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# Learning from contemporary student activism: towards a curriculum of fervent concern and critical hope

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## Introduction

In recent years, school-aged students have organised politically across a range of issues, in street protests, online and in other media: from the student-led gun control advocacy group who organised March for Our Lives<sup>1</sup> following the mass

shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida , to the global School Strike for Climate<sup>2</sup> marches where students missed school to demand action from politicians on climate change.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the support that these young people have received – for example, the support of Barack Obama for the March for Our Lives activists (Obama 2019) and the nomination of Greta Thunberg for a Nobel Peace Prize for her role in launching the climate change mass movement (Carrington 2019) – other responses to the students’ actions have not been as complimentary. Children and young people have been represented as naïve, malleable, and easily stirred by ‘feelings’, beyond reason and rationality. For example, in anticipation of the November 2018 protests, Australia’s conservative Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, declared a desire for “more learning in schools and less activism in schools” (The Guardian ParLVew, 27 November 2018). Students marching in the climate change marches were represented, in one opinion piece, as “pawns in climate wars”: “Kids are the perfect weapon when it comes to emotive issues, because there’s never any sensible centre or intelligent debate when it comes to feelings, and who better to use than children” (Tognini 2019, para. 9). The National Rifle Association posted on its Facebook page, on the day of the March for Our Lives protests: “Gun-hating billionaires and Hollywood elites are manipulating and exploiting children as part of their plan to DESTROY the Second Amendment and strip us of our right to defend ourselves and our loved ones” (reported in Griggs 2018).

Vehement feelings propel these social movements; feelings often considered ‘negative’ (like grief, fear and anger) are inextricable from political action. The students organising the March for Our Lives movement have been described as “using their grief as a catalyst for change” (Cullen 2018). Greta Thunberg, at a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, rejected adult imposition of naïve hope:

Adults keep saying: “We owe it to the young people to give them hope.” But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is. (Thunberg 2019)-

Thunberg exhorts the stirring of feeling – to ‘panic’ and ‘fear’ - in order ‘to act’. A recent editorial in the NewsCorp tabloid newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* laments such pedagogical stirring of feeling: “For some years now, parents have had to cope with distressed youngsters returning home from school full of dread about global warming” (Blair 2019, para. 1). However, we argue below that Thunberg’s speech encourages a different mode of feeling to an individualised ‘dread’ that paralyses and reduces the capacity to act.

In this article, we argue that the work that young people do with ‘troubling’ feelings like grief and panic in these movements compels a rethinking of the political feelings associated with transformative pedagogy and co-constructed curricula. In these recent political movements, faced with matters of vital concern to the planet’s existence and future, students have literally walked out of a form of schooling (and politics) that does not address their present and future concerns.<sup>4</sup> We consider what schools might learn from student activism and these various responses to their activism. We don’t mean educators co-opting or appropriating student protest movements, or seeking to develop ‘trendy’ curricula for the sake of it. Instead, we consider what it might look like for educators to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) – that is, to remain awhile with fervent feelings (like grief and fear), often considered ‘negative’ and traditionally to be avoided or eliminated from classrooms and schools – and to disclose the potential of working *with* shared concerns for transformation of the present. We consider the possibility of working with such ‘negative’ feelings in communal action, towards a critical mode of hope and a different future.

## Towards a curriculum of fervent concern

In considering what a curriculum that works with fervent feelings might look like and do, it is necessary to rethink questions of what feelings are and their role in education, how feelings relate to knowledge, and the ethics of working with fervent feelings in education. We do not understand ‘feelings’ to be individual possessions of an individual person (student/ teacher) “expressed” from the “inside-out” (Ahmed 2004, pp. 8–9). When feelings are understood in this individualistic way, the individual then becomes positioned as responsible to smooth over and calm more ‘negative’ feelings (like rage or grief). Such ways of understanding emotions sideline the *ethical-political* question of who decides what feelings are acceptable and unacceptable in education. We understand feelings to be inextricable from questions of knowing and of ethics in education – what is felt is entangled with issues of knowledge (the curriculum) and ethics (how to live and how to respond to urgent, present concerns).

