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BOOK REVIEW

Connecting the Hidden Dots: An Essay Book Review of Erica Meiners' *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*

(New York, NY: Routledge. 224pp., \$43.95. ISBN0415957125)

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ABSTRACT

This article is an essay book review of Meiners's *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons and the Making of Public Enemies* (2007). While educators are usually not brought to reflect upon penal institutions, Meiners builds a compelling case for why this should be otherwise. Meiners' objective is to push educators to think about the ways in which the practices, ideologies, and processes in schools play a role in supporting the Prison Industrial Complex. Meiners accomplishes this by outlining historical and current realities of schools, which have functioned to normalize an expectation of incarceration for select youth. Meiners' ability to explore highly controversial and emotionally charged subject matter is commendable, and this book breaks down boundaries in expanding what counts as important knowledge for teachers. Although mainly aimed at educators, it is of interest to any person wishing to understand how prisons have become naturalized as inevitable social institutions for select groups of people.

Introduction

Several years ago, I taught a grade one student who loved to spin in circles. During math lessons, Peter hopped out of his desk and twirled in the back of the classroom. Instead of returning to the classroom after recess, he whirled around the hallways. He was removed from the school talent show for spinning on the gym floor during performances, and made to sit outside the principal's office. Peter's spinning was but one of several reasons that he became singled out at Saint-Xavier School. His reading and writing skills were below average. Rumors circulated about his home-life: His parents were former addicts struggling to rebuild their lives, and his grandparents often assumed care of Peter and his sister. The school staff held meetings in order to intervene and to "help" Peter. An occupational therapist gave Peter a special seat with a buckled strap to discourage him from leaving his desk, and the principal put a tent in the classroom so that Peter could retreat from the outside world. Everyone, including myself, was trying to make Peter fit into the narrow compartment of a so-called regular, grade one child. But Peter did not fit. By the end of the year, Peter hated school. He refused to participate in any of our classroom activities. He called himself stupid. Parents started requesting that I discourage their children from playing with Peter at recess. That year, I ended several school days asking myself what we were doing to Peter, and why? In my mind, Peter's future in the school system seemed incredibly bleak and, for some reason, I imagined that Peter would some day be pushed into yet another cruel institution.

That year, I began to ask myself questions related to the connections between prisons and schools. Why did I imagine Peter's future as an incarcerated individual? Was this simply from my own ignorance and narrow-mindedness, or were these thoughts stemming from a larger and more powerful phenomenon?

Erica Meiners (2007), in *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons and the Making of Public Enemies* begins to help educators such as myself answer such questions, by examining the social practices of schools that participate in the production of public enemies, and, consequently, support the belief that our society needs penal institutions. This book goes beyond naming the obvious physical resemblances between schools and jails, such as similarities in building structures and surveillance policies, concepts first introduced by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and expands on how schools often espouse pedagogies and philosophies which uphold discourses of prisons as natural and just institutions. Meiners aims to move educators to question the "seemingly natural or normal educational categories and practices, such as school discipline [and] the concept of the child and to push for an expanded conception of educational policy that encompasses the Prison Industrial Complex" (p. 184).

In a society where prisons have become synonymous with justice, and many teachers believe their practices are apolitical, Meiners has undertaken a difficult task. However, through the presentation of an impressive array of theoretical frameworks and data to support them, Meiners builds a compelling case for broadening the scope of what needs to be included in justice-oriented educational policies and practices. Borrowing from Kincheloe (2004), Meiners exposes oppressive power politics within White, male, heterosexist, and colonial privilege that assert the power to claim

objectivity and neutrality. By examining schools and prisons through critical theoretical frameworks, Meiners produces “undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 310).

According to Meiners, this book was written so that educators may consider their active and passive collusions that perpetuate relationships between schools and prisons, and to begin imagining a future without punitive institutions. This call for educators to imagine a different future situates Meiners’ work within the field of critical pedagogy, which is grounded in a social and educational vision of justice and equity (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 4). However, this book is also likely to be of interest to law specialists, policy-makers, prison abolitionists, and to any person wishing to gain an understanding of “how prisons are naturalized as inevitable social institutions” (Meiners, p. 9).

