

# Rethinking Resistance in Schools: Power, Politics, and Illicit Pleasures

introduction

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bank street college of education

MAY 2005

occasional  
paper  
series

14

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**RETHINKING RESISTANCE IN SCHOOLS:  
POWER, POLITICS, AND ILLICIT PLEASURES**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
jonathan g. silin	
<b>PART I – RESISTANCE AS CLASSROOM DYNAMIC</b>	<b>6</b>
<i><b>Finding Meaning in the Resistance of Preschool Children: Critical Theory Takes an Interpretative Look</b></i>	
steven schultz	
<i><b>Building Higher Than We Are Tall: The Power of Narrative Inquiry in the Life of a Teacher</b></i>	
stephanie bevacqua	
<i><b>From Resistance to Rebellion, and Rebellion to Revolution: Notes on Transformation in First Grade</b></i>	
jenna laslocky	
<b>PART II – RESISTANCE: BEYOND CRITICAL THEORY</b>	<b>32</b>
<i><b>Everyday Tactics and the Carnavalesque: New Lenses for Viewing Resistance in the Preschool</b></i>	
joseph tobin	
<i><b>The Pleasure of Resistance: Jouissance and Reconceiving "Misbehavior"</b></i>	
peter taubman	
<b>PART III – RESISTANCE: FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND EDUCATIONAL CHOICES</b>	<b>45</b>
<i><b>The Power of More Than One</b></i>	
jane king	
<i><b>Student Resistance and Standardization in Schools</b></i>	
frank pignatelli	
<i><b>Teaching My Child to Resist Kindergarten</b></i>	
christine ferris	

*In recognition of all Steve taught us.*

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610 West 112th Street, New York, NY 10025-1898

ISBN 1-932121-153

## INTRODUCTION

jonathan g. silin

This issue of *Occasional Papers* began as a Graduate School seminar honoring Steven Schultz, a much beloved and respected faculty member whose untimely death from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses left a terrible hole in our lives at Bank Street. The seminar, organized by Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Virginia Casper, a close friend and colleague of Steve's, was structured around his paper, "Finding Meaning in the Resistance of Preschool Children: Critical Theory Takes an Interpretive Look" (Schultz, 1989). The provocative discussion following papers by Frank Pignatelli and Peter Taubman attested to the enduring nature of Steve's contribution to the field.

In 1989, Steve's work was on the cutting edge of attempts to see acts of individual and collective resistance in preschool classrooms as potential precursors of political resistance among adults. In a field that made extraordinary efforts to convince itself that the care and education of the young was an apolitical practice through the codification of developmentally appropriate practices, Steve dared to ask about the lessons in social meaning that children should be taking away from their experiences (Cannella, 1997; Silin, 1995). The Stonewall Rebellion of 1977, the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 were never far from his mind as he looked at the role of early school experiences in helping young children to understand the power of group action. For Steve it was never too early to lay the groundwork for fostering activist-citizens who would stand up for social justice. Nor would he let educators abdicate their political responsibilities outside of the classroom in fighting for better schools and a more equitable society. Only in recent years has resistance become a popular theme in the educational literature (Abowitz, 2000; Britzman, 1998; Schutz, 2004).

The essays in *Rethinking Resistance* reflect a broad range of experiences and perspectives. Some of the ideas will be familiar to our readers, and some, we hope, will open new doors into our classroom lives.<sup>1</sup> Five of the authors are drawn from the immediate Bank Street community: three students of Steve's (King, Ferris, and Laslocky), a former School for Children teacher (Bevacqua), and a Graduate School faculty member (Pignatelli). Two of the authors from outside the College (Taubman and Tobin) are in the forefront of the move to bring new theoretical perspectives to thinking about the early years.

Bevacqua and Laslocky write as classroom teachers challenged by different forms of student resistance to re-examine their own pedagogical authority. They both struggle with how to negotiate a balance that permits children to take control in the classroom in a manner that is neither patronizing nor leading to chaos or physical harm. Each in his or her own way documents and beautifully describes, as only classroom teachers can, the powerful dynamics that can signal the birth and maturing of community life. Together Bevacqua and Laslocky raise a critical question: If we value student resistance as part of the process through which a class of disparate individual becomes a powerful group, what kinds of adult responses can be offered so as not to co-opt their agency? Tobin and Taubman's essays may be viewed as responses to this question, albeit from more theoretical vantage points. While Steve's work is firmly grounded in critical theory, these authors' work looks to a more diverse group of social thinkers. Tobin introduces the idea of small, everyday tactics of resistance found in the work of de Certeau and the concept of the carnivalesque employed by Mikhail Bakhtin to illumine moments when social rules are relaxed, laughter and pleasure reign, and ridicule and parody enter the classroom. Taubman uses Lacan's concept of *jouissance* to unpack the potential pleasures and excesses involved in resistance. Taubman's paper echoes the work of early childhood reconceptualists who deploy psychoanalytic concepts, not to treat individual children, but as alternative tools for diagnosing the curriculum itself (Boldt & Salvio, in press.)

King and Ferris, both former teachers with progressive commitments, now turned parents with children in traditional schools, poignantly write about another deeply troubling dilemma: How to go against the grain and advocate for progressive pedagogy without risking negative repercussions for their children? Although they ultimately come to different decisions about how to respond to this situation, they both find themselves teaching their children critical lessons about resistance. Finally, acknowledging that individual acts of resistance can be enlightening as well as self-defeating, Pignatelli offers critical examples of schools and programs that support student voice and teach strategies for resisting intensified standardization and testing.

As a group, these essays prompt us to rethink the meaning of resistance. While the majority do not directly address Steve Schultz's work, they honor it by aptly demonstrating that his teaching and thinking flourish today. Indeed, the biggest challenge we face in Steve's loss is how to move forward, while still sustaining the powerful connections that bind us to him. How do we do justice to his ideas, while exploring new concepts and responding to a changed educational context? Indeed, how do we acknowledge the moments of pleasure that come from returning to his work ten years later? We begin, I think, as do the authors included here, by resisting the temptation to memorialize the past. Drawing on Steve's deep political commitments, his canny intellect, and his profound kindness, we generate new ways of imagining the educational enterprise.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of reviewers from outside the Editorial Board who worked on this project, including Bernadette Anand, Chelsea Bailey, Harriet Cuffaro, Helen Freidus, Nancy Gropper, Kathleen Hayes, Ali McKersie, and Edna Shapiro.

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**FINDING MEANING IN THE RESISTANCE OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN:  
CRITICAL THEORY TAKES AN INTERPRETIVE LOOK****steven schultz**

*Leona, not yet three years old, begins to slide down the small plastic indoor slide. In the middle of her movement, she seems to change her mind and move back up the slide toward the platform on top. As she moves she bumps into three-year-old Sharon. Sharon cries out and Judy, the teacher, calls after Leona, “Leona, what’s the problem?” Leona stops and looks at her teacher. Judy says, “Leona, go down, please,” as Leona turns back around, facing the platform. She moves her hand to Sharon as if she is about to pinch her. Sharon cries and Judy yells loudly, “Leona! Please go down!” Then Nadia, the assistant teacher, prompts her, “Turn around. Turn around and go down,” and Judy says firmly, “No hitting!” Nadia prompts again, “Down....” Leona complies.*

*It is the beginning of the day and not all of the children have arrived at school yet, but Jimmy, David, Dennis, John, and Mark have come into the room with the assistant teachers, Nadia and Dorothy. As if by a pre-arranged cue, all of the children suddenly begin to move around in a circle in the middle of the room. But they do this without having exchanged any verbal communication. As they move, they increase their speed, until they are running around in a circle, laughing as they move. Twice Nadia and Dorothy tell the children to slow down. The group responds at first, but quickly increase its speed until the children are running as fast as before.*

These vignettes, and others like them, are interesting because they depict very young children attempting to assert themselves. In a variety of ways, to varying degrees, alone and together, these young children pursue their own plans—plans which might involve escaping one of the teacher’s activities, exploring one’s own interests that may be in opposition to the rules of the school, or simply acting together with peers where the power of unity can be experienced. We might assume that events such as these occur frequently in the earlier school and preschool grades because the children have not yet been socialized. They have not yet learned the

rules of “civilized behavior,” it seems, and when they do, general compliance with these rules—which, to us, exist mainly for the benefit of the individual and the group—will be achieved.

A variety of interpretations of the behaviors of the children in these vignettes is possible. The direction of the interpretations will depend on the theoretical perspective of the observer. A psychoanalytic-oriented analysis of Leona’s behavior, for instance, paying more attention to the pinching, might interpret her aggressive energies to be signs of movement toward autonomy during a stage when the superego cannot yet be fully employed as an internal regulating force. Employing a developmental formula, this observer might predict that Leona’s aggressive behaviors will eventually be placed under internal control as her language develops more fully and she is able to employ it more easily to negotiate her desires with others. Or, in the same vein as Kagan’s recent discussion (1984) of the “unconnectedness” of early behaviors within a developmental perspective, one might interpret the spontaneous running of Jimmy, David, Dennis, John, and Mark as a “maturational state” behavior similar to the behavior of crawling which occurs prior to walking, but which is not necessary for walking to develop. In other words, these seemingly spontaneous group behaviors may be seen as serving an important function during a particular period of time (as the infant’s crying behavior serves to attract the caregiver’s attention), but which has no developmentally connected future function.

Without denying the relevance of other interpretations, a different kind of analysis of these events will be offered here; an analysis that focuses upon the social and cultural meanings of individual and group behaviors. Here we will be more concerned with the acts of the children that run contrary to, or simply outside of, the sanctioned school activities. This is an important vantage from which to analyze the vignettes because some important behaviors can be identified at the point when they are first likely to occur; when young children, as members of a peer group, first meet figures of authority.

From this perspective, the most conspicuous feature about these events is that these children take the initiative. These young children are taking action themselves, without the permission of their teachers. They do this by assuming control over their own behavior; a control which sometimes, but not always, moves them against the control of the school. Perhaps it is simply the self-initiation of these acts that pits them against some of the more powerful adults and institutions in their lives. In moving outside of the pre-established rules of conduct, these children engage in acts which run contrary to the teacher- or school-defined boundaries of acceptable, sanctioned behavior. Following the lead of the “resistance theorists” (Carnoy, 1984; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977), we might term these interactions acts of resistance.

A number of theorists and some researchers have looked at this phenomenon of resistance (Carnoy, 1984; Giroux, 1983; King, 1982; Willis, 1977). Drawing from critical theory, which shows how “dialectical thought reveals the power of human activity and human knowledge as both a product of and force in the shaping of

social reality” (Giroux, p. 18), Giroux defines resistance:

*What is highlighted here is that power is never unidimensional; it is exercised not only as a mode of domination, but also as an act of resistance or even as an expression of a creative mode of cultural and social production outside the immediate force of domination. . . . It is in these modes of behavior as well as in creative acts of resistance that the fleeting images of freedom are to be found...an expressed hope, an element of transcendence, for radical transformation...(p. 108)*

The most recent empirical works in this area offer a more complex account than the single dimensional reproductive scheme described by Bowles and Gintis (1976). These newer writings (e.g., Carnoy, 1984) portray a more dynamic relationship between teachers and students. They interpret the world of the school as a particularly vital part of the larger societal structure; a social structure that is in a state of constant struggle and adjustment, and that always carries within it a potential for change.

But if this is the framework into which the actions of these preschool children are to be placed, an alteration is clearly necessary. Although very young children do engage in acts which have the result of resisting the dominant cultural values of the school, they do this prior to any conscious or critical intent (Schultz, 1988). In this sense, it is the form of resistance activities which are of concern here, not any oppositional or critical purpose. The progressive aspect of this resistance is not the act itself, but the form in which the act takes place. The acts, and the teachers’ responses to them, create a kind of structure which is essential to the occurrence of any later, more meaningful act. Yet the preschool occurrence of these resisting events does not guarantee that later critical ideas will be available to translate those ideas into action.

What does it mean for young children to act in ways which are contrary to teacher-directed or teacher-sanctioned actions? What does participation in these opposing activities mean to children? This paper, by examining a small number of the resistance acts displayed by young children, will seek to explore the meaning that they have on those who perform them. Some tentative conjectures will also be made as to the impact that participation and mastery of these acts has upon children as they move through the elementary and high schools and out into the world of adults. (For a more comprehensive examination of this issue, see Schultz (1988).)

The events included here were transcribed from thirty-five hours of videotape and are part of a larger research project that took place over a period of five months in the spring of 1986. The videotaped vignettes used in this paper are of two classrooms of three-to-four-year-old children in a small private school that is publicly funded through the local courts. The school is located in a changing neighborhood in Brooklyn. Because of this location, the school was able to draw children from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. Since it is housed in a Jewish Center, the school attracted a number of Jewish children and a fair number of children from very reli-

gious families. There was also a large number of children from the English-, French-, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean Islands, and a good percentage of Black children from the continental U.S. Children came from a variety of economic backgrounds, though there was a heavier representation from the lower socioeconomic classes. There were eight children, one teacher, and two assistant teachers in each classroom. The children attended school for three-and-a-half-hours a day, and were transported to and from school by car.

### **Constructing Acts of Resistance**

Individual actions defined as resisting take place either fully or partially outside the boundaries of the teacher-sanctioned activities in the room. While children are occasionally successful in moving completely outside the parameters of acceptable behaviors within a given activity, in the great majority of these more extreme acts of resistance, a teacher immediately stops them and requires them to return to the group event.

Resistance is most successful by the children who are skilled in combining “inside” and “outside” elements—or some behaviors which are a part of the given activity with other behaviors outside it. These children are able to operate on a more subtle level—a level that includes a certain degree of sophistication about the culture of the school, and one where they have already attached school-defined meanings to their own behaviors. The following example is relevant because it shows how José, a child in Rachel’s afternoon class, first moves completely outside the behaviors allowed in small group activities, but then tags what seems to be a fail-safe element on the end.

