaborative and interdisciplinary engagement is inadequate should philosophers of education hope to contribute anything of value to our present social crises.

To summarize, though we find ourselves in a time of fierce urgency in relation to crises of democracy, justice, and other concepts proximal to philosophical concern, the previous discussion indicates that a variety of factors constrain possibilities for meaningful engagement between philosophers of education and the urgent problems of our present. Must this situation be accepted, however? Are there pathways forward for philosophers of education to contribute substantively to the urgent crises of our times? Despite the limitations that I have summarized in this section, I will next argue that our current moment demands a responsive attitude that is central to philosophical inquiry and calls for a collaborative intellectual engagement of border crossing within and between philosophy and education.

WHAT URGENCY DEMANDS OF PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

In the previous section, I explained that the nature of philosophical inquiry is not necessarily conducive to the calls to action which urgency demands. However, this does not mean that philosophical inquiry does not play a critical role in cultivating the possibilities for action that aid in ameliorating given problems. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I turn to Dewey and his view of the relation between philosophy, education, and society to begin to fashion a response to my central question. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey wrote:

Philosophy is thinking what the known demands

of us—what responsive attitude it exacts. It is an idea of what is possible, not a record of accomplished fact . . . It presents an assignment of something to be done—something to be tried. Its value lies not in furnishing solutions (which can be achieved only in action) but in defining difficulties and suggesting methods for dealing with them.²⁴

Dewey argues that philosophy is not a collected body of knowledge, but an active attitude that requires something of its practitioners. I will say more about this later, but it is important to note here that part of the attitude of responsiveness that characterizes philosophy, according to Dewey, is both diagnostic (“defining difficulties”) and ameliorative (“suggesting methods for dealing with them”).

Philosophy, then, is not a purely intellectual enterprise but an attitude that calls forth a responsibility to assist in the contextualization and resolution of problems. Dewey makes a clear link between his understanding of philosophy and education when he writes that “education offers a vantage ground from which to penetrate to the human, as distinct from the technical, significance of philosophic discussions.”²⁵ Going further, he links the relationship between philosophy and education to schooling and its role within the wider world. He explains, “the business of schooling tends to become a routine empirical affair unless its aims and methods are animated by such a broad and sympathetic survey of its place in contemporary life as it is the business of philosophy to provide.”²⁶ From this perspective, philosophy of education not only offers something to our current moment of urgency but, in fact, demands an active engagement of philosophical inquiry to social problems via their relation to education and schooling.

With this in mind, I will now turn to a few concepts that I think

are important when considering what an active engagement between philosophers of education and the urgency of the present demand in our current time. As identified above, Dewey understands philosophy as “thinking what the known *demands* of us” and, thus, explicitly links philosophical inquiry to a responsive attitude that is directly linked to education. Knight Abowitz, drawing upon Levinas, links the work of philosophers of education to a stance of “responsibility” and to students, educational institutions, and the practitioners within them, writing

Responsibility, in Levinas’ rendering, is a radical ethical stance without rules but with a jaw dropping requirement of unconditionality to and for the Other . . . It calls us to *be* for the Other the teacher, the administrator, the student, the secretary, the parent—and respond and witness. In this response and witnessing we attempt to lessen the distances between ourselves and the Other, to be more proximal.²⁷

This concern over responsibility and proximity to the Other was also of importance to Derrida in considering the concept of justice. Rejecting the notion of a fixed and calculable understanding of justice, Derrida also turns to Levinas, writing, “Levinas says . . . that justice—which is very minimal but which I love, which I think is really rigorous—is that justice is the relation to the other.”²⁸ From this lens, we might say that the “fierce urgency of now” intensifies these relations, enhancing the criticality of the responsiveness that philosophy of education *demands*, coupled with responsibility and proximity to education and educators.