This article provides a summary of the book followed by a review. Given the comprehensiveness of topics in Meiners’ book, the review focuses on themes I contend most support Meiners’ conviction that incarceration is a concern for educators. I highlight how conceptions of gender and sexuality, drug policy, and special education are directly related to incarceration by expanding on Meiners’ arguments with supporting literature from the field of curriculum studies. I also discuss how Meiners may have strengthened her argument by offering my own insights into the ties between education and incarceration. My criterion in reviewing this book is how well Meiners’ presentation of theories and evidence builds a compelling case for the need for educators to consider their role in penal institutions.

Summary

In the introduction, Meiners shares personal experiences that led her to the writing of *Right to be Hostile*. Meiners asserts that she felt an urgency to write something that connected her formerly incarcerated adult students with her pre-service teachers at the university, in order “to illustrate the role the profession of teaching plays in producing the students who sit in my high school classes” (p. 10). Meiners presents an overview of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) in the United States, and familiarizes the reader with current debates surrounding this system.

Meiners discusses how global changes in trade and industry aid the movement of students from schools to jails by shaping future options for youth. Meiners asserts that the perception of school policies such as special education, racial profiling, and school suspensions and expulsions, as being outside of a direct relationship to incarceration requires reassessment. Meiners then discusses “ideological management” (p. 5), a process “blatant in curricula where textbooks and course materials naturalize ideologies of meritocracy and erase white supremacy” (Loewen, 1995, as cited in Meiners, p. 5). Ideological management is also enacted by the legitimization of the normal and the natural, which delineates who needs protection, and who is to be feared.

The first chapter, “Surveillance, Ladies Bountiful, and the Management of Outlaw Emotions,” focuses on highlighting the role of the teaching profession in the movement of students from school to jail. Meiners begins with a discussion on anger expressed by marginalized youth, which she argues is a fair response to oppressive institutions and to a political state that excludes participation. Meiners demonstrates how marginalized youth are often caught within school practices that function to normalize an expectation of incarceration. She discusses how disciplinary policies and special education are practices that target youth through racialized surveillance, and which have serious repercussions on their future options. Meiners discusses the history of Whiteness of the teaching profession and White supremacy, both of which are enacted within landscapes of colonialism, and “[illuminate] the role of the profession to collude in the production of youth of color as public enemies” (p. 54).

In chapter 2, “Strange Fruit: Prison Expansion, Deindustrialisation and What Counts as an Educational Issue,” Meiners guides the reader from the school and jail nexus to a discussion on “the nation’s extraordinary public investment in education” (p. 57), and the disparity between resource allocations for incarceration and education. When more jail cells are being built than classrooms, “ignoring prisons as an educational policy issue is dangerous” (p. 62). Meiners also discusses economic forces and legislation that act alongside schools to maintain support for incarceration.

Chapter 3, “Life after Oz: Policies, Popular Culture and Public Enemies,” illustrates the role of mass media in re-telling the same old stories of race and crime. These stories perpetuate popular misconceptions surrounding criminals and prisons, which work to advance regressive PIC policies. The media are especially powerful, because their representations are usually the only glimpse that most people have into life in prisons—yet this view is largely inaccurate and perpetuates myths about incarceration. This chapter also includes an overview of ineffective and racist drug policy in the United States, and how these work to form public enemies and to incarcerate people of color in disproportionately high numbers.

In chapter 4, “Awful Acts and the Trouble with Normal,” Meiners presents the history of sex offender registries in the United States, and argues that these are yet another form of justification for the expansion of the PIC. She demonstrates how the driving forces of these registries, for example the need for protection against stranger abductions, are often enacted within schools. Schools participate in the teaching of such concepts by the legitimization of stereotypical family roles and their refusal to address gender issues, and the PIC requires the maintenance of the resulting constructs, such as the innocent child and the virtuous White woman (p. 140).

In chapter 5, “Political Recoveries: ‘Softening’ Selves, Hard Experiences, and Organized Resistance,” Meiners discusses how harmful public policies are often recast as individual and private issues: “The PIC requires that the experiences and the lives of those harmed by institutions and policies be transformed from concrete, potentially revolutionary evidence into private, individual failures” (p. 140). One way that this happens in schools is through special education, a process by which students are tracked “away from education and into invisible and abnormal identities in a blink of an eye” (p. 148). This chapter also includes examples and ideas for political activism within the PIC arena.