*Three four-year-old children sit at a small table with Joan, an assistant teacher. They are involved in “small group activities,” an intense period of the day where teachers closely direct children in academic-type activities. This is clearly a time that is viewed by both teachers and children as an instruction, or “work” period. José gets up from the small-group table and walks toward the door. Joan, looking astounded, just stares at him. Before she says anything to him, he says, “Bathroom.” Joan tells him the bathroom is locked. José responds by walking around a table behind the shelf. Joan looks into the camera with an expression of disbelief and frustration. She calls José back to the table, telling him to try the bathroom door to see if it is open. José does not return from behind the shelves. Joan calls him several times. Shelley, another child at the table, also calls him. Finally José returns to the table area and Joan repeats the directions to try the bathroom door. José leaves the room in the direction of the hall bathroom.*

José’s initial movement to simply walk away from the table is so far outside of the acceptable parameters of the event that Joan is at first left speechless. This reaction is indicative not only of Joan’s understanding that leaving the table during

small-group is “illegal,” but also of her knowledge that José knows that it is an unacceptable behavior. Her reaction seems to say, “Everyone knows that you can’t leave the table during group time.” José not only understands this point, he also seems to know that there are certain “wildcard moves” which, when made, could have the effect of automatically placing that behavior within acceptable limits. In fact, he appears to be almost blasé about this, providing only a one-word explanation, “bathroom,” to Joan’s as yet unexpressed objection.

Successful individual resistance has varying effects upon the group. Some of these events result in individual children’s simply being able to do things that other children do not or cannot do as part of the activities of the group. David, a child in Judy’s afternoon class, frequently stretches the limits of the recognized boundary of circle group by mixing acceptable actions performed during the songs with unacceptable actions. While this often has no effect on the activity of the group, itself, it does allow him a degree of freedom of expression that the other children do not enjoy. In other events, however, the actions of individual children do have an impact on the rest of the group. In one example, two children lead the group from a stationary singing and hand-clapping activity to one where they are all marching around the room. They accomplish this by combining the “deviant” behaviors with the rhythmic and melodic aspects of the activity.

In some ways resistance of this type is more relevant to the group actions of older children and adults. It is certainly more powerful than the other in that it not only allows the expression of a “deviant” behavior in one particular child, but it alters the actions of the entire group. Though these group transformations are all constrained to some extent by recognized boundaries, they are also illustrations of a process of mediation where the children are able to exert some influence on the total shape of the events.

Another type of resistance which involves a spontaneous, coordinated activity among many (and sometimes all) of the children, is also observed to take place in the classrooms. These episodes included such actions as coordinated and prolonged group laughing, seemingly chaotic whole-group running, and organized acts such as the circle-running event described earlier. Usually initiated and organized by one child, the actions are immediately picked up by a group of children. In fact, this group pick-up was so quick that in many of these episodes it was necessary to slow the videotape down so that the movements of the children could be examined frame-by-frame in order to determine which child was the leader. The reason for these events is frequently unclear or invisible to the observer, and in fact the motivating force often appears to be simply the act of acting in unison. The children appear to derive satisfaction out of an awareness that many of them are doing the same thing together in what might be a budding consciousness of the power of group action. Rachel’s afternoon class offers an example:

*The children are sitting in groups of two to four around small tables in an area of the room reserved for snack and art activities. They are waiting for an art activity to begin. They all have been given paper, but they have nothing else, and they have not yet been given instructions for the activity. Then, beginning with what appears to be a single, unified act, the children lift their hands up and down, banging a rhythm on their tables. This continues for a short time.*

The striking aspect about this event is that the children performed this act spontaneously, cohesively, and with such precision that some previous rehearsal, or at least the voicing of a hidden cue to begin, would seem necessary. Many of these coordinated group actions (CGA) took place within what might be called the contextual seams—times and places where the teachers and children were in between two activities, or were in the process of initiating one. But CGAs also emerged during periods of the day that were not transitions.

However subtle the signal, there is a child who initiates these events. This often seems to be accomplished, in part, through the insertion of a provocative act that includes characteristics which can be easily copied by a group of children. But in order for this initiation to be successful, a readiness on the part of the group is also necessary. This combination of skillful initiators and group readiness can lead to quick formation of these coordinated group acts, acts which create rifts in the normal classroom relations.

But these rifts have not necessarily been made with the intention of resisting classroom norms. There is a dichotomy here. On the one hand, while these acts can contain oppositional elements, the children who participate in them generally do not seem to be doing so with the purpose of resisting ongoing classroom activities. On the other hand, while the CGA is not an event which seeks to resist, it does contain elements which inherently do resist, *given the physical, mental, emotional, and culturally-imposed differences between children and adults*. Adults are physically more powerful than young children. This is no small thing. In addition, regardless of the school, greater authority and control are placed in the person of the teacher than in the child. When young children assume an independent power through their coordinated group acts, even when there appears to be no purpose to them, they are often interpreted by the teacher as threatening *simply because they are not within her control*. What respectful teacher would have a bunch of three-year-olds banging on their tables in unison, ignoring all of her attempts to make them stop? It's a little scary. The creation of a breach in normal classroom relations is a disruptive act in and of itself.

These group actions are most interesting, then, for several reasons. First, the children who participate in these acts seem to be more interested in the formation of group than in what the group is doing. The pleasure derived from these acts appears to be connected to an awareness that they are doing something together with other children.

Second, there seems to be a budding awareness by the children of the power available in these actions. This is especially true when teachers fail to break these actions. As reflected in their facial expressions, the children seem to suddenly become acutely aware that the teachers' power is strangely ineffective. Even those who are ordinarily more reticent and less likely to engage in *individual* resistance become participants in these CGAs.

Third, these group actions arise spontaneously during a variety of ongoing activities. They are not planned actions; they are never discussed by the children before they participate in them. This fact has two implications: the children must be ready to jump into a CGA if one were to begin, and these actions must be devoid of any insight on the part of the group. If there is no prior discussion or predetermined starting signal, or if the signal is momentary and subtle, then the action cannot be the result of any critical thought or insight that requires some degree of reflection and planning. Instead, the children, as a group, must be alert to these actions and their starting signals.

### **Connections to a Larger Context**

If they involve no insight by the participants, what is the significance of these acts? The argument here is that the significance is, in Kagan's (1984) "connected" sense of the word, developmental. They are connected to—are necessary for—the possibility of any future group actions that *do* involve prior organization and meaningful content. The significant elements can be likened to Vygotsky's "everyday" or "spontaneous" experiences (Vygotsky, 1962). It is these early experiences which flesh out and give experiential meaning to the more scientific ideas of "solidarity" or "union," where the power of group formations is consciously known. Socially meaningful and organized movements by large groups of adults do not spring fully formed without a background. They can only occur when prior experiences build a foundation; experiences which extend back to one's earliest involvement in group settings. It is here that the form of group action emerges in practice and where a dawning understanding of its power can be gleaned.

One way of searching for evidence of these connections is to examine research of a similar nature that has studied the actions of older children. In addition, connections might be found in various preplanned and meaningful actions of adults. By highlighting the appearance of coordinated group actions at two points—at the junior high school and adult levels—the developmental nature of resistance in the preschool may be seen. In an ethnographic study by Everhart (1983), for example, junior high school students engage in actions together which *are* planned, and which *do* have a reason for their occurrence, even if that reason is just to "goof off" or to "bug the teachers." Confiding in Everhart, one of the students describes some of their rules for goofing off in class. Chris says,

*We've got this deal, John [another student], me, Mike, and a couple of other guys, like when one says something the other guy backs him up, helps him so he doesn't get into a lot of trouble. That's why that rabbit story was so neat [a successful "bugging the teacher" episode in English class]. I was able to help John out by asking questions so he could finish his report (p. 175).*

Everhart goes on to interpret,

*Goofing off resembles a shared speech community wherein collective interpretations of the relationship of the student to the productive process demanded by the school give rise to collective actions...goofing off itself was a uniformly perceived activity engaged in with friends through acts of self-determination (pp. 176, 189).*

Further connections can be seen even in a brief glimpse at adult acts of coordinated resistance. These acts of adult-coordinated group actions can contain even more awareness, planning, and especially insight into the implications and power of participation in these acts. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, a highly organized act of resistance that included the coordinated efforts of 50,000 mostly Black men, women and children, is an impressive example of this (Williams, 1987). The Stonewall Rebellion, where lesbians and gay men fought the police in four days of street battles (McCubbin, 1976), is another example of coordinated group actions at higher developmental levels. These and numerous other group acts were aimed toward increasing the social, political, and economic rights of disenfranchised groups. Clearly these coordinated adult group acts were more insightful, preplanned, and well aimed than the group actions on the preschool or junior high school levels. They were intended to advance social justice, whereas the actions of the preschool children described above were not. Yet there is a basic similarity among them, a similarity that is related to their structure. There is, even if only on the motoric level for the preschool children, an understanding among the participants that there is strength in numbers. While the purpose of the Montgomery bus boycott was of prime importance, it could not have been realized without its being acted out in a form which generally resembled that of the CGAs of the school and preschool years.

But we need to be careful here in our interpretations. King (1982) cautions us:

*Researchers must be careful to make neither too much nor too little of the resistance and potential resistance which are part of children's play in school. It is clear that the children's play includes elements of pre-political resistance; it is also clear that children do not ordinarily intend to exact political consequences through their play.*

Still, we must ask this question: Are comparisons of Stonewall, the Montgomery bus boycott and junior high school children with vignettes of the actions of preschool children stretching it? Perhaps. But if we are concerned with infusing the lives of our children with social meaning—the ability to have critical insight and then to act upon it—we must, in addition to academic content, be concerned with the less explicit social lessons our children are learning in school. Instances of resistance by children in the preschool are important and ever-present. They “keep the teacher on her toes.” In this sense, while young children are mental, physical, and emotional nonequals of their adult teachers, they are still, clearly, able to challenge them. These comparisons between preschool resistance and later socially rich and organized instances of resistance are comparisons of acts of self-empowerment. If we can accept that organized political actions by adults are the descendants of coordinated acts and individual initiative of young children, then we might find an important connection here in terms of self-control. Even when the young children in these vignettes are not trying to act against the authority vested in their teachers, the fact that their actions take place outside of the teacher-set parameters structurally places them against that authority. The very fact that these children engage in continuous acts of resistance forces the teachers (as representatives of the school) to engage in continuous acts of struggle with their students.

It is true that teachers who design curriculum with the understanding that knowledge is something that is co-constructed by teacher and learner can have a great impact on the levels of passivity or self-control felt by the children in their classrooms. As Nager states, “In a nontraditional model of teaching and teachers, the teacher is one who empowers” (Nager, 1987, p. 27). Yet, when we look at our examples involving adults, it is clear that empowerment cannot be *given* to them by those in positions of authority. Oppressed groups, clearly, must take that power for themselves. Likewise, if we are to make any comparisons between adult and preschool acts of resistance, we must look at the issue of empowering the lives of our children not only from the standpoint of the ways in which teachers *give* self-direction to them, but also in the ways in which children *take* it for themselves. The simple fact is that many children (and certainly those who number among the many disenfranchised groups) will need to use lessons in learning how to take those rights that are not being freely offered as they enter the adult world. It is in this sense, in an unequal world, that these acts of resistance are more precise sources of empowerment. And perhaps the importance of seeing these connections demands a little stretching.

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**BUILDING HIGHER THAN WE ARE TALL:  
THE POWER OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN THE LIFE OF A TEACHER**

**stephanie bevacqua**

*Will takes the bin of Cuisinaire Rods into the block area and calls Nicholas over to join him. The two boys begin to construct a tower that “starts out fat on the bottom and gets skinny at the top, like the Empire State Building,” with the collection of rods, colorful units ranging in length from one inch to ten inches. As Will and Nicholas arrange the rods, they stretch to place the units higher and higher. When they can no longer reach the top of their structure, Will gets a stool from the meeting area and Nicholas grabs a chair. Perched gingerly above their building, the boys continue to make the tower taller. Children gather in the block area to watch. They speak. “It is going to fall!” “Hey, you can’t build higher than you are tall!” “Are we allowed to stand on the stool?” “That’s Stephanie’s stool.” “Nicholas is standing on the chair!” “One more rod and the whole thing is going to fall!” “How high are you going to build it?” “Can I help?” “The rods don’t belong to you.” “I don’t think it looks like the Empire State Building.” “You are building it crooked.” “Look how high it is getting now.” “I’m going to tell Stephanie that you won’t let me help.” “I can’t believe you’re on the teacher’s stool, you’re gonna fall on your head.” “Higher and higher, going up, up, up!” “Can we build with the rods when you are done?” “Watch out, watch out, it is going to fall!” “Wow, that’s tall!”*

*Will and Nicholas continue to build around the comments and through the questions. They do not respond to the other children with words, but gesture them out of their way, remaining focused on the tower. They do, however, glance towards me, the teacher, when someone’s words threaten the continuation of their work. I haven’t said anything about the tower, about the building of the tower. I remain silent about whether or not Nicholas and Will can stand on the furniture or build higher than they are tall. Although I hear the children’s questions and comments, I realize that none are actually directed towards me. I remain on the outside of their interaction, yet I feel my presence plays a major role in defining it. My authority—the fact*

*that I am cognizant of the rules Will and Nicholas may be breaking, the fact that at any moment I could interfere with the building of the tower by telling the boys to get off of the chair, the fact that I am not saying anything at all, fuels the activity.*

*Will and Nicholas have begun to build faster. The other children's voices are rising. The tower begins to wobble. A learning specialist enters the classroom, looks towards the block area, scans the room for me and says, as she points to the construction site, "This doesn't look promising." I remain silent. She says, "Do you think they are okay standing on the furniture?" I nod affirmatively. The tower looms. Will reaches to place a rod on the top of the structure. He disturbs the balance. The tower tumbles down. The rods scatter across the floor. There are exclamations of excitement, disappointment, anger, and joy. The children scurry to collect the rods. The building begins again. The children build the tower of rods every day. The tower or the construction of it has become a familiar fixture in our classroom.*

*Late one evening I return to the classroom to pick up a file. As I enter the classroom, I see the tower standing in city light coming through the window. It leans this way and that as it goes up higher than any of the children are tall. I pause in the doorway and stare at it for a long time. I make my way across the room towards the filing cabinet and as I pass the tower, my coat-tail brushes up against it. As I turn to pull my coat close to my body, the tower begins to collapse. Green, red, yellow, black, brown, pink, orange, white, blue, and purple fall around me. I am embarrassed and I am thrilled. I watch the rods land and when the room is still again, I gather them up and begin to build.*

