Look Down Here: Poems on Curriculum Based Violence

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Abstract: Watson discusses their series of poems that deconstruct language within legislation that references school curriculum, particularly those that deal with violence in schools.

Keywords: poems, violence in schools, intersectional conflict analysis, art, arts approaches to conflict, Agnes Scott College

Creative Statement

When I first began to develop this project, I knew two things. Firstly, I knew I didn’t want to write a two-thousand-word essay and secondly, and I knew I wanted to use my project to discuss something that really matters to me. The second part was much more challenging than the first, because there are so many things that matter to me. I could talk about gun control, or rather the lack thereof, in the United States. I could talk about diversity and the importance of representation. I could talk about reproductive rights or about children’s rights — the list goes on.

I ultimately knew that I wanted this project to feel personal rather than simply being only for the sake of turning an assignment in. So, I started thinking about how I could incorporate some of my passions into this project, and more so, how I could insert myself into the project. I started thinking about my background in childcare. Then I began thinking about some of the many conversations that I have had about education, and I realized that it was something there that connected my passions and my identity. Particularly, I was intrigued by the intersection between legislation and education.

Emerging from that rabbit hole, I was led to the question “How does curriculum impact children’s creativity?” Secondarily, “How does legislation impact curriculum?” These questions initially suggested the ongoing discourse about representation and several recent controversies over curriculum in public school settings such as restrictions on teaching Critical Race Theory to also include restricting Black History Month programs and the removal of AP African American Studies from some Florida schools. After really sitting with the concept longer, other things came to mind such as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” policies against transgender students and restrictions that ban specific books from schools. I began to challenge myself to look at how school as a concept has impacted the students inside whether it be in a positive or negative way.

For the creative elements of this project, I thought that it would be interesting to make a series of poems deconstructing the language within the legislation that referenced curriculum. I envisioned making a poem or two for each policy or restriction and perhaps mimicking the artwork of children or collaging the work that children and older students made to overlay into the document. I would then scan them all together. To fuel the creation of these poems, I planned to research the
different bills and addendums that have affected schools. I also thought it would be interesting to arrange a tour or interview with some of the local schools like Decatur High, Beacon Hill, Avondale, and Winona Park to ask students and teachers about how the policies affected them.

My project immediately began to change form through the research process. While I started researching these topics by looking at the legislation and the different bills that have passed, my understanding and perception of what school is supposed to be began to change. From my own, mostly positive experiences in school, I had this assumption that schools are supposed to be a place of education but also a place for students to learn about themselves and others. With all these new policies and restrictions that have shaped curriculum and the resources that students have available to them; I began to question this. I was watching news coverage about school shootings and going onto online forums to research peoples’ thoughts on new policies and it made me consider some of the not so glamorous parts of my schooling prior to going to Agnes Scott College.

This exploration opened me up to the ethnographic aspect of the research than I had originally had. I realized that I was looking for examples instead of experiences even though my research is about experience. This realization led to another pivot. I began recounting my own memories as a way to guide myself through the project. I considered the random active shooter drills, the occasional visits from the drug sniffing dogs, and the dedicated teachers that struggled to manage crowded classrooms. I swapped stories with my friends about bomb threats, insensitive lesson plans, and the underlying sense of anxiety we all had. We then discussed how our younger siblings seemed to have it even harder than we did in school. Some of our siblings started having to carry clear backpacks to school and feared being outed for their queer identities.

What I learned in this course is that conflict is never a one-sided issue. I realized needed to widen my perspective once again. From the perspective of the educators, I began to look back to interviews with professors and conversations I had with family members and friends working in education. They talked about their concerns about the lack of job security and ever-increasing workload. They took on the roles of not only educators, but of counselors, make-shift nurses, advisors, coaches. Like a hydra-like-beast of responsibility without any increase in an already lower paying job. They expressed to me that these attacks against curriculum led to a panoptic fear of discipline and trouble. During an interview with one of my professors, she expressed to me that, “Without job security, you don’t teach the things that are hard.”

All these things considered, it influenced the poems I created, and I decide to take a broader approach. Though I originally planned to write these poems entirely from a student’s perspective, the interviews made me realize that this legislation impacts much more than students. It impacts teachers, schools, and whole communities. Therefore, I slightly changed the structure of my project to honor all these perspectives. Additionally, I decided to split my project into four sections, “This Is Not a Drill”, “Ode to the Arts” “Permission Slip”, and “Color Theory.” Each one of these sections corresponds to issues where legislation has intersected with the classroom in some way, with some poems speaking more directly than others. “This Is Not a Drill”, is focused on gun control and the subconscious anxiety and paranoia that it causes in students and includes the poems “Backpack Poem” and “Carpe Diem.” “Carpe Diem” is a sort of rhythmic poem that uses a bit of call and response interaction between the reader and the audience. Before reading, the leader instructs the audience to say “Carpe Diem” twice after each line. “Ode to the Arts” explores conversations about the necessity of arts education and imagines the impact their removal from school can have.
on students. “Permission Slip” is centered around the intersection of children’s rights and LGBT+ rights. The poem directly speaks to the right of parental authority over children’s identity and education as discussed in Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay Bill” (FL HB1557). Special thanks to Lee Willis for inspiring the poem. Finally, “Color Theory” explores race, colorism and other sociocultural structures that impact the way that students perceive themselves within a classroom setting. This section particularly seeks to deconstruct the ideas of reverse racism that are alluded to lines 1-13 of Georgia’s Senate Bill 377 (GA SB377).