Finally, in the last section of this book, chapter 6, “Horizons of Abolition, Strategizing for Change through the Good, the Bad and the Innocent” Meiners presents different organizations that are working to interrupt the school-to-prison track. She explains the term *prison abolition* and presents groups involved in this movement. Meiners concludes with a plea for educators to participate in local movements for change: “When the research gaze moves from the students and those directly impacted, to the educational policies, practices and informal knowledges that participate in the movement of bodies from schools to jails, we are responsible” (p. 186).

Review

Gender and Sexuality

Meiners presents original insights that contribute to the importance of confronting gender and sexuality in classrooms and schools. She fills an important gap in gender education that Kumashiro (2008) contends is often ignored; although LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, questioning) advocates often point to the need to reduce homophobia in schools, “left unexamined are the ways that we think about and treat heterosexuality and gender norms, including the prevailing assumptions that heterosexuality and gender conformity are the natural, normal, better or moral way to be” (p. 51). Meiners points out the frequent violence that occurs within heterosexual contexts and examines how the prevailing assumptions of heterosexuality as safe and normal have worked in part to create sex offender registries that privilege only the *status quo*, and “value the lives of specific innocent children and women more highly” (p. 115) than others.

Meiners is conscious that the subject matter of sex offenders is highly controversial and sensitive. She anticipates that readers might have questions such as these: “What do sex offender registries have to do with schools? And what is the connection to the expanding prison nation?” (p. 116). Meiners explains how schools work to construct naturalized family ideals that justify the expansion of the PIC: Meiners deconstructs the taken-for-granted assumption that sex offender registries work in the best interest of society, and that they are an excellent way to prevent violence against women and children. Meiners shows readers that this is far from the truth: She presents data and crime statistics that reveal surprising truths about the likeliness of strangers being dangerous. This invalidates and contradicts the stranger-danger attitude that is often taught in schools. In fact, women and children are most likely to be harmed by the intimate men in their lives (p. 125), and for female victims of sexual assault, their acquaintances are the most likely perpetrators (p. 121).

The role of teachers in the perpetuation of stranger danger is clearer when one considers how gender and sexuality are most likely to be presented in schools: They are either non-existent, or the nuclear family is privileged. Meiners explains: “The perpetuation of stranger danger takes responsibility off the construct of the family or patriarchy. If violence is represented as the stranger, a nuclear family is preserved as a natural and safe institution...the danger is outside this system” (p. 124). When educators consider how school curricula have been historically entrenched with same-sex role models and nuclear families, Meiners’ arguments are in no way outrageous. When teachers present the nuclear family as the safest and most natural way of life, students are misled in more ways than one.

Special Education

“Across the last few decades of the 20th century, and into the 21st, there has been a proliferation of categories of educational disability used to mark students as outside norms of child development or as at risk of school failure” (Baker, 2002, p. 675). Meiners’ work gives teachers new and pressing reasons to re-evaluate how special education is enacted in

their schools. According to Meiners, special education is “simply a mechanism of state oppression” (p. 155). Meiners uses the notion of *ontological choreography* as a framework for understanding the severe consequences of special education on students: Ontological choreography is “...how individuals come to be viewed as disposable bodies, public enemies that threaten ‘our’ way of life, for whom civic and physical death are viewed as a natural outcome of independent individual choices” (p. 20). Meiners’ work follows Baker’s (2002) conception of an *outlaw ontology*, which refers to “...a way of being or is existing that is thought outside the normal, and as such to need chasing down” (p. 674).

Meiners reminds readers that there are counter narratives, often left untold, about the negative effects of streaming programs on students’ lives. Special education is highly racialized, and it “decreases a student’s possibility of graduation, and his or her probability of meaningful employment, and increases his or her probability of incarceration” (p. 39). Meiners explains how racialized surveillance plays a major role in determining the overrepresentation of non-dominant groups in special education: Racialized surveillance “disproportionately [targets] African Americans for educational disability categories in middle and elementary school” (p. 39).

Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997) conclude that youth with disabilities face very limited prospects if they do complete school, and their dropout rate is almost double that of nondisabled students (as cited in Baker, 2002, p. 677).

Meiners returns to special education in chapter 5, where she explores how it is used as a mechanism of the state to portray individuals as the product of their choices, rather than as actively produced in concert with sociocultural forces (p. 144). Meiners asserts that the function of the so-called *helping* discourses of special education are to “...provide a highly individuated subject that is prepared for surveillance, and a self that is trained to separate the individual from his or her sociocultural contexts” (p. 144). She effectively demonstrates how student behavior generally becomes a problem only in the context of the school and other institutions. The problematizing of student behavior, as well as planning ways to try and fix the behavior, is one way that educators recast public issues as private ones. When a child can function and resolve problems in everyday life, but not in school-based settings (p. 145), the institutional practices are clearly in need of examination.