*As I think about the building of the tower, I realize that the experience is most meaningful to me in terms of what it reveals about social relationships in the classroom. As Will and Nicholas built the tower for the first time, the entire classroom became consumed in defining and testing the roles of teacher and student, and community rules. Although the children were excited to build with a new and interesting material, their experimentation with limits charged their play. The fact that the building of the tower relied on the suspenseful approach of the top of the tower only augmented the feeling of pleasure they all received from brushing up against behavioral codes and established limits.*

*When I observed Will and Nicholas standing on the furniture to reach higher, I thought it was important to let them do this because they were so entirely thrilled with making the tower taller. I thought it was more important for*

*them to build the tower taller than it was for me to insure their safety, and classroom order, by asking them to get down from the furniture. When other children became involved in their building, especially in the fact that they were breaking classroom rules, my intrigue grew. I listened carefully to the children's comments and questions. As they continued to reflect on Will and Nicholas' building in terms of classroom rules, stated clearly through my authority as the teacher, I realized, more clearly than ever before, the amount of power I possess as a teacher. I was momentarily appalled and frightened. We had worked hard to establish a democratic environment and yet this incident seemed to testify to the fact that I was omnipotent. I was troubled by this power and more, I loathed the children's cognizance of it. I remained silent. I wanted to see them test the limits. I wanted them to rebel against my authority. I wanted to see how high they could build the tower. When the learning specialist entered the classroom and questioned my judgment, I began to test limits too.*

*After the tower fell to the floor for the first time and the children began to build it up again, the process became part of our classroom activities in a silent manner. We never talked about if it was okay to stand on the furniture in order to reach higher, or if it was okay to build the tower high above heads. The children did not ask me these questions directly and I did not bring them up. Every day, they built the tower, watched it crash to the floor repeatedly and built it up again. Every day, I was silent, until I made the tower fall late one evening and built it up again myself.*

*Building the tower in the block area that evening brought me close to the children's experience. As I put together the rods, I reviewed all that had occurred around the building of the tower. The children's voices filled the classroom and as I built the tower higher than I am tall, their struggle to understand themselves in relation to me as their teacher and each other as friends and classmates grew lucid. The questions and comments children made as Will and Nicholas built the tower no longer made me anxious about our relationship and roles. Rather, I saw the experience as an opportunity to explore and define ourselves together.*

*Returning to the classroom the next day, I told the children about what had happened the night before. I told them about how I knocked down the tower and built it up again. They were impressed with the height of the tower. We talked about building with rods in the block area. We talked about what rules are, how we make rules and whether or not we should be able to stand on the furniture in order to reach higher, and if we should be able to build higher than we are tall. After we talked and listened together, the children*

*went into the block area and delighted in making the tower fall down. Then, they built it up again.*

Writing teacher stories offers me the opportunity to reflect carefully on my practices as a teacher and to build an understanding of my students. I wrote the above narrative, “Building Higher Than We Are Tall,” to examine power relations in an early childhood classroom when I was a graduate student at Bank Street College ten years ago. My graduate studies at Bank Street encouraged me to create and share narratives about teaching with my colleagues as a means of critical reflection about our work as early childhood educators. The block building experience was a formative moment in the construction of the image of myself as a progressive teacher who works to redefine traditional power relations in the classroom by supporting the children’s investigation of community rules and codes of appropriate behavior, illuminated here by the children’s testing of the limit, “Do not build a block building higher than you are tall,” and the classroom dialogue about community rules that ensued following the children’s and my experimentation.

Revisiting the block building story now, ten years later, in response to Steven Schultz’s work on resistance, I re-examine my work as a progressive educator as a kindergarten teacher in a laboratory school for children at a conservative, Midwestern university. When I originally wrote the block building narrative, I was teaching in a progressive setting in New York City that supported the development of a dynamic teacher-student partnership, which worked to create a democratic community and learning agenda in the classroom. By supporting the children’s experimentation with classroom rules, I situated myself comfortably within the progressive tradition of the school as I worked to build a non-hierarchical relationship with my students. Reading the story now, I reflect on the development of myself as a progressive educator and as a resister to conservative notions of the role of the teacher and the goals of early childhood education. I search for my teacher-self in the stories I tell about my current kindergarten classroom, still believing that the sharing of teacher narratives plays a vital part in our self-evaluation as educators.

### **THERE ARE NO CITY LIGHTS HERE: REFLECTIONS ON MY TEACHER-SELF**

There are no city lights to illuminate my classroom here on the edge of the University of Notre Dame’s campus in South Bend, Indiana. When I enter late at night to write this story, the glare of my computer screen is the only mark on the darkness of the still room. I reflect on my work for the last six years at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC). Here I have designed and implemented a developmental interaction approach to curriculum that values the young child as a social individual involved in the construction of knowledge through his/her interactions with the world. Although the ECDC administration supported my efforts to move their program’s theme-based, teacher-directed curriculum towards an integrated, project-approach, the community as a whole, conservative to begin with, enthu-

siastically embraced the national shift towards the implementation of state standards and testing. Parents began to express concerns that our child-centered, hands-on learning approach was not fostering the necessary reading, writing, and math skills that the children needed to succeed in public school first-grade classrooms.

At the beginning of each year, I observed that an increasing number of the parents were anxious about reading instruction. Curriculum night discussions, which in the past had focused on the development of cooperative social interactions, creative and critical thinking, and a commitment to intellectual curiosity, now began to center on the literacy goals for kindergarten. In addition, the local school corporation focused their kindergarten curriculum on basic skill development. Graduate school classes in reading and math at Indiana University, South Bend, began to attend more strictly to skill-based learning and assessment. Members of the early childhood education community spoke out at local conferences and in the newspaper against whole language practices and demanded accountability towards the standards.

Committed to an understanding that children learn through interactions with the materials and people of their world, I struggle with the pressure to add more direct instruction of skills. Under pressure to respond to the fervor, my own teaching team at ECDC began to speak of “tweaking” our curriculum to meet the first-grade expectations, especially the demands of the assessment test that the children were faced with during the beginning weeks of first grade, an achievement test that determines the child’s placement in leveled reading and math learning groups. The struggle to balance my goals as a progressive educator with the community’s demand to teach to the state standards continues in my kindergarten classroom.

Recently, the children joined in the conflict as they engaged in an act of resistance against a teacher-directed lesson. The ECDC kindergarten conducts a yearly study of multicultural markets in the city of South Bend. As we prepare for our visit to the local markets, the children formulate questions for the shopkeepers about their work. My training at Bank Street helped me realize the importance of children’s taking ownership of their investigations as they create these questions, thus, in effect, directing their own exploration of a particular topic. A diehard constructivist, I believe the children actively participate in the building of knowledge as they pursue their own research agenda. When we gather together to create our questions, I am always delighted by the diversity of the children’s inquiries, and I write up their questions on a large chart for all to see. We refer back to the questions throughout our preparation for the field trip, seek out the answers at the field trip site, and reflect upon our research when we return to the classroom.

This year, in an effort to have the kindergarten curriculum respond more directly to the reading and writing standards, I added a new activity to our question creation. The standards state that the children must exhibit “print knowledge,” cognizance, for instance, of the fact that letters make up words, and that words come together to form sentences. After the children had constructed their questions for

the market trip, I printed each sentence on brightly colored “sentence strips,” strips of lined card stock paper designed for exactly this purpose. I gave each child their sentence strip and a handful of plastic chips. I then asked the children to place a chip on the letters of the words, and then on each word in the sentence. The activity had been described to me in a local graduate course on reading as a tangible way to measure the children’s understanding of the written system of letters and words. As the activity progressed, the children sorted their plastic chips by color, stacked the chips and watched them fall, and traded chips with each other for favorite colors. I quickly realized that the children were not interested in dissecting words and sentences. Soon the children began to place the sentence strips around their heads, forming a band. As more children noticed others creating these headbands, more began to make the bands. The student teachers in the room, speaking with increasingly firm voices, encouraged the children to put down their sentence strips and listen carefully for the next clue about where to put the chip.

Then Max spoke, “Hey, Ms. Bevacqua, we can wear the headbands to the market tomorrow; that way, we won’t forget our questions!” Max’s suggestion was met with a roar of consent from his friends. The children began asking how to fasten the bands onto their heads. Friends began to hold the bands around each other’s heads. An argument ensued about whether we should call the new objects “headbands” or “crowns.” The goal of counting letters and words fell away as I watched and listened to the intensity and delight of the children as they pursued this new endeavor. As they worked to fix the sentence strips around their heads, their questions for the market workers took on a revered place in our community. Of course, we will wear our questions around our heads like headbands or crowns—our inquiries will become, quite literally, a part of ourselves!

Thrilled, I began a clapping pattern—our class signal that we all stop our activities and listen for an important message—and began a conversation about the “question crowns.” Together we worked out ways to fasten the sentence strips around heads so that they did not fall into the children’s eyes. We settled disagreements about who wanted which color strip. We took turns reading each other’s questions as we revolved around our friends, recognizing familiar words and figuring out new words together. We defined our field trip work as the children asked significant questions: “How do you work the cash register?” “Do you drive the delivery truck?” “Do you sell treats?” “Do you like your job at the market?” The next day twenty-seven kindergartners loaded onto the bus for a trip to the market adorned with question crowns.

One interpretation of the “question crowns” story suggests that by stepping back and allowing the children to take over the lesson, I relinquished my role as the authority figure in the classroom and shared power with my students. This interpretation, although it may apply to the narrative itself, does not fully capture the meaning of the experience for me. By creating the crowns out of the sentence strips and wrapping them around their heads, the children took what had been a contrived

activity and made it an authentic engagement by putting the questions back into the texture of their lives. In doing so, their questions, which had been removed from them on the sentence strips, became real again, as evidenced by the children's desire to wear the crowns to the market.

Educators adore talking about “teachable moments,” experiences in the classroom that invite instruction if seized by the teacher. For me, there are also monumental moments in our daily lives with children—moments that define our beliefs about the children we care for, the teachers we are, and the work we do in our classrooms. In this paper, I have shared two such moments of young children's acts of resistance in early childhood classrooms. Finding meaning in these experiences has helped me define my role as a teacher who is committed to resisting pedagogical practices that take away children's opportunity for genuine investigation of their worlds. At a time when teachers are under pressure to transform early childhood education into the downloading of a certain set of basic skills, sharing teacher stories about how children actually construct knowledge through their explorations no longer functions just as a means of critical self-reflection, it becomes a public act of resistance.

**FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION, AND REBELLION TO REVOLUTION:  
NOTES ON TRANSFORMATION IN FIRST GRADE**

**jenna laslocky**

It's late May and, as always, a sense of foreboding is taking hold. A sadness hides just behind every mark tallying the days of the school year, just behind every powerful conversation. There's a catch at the back of my throat as I read the last chapters of *Charlotte's Web* about the parting of Charlotte and Wilbur. The children notice, but don't seem to mind. We are all feeling things a bit more strongly than usual.

As ready as I am for the slow pace of summer days, I don't want the year to end. I don't want to say goodbye. I never do. The children don't, either. They never do. Certainly the reasons for our reluctance are different. With just kindergarten and first grade to inform them, the children can't know that everything will be all right in second grade—that after a few September hugs in the hall and an already promised lunch date in October, they will find themselves in whole new worlds that will satisfy them absolutely.

As for me, with seven school years by which to judge the future, I know to savor this last bit of time together. I know that I'll care just as deeply for next year's class as I care for this one, but I never trust this knowledge. Not when I look at the particular faces that are part of my everyday. Not when I think about who we are together, the unique nature of our collective experience, the things that have brought us together, tightened our bonds.

Some years, things come easily. On the first days of school, a gentle warmth sets its roots down, friendships evolve and flourish among children, among families, between families and myself. The spirit of mutual support prevails. Other years, our community is galvanized by a profound sadness—the loss of a child's parent, the reality of racism we witnessed together on what was supposed to be a benign neighborhood walk, the smoke and ashes and fear drifting over the school yard on September 11th.

This past year was, as I see it now, shaped by a sort of revolution that was initially harrowing, at times heartbreaking, and ultimately inspiring. I didn't see this back in November, when first asked to think about resistance in the classroom. Two months into the school year, I was for the most part witnessing the vital role it played in the children's transition to first grade. Many children were, quite appropriately, reacting to my authority, to the rigors of the workshop model across the day,

the abbreviated nature of Choice Time. Margaret used every meeting as an opportunity to shape her performance skills, drawing gales of laughter and routinely drawing attention away from any instructional objective. Thomas would spend Writer's Workshop discretely poking holes in the other children's work. William would simply remain in his seat when it was time for the class to leave for lunch or any other special activity. And certainly there were those early, more collective efforts at chanting, just as there are every year.

My feelings about these acts of resistance were, just as they always are, complicated. I was eager to establish a harmonious, smoothly functioning classroom community. Together with the children, I wanted to create a place where their hearts, minds, and bodies were safe, a place that was conducive to learning in all its forms. At the same time, I wanted the children to hold onto the unique identities that they were expressing through their rebellious actions. I wanted them to hold onto their spirited irreverence for the *status quo*. I wanted them to give voice to their wants and needs, to question authority, to test limits. The various acts of resistance showed the children doing just that.

This familiar autumn quandary was further complicated by my concerns about this particular class. If, some years, a quiet harmony takes root during the first few days of school, then this year started with an emotional upheaval as a number of powerful individuals bumped up against one another in a terrific clamor. Every recess was punctuated by conflict. Almost every reading, writing, math, and walking partnership wrestled with dominance issues, if not the actual outbreak of discord. And there were the delicate individuals. There were children new to the school and frightened by the vast expanse of the backyard; children with complicated social issues; children who wandered aimlessly around the classroom, frightened by having to make a choice about where to sit; and children who were, most simply, very shy. I was afraid that the clamor was making them even more fragile.

