

Sophie Fox

LuAnna Nesbitt

SD 3533-101

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What Makes you Mad

Maybe it's a mix of my learning disabilities or social anxiety but I have never been one of those people that school came effortlessly too. I struggled with almost every aspect of traditional schooling, from sitting still and focusing to my academic performance. When I was in second grade my anxiety surrounding school began to build. Just getting into the building was a struggle, I would often lock myself in the car when my mom would try to walk me inside. I couldn't sleep at night in anticipation of going to class. From a young age, I felt a deep sense that I was insufficient in the traditional schooling system. After a year of struggling my parents decided to homeschool me.

The privilege of having parents with the education and the time to homeschool me for elementary school helped me to hang on to my childlike wonder surrounding the Earth and everything in it. Almost daily during my time homeschooling, I would bike to our pond in search of frogs, with gallon ice cream buckets hanging from my handlebars. I would fill the buckets with pond water and algae for the frogs to sit in while I wrote notes about them. My mom would read to me about female scientists and inventors and I wholeheartedly believed I was one of them. In many ways, homeschooling also spared me of the misogyny and standardization that is so often embedded in our education system. The ability to learn about what I was interested in from a young age cultivated my love of the world.

As I reflect on my entrance into the climate movement it hinges on a question, I was asked in high school, “what makes you mad?” For a portion of high school, I attend an alternative school, Iowa BIG. Here, I finally learned that I didn’t have to be the best at algebra or physics, rather I just had to put myself into something I loved. I also realized that human connections are one of the most powerful forces in learning. At the time, climate change was on my mind (I was trying to pitch a character to PBS who was saving the world from plastic) however my answer to the question “what makes you mad” was gender inequalities. I helped found a startup, working to keep middle school girls interested in STEM by funding the projects they created. I built things, did public speaking engagements, and helped conduct research on Flow for psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. My time here also made me more comfortable with failure. Once I hosted a community dinner, but I was the only person who showed up. Small things like this would have once sent me into a spiral of doubting my ability. Now, I realize how important it is we give students a comfortable place to fail. I felt like I was having real impacts on my community, and was learning things I never could have inside classroom walls. It was during this time that I began to explore not only what I want to change in the world, but also what I want to preserve. I learned the importance of community-based organizing and challenging the status quo. For the first time in my life, I felt brave in my abilities, something I had never experienced before.

I can’t remember a time in my life that I haven’t been aware of climate change. I had seen the videos of dead albatrosses filled with plastic and watched videos of ice sheets collapsing in school. While I knew the facts, climate change didn’t feel like an impending threat to my life. Still, I did all of the things we were told to do to stop climate change. I recycled and composted, reduced my meat consumption, and wrote letters to congress. The solutions I practiced felt

arbitrary, like so many of us were going through the motions to prevent something we knew was happening but didn't realize we were actively *experiencing*. What I believe so much of our climate crisis education is lacking, is recognition or understanding our communities are also facing its effects. I grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. A city that all too often experiences "100-year floods" that destroy homes and businesses or droughts that wipe out entire crops. What I didn't know previously, is the linkage between volatile weather and a changing climate. This is not to say we should only care about something if it's happening to us. However, with so much of our society bogged down by capitalist norms and expectations, we cannot expect people to devote energy to change if something feels abstract. Or maybe we as a society must collectively realize that the fight against climate change and the fight against capitalism is the same.

Our current education system developed alongside the industrial revolution and still mirrors the factory system in most cases. Students are told where to sit when to go to the bathroom, what to learn and how to learn it. The movement for standardized testing and learning began in the early 1900s. This factory model of education reduces students to products, judged solely based on their test scores. With grades moving like assembly lines, there is often a lack of regard for different learning paces and abilities. Not only does this leave little room for imaginative responses, but it also leaves many students behind. Before attending an alternative high school, and taking a gap year I knew with certainty college had little place in my future. Standardization had made me feel, and on paper appear inadequate. I couldn't imagine willingly putting myself through 4 more years of school.

Fueled by my genetic predisposition, and feelings of inadequacy, I struggled with an eating disorder for much of high school. I had no interest in attending college, and my parents

wouldn't let me due to health concerns, so I took a gap year. Though at the time it didn't feel like a gap year as I had no future plans to come back to school. During this time I was able to travel. I distinctly remember my time in Leh, Ladakh. My friend and local Reza pointed out the receding glaciers and explained to me their ecological importance. It was at that moment that my whole world seemed to open up. I have always loved learning outside of the classroom and this was one of the first times in my life I had something flicker in me telling me to go to college. I had previously told myself if there was something I cared deeply about, I would go. Until then I wasn't going to waste my time going through the motions. Seeing the glaciers, and thinking of my beloved community at home it was becoming more and more apparent to me that we need stories of climate change, not just pictures of polar bears or penguins as moving as they are. We need real people telling us real stories. I had finally realized climate change is *what makes me mad*.

We are currently in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, a human-caused phenomenon, that like our school systems heirs from the industrial revolution. We often point to education as the solution maker for anthropogenic climate change. In many ways this holds true, when people know about an issue, they can work to correct it. We've known about anthropogenic climate change for over a century. When our education systems mirror the systems responsible for climate change how can we expect things to be different? I propose that just as we reimagine our governments to work for all, we also rethink education. This past decade has shown the world that young people are a large driver of the climate movement. Why not make schools that work in tandem with students, serving as a resource to them and their ideas? I want our schools to cultivate change-makers and creative thinkers. I want every student to have the same

opportunities in education that I received. I want personal and community stories to be part of our climate curriculum. Most of all, I want people to be mad about climate change.

Sources

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