Meiners gives teachers many reasons to rethink the special education programs in their own schools, and to question why it is that certain behaviors are perceived as problematic. Anyone who has ever worked in a school can attest to how students are, in many ways, chased down and singled out due to their perceived (ab)normal behaviors, which are often completely harmless, and then subjected to interventions meant to regulate or stop the behavior.

Drug Education

Meiners demonstrates how the war on drugs in the United States plays a key role in the making of the public enemy. It contributes to a high number of incarcerated individuals convicted on drug-related offenses, related to both trafficking and usage. Policies on mandatory minimums enacted in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s have translated into escalating prison populations, and Meiners explains how drug laws in the United States have targeted non-dominant groups. For example, crack cocaine is predominant in Black and Hispanic communities, and powdered cocaine is most popular in White communities. The possession for crack cocaine results in a mandatory minimum sentencing of five years in prison, while the possession of powdered cocaine does not (p. 102). Not only are the laws inherently racist, but they have also proven ineffective in functioning as a deterrent to drug abuse. Meiners’ work encourages readers to reflect on the socially constructed definition of a criminal, and to imagine a society where substance abuse problems are treated by health professionals rather than by law enforcement.

Surprisingly, Meiners does not take the opportunity to discuss the role of schools and curriculum in perpetuating common myths surrounding substance abuse and, consequently, readers might be unconvinced about how the war on drugs is related to schools. Here, Meiners might have examined drug prevention programs in schools in order to demonstrate how they demonize illicit drugs, thus creating the public enemy, but often fail to provide facts on the most widely used and harmful legal drug—alcohol. For example, Canada’s National Anti-Drug Strategy (NADS) grossly omits alcohol in their campaign to combat drug use amongst teenagers. On *DrugsNot4Me*, a Health Canada (2010) website targeted at teenagers, visitors can click on pictures of a variety of illicit drugs such as cocaine, heroine, and LSD and learn a number of facts pertaining to their harmful effects. Shockingly, alcohol is absent, which is deeply deceptive and inaccurate when one considers that, according to the Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse (2007), alcohol is the most common drug used by teenagers, and surveys have shown that a third of young drinkers binge drink at a hazardous level. This considered, the absence of alcohol in the government’s anti-drug campaign, a campaign which teachers are likely to depend on for resources, demands an inquiry into whose interests this gross omission protects.

I contend that the absence of alcohol is not an error, but rather a strategic move by the political right, enacted with the goal of protecting and normalizing the abuse of alcohol that occurs amongst dominant populations. Simultaneously, this move supports the incarceration of non-dominant populations who are more likely to use illicit drugs that lead to criminal conviction. Although Meiners might have presented a similar argument related to drug education in the United States, she leaves it up to readers to make their own linkages between schools and drugs.

Final Thoughts

According to Connell (2009), “one of the most difficult tasks in social research is to take a situation that everyone thinks they understand and illuminate it in new ways” (p. 13). Without a doubt, Erica Meiners has accomplished this with *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*. This review does not do justice to the plethora of issues and concepts that Meiners has brought forward. Her book provides an in-depth look at how numerous interlocking social constructs justify society’s need for penal institutions. Meiners demonstrates that while schools are not the only place where these constructs are shaped and upheld, the role of the school is significant. Meiners has not written a handbook of suggestions on how educators might begin to act to disrupt the school-to-jail pipeline; however, for work that is situated in frameworks of critical theory, there are no easy answers. Nevertheless, what Meiners has accomplished is the presentation of a vast array of substantial arguments that demonstrate the collusion that takes place between schools and jails.

As a scholar deeply interested in prison abolition, I have found through this book some very important reasons to pursue work related to education and incarceration. I was captivated by Meiners’ skillful presentation of arguments and the passionate sense of urgency in her writing. Her boldness in questioning highly controversial and emotionally charged subjects such as sex offender registries and drug policy, while linking these to educators’ work, is commendable. I now have more frames through which to more deeply reflect on my past experiences, such as my work with Peter. It is perhaps a cliché to say that I wish I knew then what I know now, but this is exactly how I feel. Meiners has taught me that if we can recognize how students are directed into the pipeline that leads to incarceration, then we can work towards directing them out.

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