There is a bit of philosophical border crossing here, as I jump from Deweyan pragmatism to Derridean deconstruction, and this is intentional. While recognizing and appreciating the important distinctions between different worlds (e.g., philosophy and schooling) and different traditions in philosophy, I also believe this moment requires a renewed engagement,

both within philosophy of education and across educational contexts, to cross borders, both intellectually and practically, to find spaces where meaningful engagement can happen in view of the immediate problems that define the present. I return again to Derrida here as inspiration for this border-crossing stance. In a series of interviews given as part of the inauguration of a new program of philosophy at Villanova University, Derrida discussed his belief that, while philosophy as a discipline must be maintained and respected, a strict adherence to rigid borders between disciplines and across educational contexts needed to be challenged. He then noted his work in helping found the “Research Group for the Teaching of Philosophy” in 1975 that attempted to teach philosophy to students at earlier ages and across disciplines. Commenting on this work, he writes, “We should have philosophers trained as philosophers, as rigorously as possible, and at the same time audacious philosophers who cross the borders and discover new connections, new fields, not only interdisciplinary researches but themes that are not even interdisciplinary.”²⁹ Such an attitude would require a few things of philosophers of education: 1) a recognition of some of the problems of a rigid adherence to philosophical disciplines and institutional identities, 2) a willingness to engage across borders intellectually and practically within contexts that may be unfamiliar or even contradictory at first glance. Again, it is not that we should not value philosophy as philosophy. I argue, however, that a strict adherence to rigid disciplinary boundaries or purely intellectual pursuits are inadequate in the face of the current moment of crisis, as the “fierce urgency” of our present demands something different in the here and now.

Surely, the various crises that define this moment present “themes that are not even interdisciplinary” that might be better understood from a variety of philosophical perspectives in the service of clarifying possible avenues for reconstruction. Importantly, this does not mean the dissolution

of philosophical disciplines or a simplistic reading of one tradition into the other. Let me use an example that I have been very much interested in and which I have already introduced somewhat: the relation between pragmatism and postmodernism/poststructuralism. Responding to thinkers commonly associated with these traditions, Rorty wrote, “James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling.”³⁰ Rejecting this metaphor, Colapietro argues, “Dewey was not awaiting Foucault at the end of any path forged by this incomparable experimentalist.”³¹ He explains that each thinker and tradition must be recognized for their unique contributions and for the important ways in which they deviate from each other. However, rather than coming together at the terminus of some dialectical road, the trajectories of these thinkers importantly intersect at crucial moments. Colapietro explains that

the paths of these thinkers did in effect cross each other time and again; moreover, they did so at decisive junctures—critical points. Finally, the junctures at which their paths intersect can now be taken as invitations to take an alternative route (to deviate from the familiar road), by treading that blazed by the other thinker.³²

These invitations to take an alternative route open up possibilities for engagement with the urgency of the present as they may help to clarify, contextualize, or offer new methods for reconstruction of different social problems and present crises. As Colapietro asks and answers, “‘What is the purpose of undertaking such a venture?’ From the perspective of each thinker, the only convincing answer is that such an exploration holds the promise of illuminating how we might appropriate these insights into the practice of freedom.”³³

A similar attitude is taken by Koopman when he argues that rigid disciplinary boundaries in philosophy are often the products of constructed institutional norms that hamstring the possibilities for a meaningful engagement with our present. Directly speaking to many of the themes I have tried to explore here, he writes, “All of these divisions are obstacles to productive philosophical work on the critical problems we face in the present . . . and as ethical matters we all feel the force of in intensely personal ways.”³⁴ The possible junctures between pragmatism and “post” traditions are, of course, but one example of philosophical border-crossing. I have also only just implied how this might relate to border-crossing from philosophy to education and then outward to our fiercely urgent present, though I hope the perspective offered above from Koopman clarifies this a bit. I hope here to establish that in addition to the characteristics of responsiveness, responsibility, and proximity already mentioned, our present, I believe, also requires new modes of intellectual collaboration across borders both within and outside of philosophy of education.

Since I have already introduced Koopman, I will rely on him once again to consider some possibilities for the application of border-crossing from philosophy to education and beyond as a way of conclusion. Earlier, I explained that Dewey’s conception of philosophy of education contained both diagnostic and ameliorative functions, when he states, “its value lies not in furnishing solutions (which can be achieved only in action) but in defining difficulties and suggesting methods for dealing with them.”³⁵ It is via this framing that Koopman identifies crucial intersections between the work of Dewey and Foucault in particular. He explains that a central theme of Foucault’s work centered on *problematization*, a diagnostic task which “involves the critical-historical work of clarifying the problems at the heart of practices and projects we otherwise would take as unproblematic,” while Dewey centered on *reconstruction*, an ameliorative task which

“involves a critical-normative work meliorating the historically-contextualized problems in which we find ourselves.”³⁶ Taken together, these distinct philosophical projects both take seriously the role of history in contextualizing and informing the present as part of a critical inquiry which Koopman describes as “genealogical pragmatism.”