In the Deep Ecology literature, Joanna Macy (1991) urges collective re-thinking and re-working of “the way we view our world and our relationship to it” (p. 4). What is destroying the world, she argues, is “the persistent notion that we are independent of it, aloof from other species, and immune to what we do to them” (p. 13). She suggests that pain for a troubled world is “a testimony to the unity of life, the deep interconnections that relate us to all beings” – a stance that fundamentally contrasts to a view of self as “essentially separate, competitive, and ego-identified beings” (p. 21). Macy and Johnstone (2012) write about processes of feeling and action – working *with* and *through* despair in the face of

the planetary crisis, “honouring our pain for the world” (p. 6) – as part of the world. While hope is vitally important to the Deep Ecology movement (see below), such ‘hope’ is not to be “invoked too soon” (Macy 1991, p. 25):

Despair cannot be banished by injections of optimism or sermons on ‘positive thinking.’ Like grief, it must be acknowledged and worked through.... Faced and experienced, its power can be used ... [W]e can come to terms with apocalyptic anxieties in ways that are integrative and liberating, opening awareness not only to planetary distress, but also to the hope inherent in our capacity to change. (Macy 1991, p. 16):

Such a reoriented stance in the relation to the world – as thoroughly entangled with it – has potent consequences for curriculum, compelling a re-thinking of what it might look like to work with matters of shared, fervent concern *with* students and the world.

## An example: Student action teams

What might it look like to recognise that these feelings may be best addressed as valid curriculum concerns that enable us to work together to shape a common, more hopeful future? We seek an alternative approach to curriculum, in which schools are centrally involved in working with matters of shared, fervent concern and in the co-creation with students of more hopeful futures – where schools are felt by students and teachers to be sites for compelling learning and potent action.

We offer several examples of how such a curriculum might be created, even if some of these have been enacted in limited ways to date. For the last 20 years, Student Action Teams (SATs) have been a feature of many Victorian schools (Holdsworth 2006). SATs involve teams of students who identify an issue of concern within their school and/or (hopefully) wider community, investigate it, and then design and take action to improve it (Holdsworth 2010; Holdsworth et al. 2003; Holdsworth et al. 2001).<sup>5</sup>

These teams were initially established from 1999 in the context of concerns about “community safety”. In these teams, students in primary and secondary schools grappled with issues such as inter-generational trust, community perceptions of safe/unsafe areas, risky fire practices, and so on. Initially, the students met as co-curricular teams with a staff member, often coming out of classes or meeting during breaks. Many of the teams drew upon wider student interests and expertise than that of ‘elected’ student representatives (the ‘usual suspects’) and hence enabled schools to embed more inclusive practices. For example, a team investigating truancy was composed of students who had

substantial experience as truants; a team of primary school students investigating school engagement was composed of both engaged and disengaged students – as these were the ‘experts’ (Student Action Teams at Pender’s Grove Primary School and Preston South Primary School 2009). As these approaches developed beyond the initial program, it was realised that organisational models that drew students away from classes, or demanded that they meet in their own time, were not only inappropriate to the needs for a developed curriculum of shared concern, but that they were also organisationally unsustainable (as they also involved staff who had no teaching allocation for this work). Many of the examples then became implemented within the formal curriculum of the school, working with whole cohorts rather than a small group of students.

For example, in 2003, Student Action Teams developed in a working-class area in the north of Melbourne in response to the death of a child outside a school during pick-up times. Grief and disbelief became a catalyst for shared concern and action. Students from 15 schools (primary and secondary) worked together to explore aspects of traffic safety in the area. The teams defined their own areas of concern, researched and documented these, presented results to community organisations (Council, Police, Traffic Accident Commission, etc.), and developed and, in some cases, implemented solutions. Small student teams from each of the schools led the initiatives, meeting together in half-day workshops to plan and report on their work, and then conducting research and discussion activities with other students back in their schools. The same group of schools then accepted a challenge in 2005–2006 from local government to investigate and act on local environmental sustainability issues: how to increase community knowledge and take up of sustainable practices. This time, some of the schools embedded the Student Action Team approach within their core curriculum, involving whole classes in the research and action (Holdsworth 2006).

Student Action Teams define areas of shared, fervent concern and devise their own curricula within school structures. They build on existing opportunities within schools’ approaches, such as ‘Inquiry’ time, transforming this from abstracted and individualised ‘investigations’ of prescribed or even student-chosen topics (whether ‘dinosaurs’ or ‘climate change’), towards deep investigations and planning around shared concerns, with the intention of culminating in collective action and change efforts. The formal curriculum – knowledge and skills – is thus re-generated to serve shared needs – the learning of both students and teachers – in addressing their collective concerns.