Given this state of affairs, I had to set aside many convictions and ideals. There was no room for the centrifugal energy of resistance. I needed to create a safe place. Perhaps later we could carve out a place for constructive rebellion. I was firm. Parents were contacted, behavior plans adopted, and by November we'd cobbled together a delicate harmony. Dominant figures were a little less dominant, soft voices were just a little louder. Things were still a bit tense. Unkind whispers punctuated meetings from time to time. At the end of lunch period, I was still met with a host of raised hands eager to convey to me the latest schoolyard or cafeteria infraction. But even if the focus was still upon the ways that things go wrong rather than the ways that things go well, at least we were on ground that I recognized and thought I could negotiate.

In late November, I was to learn just how fragile that territory was.

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I had started the year in the usual way. In mid-August, I, like so many teachers, had sent letters to the children introducing myself, telling them how much I looked forward to meeting them, how eager I was to start our year together. I had spent the first days of September putting children's names on bulletin boards, on cubbies, on the door, so that they would know, when they walked into the still-barren classroom on the first day of school, that the room belonged to them. It's what we do to ease children into our year together.

And of course, I know that I was easing my transition into the school year, as well: each time I wrote a name, I imagined a child. I pored over files, gleaning as much as I could from the information they contained. Of course much of what I imagined or deduced from the previous teacher's notes was abandoned during the first few minutes of the first day of school—a summer's worth of growth and a new classroom context had rendered so many comments irrelevant. Still, these rituals prepared me for the moment when I would open the classroom door at 8:30 on the first day of school.

Understanding what all of this preparation means makes me wonder about what happens when there isn't the opportunity for it, when there is no easing the transition. What happens for the child who arrives months after the start of school? The one who received no letter? The one whose name is nowhere? And what happens for the children and teacher who receive him? Certainly, these later-in-the-year arrivals have happened nearly every year. And usually, after an anxious day, or perhaps two or three, a child settles in. He has a partner to help him to get from one activity to the next, one place to the next. She has someone to watch out for her at recess, to make sure that she is not alone in this huge school. Partners become friends, and soon, the community folds another person into itself. This year, however, it would be different.

We were having our morning meeting on the Tuesday following Thanksgiving, when an administrator knocked on our door. With her stood a boy and his mother. Introductions were made, smiles exchanged, and I invited Jahnathan into our room. The circle of children looked on as I showed him an available hook for his backpack, and brought him to the rug.

A place beside me in our circle was the best comfort I could offer. Every time I invite a child to our meeting area for the first time, I think what little comfort this actually is, and how I, too, am a stranger. I think about how all of us, child and teacher, and parent just outside in the hall, are all bluffing a bit. We're all acutely aware of the position the new child is in, the sense of exposure he must experience with all eyes upon him, the sense of vulnerability that comes with such exposure. I was, therefore, reassured this particular morning, when I saw Jahnathan manage a smile and look around the circle saying our names as each child said his or her name.

What were his first impressions? What kind of culture did we represent? When he looked at the faces in the circle around him, did he see a group that was,

at least superficially, familiar and comfortable, or did we represent something quite new and different? And if we represented something new and different, how did he feel about this? Confident? Or again, perhaps, disoriented, even alienated? What about the classroom? We'd had three full months of school to transform its first-day-of-school barrenness into a place reflecting our individuality, our collective identity, and a customized version of the school culture. As comfortable as the classroom now seemed to those of us who had made it, it would have been unfamiliar at best to an outsider. And if Jahnathan were coming from a neatly run classroom where teacher-directed order ruled and carefully choreographed work hung on the walls, it might have been disorienting to see stuffed paper cats flying from the lights, paintbrushes filling the sink, and a *papier mâché* tree growing right in the middle of the room.

And how did these first impressions fit with all of the feelings that Jahnathan had brought with him that morning—feelings about his old school, where, just the day before, he'd experienced a sense of belonging, with friends in the classroom, friends that he met in the school yard at recess every day? Was there wary enthusiasm for these new circumstances, or did we represent a certain provocation, a longing for the familiar?

If the way Jahnathan were experiencing the first few moments with us was foremost in my mind at the time, it wasn't the only thing. The class had, as I've mentioned, only recently begun to manage itself as a cooperative community. I wasn't sure that we were on solid ground yet. How would the class manage the arrival of a new child into its midst? Would it be strong enough to embrace him? Or would it fall apart? And what role would Jahnathan play in this small drama?

After our meeting, the class moved into Reader's Workshop. The children scattered to their private work spots around the room and I settled in with Jahnathan. I wanted to introduce him to our workshop model and to get a quick sense of him as a reader. Although he demonstrated a clear grasp of sound-letter correspondence, he wasn't yet drawing upon an internalized sight word vocabulary or demonstrating many reading strategies beyond healthy guessing with regard to text in the earliest level reading books. We had work to do together before he'd find a similarly leveled reader for partnership work. All in good time. For now, I set him up with a small bin of books and showed him how to use it. Then I moved on to meet with a group of children on the rug.

After just a few minutes, a whispered tussle broke out across the room. "He's teasing me about my shoes," Asia said. "Shhh..." and then, a few more minutes later, another whispered tussle. "He took my book bin," Tim called out. Jahnathan flashed a grin, returned the book bin, and opened one of his books.

As I had been reassured by his smile during his first time joining our circle, I was again in some way reassured by seeing such acts of bravado during Jahnathan's first few minutes of independent work in our class. Through resistance to the established structures, he was daring to express himself in what was most certainly an

uncomfortable moment. I didn't—I couldn't—untangle the multitude of feelings he must have been experiencing at that moment, not only his eagerness to establish a more personal contact with children in the class, but also, perhaps, a sense of antagonism caused by the books in his bin whose every word challenged him, by the children around the room immersed in their books, by the workshop model itself. Even if I had paused to contemplate Jahnathan's experience, I don't know what I might have done to help him. Not without forethought.

I had hoped to safeguard Jahnathan's way through recess and lunch later that morning by asking several of the children to guide him through this often fractious part of our day. I had hoped that when I picked the children up afterwards, I would see him with several newly made friends. That's usually what happens with new arrivals in our class. Instead, I was greeted with a litany of Jahnathan's perceived misbehaviors, reported with all of the indignation that six- and seven-year-olds can muster when they feel their world being shaken. And, as I heard the snippets of what had taken place in the schoolyard, I could see that that their worlds *were* being shaken by this newcomer. He'd pushed them, called them names, said "shut up." He'd broken long-established rules, the rights and wrongs that held the playground world together for the children.

Jahnathan, meanwhile, hid his face in the crook of the arm he'd propped against the hallway wall. He shook with his sobs. My heart broke for him. In one short day, he'd lost what he knew, was thrown into this whole new world, and already, just three hours into the day, everyone seemed set against him. Standing in the hall that noontime, I wasn't in a position to offer much comfort beyond a hand on the shoulder and a promise that things would be all right. I was still a stranger and would continue to be for a while more.

I also had the rest of the class counting on me to enforce the school rules. I couldn't just ignore what had happened—not if they were to feel secure and sense that there was some justice in our world, especially when they, themselves, had worked so hard to gather themselves around these rules. The rules were, at least in those first few months of school, what held our community together. And Jahnathan needed to understand the parameters of allowable behavior in this new environment.

When we returned to the classroom, instead of the usual after-lunch read-aloud, we went over the yellow sheet of "Community Standards" that is posted in every classroom in our school. No matter how casually I put the need to go over them, something along the lines of "it's always good to go over the school rules, just so everyone's sure what they are and what they mean"—every word was an admonishment. His brow furrowed, his eyes still reddened from the lunchtime debacle, Jahnathan sat with us on the rug. He stared down at the rug.

As the days passed, a pattern of behavior that started on that first morning—Jahnathan's testing of limits, with teasing humor or by asserting himself physically, and the other children's reporting upon his every move—crystallized. It wasn't so much that Jahnathan was doing anything too out of the ordinary in a group of

twenty six- and seven-year-olds. He gently taunted, muttered rudenesses under his breath, pushed and shoved. There was, however, something about the way he did things that seemed to strike a nerve. Maybe it was just that the children had, themselves, been working so hard and long on the same issues that they couldn't help but notice their re-introduction to the classroom. I imagine that some of it, perhaps even a lot of it, also had to do with the language he used: when teasing, instead of using the more familiar "baby," Jahnathan would call someone "little girl," or "little boy." He continued to say "shut up" and that things were "stupid" and "dumb," and the children would react as if he'd just cursed. Jahnathan would also refer to skin color—not derogatorily, mind you, but honestly, though occasionally, incorrectly. This was very nearly a cultural taboo. Such talk, along with the pushing and shoving, seemed to reflect the etiquette of a different playground. It was something that the children couldn't reconcile with the rules of their own world.

Academic experience became another isolating factor. As teachers, we know that no matter how hard we try to assure children that learning is a personal process and occurs at an individual rate, it's hard to keep them from monitoring themselves, defining an academic hierarchy and locating themselves within it. As disturbing as this phenomenon is, at least it's usually a private one, and I can ease it by helping the children to feel successful, getting them in some way to the fun stuff. It is something altogether different when the children use this hierarchical sensibility to define another child. Because the children were watching Jahnathan's every move, they knew the kinds of books he had in his bin and that he was a little behind most of the class when it came to reading. He had a habit, too, of relying upon a neighbor's thinking when it came to written work. Copying was a survival strategy for him, but the other children didn't see it that way. And so Jahnathan's learning was not a private phenomenon, and in losing its privacy, it became a kind of platform for whispered disparagement.

I was painfully aware of what was happening and troubled by the possibility that our newcomer would remain an outsider in our community. Everyone would suffer this loss. I tried to buy time for the children to get used to one another. Afraid of the brutal honesty that might emerge in open discussions, I took a more teacher-directed route. I did a lot of explaining, both to myself, and to the children—giving the reasons, as I saw them, for what we all were seeing and feeling. We'd talk about how hard it must be for Jahnathan to join a new class after it was already started. The children imagined how upset they would have been, how they would have missed old friends, old teachers, had they been Jahnathan. We talked about what was going on at recess, what it was like when people only noticed the wrong things you did, how it could make you ashamed and angry. We talked about how hard it is to handle shame and anger safely. And if much of this went toward explaining Jahnathan's behavior, we also talked about how his behavior made them feel, how threatening the name-calling and pushing and shoving were. We didn't talk about how threatened the children felt by my apparent willingness to explain

Jahnathan's behavior, by my seeming switch of allegiance. I wish we had. I think it would have set a number of hearts at ease had we talked about my role as a teacher and as an advocate on every child's behalf.

When several weeks had passed and still nothing changed, it was clear that there was no buying time for this problem. No one was growing used to the situation. I began to realize that I was no longer watching the clash of resistances—the class to the arrival of a newcomer and the newcomer to his new class. Disparate acts of resistance on the class's part had coalesced into a rebellion. It was all very subtle: a visitor wouldn't have noticed it. It was, however, profound.

The more powerful social presences in the class, the ones who'd caused such a clamor at the start of the year, united against Jahnathan. Their antagonism was palpable as they fought fiercely for their places on line or spots on the rug, rolled their eyes at his every effort. What is more, these children, by virtue of their social power, became the organizing forces around whom much of the rest of the class gravitated. Many previously cheerful, easy-going children were swept into the maelstrom as they became eager reporters on every playground misbehavior. The children who didn't participate in the antagonism looked on in unhappy confusion.

I don't think there was anything deliberate or premeditated in any of these actions. Not in Jahnathan's behavior on the playground, not in the behavior of the rest of the class. The tensions seemed to originate at a deeper, almost unconscious level, a place where territory matters and where a sense of alienation finds its home. This made it all the more troubling. Primal as it all seemed, I didn't know how I could get at it.

And in the meantime, there was Jahnathan, bearing the brunt of it all. Naturally, as the behaviors against him escalated, so did his responses. A certain justifiable outrage began to reveal itself. Rough play at recess was replaced by all-out fighting. Taunting words were replaced by curses. Pushing and shoving turned to punches. The part of me that knows what it is to be an outsider wanted him to keep fighting back because I never did, the part of me that's a teacher assured him that I understood why he was fighting, that there was nothing right about what was happening, but that he needed to stop. Of course these were all just words.

I like to think that student resistance in the classroom serves as a vehicle for self-expression, fosters a healthy irreverence for the establishment, and, ultimately, provides practice in the shaping of political identities. But that's assuming the classroom environment is a safe and happy one. Our class was anything but this. I was frightened. What if I couldn't turn this around? What were the twenty-two children in my care learning? Again, I realized that my ideals were irrelevant in this circumstance.

Just as I had, earlier in the year, I gave up the explaining, the justifying. I pulled in the authorities—the assistant principal spoke with the class, while I spoke with Jahnathan. I was forthcoming with the parents who called me expressing their concerns about Jahnathan's behavior in the playground. For every time they blamed

the newcomer, I described what was happening. I was discrete but I was honest: not until the children showed some compassion toward Jahnathan would things begin to calm down. Of course I would work with him, but we *all* needed to work on the problem. I resorted to time outs, just because we needed moments when there was no strife, times when the children—all of them—sensed the safety of limits on their behaviors.

In the beginning there was no change. But with so much grown-up consternation, perhaps the children understood the gravity of the situation. Maybe the soil got loosened a little bit so that, slowly, change could happen. I didn't realize it at first. I have to think back, try to put the pieces together to figure out when and how the shift began. And even thinking back, I'm bound to miss a huge part of it. Here, anyway, is what I remember: Out of frustration because it seemed nothing was working, I asked the children, "Why do people bother to be nice to each other?" I think it was the first truly honest question I'd ever asked—the first time I wasn't trying to orchestrate order or compassion, the first time I wasn't in some way addressing misbehavior, thinking that I could somehow manage it. I needed to know what the children believed so that I understood the raw social and moral materials with which we were working.

I don't remember precisely what was said, but I do remember how everyone was listening, how everyone had something to say and the urgency with which they said it. I remember how the small bodies around me leaned forward in the circle. I remember that the conversation started with "so people will be nice back to you" and ended with something like "kindness grows kindness." I remember that I was relaxed—that somehow the ball had been tossed into the children's court. It was up to them to carry the conversation forward—and they owned that responsibility wholeheartedly.

Of course the classroom climate didn't improve immediately. But we all started to watch for acts of kindness and generosity. At first, in that typical first-grade way, the children reported on what they had done. "I got Emily her lunch box." "I asked Alexander if he was okay when he fell." But then something interesting started to happen. I'd pick the children up at lunch and I'd hear, "Jahnathan cleaned up the whole table at lunch today."