To consider the significance of such a project of critical inquiry for education, I will once again turn to the example of the Wisconsin school teacher that I mentioned earlier. Remember, in the wake of the killings of George Floyd and Jacob Blake in nearby Kenosha and the subsequent racial turmoil, this elementary school teacher used the present crisis to educate elementary students about systemic racism. Firstly, we might say that this teacher already occupied an active philosophical and responsive attitude by trying to diagnose the problem and, thus, educate and inform students about an immediate crisis in need of reconstruction. As mentioned previously, however, this action led to calls for the teacher’s removal on the part of parents in the mostly White community. Some parents accused the teacher of trying to “indoctrinate their kids,” with one parent explaining, “I don’t think it’s bad to be talking about racial issues in school, but the whole political slant to it and biased information is what I oppose.”³⁷ Though the school board would later come to the teacher’s defense, the initial reaction of one school board member was that the teacher “went rogue and will be dealt with.”³⁸ Later, a parent Facebook group was formed called “Parents Against Rogue Teachers,” with an administrator of the group explaining that parents were “upset the lesson plan was not part of the authorized curriculum.”³⁹

In this example, in addition to the direct lack of historical understanding of systemic racism and its importance for confronting today’s racial injustices, we see the ways in which assumptions of education, schooling, and the role of the teacher are utilized to entrench dominant

norms. To the upset parents and at least one board member, education is fixed (see “not part of the authorized curriculum”), schools are neutral and de-politicized (see the language of “political slant” and “biased information”), and teachers are to stick to the script (see the language of the “rogue” teacher). To use Foucaultian terms, a *problematization* of these ideas could do much to properly contextualize and diagnose such a situation in view of informing possible solutions. Elsewhere, Foucault explains that central to this work is the cultivation of a “historical ontology,” which is “a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.”⁴⁰ Such an attitude, he argues, would serve as a catalyst for “the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”⁴¹ Philosophers of education, in responsibility and proximity to education, can help problematize the ways in which notions of “neutral curriculum,” and teachers as mere managers and technicians of a received tradition create a moribund educational experience and work to uphold oppressive systems; in this instance, by falling back on presumed institutional norms to create a comfortable space for White communities at the expense of a crucial understanding of the current crisis of racial injustice. Even more importantly, via border-crossing both within philosophy of education and between philosophy and education, perhaps we can assist in cultivating such a critical-historical attitude amongst and with educators in a way that challenges the institutional norms that uphold, and perhaps even exacerbate, the “fierce urgency of now.”

CONCLUSION

One year before his death, Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraged his audience at the Riverside Church in New York City. He said, “Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world.”⁴² Faced with the ongoing crises

of racial violence and the Vietnam War, this rededication to struggle for a more just future was what he felt this crucial moment of human history, what he deemed the “fierce urgency of now,” demanded. I have attempted to illustrate that our own critical historical moment demands something as well, especially for those who proclaim justice and democracy. For philosophers of education, the fierce urgency of now demands a responsive attitude of “thinking what the known demands of us,” a responsibility and proximity to like-minded educators, and recognizing the possibilities afforded by crossing borders in the long and bitter struggle for a new world.⁴⁵

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream Speech,” in its Entirety,” *NPR*, January 18, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

2 King, Jr., “I Have a Dream Speech.”

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence,” *American Rhetoric*, Last modified January 3, 2021, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>.

4 King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam.”

5 Reuters, “Rich Get Richer in Pandemic: Collective Wealth of Billionaires Like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos Reaches \$11.95 Trillion,” *The Economic Times*, Last modified January 25, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/rich-get-richer-in-pandemic-collective-wealth-of-billionaires-like-elon-musk-jeff-bezos-reaches-11-95-trillion/articleshow/80447509.cms>.

6 Reuters, “Rich Get Richer in Pandemic.”

7 The COVID Tracking Project, “COVID-19 is Affecting Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Other People of Color the Most,” *The COVID Racial Data Track-*

er, Last modified March 7, 2021, <https://covidtracking.com/race>.

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