

Toxicity, Positionality, and Ways Forward

F. Todd Goodson

In this issue, Stephen Gordon notes, “Society is currently experiencing a wave of misinformation and disinformation spread through social media and other means.” It’s hard to disagree with that. Currently, our work is challenging in ways few of us anticipated when we chose this profession. In such complex and contentious times, it is important to take stock of the situation as dispassionately as possible. Gordon poses a question: “How can [schools] assist students to develop the skills and dispositions for critical thinking, differentiating information from misinformation and disinformation, collaborative problem solving, and democratic citizenship when conventional schools are not prepared to do so, and some external forces are bent on resisting such learning?”

It is easy to appreciate the underlying frustrations dripping from Gordon’s question. I also think it is worth unpacking it for a moment as an exercise in positionality. One person’s disinformation is another person’s truth. One person’s critical thinking is another person’s indoctrination. One person’s objective fact is another person’s lie. It depends on where we are standing. It depends on the communities to which we are subscribed. No community is immune from this kind of binary thinking.

As we confront the socio-political complexities of our present moment, I believe it is important to take a step back and breathe. It is easy to villainize those with different viewpoints, and while it is impossible to see inside another’s heart, I will say I believe the vast majority of those seeking to (re)shape the practices of public schools do so from firm convictions that they are working to correct things they passionately believe to be broken. I’m not naïve enough to know that a certain minority of individuals working to influence policy are taking advantage of existing societal division in search of personal gain, but putting aside the class of professional rhetoricians crafting sensational narratives for the purpose of inflaming groups—and gaining something in return from the reactions provoked—I have enough faith in our species to believe in the basic sincerity of individuals. Good people can, in good faith, disagree with one another.

From inside our own skin, we hold assumptions and truths, and when we are confronted with individuals and groups grounded in alternative assumptions and truths, it is tempting to assume they are either misled, not well-informed, or advancing nefarious motives. It is far too easy to villainize those with whom we disagree. But how to respond? We can “fact check,” counter message, and organize resistance as much as we like, but those efforts almost always have the predictable effect of hardening the positions of those we have defined as our adversaries. People from all sides of cultural divides need alternatives to the toxic discourse of this moment.

Also in this issue, Brandon Cheeks offers a thoughtful review of the shifting sands under institutional efforts to advance social justice issues, and I would like to call attention to what I think is an important part of his conclusion:

How do we ensure a “sense of belonging” for all students? Rather than allowing this moment to become a point of division, higher education institutions have an opportunity and responsibility to reimagine inclusion in ways that transcend political lines and focus

on shared human dignity. Institutions must ask: What systems, values, and practices will replace DEI?

I would add K-12 education (in addition to higher education), but before we attempt to answer his final question above, I think it is important to step back once again and breathe, and let me say we need to recognize the sincerely held beliefs and altruistic goals of the vast majority of actors seeking to drive change. I also think we simply must recognize the legitimate positions and questions that challenge assumptions and values to which we subscribe.

The temptation to villainize those with whom we disagree does not know ideological boundaries. Lazy stereotypes and hateful narratives come in many flavors.

To return to Cheek's question about what systems, values, and practices will replace DEI, the best answer begins with resisting the impulse to villainize. The answer begins with respect for those voices that grate on our intellectual senses. The first steps must involve a much deeper understanding of all the people and groups bringing voices to the table.

Truth be told, if we sincerely seek common ground, I believe it is possible to find it, without looking too hard. I cannot imagine anyone presently engaged in the ongoing debates about schools and schooling who does not seek safe, nurturing environments for all children, schools that challenge students to grow, and schools that are fixtures of stability within their communities. While that might sound simplistic, my experience suggests it is a very heavy lift in actual practice, and it is not possible without dialogue in the absence of vitriol.

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