Jahnathan's inclination to help out was not new to me. (Nor, for that matter, was the fact that he introduced "thank you" to the class vocabulary.) From his first morning in our room, he'd always gone the extra distance to wipe down the desks, pass out folders, lend me a hand. No matter how publicly I thanked him, the children had not been prepared to notice or appreciate this generosity of spirit. And up to this point, Jahnathan's behavior at lunch had not been the best, even as the adults in charge had reported it to me. But one very wise lunchtime supervisor had thought to subvert Jahnathan's disruptive tendencies by drawing on his helpful inclinations.

I might have been concerned had Jahnathan simply taken on the task of being “lunchtime monitor.” I might have worried that he was isolating himself in an under-appreciated task. I might have worried that he was relying too much on adult approval and attention at the expense of peer companionship. But I began to notice other changes. When I picked up the children after lunch, for example, I was met with “Jahnathan let me help him clean up today.” Parents who’d once expressed their concern about the newcomer were asking me why the children were stuffing plastic shopping bags into their backpacks before they left home in the morning. It turned out that Jahnathan was asking the children who brought plastic bags for lunch table garbage—wrappers and baggies and such—to help him. The children began to regard themselves as a team—and one which received praise for their contributions toward making lunchtime easier for everyone.

Bit by bit, this cooperative spirit began to seep into the classroom. Instead of all the pushing on the rug, tussling on line, the children would save spots for Jahnathan. And he was saving spots for them. Then it was early April and we’d just come back from a fieldtrip. Lunch was late and picnic-style in small groups on the classroom floor. Jahnathan sat with Nile—Nile who’d been so powerful, so antagonistically disposed—and a group of other boys. They were talking about their lunches, the kinds of food they liked. It was an easy, simple conversation. And I realized that there was no newcomer, no outsider, just a group of boys talking. Perhaps there hadn’t been one for a while and I’d simply not noticed. But from then on, there was no one set apart, not in the classroom at Reader’s Workshop and at Choice Time, nor at lunch and recess.

Resistance, which had become rebellion, had changed once more, this time into a magnificent revolution. We were absolutely different from what we’d been—what we were before Jahnathan’s arrival, and what we’d been with his arrival. Whether we were aware of it or not (and I know a lot of us were not), we’d faced a demon or two and, in doing so, understood ourselves and one another better. Our differences remained as powerful as they ever were, but they no longer mattered quite so much.

And now it is late May, after all of this good hard work, after seeing what we’ve become, I do not want to say goodbye. I want to linger over this transformation, admire it a little longer. We talk about it sometimes. We talk about how we’ve changed. The children remember the cruelty of before and the tolerance and mutual appreciation of the present. I hope that they remember it always. They have the ability to change things, to change themselves or, more accurately, their behavior, and improve the world they live in. I hope that I remember it too.

**EVERYDAY TACTICS AND THE CARNAVALESQUE:  
NEW LENSES FOR VIEWING RESISTANCE IN THE PRESCHOOL**

**joseph tobin**

In his 1989 paper, Steve Schultz presents us with a series of incidents of preschool children misbehaving: José jumps up from his seat during an art activity; Leona goes up rather than down the slide, threatening to pinch Sharon along the way; a whole group of children run in circles around the classroom—screaming—or bang their cups on the table while waiting for lunch. Schultz suggests that these behaviors are often interpreted by the teacher as threatening *simply because they are not within her control*. What respectful teacher would have a bunch of three-year-olds banging on their table in unison, ignoring all of her attempts to make them stop? It's a little scary. The creation of a breach in normal classroom relations is a disruptive act in and of itself.

What should a preschool teacher do when confronted with such disruptive acts? Although Schultz does not directly answer this question, I believe that his analysis of the children's behavior carries profound implications for practice, implications I will pursue in the end of this paper, after reviewing and extending Schultz's thesis.

**Practicing Resistance: From Circle Time to Stonewall**

At the core of Steve Schultz's paper is a radical rhetorical move: rascally preschoolers can be usefully compared to the Montgomery bus boycotters, to lesbians and gay men engaged in the Stonewall Rebellion, and to other politically active aggrieved adults. Schultz's argument is that young children's resisting authority in preschool is a rehearsal or training ground for resisting authority later in life. If we follow Schultz's logic and think of children's acting up not (just) as naughtiness, but also as a form of resistance to power, we can then turn to theories of power and resistance to help us understand everyday events in preschools, and to suggest implications for the choices we make as adults who work with young children.

Schultz makes an important distinction between individual and collective acts of resistance to authority. As an example of an individual act of resistance, he presents a vignette of a four-year-old boy, José, who suddenly stands up and walks away from the table during small-group activity time. Before his startled teacher can get an admonishing word out of her mouth, he says just a single word: "Bathroom." Schultz argues that the standing up and walking away in violation of a well-known

class rule, and then justifying this behavior as a trip to the bathroom, constitutes an artful act of resistance. José excuses the breaking of one school rule by citing another one, which trumps the first.

As an example of a collective act of resistance, or what he terms a “coordinated group action” or “CGA,” Schultz presents this vignette: “As if by a pre-arranged cue, all of the children suddenly begin to move around in a circle in the beginning of the room. But they do this without having exchanged any verbal communication. As they move, they increase their speed, until they are running around in a circle, laughing as they move.”

### **Carnival and the Wig**

We can extend Schultz’s argument by turning to two theories Schultz did not draw on in his essay: the theories of resistance proposed by the French sociologist Michel de Certeau and the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin.

In his 1984 book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau draws a distinction between strategies and tactics. Strategies, argues de Certeau, are used by the powerful against the weak; tactics, by the weak against the powerful. A colonizing army, which has the power to conduct the war however it pleases, employs strategies; a resisting guerilla force must resort to tactics, which are constructed in opposition to strategies, and which must continually be adjusted and adapted “by any means necessary.” Another key idea put forward by de Certeau is *le perruque*, which, in French, literally means “the wig,” but which idiomatically means to disguise or cover up one’s activities in order to get away with something. De Certeau gives the example of a garment worker who sits in front of a sewing machine making clothes for the factory most of the day, but who sews something for her daughter when the supervisor isn’t looking. Another example would be the office worker who surfs the net while pretending to be hard at work. Such tactics are what James Scott, in his study of plantation workers (1985), calls “weapons of the weak,” by which he means acts of resistance, such as workers pretending to not understand simple instructions or to be too clumsy to work at a faster pace.

Such tactics of the weak are familiar to early childhood educators who have daily experience with children feigning to be incompetent when they are, in fact, unwilling; pretending to pay attention when they are daydreaming; pretending not to have heard instructions when they have chosen to ignore them; pretending to be unable to put on their snowsuit as a way of silently protesting having to wear one; or pretending to need to go to the bathroom to avoid participating in an art activity.

In his essay, Schultz suggests that such tactics, especially when employed by a group of children, are valuable as rehearsals for acts of resistance to political authority to be deployed later in life. What de Certeau’s approach adds is an appreciation of what he calls the “quotidian” or “everyday” dimension of resistance. Resistance to authority comes not only in the form of such dramatic, open acts of defiance as strikes, marches, rallies, protests, and guerilla wars; it also comes in the form of such

ordinary, mundane, subtle acts of resistance as sarcastic replies and other displays of bad attitude; work slowdowns; alibis for work not done or done poorly; covering up for mistakes made by co-workers; and pretending to be busier, dumber, and in other ways less competent than one really is in order to withhold from those who supervise us some of our labor as well as a bit of our pride and self-respect.

I suspect that most of us are comfortable with Schultz' suggestion that preschools should be sites where young children develop the will and the ability they will need as adults to openly and bravely fight oppression when they pursue such political actions as participating in boycotts or marching on police headquarters. But are we also comfortable with the notion that preschools are sites where children practice and master techniques not for overturning authority, but just to resist it in the form of tactics for getting by, for undermining, and for making the exercise of authority difficult?

Mikhail Bakhtin presents us with a very different notion of power and resistance than does de Certeau or the other neo-Marxist theorists upon whom Schultz draws. The critical theorists Schultz cites (Carnoy, 1984; Giroux, 1985; Willis, and Carnoy, 1977) all reflect a neo-Marxist view of power as located in the need for capitalism to reproduce itself by producing compliant students, workers, and citizens. Bakhtin, in contrast, conceptualizes power and resistance less in terms of management and workers than in terms of a feudal order of rulers and subjects. I find this feudal analogy potentially more useful for describing and reconceptualizing dynamics in preschools than the analogies drawn from the Civil Rights Movement or industrial capitalism.

In his book, *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin introduces the concept of the "carnavalesque," a term he uses to describe moments where hierarchies are temporarily overturned, traditional distinctions erased, and the usual rules and norms suspended. *Mardi Gras* and carnivals are annual events that feature exuberant dancing, drinking to excess, lewdness, and parodies of everything that is high or pompous. In addition to these annual holidays, the carnivalesque spirit is manifested throughout the year in such figures as the court jester who parodies the words, look, and behavior of the King; and in the relaxation of social rules that occurs at the end of the workday in pubs and on neighborhood street corners and front stoops. In each of these settings, we can find the core components of the carnivalesque, which include a focus on laughter and pleasure; naughty language; and ridicule and parody—especially of figures of authority, and on the body, with an emphasis on the orifices. Carnival opposes segregation and hierarchy by calling attention to that which makes us all human, the common anatomy and physiology that is shared by the king and the commoner, the old and the young, the rich and the poor. As the title of a popular children's book puts it, *Everybody Poops*. A heterogeneous group of people dancing spontaneously and wildly in a circle, their bodies moving in synchrony and in contact, is the perfect metaphor for the carnivalesque.

Without citing Bakhtin or de Certeau in his essay, Schultz presents a series of moments that are perfect examples of both the carnivalesque and of the resistant tactical practices of everyday life (weapons of the weak). One such moment is an individual act: José's excusing his standing up during art time by saying the single word "bathroom" is de Certeau in his clever tactical use of the means at hand—both José and his teacher know that the chance of a four-year-old wetting his pants (or worse) is sufficiently great that to give even a hint of the need to go to the bathroom is to play a card that trumps any other classroom rule. It's also Bakhtinian in José's using his body and its natural functions to disrupt, at least for a moment, the seriousness of the classroom as a site to work on projects.

Schultz makes a useful distinction between individual and group acts of resistance: "Another type of resistance which involves a spontaneous, coordinated activity among many (and sometimes all) of the children, is also observed to take place in the classrooms. These episodes included such actions as coordinated and prolonged group laughing, seemingly chaotic whole group running and organized acts such as the circle-running event described earlier... The reason for these events is frequently unclear or invisible to the observer, and in fact the motivating force often appears to be simply the act of acting in unison."

Such disruptive, coordinated group actions can be seen as Bakhtinian in overturning the dominance of the usual order of the classroom, flouting authority, and expressing the joy of sharing in uninhibited bodily movement. They are also de Certeau in cleverly using the routines of the classroom (standing in a circle, performing rhythmic activities) in the service of resistance. De Certeau provides as an example of a tactical weapon of the weak the way some species of small fish, when confronted by a predator, form themselves into a school that makes them look large and therefore hard to attack. A "school" of four-year-olds running around the pre-school classroom as a group could be said to be deploying a similar tactic: what's the teacher to do? Give them all a "time out"?

The biggest difference between a Bakhtinian and a Marxist theory of resistance is that carnival is a resistance that is not intended to produce a revolution. Carnival overturns power, but only temporarily. For this reason, some people suggest that carnival is inherently conservative, as it works as a pressure valve, releasing pent-up anger and frustration before it can build into revolutionary action. Similar critiques can be made of "wiggling" and the other resistant everyday practices described by de Certeau—workers may pretend to misunderstand an order and they may steal a few minutes of company time to make something for themselves that they slip into their shirt, but at the end of the day nothing has changed.

I would suggest, however, that this is too harsh a take on the carnivalesque and on the small acts of resistance described and celebrated by de Certeau. Just because there has not been a revolution does not mean that nothing resistant is going on. I would also suggest that the notions of resistance put forward by Bakhtinian and de Certeau are more useful for describing and helping us think

through dynamics in a preschool classroom than are theories of resistance as revolution. Four-year-old children will not and should not overthrow their teachers and seize control of their classrooms. But they can and should have moments in the day when they resist and subvert order and authority. Such carnivalesque moments in the preschool classroom are opportunities for young children to learn, rehearse, and practice tactics for resistance, both playful and serious.

### **Implications for Practice**

Schultz's analogy between the misbehavior of preschool children and the political protests of adults presents us with a provocative question: If the young children we teach and care for are engaged in acts of political resistance, who, then, are we, their teachers? We early childhood educators are not accustomed to thinking of ourselves as authority figures, much less of thinking of ourselves as oppressive figures, as, well—"the man."

Schultz's essay suggests that teachers are appropriate targets for children's resistance and even anger, not because of anything particular they do, but because of the positions they occupy. In the world of the preschool, the teacher is all three branches of government: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. Children can and should resist their teacher's authority, not only if and when the teacher is unfair or draconian in her rules and rulings, but even when she is benevolent and wise. As Schultz suggests, young children should resist the authority of their teachers because learning to resist authority both individually and collectively is necessary to becoming a responsible, engaged citizen. Democracy requires not just good leaders but also skeptical, challenging, resistant citizens.

While this may sound good in principle, it can be threatening as well. When children come to appreciate their power to resist, they also become aware of the limits of their teachers' power to govern the classroom. Schultz writes: "There seems to be a budding awareness by the children of the power available in these actions...As reflected in their facial expressions, the children seem to suddenly become acutely aware that the teachers' power is strangely ineffective."

These moments when the children misbehave in ways that make clear simultaneously their power to disrupt and the limits of the power of their teachers are critical moments in the life of a preschool classroom. Depending on the teacher's response, these can be moments of conflict and confrontation, or of a shared epiphany, an acknowledgement shared by the teacher and the children of an important realization about power and resistance. This realization can be threatening as well as liberating.

