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# OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

# OUR SELVES

Social Justice  
Unionism and the Chicago  
Teachers' Strike

Free Post-secondary  
Education is Possible!

Standing Up to  
Standardized Testing

## RE:GENERATIONS

A PRIMER FOR ALL AGES





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**RE: GENERATIONS: A PRIMER FOR ALL AGES**



ERIKA SHAKER

## Activism for the Ages

Earlier this spring, our new CCPA Ontario office put together an infographic outlining some of the profound differences experienced by university graduates today, and university graduates a generation ago. As with any infographic, it was not an exhaustive report on the subject, but it did call attention to the very different situations experienced by two generations of young people with regard to tuition fees, debt, and minimum wage.

This quickly became one of the more shared infographics on our social media channels, prompting feedback from people who talked about how they were experiencing changing labour markets and the longterm impacts of student debt as a result of rising tuition fees.

It also sparked some heated debate (even among some self-defined progressives) about “young people” today who “don’t know the meaning of hard work/value of a dollar; who would rather buy cell phones than work hard on a farm and save their money” (or something like that). While the clichés were somewhat predictable (and entrenched in the “grumpy old man” meme — though some of the complainants appeared to be in their 40s), they seemed to stem from real resentment at how we, by focusing on how things are more difficult for young people today, were apparently equating earlier generations “having had it easier” with “being entitled slackers”.

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It was remarkably indicative of how concepts of work are so intertwined with self-worth. It was also indicative of how much is invested in thinking that everyone else has it easier — without actually talking to anyone else about their own experiences and personal situation in order to find common ground. And at a time when so much is invested politically and economically in factionalism and a society that has virtually no concept of a collective consciousness, we simply cannot afford to reject opportunities to learn from and listen to each other in order to find — not force — connections on which we can build.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* represents a departure from our usual format(s); it's structured as a sort of an "issue within an issue", and is focused — specifically and more generally — on working together across generations for progressive change. Lyndsay Poaps and Kevin Millsip have co-edited this issue with me: they have been doing extensive work to help facilitate intergenerational dialogue. In their own words:

In the last few years we've seen a lot of attention being paid to the idea of generational tensions. As the economic crisis continues we hear more and more that seniors should be afraid of younger people and younger people should be pissed off at older people. Common refrains are about how young people don't want to pay for seniors' medical costs or pensions; that young people should be pissed off at older people for screwing up the environment, or the economy, or both; that older people don't want to support the education costs of younger people; that younger people are too entitled and have unrealistic expectations; the litany of negative typecasts is endless.

In the last 18 months alone there has been an explosion of articles and media discussing intergenerational conflicts and the troubles faced within each generation. Most of these articles follow a simple formula with the focus on how members of one generation aren't doing well, are concerned about their futures, are blissfully unaware of their impact on each other, and resolves with the conclusion that the other generations are to blame.

There's bound to be some truth in some of the above but it seems to us that focusing on the things that separate us, or cause us to fear, mistrust or care less about one another, especially generationally, may not serve either our common or our individual interests.



The rest of this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* explores ways to begin cross-generational, cross-experiential, cross-sectoral dialogue. Robert Green discusses the Chicago teachers' strike as a model for a new model of social justice unionism; one that works with non-members, with parents, with students and with the broader community to protect schools and move a progressive vision of education forward in the face of a corporate model that advocated closing schools in some of the most vulnerable communities in Chicago.

Glen Hansman discusses the key role education and educators play in ending a culture of racism towards Aboriginal Peoples: he explains it "will take a long time to change attitudes at all levels of government, throughout society, as well as in our schools such a long time that it will be the children, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who will need to carry on this work. And we have a responsibility for helping them."

The responsibility of educators towards the development of critical awareness in their students is the subject of a thoughtful piece by Heidi Driscoll. She describes how she and her students used the presence of standardized testing in their school to talk about the discourse of "secret education" and "invisible learning," the school as a political institution, issues of fairness and justice, and the "sorting" of students through created measurements of "intelligence". The students decided to express their opposition to the testing agenda, which brings up another aspect of control: the degree to which educators fear being accused of or being reprimanded for "over-politicizing" students. The article is an honest, self-aware attempt to examine how learners can use the school to expose and challenge power dynamics within a classroom while simultaneously recognizing the difficulty in doing so.

Misha Arbarbanal examines teacher bashing in the context of Ontario's Bill 115 and austerity, but he also juxtaposes the personal appreciation students have for their teachers with the often anonymous vitriol expressed by adults. And he, too, identifies the divide that Kevin and Lyndsay are grappling with in their section of *Our Schools/Our Selves*: "...what happens, chronologically, between the adulation of the students and the vitriol of the adults? Life is hard. After a few broken hearts, financial pressures, professional challenges, health challenges, and other frustrations, we all wear and tear a little. Everything is the fault of those who have more, are perceived to have more, or are perceived to have more than they deserve. And anyone who

has more (or seems to have more) couldn't possibly deserve what they have because we all work hard. And that's true: we do. People are tired; they don't have everything they want; they're being told that teachers are spoiled and that their obstinate unions are the ones who refused to collectively bargain, when in fact, unions were pleading to negotiate the imposed provincial framework; and the mainstream media are only too happy to stoke the fires and validate the angst."

Teachers are not, of course, the only ones on the receiving end of public outrage (which is often stoked by politicians and the media). Quebec students were also vilified during the 2012 strike (which was discussed in the fall 2012 *Our Schools/Our Selves*. Here, Simon Tremblay-Pepin analyses media coverage of the Quebec tuition fee hike from 2001 to 2010 to try and determine the extent to which an anti-student and, I would argue, an anti-youth sentiment was fueled by the major Quebec daily newspapers. It's a fascinating analysis. Further to that, Gabe Rice tackles the issue of "free" education (or, more accurately, zero tuition fees) to demonstrate that the decision to not make education public speaks far more to government choices (austerity-induced) than what is feasible or desirable. Thanks also to Larry Kuehn for his RoundUp in this issue, and Nancy Reid for her artistic genius.

We are living in a moment of profound challenge, where "divide and conquer" strategies are often used to reinforce divisions between those who could be formidable allies; where the politics and the practice of austerity is encouraging individualistic rather than collective outlooks; where standards are being set ever-lower to ensure that none of us has more than anyone else, rather than endeavouring to build a society that makes it a priority to ensure that fewer of us have to keep making do with less and less.

But this slow decline is not inevitable.

In the words of Kevin and Lynsday, "Rather than focusing on the divisions, the differences and the disconnections we see the power, the potential and the potency of working across generations. Ageless activism."

**Correction:** In the Winter 2013 issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, Gail Stromquist's article refers to Residential Schools being closed "less than five decades ago." It should read "less than two decades ago." The online version of the article reflects this correction.