


EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

## Education, Power, and Control: Who Decides?

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The United States has entered a period of fundamental transformation, in which legal and political assumptions of the past no longer apply. Over the past few years, we've seen the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, a dissolving barrier between church and state, and the gutting of civil rights legislation. Political rhetoric, meanwhile, has reached a fevered pitch. Contesting elections has become almost fashionable, and violating election laws has become a symbol of power and a vehicle for fundraising.<sup>1</sup>

As the nation moves, so goes education. Policies on gender equity have been overturned, public funds are being channeled to religious schools, and affirmative action has been unmade. Education policy debates, meanwhile, have become just as tense as our broader political discourse. School board meetings and university forums have long been battlegrounds for competing ideas. But the temperature in many communities appears to have boiled over, with threats and intimidation now almost commonplace.<sup>2</sup>

The hard slog of democratic decision-making was never meant to be easy. But most of us now live in a digital world run by algorithms instantly serving up our daily whims and complicating our analog world. Older expectations, such as listening to competing ideas, seem virtually incompatible with the world that future generations will inherit.<sup>3</sup>

This context is on our minds as we send this issue of *HEQ* to press. The articles included here represent a wide range of topics, periods, and places. Still, we couldn't help but see each contribution as timely. All five of the feature articles in this issue offer new ways of thinking about contemporary challenges. And all five read differently today than they might have just a few years ago.

Consider, for instance, Rachel Rosenberg's "Women Teachers' Lobby": Justice, Gender, and Politics in the Equal Pay Fight of the New York City Interborough

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<sup>1</sup>*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022); *Shurtleff v. Boston* (2022); *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen* (2022); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2019); Jimmy Carter, "I Fear for Our Democracy," *New York Times*, Jan. 5, 2022; US House of Representatives, *Final Report: Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College* (2023); *Biden v. Nebraska* (2023); *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022); *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020); *Carson v. Makin* (2022).

<sup>3</sup>Michael Serazio, "The Algorithm vs. the Syllabus," *Boston Globe*, Aug. 20, 2023.

Association of Women Teachers, 1906-1911.” The article recounts the organizing efforts of New York teachers, whose simple demands for parity in compensation were anything but—requiring skillful maneuvering of both city- and state-level politics in the quest for gender equity. The broad contours of this story, in other words, could be ripped from today’s headlines. And beyond the obvious parallels with contemporary struggles for a living wage, the article has particular resonance at a time when more and more teachers are leaving the profession, citing insufficient pay as a leading reason for their exit.

Or consider Stella Meng Wang’s “New Women in Periodical Press: Portraying Usefulness at St. Stephen’s Girls’ College in Hong Kong, 1921-1941.” Unlike many schools of the period—in China and elsewhere—St. Stephen’s sought to prepare young women for relatively equal participation in social and economic life. However, the school was only able to do so because its leaders strategically portrayed St. Stephen’s as a site for advancing the interests of China’s republican government and Hong Kong’s colonial regime. The article, in short, reminds us of the ways that gender shapes expectations not just about the roles people play in society, but also about the way they are educated. As Americans fight over issues like pronoun usage, bathroom assignments, and the so-called war on boys, we are reminded that although the particulars of our present moment may be unique, our current challenges do bear a striking resemblance to those of the past.

A third feature article in this issue, Ian F. McNeely’s “Student Development Theory and the Transformation of Student Affairs in the 1970s,” details the emergence of a framework that has transformed the way administrators in higher education understand student growth and development. Reading this article in the present moment calls to mind the culture war that has turned issues like social and emotional learning into political flashpoints. The uncontroversial rise of student development theory seems particularly striking in this context.

Finally, this issue includes the annual Barnard Prize essay and a Policy Dialogue. This year’s prize went to Lily Todorinova, a Rutgers University graduate student, who offers new perspectives on the 1828 Yale Report. She argues that the document “created a lasting binary that defined Black educational opportunities in the nineteenth century and beyond.” Our latest Policy Dialogue, meanwhile, features a conversation between historian Johann Neem of Western Washington University and Carol Burreis of the Network for Public Education. The pair consider the past, present, and future of public schooling in the United States.

Each contribution in this issue takes the past on its own terms, exploring the rich contexts of bygone worlds. And yet, as is so often the case, the historical questions raised by each of these studies—about power and authority, identity and the self, education and the state—are powerful questions in any era. As Americans continue the struggle to find common ground, old questions once again demand to be answered. They never disappeared, of course; the big questions never do. But this issue of *HEQ* offers an occasion to see the old as new again, reminding us of the ongoing relevance of the past.