From this, my project seems to be unified by two main themes of curriculum-based violence and trauma and academic consumerism. Curriculum based violence and trauma considers how academic systems can negatively impact students psychologically. I would argue that curriculum is just as defined by what is not taught as what is taught. I argue that anything that negatively impacts the connection between educators and students can be attributed to curriculum-based violence. Academic consumerism, how some educators spoke of the almost “customer is always right” mentality that some students have adopted in opposition to things that they don’t like about the curriculum, strains the relationship between students and educators. Overall, this project was very insightful and I learned a lot from it. It expanded what I thought I knew about the field of education and proved that it is a lot more of a political area than what is often perceived. All of these restrictions make it harder for us to connect to each other and, ultimately, they interfere with our ability to see and honor our humanity.

**This Is Not A Drill**

It’s safer this way, that it’s easier to spot the danger Before it happens. They say it as if clear backpacks are bulletproof vests.

*Backpack Poem*

When you’re a teenager
everything is about privacy; It’s all closed doors, passwords,
and journals tucked out of sight.
I remember cramming stashes of private
journals, sketchbooks, and musings at novels
that would never see the sun, into the sanctuary
of my knock off Jansport. It brought me peace
of mind knowing that my belongings were away
from prying eyes.

My little brother doesn’t get this luxury.
He carries a clear backpack to school each day.
Having nothing and nowhere to hide. They tell us
It’s safer this way, that it’s easier to spot the danger
Before it happens. They say it as if clear backpacks
are bulletproof vests.
Carpe Diem

I keep my prayers on speed dial
whenever I leave the house.
I live each day like it’s my last,
because maybe it might be.

Carpe Diem, Carpe Diem

I stopped going out at night,
But I still can’t fall asleep.
Cause I can’t stop scrolling.
Another one happens.
Almost everyday.

Carpe Diem, Carpe Diem

I started skipping classes.
My friends say they miss me
But I can’t go to the movies,
And I’ve never been to a nightclub
And I’m too scared of concerts

Carpe Diem, Carpe Diem

I’m getting tired of hiding
I miss feeling safe
This shouldn’t be normal?
How did this happen?

Carpe Diem, Carpe Diem

Something has to change
I want to make a difference
I’m scared, yet I’m hopeful
Another one happens
Almost every day.

Carpe Diem, Carpe Diem

I still keep my prayers from speed dial
but I stopped going to church
Another one happens
“Look Down Here” — Watson

Almost everyday.

*Carpe Diem, Carpe Diem*

**Ode to the Arts**

*Architects of Dreams*

The Stardust of Youth, never lasts long enough, and before we know it, the Sun comes to chase the moon away, taking the stars, our beautiful dreams, with her. If we endure this cycle for long enough, we may believe that the wonder belonging to these times is to be left behind, much like the moon is forced to part with the sky each morning. Yet some of us are brave. Some of us are willing to endure the Sun at the promise of the Stars.

We are the artists, the creatives, the architects of dreams.

*Procession for a Drummer Boy*

There are no blues to sing, for The world has lost its color

Listen to the Brass wail and Woodwinds sigh, Listen to the poor Percussion cry out Even the songbird has lost its tune It’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.

Yet what truly breaks my heart is that There is no one to capture the moment As the final trumpet blows No one to trace the melody No one to keep the score Harmony is lost Just silence, nothing more.

*Permission Slip*

Mother May I? Mother, may I make you proud? And
Mother, may I be myself? And
Mother, may I pick my clothes? But

Mother, may I truly be myself? And
Mother, may I leave your shadow? And
Mother, may I choose myself, though you
May think I’m selfish
Mother, may I forge my own path,
despite the/your obstacles? And
Mother, may I forgive myself,
even if you won’t?

Mother, may I still call your heart my home?
Mother, may I wipe our tears?

Mother, may I live freely? And
Mother, may I dress freely? And
Mother, may I love freely, though you
May not understand
Mother, may I make you proud.

**Color Theory**

**My First Friend**

Everything seemed to glow on my way
Back from school, even the bus was brighter than bananas
as I rushed to tell my parents about my new friend.
They shared my joy, though they were curious
About what she looked like, and thinking nothing of it
I replied “My friend is pink”

Back then, color was still a new concept,
Taught by Dora and my crayons, so
Only the rainbow existed;
White was too advanced
For a toddler’s young mind.

If only the world was as innocent as I was
If only skin could forever be described in Crayola technicolor
If only we could stay as colorblind as children