The way we respond to these moments when our authority and control are challenged depends in part on how we view our classrooms as democratic societies and our role in these societies. It is useful to consider children's misbehavior not just as naughtiness or recalcitrance, but also as acts of disagreement with our classroom policies and with the fairness of our leadership.<sup>1</sup> Believing as we do in democratic

values, we should expect and respect our students to express a diversity of opinions about classroom rules and expectations. The art of teaching preschool lies in finding a balance between establishing an orderly community and allowing for disagreements, a balance that is comfortable and authentic for us as well as for our students. We can err in either direction—that is, by reacting to challenges to our authority and to our classroom rules either too aggressively or too passively.

Although Bakhtin was no early childhood educator, I find in his work guidance for how a teacher can best respond to these moments of “wiggling,” of carnivalesque exuberance, and of the playful, sometimes provocative expressions of disagreement. Bakhtin points out that the wise ruler laughs at the antics of the court jester and endorses the anarchic tendencies of carnival. By laughing along with his subjects at the court jester, the king acknowledges his foibles and shows that he accepts the right of the people to laugh and misbehave, even at his expense. By accepting the need for periods of carnival, the king recognizes that his rules and laws have limits. It is an unwise, insecure ruler who would ban court jesters and carnivals.

Preschool teachers face similar choices. As teachers, especially of young children, it would be disingenuous for us to deny our power and to claim that we are just members of the classroom community. Pointing to the “physical, mental, and emotional and culturally-imposed differences between children and adults,” Schultz reminds us, “adults are physically more powerful than young children. This is no small thing. Regardless of the school, greater authority and control are placed in the person of the teacher than in the child.” This power leads, inevitably, to resistance. The question for us as teachers is how we respond to this resistance. If we feel threatened, we may overreact, taking the resistance personally, and attempting to shut it down. This is a mistake. But so, too, are the counter-impulses to approve too readily of the children’s acts of resistance and of carnivalesque exuberance or worse, to attempt to orchestrate these moments. If they are initiated or controlled by the teacher, they lose their meaning, their significance, and their pleasure.

I believe that we should acknowledge the children’s acts of resistance without endorsing them. For example, when José leaves the table and walks away from the art activity without seeking permission and excuses his departure after the fact by saying “Bathroom,” a wise teacher might respond, “José, you are making me wonder if you really have to go to the bathroom or if you are just pretending to need to go. Are you trying to play a trick on me? You can be pretty tricky sometimes.” When the children, waiting a bit longer than usual for lunch to be served, begin to bang their cups on the table, a teacher might respond by saying something which expresses her (mild) disapproval, while at the same time acknowledging the children’s vitality, power, and desire to have fun and their right to complain when things are not quite as they should be—something like, “Okay, okay, I hear you! Quit giving me such a hard time. I’m getting the food ready as fast as I can.” When the children at morning opening suddenly start to run around the room in a circle and yell, a teacher might respond by saying something like, “You guys are really silly today. I can see you are going to be a real handful for me today.”

I do not mean to suggest that any of these responses are perfect or unproblematic. The right response depends on knowing the children as well as on the teacher's style and personality. Moreover, each act of resistance is unique, a thing unto itself. Each deserves and requires a thoughtful, nuanced response, a response informed, as Steve Schulz's paper suggests, by an appreciation of the importance of children's expressing and developing strategies of resistance they can employ individually and collectively, both now and later, when they become politically active adults.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the suggestions of Lorraine Harner and Kathleen Hayes who, as readers of this paper, raised several of the key ideas discussed in this section.

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## THE PLEASURE OF RESISTANCE: *JOUISSANCE* AND RECONCEIVING “MISBEHAVIOR”

**peter taubman**

What I find most compelling about Steve Schultz’s paper, written more than fifteen years ago, is his impulse to “resist” the normalizing, standardizing, and objectifying strains in the psychological discourses that dominated the conversation on education then, and continue, with even greater force, to shape it today. Such an impulse reflects a desire to honor students’ subjectivity, to understand the contingency and specificity of the inter-subjective world in classrooms, and to revel in the pleasurable and frightening sensual messiness—the *jouissance*, if you will—of life in schools. It is that *jouissance* that psychological discourses, especially those of developmental and cognitive psychology, drain out or cast beyond the pale. And it is also progressive education’s privileging of a particular kind of reason and rationality as a way to contain that *jouissance* that Steve, I would speculate, was also challenging, although in language paradoxically anchored in modernist approaches to reason and rationality.

In his essay, Steve analyzed the behavior of specific children at school. In the first anecdote presented, Leona, a toddler, is climbing back up a slide the wrong way, while another child waits to slide down. Leona appears to be about to pinch the child for getting in her way, and then, when her teachers tell her to get down and to stop hitting, she seems to refuse the directions. In a second anecdote, a group of children seem, by almost prearranged plan, to run in a circle in the classroom. They refuse to stop even though the teachers demand a halt to the wild circling. In yet another anecdote, the children are waiting for an activity to begin, and when it does not, they start to bang on the table in unison, much as hungry prisoners are portrayed doing in films when they want food.

Framing his analysis of these children’s behavior in terms of resistance theory, a theory initially elaborated by Paul Willis (1977), Steve saw in the children’s actions a nascent political activism. A response to the critique of reproduction theory as leading to despair and a view of people as passive victims, resistance theory had tried to bring subjectivity back into the neo-Marxist analysis of education (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Taubman, 1994). It did this by interpreting students’ transgressions in school as acts of resistance to the bleak authoritarianism and irrelevance of schooling. Rather than positioning students as products of oppressive systems, the way reproduction theory did, Willis and other resistance theorists attributed agency to

the students. Thus, resistance theory offered Steve and other progressive educators a way to think about children's behavior that contextualized that behavior within a socioeconomic system, capitalism, but did not reduce that behavior to the conditioned responses of passive victims. Resistance theory seemed to rescue child-centered pedagogy from its de-politicized Romanticism and return a politicized subjectivity and agency to children.

Resistance theory, however, soon came under attack for its simplistic reading of student behavior that, in fact, was part of and reproduced the status quo. Thus, for example, while adolescent boys' or girls' refusal to do homework or follow teachers' instructions could be read as conscious resistance, it could also be read as sustaining those students' own position in both the school system and the larger social world. Thus, it had the potential to increase surveillance and to generate even more meaningless work. Furthermore, resistance theory tended to reduce a student's subjectivity to that of a rational, incipient, political activist; and while young children may have a strong sense of fairness and loyalty, and while they may be capable of solidarity, they also subjectivize those feelings and capacities.

While I applaud what I am reading as the implicit impulse on Steve's part to broaden the discourse in early childhood education, I think resistance theory is not particularly helpful, because it does not take into account the complexity of subjectivity and desire, nor does it offer as many alternative ways of responding to and understanding life in the classroom as Steve may have yearned for.

I would suggest that Lacanian psychoanalysis, and in particular Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, offer an alternative way to read the vignettes that Steve presents. *Jouissance* is a word associated, of course, with the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who used it in multiple ways over the course of his teachings. I want to mention just some of the meanings attached to this word. In my brief overview of the meanings of the term, I have relied on Dylan Evans's *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1997) and Danny Nobus's *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1999).

First, *jouissance* is associated with orgasm, but it cannot be reduced to that, because it is not synonymous with sexual pleasure, in particular, or even pleasure in general. In fact, *jouissance*, as Lacan defines it, is an excess of pleasure or an excess that is beyond pleasure. If anything, pleasure serves as a limit on *jouissance*. In this sense, pleasure is to *jouissance* as religion is to spirituality, or as genital sex is to eroticism.

Second, *jouissance* designates a kind of ecstasy tied to loss of control and rational consciousness, and secondarily to violence, either emotional or physical. Such ecstasy can result from intense suffering—think of the mortification of the saints—or from surrender to the thrill of risk, a minor example being all those amusement park rides that terrify. In this sense, there is a resonance with Edmund Burke's idea of the sublime that stops language and desire, as it inspires terror, dread, and awe.

Third, Lacan defines *jouissance* as the “paradoxical satisfaction that is found in pursuing an eternally unsatisfied desire” (Nobus, p.5). It is this meaning that resonates with the pleasure derived from repetition.

Fourth, *jouissance* can designate the pleasure that results from a transgressive act because of its transgressiveness. It is in this sense that the degree of pleasure is in direct relation to the price one must pay for it. Thus, the pleasure of the transgressive act is proportional to the punishment one risks.

Fifth, in his later writings, Lacan conceives of *jouissance* as being beyond the pleasure principle. In other words, the normal or reasonable calculations of pleasure and pain are disregarded. Accepting suffering and even death, and the pursuit of an unsatisfied desire without regard for one’s own safety, places that pursuit in the ethical domain. The story of Antigone is the primary example of such ethical behavior.

Sixth, Lacan speaks in his later writing of the *jouissance* trapped in the symptom. He called this a *sinthome*, and defined it as a kernel of enjoyment immune to analytic methods. It constitutes a resistance that cannot be overcome, for the analysand derives too much unconscious pleasure from the symptom. In fact the symptom is not only filled with *jouissance*, but provides a unique organization of that analysand’s *jouissance*. Thus, for example, not only does the analysand who persists in apparently self-defeating or self-destructive behavior or thoughts find pleasure in this pursuit, but the form of that pursuit organizes that analysand’s more general relation to *jouissance*.

Finally, *jouissance* is bodily. It is a force beyond language, although it may offer enjoyment in pursuing meaning in language. There is something physical about *jouissance*, and while the hydraulic metaphors that accompany Lacan’s use of the term seem as dated as those that accompany Freud’s use of term *libido*, it may be premature in this age of chemical origins of moods and behaviors and brain waves and energy fields to dismiss such metaphors.

What I want to emphasize about *jouissance* is its uncontrollability. It resists, subverts, and eludes control or domestication. While it may need to be sacrifice—and Lacan would be the first to say that civilization is built on that sacrifice—it offers us an alternative way to understand, to appreciate, and to engage with one another, no matter how old we are.

I believe, for example, that Steve was struggling to find a way to honor students’ subjectivity and to bring *jouissance* into the conversation about early childhood education. My sense is that this might be why Steve turned to resistance theory in the late 1980’s. Ironically, that turn to resistance theory sustained a particular kind of appropriation of the students’ subjectivity. In other words, he projected into these children a pre-political consciousness, placed on a developmental trajectory that culminated in political activism. At no point were the children asked why they disobeyed their teachers, or why they did what they did.

While I was thinking about my response to Steve’s paper, I asked my four-year-old daughter and her friend why they disobey their teachers, and why they, like

Leona in Steve's anecdote, might, as they were going down a slide, stop midway, turn around and climb back up, even though another child was waiting at the top. Both my daughter and her friend said they would climb back up the slide so they could keep going down again and again. My daughter said she would disobey a teacher sometimes so she could get time out because she needed to be alone, away from the group. And, she added, sometimes the teacher was wrong. Her friend said she would disobey because it was "scary fun" and so she could get a time out. Then her friends would be nice to her because they would be "sad for her." Later, I asked another of my daughter's friends why he disobeyed his teachers. Nicky said he disobeyed because he hated school and he was angry with the teachers that he had to be there.

Although they had elaborate explanations for doing what they did, none of them, except perhaps Nicky, were "resisting" in any pre-political sense; and if he were, one can already see how his resistance might function to reproduce his further entrapment in more repressive structures such as the labeling system of special needs. If we read these three children's responses or behaviors in terms of *jouissance*, however, a different picture emerges than the one conjured by resistance theory. We can read the children's explanations for their behavior in terms of the pleasure of repetition, the thrill of transgression, the joy of feeling sorry for oneself, the sense of solitariness and pursuing an unsatisfied desire to the point of exclusion from community.

I want to argue, then, for an appreciation of the *jouissance* in schools. Such an appreciation would work against the impulse to domesticate, to control or to appropriate the subjectivities of students and children.

I close by looking at a recent piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, written by Michael Berube, entitled "Standards of Reason in the Classroom." In this essay Berube describes an undergraduate literature class in which a "large white" (B8) male student increasingly resisted or transgressed the etiquette of classroom discussion. The student not only voiced the rightwing opinions we have become accustomed to hearing on talk radio, but also claimed he was silenced by the hegemonic political correctness of liberal and radical voices in the class. Berube writes:

*John spoke up often, sometimes loudly, sometimes out of turn. He had begun to conceive of himself as the only countervailing conservative voice in a classroom full of liberal-left thinkalikes... Often he was obstreperous and out of bounds. (B8).*

Berube chose not to control him, or "teach him manners," or shut him up, because he didn't want to "contribute to John's growing sense of lonely opposition" (B8). The denouement came when John defended the internment of the Japanese during WWII and the possible internment of Muslims today. At that point Berube felt compelled to speak to John, almost solicitously, he says, as if to say, "You under-

stand so little about how some of your remarks might be taken by members of racial minorities, and yet you say so much about them, you could be in for some rough times” (B10).

Berube concludes:

*To all such students—indeed to all students, those with disabilities and those without—I try to apply the standard of disability law: I make reasonable accommodations for them. The challenge, though, lies in making reasonable accommodations for students whose standards of “reasonableness” are significantly different than yours. Few aspects of teaching are so difficult—and I think, so rarely acknowledged by people who don’t teach for a living. (B10)*

As I finished Berube’s article, I kept thinking of Steve’s call for resistance. After all, John was resisting, transgressing several norms, but he was not engaged in the kind of resistance critical pedagogues have in mind. How might Steve have understood such resistance? And I kept thinking of those early childhood educators who might, if John were a child, tell him to use his words more carefully, or those developmentalists who might soothe their own anxiety about loss of control by placing John just a little behind on a developmental continuum, or those cognitivists who might imagine that a meta-discourse on racism would convince John of his uncritical thinking, as if more language or reason or maturation would lead to John’s enlightenment or progress. And I thought of Lacan’s elaboration of *jouissance*, for indeed John may well have fathomed himself as Antigone, or been engaged in a repetition compulsion, or perhaps he was pursuing the joy of transgression. Seeing him in this light might have offered Berube other alternatives to the liberal reasoning that seems both ineffectual and patronizing.

Confronted with behavior or attitudes that fall beyond the norm or that appear resistant or transgressive, I think we need to consider several possible actions.

