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DILEMMA 1 THE SHOCK OF RECOGNITION: (DE)POLITICIZING EDUCATION

It was May 2016 in South Africa, a beautiful autumn day in a township near Grahamstown, and children were outside learning about planting saplings during their science lesson. The teacher, Helen, was kind and warm-hearted and clearly knew what she was talking about.[1] She commanded respect without shouting or hitting students, which was common practice in other South African township schools I visited. Her face, lined with wrinkles, wore a constant smile as she moved seamlessly from student to student. Her rapport with each of them was amazing. After the class, she proudly showed me the different products her students had made from recycled materials. The beautiful colorful doormats made of bits of plastic bags were unforgettable.[2]

At first, I was captivated by the hands-on environmental education I had just witnessed, but that began to shift as I interviewed Helen. "Do you ever connect planting trees to climate change in your classes?" I asked. She gave me a pained look, and I detected a pinch of amazement at my ignorance. "The students would not be able to follow. They are just cognitively not there." I gasped. Suddenly I saw everything in a different light. This White teacher seemed to be implying that Black township children were unable to understand the concept of global warming.

As I walked out of the tool shed where we were talking, all I could see was how tangled hands-on environmental education was in a web of racism, paternalism, and apartheid. My thoughts ran away with me: those plastic mats were not about empowerment but about giving the kids the skills to become "petty entrepreneurs." And that fun, engaging lesson I had

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witnessed? It clearly was a way to give the Black children the illusion that they were doing their bit without granting them agency: "Don't ask questions about the environmental mess we are in, how we got into it, who is responsible, or how we can get out of it. Just plant your tree."

I realized only much later, as I was looking over my notes, that this episode took place in a special needs school and that I had no idea about the disabilities the students suffered from or what they were or were not capable of, and therefore I could not sit in judgment of the teacher. That I forgot this important detail told me something about my own political orientation, about the hypotheses I brought with me to the field and for which I hoped to find empirical support.[3] I was looking for simple answers that could be translated directly into policy and finding it frustrating that the field was not yielding such solutions. But even though I may have misread the situation, the shock of recognizing environmental and sustainability education (ESE) as a potentially apolitical space, and the associated grave implications, stayed with me. It was the impulse that led to the research behind this book.

Up until the encounter with Helen and her students, my research was all about the idea of sustainably developing (the core concept of education for sustainable development, or ESD) and trying to understand how best to "optimize" education to support this effort more effectively in low-income settings. But that morning my thinking started to change. What if I turned ESE[4] on its head and focused on "developing sustainability" instead? How do we define, promote, and strengthen sustainability in individuals, systems, and societies? What dangers may the depoliticization of ESE—an effort to deprive young people of the ability to imagine different futures and to limit their political agency in bringing these into being—pose to environmental sustainability?

This was my initial dilemma: Should I keep working on researching the effectiveness of ESE interventions, a subject that might appeal to practitioners but one I was becoming increasingly convinced did not get to the heart of the issue of sustainability? Or should I shift my focus to the (de)politicization of ESE, a seemingly vague and quite possibly "useless" subject?

I chose the latter, reasoning that I needed to go where the ethnographic journey was taking me. The politics of the interface between education and

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the environment became the unintended subject of my research.[5] I started seeing a pattern in the South African and Indian schools in which I was conducting research: planting trees, fixing leaking taps, or cleaning a river was seen as making a contribution to the sustainability of communities. But other actions—writing a letter to a local politician, for example—were often discouraged. Individual apolitical deeds were what the ESE interventions I was encountering seemed to stand for, and maybe this was something they shared with other development projects.

I soon found, however, that simply changing the research question did not resolve the dilemma between "sustainably developing" and "developing sustainability." To study depoliticization, we must understand what politicization may mean, and I soon discovered that my research was pulling me into spaces outside the school context. I encountered environmental activists and learnt about their radical knowledge-making practices and political imaginations[6] that contrasted sharply with what I was witnessing in schools. The pivot in the subject of my research necessitated refining my research sites, too, as I concluded that doing an ethnography of the (de)politicization of ESE necessarily meant stepping outside the realm of institutionalized education. Schooling and activism became the two spaces of my exploration.

While discussing my research with a colleague later on, I received an unexpected response that seemed to reveal the useless, disconnected-from-practice nature of my project. This scholar was uncomfortable bringing politics into the conversation about environmental decay and felt that politicizing the environment only means that we argue and fail to act, which there is no time for anymore. They asked me, "Shouldn't all the educators in the world focus on one thing and one thing only—preparing the future generation for the massive challenge of sequestering carbon from the atmosphere so that humanity survives?"

I was speechless for a moment, then thought back to my time in South Africa in 2016. On the last day of that trip, I talked to two academics from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg. These two scholars told me that schoolchildren clean up trash from the local river every year as part of their environmental education and that every year more rubbish

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made its way into the river. “There’s no point in cleaning up if you don’t fix the real issues upstream,” one of them told me. Surely there was more to ESE than this? And surely there is more to education than learning how to capture carbon from the atmosphere?

While I continue to ponder how my research—a slow, ethnographic exploration of schooling and activism in two different contexts—squares up with the urgency of the environmental multicrisis,[7] I do not doubt that studying the politics of education and the environment is worthwhile. Encountering the activist knowledge base has taught me that “politics” is not an abstract concept but can indeed be a radically practical idea. This is especially so in the Anthropocene.

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Educating for the Anthropocene

Schooling and Activism in the Face of Slow Violence

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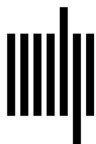

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