This curriculum approach is closely linked with other aspects of student voice, agency and participation: the integral relationship between (a) what is done as part of classroom learning; (b) support for student-run organisations where such

concerns can be discussed, debated and decided; and (c) students' participation in shared decision-making within classrooms and schools. In particular, the notion of shared concern also appears through the methods being used to provide physical and metaphorical space within schools for such dialogue and action to occur – such as the VicSRC's *Teach the Teacher* program (Holdsworth 2014; VicSRC 2018), in which students define a curricular or pedagogical issue of concern, investigate it, and then organise and lead a professional development session for school staff in which students and staff collaborate in developing solutions.

## Towards a curriculum of critical hope

In these examples of Student Action Teams, the curriculum becomes the way in which students work together with others – teachers and community – to identify fervent concerns, envision the world in which they/we want to live, and gain the knowledge and skills required to change circumstances and re/create that world. It is anchored in present realities and shared concerns of young people, their teachers and their communities, rather than deferred 'until' students achieve 'future citizenship' in the world. This approach has resonances with Youth Participatory Action Research (e.g. Cammarota and Fine 2008; Oakes and Rogers 2006), as well as Zipin's (2017) "*problematic-based curriculum approach* in which students work with/on knowledge in relation to local lifeworld *problems that matter*" (p. 67). Recognising and working with shared concerns, the curriculum becomes one of joint learning and action to build agreed futures. This is an *ethical* curriculum framework, where learning is political and living ethically is a learned politics.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that opportunities for such curricular spaces to foster "strategic affective alliances" (Zembylas 2014, p. 11) and curricular action between students and teachers have narrowed, particularly with the standardisation of curriculum and the limitations placed on teacher professional judgement. For example, in NSW, *The Daily Telegraph* recently reported how a Sydney primary school was "ordered" by the NSW Department of Education to "remove two letters from students published in an online newsletter because they breached the department's Controversial Issues in Schools policy" (Harris 2019). Their teachers were described in an editorial as "preachy" and as having "coached children as young as nine to write letters addressed to Prime Minister Scott Morrison criticising him for not taking action on climate change" (Blair 2019, headline, para. 3). Indeed, pursuing curricula of fervent concern will at times be contested and controversial. Yet, ~~W~~we do not wish to advocate a "blind optimism" (Zembylas 2014, p. 11) or a "naïve hope"



(Boler 2014, p. 36) that things will progressively get better through maintenance of the status quo.

Nor do we advocate hopelessness that comes with declarations that there is no alternative to capitalism, to running on carbon, and so on. “Hope”, argues Paolo Freire (1992/ Freire 2004), is “an ontological need” (p. 2) – but this hope must be critical and active. Freire wrote (p. 2): “We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water”. Macy and Johnstone (2012, p. 6) describe “active hope” as moving towards collective action as part of the world. When curricular problems emerge from fervent engagement with the world, learning and knowledge can be formed that works with (so-called) ‘negative’ feelings and moves towards shared, critically hopeful action.

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<sup>1</sup> This movement is also known as #NeverAgain.

<sup>2</sup> This movement is also variously known as Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate and Youth Strike 4 Climate.

<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, other movements involving young people – for example, movements advocating for Indigenous self-determination, LGQTBI+ rights, and advocacy for people with a

disability. We foreground the gun control and climate change movements because of the centrality of young people in these campaigns.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth acknowledging that, in some of the student climate march statements, students have argued that it is precisely what they have learned in school about climate change that has propelled their political action. Schools communities' support of the climate change marches have varied – from school principals who have encouraged students to attend (Collins and Coleman 2019), to others who warned students and parents that attendance would be considered an 'unapproved absence' (Tovey and Zhou 2019).

<sup>5</sup> These Student Action Teams bear some relationship to other international approaches such as Public Achievement (Değirmencioğlu 2008) or the “equalisers and organisers” in the Equal Education movement in South Africa (Robins and Fleisch 2016); though in both of these examples there is the added element of students in Further Education working with students at primary and secondary schools, particularly in areas of conflict, to learn and to bring about change.