First, we could appreciate the *jouissance* of the resistance or the transgression. Reading the resistance or transgression in this way allows us to speculate about the various possibilities for understanding and responding, possibilities enumerated above. Second, we could put the resistance or transgression into some curricular register, for example the aesthetic, that allows for a fuller elaboration of feelings, associations, movements, and imaginings. By placing the resistance or transgression in this register, we allow for it to be opened up, explored, and expressed in ways that have more explicit intentionality. The autonomy and power in the resistance can be preserved, but they can also be expressed more creatively and consciously. Third, we can explicitly acknowledge our own views, and if they are held as truths, however contingent, not resort to manipulation through a kind of “reasonable reason” that feels patronizing and controlling to me. Rather, we can hold fast to our own ethical *jouissance*. Finally, we can refrain from the passive aggressive move of pathologizing stu-

dents by placing their subjectivity on some a priori psychological trajectory of cognitive or emotional development.

In taking such steps, we honor the subjectivity of our students, acknowledge the intersubjective world of the classroom, allow for a more intentional expression of political and creative dissent, and offer our students and ourselves opportunities to investigate the knots, the pressures, the tensions, the resistances, the desires, and the *jouissance* that constitute life in schools.

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**THE POWER OF MORE THAN ONE****jane king**

When my husband and I moved from New York City to Dickson, Indiana, I found a job in one of the private preschools in town. I frequently felt like Leona, the child Steve Schultz describes at the beginning of his article on resistance, who wants to go back up the slide. While other teachers were planning curriculum—climbing the slide and sliding down in an orderly fashion—I always felt like I was moving against the tide—crawling up the slide toward the platform at the top. The other teachers designed patterns and sent them home to parents who cut neat and identical pieces for the children. In this way, three-, four-, and five-year-olds were able to construct scenes that looked just like the pictures of the rain forest the teacher showed them in the rain forest book.

When I planned curriculum, we didn't study the rain forest. Instead I put out paper, crayons, markers, scissors, glue, and whatever else I could find and let the children create their own record of what they saw outside our preschool windows. They looked at the mountain across the street and drew the trails they had hiked with their families. Instead of gluing on animals their parents cut out for them, the children drew the deer and elk that lived on the mountain. Their drawings didn't look much like actual deer and elk, but the children weren't concerned. Our murals grew bigger and, some might say, messier. I took dictation and we made class books about the places we'd hiked as a class. Some of the older children did their own writing. The classroom was noisy, messy, productive, and exciting. One of the other teachers offered me precut animal shapes. I said no thank you. I hung on to the sides of that slide, and kept climbing up, even though every voice of authority I could hear was telling me to turn around and slide down.

I've been in Dickson almost ten years now. Some days I feel like my grip on the slide is loosening. I stop and think about what's made it possible for me to hang on. A big part of the answer is the years I spent teaching in New York City before I moved to Dickson. My colleagues there had noisy, messy, productive, and exciting classrooms. Together we questioned and explored—with each other and with our students. Now on the days when I find myself feeling alone and at odds with the Dickson school community, I think of the people in the school community I left behind. I think of what they would say to me if they were here. I remind myself that in Dickson, even when I am alone on the slide, I am not alone in the world.

In my second year at the preschool, I worked with a new co-teacher. We circled each other carefully when we met for our first planning meeting. I didn't know what Sandy was thinking. I was wondering how hard it was going to be for me to climb up the slide while Sandy was urging me to go down. But she didn't urge me to slide down; in fact, she climbed up with me. I discovered that Sandy had liked my classroom the year before. She saw beyond the noise and the mess to what the children were saying and doing. The year we taught together was exhilarating. We took more trips. We walked to the neighborhood coffee shop to watch the soda truck unload. We let the children mix their own paint colors. We brought the woodworking table in from outside. Other staff members couldn't believe we welcomed that noise into our classroom. Sadly, Sandy left Dickson at the end of that year. I don't think I've had as rich a school year since.

Resistance from more than one begins to demand attention. Steve Schultz asks, "What respectful teacher would have a bunch of three-year-olds banging on their tables in unison, ignoring all of her attempts to make them stop?" While I admit to the nightmare quality of this scenario as a teacher, I also recognize that while one three-year-old banging on a table and refusing to stop might be escorted to the director's office, a group of three-year-olds would command a different kind of attention. There is power in more than one.

I sensed this power during the year I worked with Sandy. It was infinitely easier to work with Sandy than to work alone. My co-teachers the previous year did not want the noise of the woodworking table in the classroom. The school director agreed with them, and the woodworking table remained outside. It was when Sandy and I insisted together that the sound of sawing and hammering was not merely noise, but the by-product of children's real work, that we were able to carry the table inside.

I believe that a crucial part of our work as teachers must be to help children find their voices. We must listen to those voices. We must help each child recognize that his or her voice, even in disagreement, can be important to the group. If we do, there is a better chance that our students will become adults who are willing and able to question, and perhaps change, the direction in which the rest of us are moving.

I am no longer working in the preschool. I am an at-home mom of a four- and a nine-year-old. I have volunteered regularly in my daughter Meagan's public school classrooms, and I cringe at the hidden curriculum that tries to teach my child, and other children at the school, that homogeneity is desirable. Last year, in Meagan's second-grade classroom, simply taking initiative—using art materials in a way the teacher had not demonstrated, reading a book that was not in your reading group's book basket—was an act of resistance.

At Meagan's school, children who are not "working well" within the established system are seen as outside the "norm," a "condition" the schools try to address in various ways. During IEP meetings [Individualized Education Plan, required by

law for students defined as having special needs], faculty and support staff give parents suggestions of ways they can help their children fit into the school experience, rather than talking about ways the school experience might be adapted to fit the needs of an individual child.

At Meagan's school, there aren't meetings in which students discuss how to make sure school is a safe place for everyone. When bullying becomes an issue on the playground, recess times are shortened. When some children end up sad because they have no one to sit with during lunch, everyone is assigned a seat in the lunchroom. As a result, opportunities the school might provide for children to learn how to work out conflicts, how to get along with and take care of one another, are missed. During music time, children sing songs about community; but little classroom time is spent talking about what the word "community" actually means.

I am a member of the PTA. I chair fundraising events for the school. Outwardly, I am seen as a supportive parent. At the same time, I continue to resist, to teach my children to resist, and to recruit others who will resist with me.

Some days I feel discouraged. Other days I talk with the small handful of parents I have gotten to know who are uneasy about their children's school experience(s) and the school's hidden curriculum of conformity. When I am with this group, I believe that change might be possible. I realize that even in Dickson, I am not alone. I feel able and ready to go into the school and make whatever small changes I can.

When I volunteered in Meagan's second-grade classroom, I got out extra bottles of glue for children who wanted to use more than the teacher's recommended "dot, dot, not a lot." I handed scissors to a child who asked me to cut something out for him. I taught strategies other than "sounding out" when I read with children. I showed Katie where to find books that were not in her assigned reading box. I watched her face light up as she realized that part of being a reader is making choices about what to read, and as she absorbed my unspoken message about where to find other books.

I taught my daughter, Meagan, who in turn taught her friends, how to sneak back into the school if they forgot their mittens when they went outside for recess. (Going back in is against school rules). The first time Meagan helped a friend get her mittens, she came home filled with pride at the power she had been able to claim as she helped a friend in a system that generally renders children powerless.

I am frustrated with the school system. I see my children working to make sense of the world they live in, and I see their questions going not only unanswered in school, but some days unasked as well. They learn that there is no school on Monday because it is Martin Luther King Day, but they do not learn about the Montgomery bus boycott. I seesaw back and forth between wanting to return to work myself, and wanting to preserve my time with my children, those quiet after-school snack moments when we talk about Martin Luther King as a person who believed in breaking and changing rules.

In first grade, my daughter had two close friends who spent many days after school at our house. One day they decided to build a town out of shoeboxes and other found materials. They took over a corner of our living room, and worked for weeks. They wrestled their way through many questions. Should they work on buildings alone or together? Should the biggest box be used for housing or the school? Could they have a town without a park? They decided they needed a hospital in case anyone got sick. At one point they had too many businesses and not enough people to work in them. They solved that by consolidating the restaurant and the grocery store.

At the end of the year, my daughter brought her report card home from school. We read it together. When we got to social studies, she asked me what “social studies” meant. As I explained, Meagan asked, “Was the town we made like social studies?” When I answered yes, Meagan said, “Skip that part of my report card. We don’t do social studies in school.” I hugged her. I am grateful that she is able to resist, even in this private way, the labels her school attempts to put on her learning and experiences.

Some days I think about taking Meagan out of school. I think about home schooling. The argument goes round in my head in a vicious circle. I don’t believe in home schooling. I don’t think Meagan, or any child, can do their best learning alone. I want Meagan to be part of a community of learners. I yearn for a classroom where she will be empowered to take charge of her own learning and decision-making. I want Meagan to have opportunities to work out questions with her classmates such as: How do you choose a good book? How do you get along with other children on the playground? How do you make new friends? How do you solve a math problem? She needs a teacher who will help facilitate these discussions. I worry that if I leave Meagan in school, the values I have worked so hard to teach her—asking questions, talking things through, speaking up when you disagree—will not be nurtured. At the same time I worry that if I take her out of school, I will give her a message that it’s okay to leave a bad system rather than try to change it.

Now Meagan is in third grade. She has a wonderful teacher, who has survived as an outsider in the system for over thirty years. She helps children work out for themselves and with each other how to keep their supplies organized; how to make new friends; how to choose an appropriate, independent reading book; how to decide what they will work on learning this year; and how they might work on it. I love volunteering in her classroom. I love talking with her about children and about curriculum. When I am with Mrs. Thomas both of us are energized, excited, and filled with the possibilities of change and exploration. We experience the power of two.

Even when I think about home schooling, I know that Meagan will remain in school. Part of this decision is based on what I know about Meagan and me—she needs input from someone who’s not her mom. Another part of it is based on my own hidden curriculum: if I’m not at the school, who will encourage and applaud

the small acts of resistance that some of the children engage in? Who will encourage Mrs. Thomas and any other teachers like her? I suppose I have a hidden curriculum for my children, as well. Deep down, I hope that throughout their school years, as the system shows its flaws (and perhaps its possibilities) and as we talk at home about possible courses of action, my children will grow to understand more and more about the possibilities and ways of resistance.

## STUDENT RESISTANCE AND STANDARDIZATION IN SCHOOLS

frank pignatelli

*“In [the examination] are combined the ceremony of power and the form of an experience, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth.”  
(Foucault, p. 184).*

Increasingly, public schooling is being reduced to bottom-line markers and scripted, tightly managed performances on the part of students. The success of students in this current climate requires the devaluation of personhood, particularity, and robust participation in school life. At present, the dominance of standardization casts human development as adjustment and accommodation. Compliance is rewarded. Resistance and repeated failure to attain the norm meet with lowered status and increased scrutiny; while high ranking along a continuum is equated with well-being and excellence.

Standardized tests, for example, despite their justification by advocates as the primary means by which the playing field of opportunity for all, regardless of circumstance, is leveled, fuels what Jonathan Kozol (in Meier, et al., 2000) terms a “destructive conscientiousness” (p. ix). What is being risked, given even the best of intentions, in the wake of a too-often deadening uniformity, is the active engagement of persons taking responsibility for, and pleasure in, building a learning community—the development of authentic trusting relationships across the school; the habit of being held accountable to those persons one faces on a daily basis. These tests and the apparatus designed to support them depress the moral and intellectual authority of the educator whose very credibility is predicated upon exercising this authority.

Low performance on standardized tests exacts a painful price on students. When such a narrowly construed system of accountability breaks down—test fraud, miscalculations of test performance, blatant cultural bias in test construction, etc.—a residue of suspicion and vulnerability lingers. When it works, the undertow of such a system breeds a harsh, unforgiving reality, a particularly insidious kind of turmoil and pain that courses through the individual and collective body, too often leaving traces of resentment, self-doubt, and victimization. This paper will examine student resistance in the context of this expanding, high-stakes school culture of test and curricular standardization.

## Student Resistance

Student resistance can take many forms. It may present itself, for example, as goofing off, not learning—a willful refusal to embrace knowledge deemed by the student to be at odds with his/her values questioning teacher authority, arguing, limited classroom participation, or dropping-out (Everhart, 1983; Kohl, 1991; Fine, 1991, 1987; Alpert, 1991). Abowitz (2000) distinguishes between student resistance, “expressed through *symbolic expression* (style of dress, linguistic codes, graffiti, verbal insubordination, silences) and *embodied action* (...absence from class or meetings, physical insubordination, dropping out of school)” (p. 890; emphasis added). An example of the symbolic expression of student opposition can be seen in McLaren’s (1985) study of what he calls “clowning.” Here is his description and analysis of “Vinnie,” one such clown:

*As he mocked, scoffed at, lampooned, and parodied the foibles of both teachers and fellow students, the class clown may be said to have “played” with the internal inconsistency and ambiguity of the ritual symbols and metaphors. Possessing a disproportionate zeal for “being an ass,” Vinnie symbolically undid or refracted what the instructional rituals work so hard to build up—school culture and its concomitant reification of the cultural order (p. 91).*

Shanks’ (1994) study of student reactions to a standardized curriculum in an elementary school is particularly noteworthy. Teachers interviewed bore witness to how the establishment of a tightly scripted curriculum, mastery learning, coupled with closely calibrated learning objectives tested at specific intervals, was succeeding in changing how their students viewed school and schoolwork in fundamental ways. LuAnn, one such teacher, puts it this way:

*The part I see most, I guess, is in attitude. Because the message is being received earlier that only the surface is important and only the immediate is important....You know, kids come in to school with issues that they wonder about, that they learn really fast to shut off and shut down because there is not time in the day to talk about it....I hear kids worrying more and more how they’re doing on the test, I don’t know how to explain it, like your concern is for the material, the immediate evidence. And the learning isn’t recognized as meritorious anymore, and the experience, the process of learning, isn’t recognized anymore. It’s not validated because there’s not time for it. So, if you’re a quick learner, someone who can regurgitate, have quick recall, pick up on trivia, put things in a framework that you can spit back on a test, then you succeed in school. That’s what schooling has become. It’s the quick answer and let’s move on (p. 50).*

During her time at this school, Shanks was asked to work with students who were struggling. Karen, a fifth-grade student, was having trouble in mathematics. Confronted with a multiple-choice work sheet, she pushed aside an opportunity to understand the mathematical concepts about place value and remained content with bubbling in wrong answers. “Well,” Karen remarked, “I have too much other work to do...I know they’re wrong. I want to get it done. Who cares?” (p. 52). One “finishes” and produces work—even at the expense of understanding. At the same time that students like Karen were finding ways to “do” their work—from a safe, but subversive distance, as it were—Shanks also found that the same students were acutely aware of how learning could be made more engaging and satisfying. Staying on the surface, finding shortcuts, even cheating—all modes of student resistance—contest the rigidity of scripted curriculum and teaching.

Schutz (2004) sees these same forms of resistance operating in an alternative middle school he calls New Hope, whose population consisted of students who were pushed out of the more traditional, mainstream schools. For many, he reports, it was their “last chance.” “Teachers at this school,” he writes, “constantly told students to complete their ‘work,’ to do their ‘work,’ or that they did not ‘work’ hard enough, often linking this to success beyond school.” In both cases, “a rigid teacher script that does not respond to the experiences of students ‘is precisely what fosters a continuing underlife’” (p. 17-18; inner quotes, Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larsen, 1995, 462). This underlife needs to be tended to by educators concerned about the degree of standardization in schools. For these and other acts of opposition, perhaps the essential question is: How do we frame or regard such acts? Are they manifestations of a troubling deviancy or something else?

Such acts of opposition can serve as significant points of entry into a meaningful critique of standardization. Giroux (1983) provides a theoretical perspective that underscores the revelatory function of resistance. Distinguishing between merely oppositional behavior and resistance, the latter, as he puts it, “contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle in the interest of self-emancipation and social emancipation” (p. 109). Giroux sees resistance as a mode of revealing or uncovering what may, at times, be a hidden logic of moral-political renewal/transformation/possibility. He seeks to redirect prevailing, dominant understanding of resistance as symptomatic of psychological flaws, pathological conditions and, more generally, the result of individual failings to one where the notion of resistance is aligned to “the logic of moral and political indignation” (p. 107). This can be the basis for purposeful conflict and needed renewal.

### **Progressive Responses to Resistance**

Progressive educators challenge themselves to frame student resistance dialogically. They would recognize, for example, students staying on the surface of what they are learning, content to provide the teacher with “right” answers as an opportu-

nity for what Abowitz (2000) calls a “shared social enterprise.” She notes: “Opposition...presents a problem; it presents a change in conditions that further demands inquiry, reflection, discussion, and action” (p. 899). Recalling Dewey’s (1916) transactionalist framing of communication, the decision by the educator not to simply pass over, dismiss, or remain resigned to this and other acts of resistance, sets in motion a communicative process through which *both* student and teacher are “enlarged and changed” (p. 5). Dewey helps us see how the interruption caused by opposition necessarily leads to commonly held work/action on the part of both student and educator.

A case in point is the New York Performance Standards Consortium, co-chaired by Ann Cook, principal of Urban Academy, a public high school in New York City. Deeply concerned about the validity of New York State Regents examinations as adequate preparation or “proxies” for doing college-level work, the Consortium has succeeded in enlisting the active involvement of high school students in a wide range of actions, including writing letters to the Board of Regents and the Education Committees of the Senate and Assembly; writing editorials in school and other newspapers; going to Albany to speak with legislators; assisting in the organization of and attending rallies and student boycotts of schools; and speaking with parents of school age children affected by the tests. The Consortium includes twenty-eight schools. It has been in existence since 1998, the first year Regents examinations were required.

Presently, the Consortium is involved in a longitudinal study of students who were required to meet performance assessments in their high schools and now in four-year colleges (conversation with Ann Cook, November 5, 2004). Students involved as subjects, researchers, or consumers of this research get a sound understanding of how inquiry and social activism inform one another. Also, firsthand accounts written by students themselves about how they have managed to muster the courage and to gather the support needed to express their indignation over an injustice that exists either within their immediate or extended community need to be made accessible to other students. What it means to “fight back” or take a stand needs to be made explicit, modeled, and reflected upon. The Southern Poverty Law Center has collected such stories. (See, for example, “Mix It Up Stories,” “10 Steps to Take Action,” and “Tips for Teen Organizers” at [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org).)

Student resistance as a site for dialogue does not presume acquiescence, for resistance can be self-defeating. Willis’ (1977) oft-cited study of the Lads, a working-class group of boys, comes to mind. As opposed to the Ear’oles (a derisive name bestowed upon them by the Lads), who readily submitted to and accepted a curriculum designed to assure their entry into white-collar, professional jobs, the Lads employed a range of oppositional behaviors, both symbolic and embodied, that signaled their strenuous rejection of this knowledge. In addition to truancy, among those acts observed by Willis were: “being free of class, being in class and doing no work, being in the wrong class, roaming the corridors looking for excitement, being

asleep in private” (p. 27). This behavior assured their status in menial or low-skill level jobs—the same jobs their fathers and grandfathers held—and preserved the class-bound, social, and economic order that existed. An opportunity, though, might have been missed. For the educators in this situation “saw opposition as merely an outgrowth of the Lads’ deviancy rather than as a sign of political or moral critique” (Abowitz, p. 888). For student resistance to do this, both educator and student are challenged, as Simon (in Goodman, 1992) puts it, “to understand why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way;...and to envisage versions of a world which is ‘not yet’ in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived” (p. 2).

Resistance not only has the potential to spark a deeper understanding of how power in schools works and how this power both reflects and reproduces dominant socio-political arrangements that circulate throughout our society, it also speaks to a moral-imaginative undertaking between students and educators that strives to revitalize agency—“the capacity to frame and effectively act towards one’s goals” (Schutz, 2004, p. 22)—in a world of narrow, technical interpretations of what could be. Resistance may allow educators to get a glimpse at the systematic—often silent—way human potential is diminished, thwarted, or misdirected.

Student resistance, no doubt, can be disheartening to those who keep faith in schooling as a means by which inequities can be examined, addressed and, perhaps, repaired. Lather (1991), for example, meets with firm resistance by women in her women’s study course when she introduces what she believes to be an empowering curriculum, one designed to examine and critique belief systems that support gender inequity and the women students’ subordination in a male-dominated society. And Rubin (2003), in a richly textured piece of qualitative research, writes of the struggles of two very competent, progressive public high school teachers intent on detracking their social studies class. Sam Apple, one of the teachers, takes stock of his detracking efforts:

*And so we have a bad split....I saw that right away, and it kills you to see that. It’s a heartbreaker. You like the diversity but you immediately see the White kids circling the wagons around their own, sort of like, “Oh, I hope I’m not put in a group with Tiffany.” And you see the Black kids move into defensiveness and disruptive defensiveness really quickly. And it’s the job of the year (p. 550).*

To do this kind of work well, it would seem teachers must take into consideration how new, “liberating” knowledge can be deeply disruptive to a student’s personal and social belief system; how deciding not to resist what may, in fact, lead to a fuller sense of agency can also carry with it considerable risk on the student’s part as he/she stretches into unfamiliar territory. Further, Pitt (1998) asks us to consider how “our very efforts to create learning conditions designed to empower marginalized popula-

tions can both reproduce the effects of social inequality and conceal a pedagogical will to dominate” (p. 7).

Remaining attentive to the potential of student resistance to raise important questions and to lead to purposeful, empowered action can be a complex, tricky endeavor. Perhaps, at bottom, student resistance is an act that questions whether it is still possible to hold on to familiar, taken-for-granted expectations and practices—a challenge to make what is familiar strange. Resistance, in this sense, is a recognized lack, an absence of what is not yet, of what could be. Progressive educators understand student resistance as a critical moment, a challenge taken up by some students to see if it is possible to think and be different from what one is expected to be, a necessary test of limits both institutional and personal. To value the constitutive power of transgressive acts is not to deny their potential to become self-defeating. But given the enormous stress put upon the school to regulate students through a regimen of test and curricular standardization, how educators read and respond to these acts becomes vitally important.

The current educational context might prompt progressive educators to question how much interpersonal ground is ceded to faceless regulatory systems that sort, rank, and control fundamental matters of teaching and learning. In Shank’s study (1994), for example, a fourth-grade teacher told to enforce a tightly scripted mastery learning curriculum commented, “I think they [students] become more passive in the process because it’s almost as if we are saying to them, ‘You have to sit there and just receive, receive, receive. Then on appointed days you will give it back.’” And a primary teacher talked about having to “pound the curriculum” at the expense of working on values and social skills (p. 55). One wonders, what questions arise in these teachers’ minds, given what they witness and do? What possibilities for further communication with students and with their colleagues can occur? What shared work can they imagine emerging given the lacks and regrets they speak about here?

Test and curricular standardization has effectively penetrated the full range of public school cultures—those that strive toward progressive practices and seek flexibility in meeting the needs of the students in their charge, and those that manage to hide under the blankets of “the test” as the ultimate arbiter of a school’s, educator’s, or student’s worth. The crucial difference, though, lies in the manner in which teachers read and respond to *the effects* of standardized practices upon their students, practices increasingly dictated and regulated by bodies far removed from the face-to-face encounters they themselves have with their students.

### **Building Democratic Schools**

For progressive educators, responding to student resistance is as much an ethical-political matter as it is a matter of school safety and management. Accordingly, we need to think about what it means to build and administer ethical, democratic schools. Starratt (1991) speaks about such efforts in three interdependent ways, involving an ethic of critique, an ethic of justice, and an ethic of caring.

With respect to an ethic of *critique*, educators need to ask, “Who controls? What legitimates? Who defines?”

With respect to an ethic of *justice*, educators need to ask, “How shall we govern ourselves?”

With respect to cultivating an ethic of *caring*, educators need to ask, “What do our relationships ask of us?” (p.199).

How educators attend to and value student resistance might also be framed by such a project. More specifically, here are four areas that I believe require attention and cut across Starratt’s framework for an ethical school:

### **1. Civic Education**

The palpable lack of student participation in the face of an over-determined curriculum, erases any chance of cultivating what Giroux and others call citizen or civic education.<sup>2</sup> Citizen education could serve as an important, needed means of accessing and channeling student resistance, because it takes seriously a student’s desire to participate actively in the (re)making of his/her world. Moreover, citizen education provides an alternative way of defining and assessing student achievement beyond standardized measures.

The Educational Video Center is a good example of civic education. The goals of EVC, writes Steve Goodman (2004), the executive director, are “to teach documentary production and media literacy to [high school] students while nurturing their intellectual development and civic engagement.” EVC, over more than twenty years, has worked with a range of students in the New York City public schools, including, as Goodman puts it, “some of the most hard-to-reach youth” (p. 16). Topics have included foster care, the juvenile justice system, race relations, and AIDS. One student documentary, commissioned by Bill Moyers and shown on PBS, examined equity in schools. It was also shown and distributed throughout this particular school district. It succeeded in mobilizing parents angry and concerned about the inadequate conditions of one under-resourced school.<sup>3</sup> The overarching principles of EVC speak powerfully to a way of understanding and, perhaps, reconfiguring curriculum:

*Students construct knowledge through sustained and collaborative social inquiry; students present their work as a product for a public audience with a public purpose; the process of student learning is publicly assessed through portfolio roundtables (p. 16).*

EVC has demonstrated the potential of such technology in the hands of students to open up spaces to study and to take action in the midst of relations of power, breeches of care and felt injustices. The effects of standardization—how it lives in various schools—is ripe for such an endeavor.

Another example of citizen education is the Public Achievement ([www.publicachievement.org](http://www.publicachievement.org)), based at the University of Minnesota. Children throughout the United States from elementary through high school work in teams with coaches, typically college students, or teachers “to solve public problems that are important to them” (Bass, 1995; cited in Schutz, 2001, p. 113) that exist within or beyond their schools. Boyte and Kari (1996; cited in Schutz, 2001) speak to the range of actions taken on by student teams involved in Public Achievement:

*[They] have organized high school day care centers for unwed mothers. They have created community parks in settings where adults initially gave up, in the face of skepticism by neighbors. They have created curricula and strategies for dealing with issues like racial prejudice and sexual harassment (p. 118).*

The process of engaging in this civic education begins with students telling their own story “to get in touch with experiences that make them unique” (Schutz, 2001, p. 113). Out of these stories, a student comes to know what self-interests he/she can bring to a public forum where others, too, share their own personal stories, nourishing a collective interest. A sense of both “me” and “us” as members of/in a public space emerges. In order to decide upon and enact a social action plan, activities include brainstorming, developing a mission statement, building interview skills, and learning how to employ flexible tactics as the situations change in the course of their work (Schutz, pp. 115-116).

A focus on developing media literacy in the service of fostering citizen education could play a significant role in re-imagining curriculum as a *shared* enterprise taken up by both educators and students. The media—radio, television, billboards, movies, World Wide Web, etc.—is a constant presence in the lives of most young people. It influences in tacit and explicit ways and, contributes to shaping young peoples’ views and beliefs of themselves. Educators need to probe the curricula, in both form and content, to determine if and how the everyday life and popular culture of young people as portrayed in the media might be included. Keeping youth popular culture at the margins of official school life risks fraying an already fragile, tenuous relationship between professional and student, school and community. In addition to examining the effects of mass media upon student—how it is consumed—educators could work with students to foster their active, creative engagement in developing their own voices through and with media.

## **2. Student Agency**

Fostering agency needs to be an operant, guiding principle *across the school*—an abiding concern. Docility, unexamined allegiances—the fixity and predictability of grand designs established elsewhere—are inimical to such a project. It is hard to imagine a staff of teachers nourishing agency among students who are not, them-

selves, similarly engaged. Practices such as peer selection and review of staff, teachers exercising influence over budgetary matters, peer mentoring and staff-generated staff development, collaborative planning of inter/transdisciplinary courses of study, etc., work toward building and sustaining such a school culture. International High School, a public school in New York City founded in 1985 under the leadership of Eric Nadelstern, has done powerful work in this regard. In addition to democratizing the work culture in these ways, it has published internally generated documentation about how and why they do it. International High School has been studied by outsiders and regularly entertains visitors eager to understand how this school works (Acess, 2003). Nadelstern believes there is a direct link between teacher empowerment and student achievement. Five other schools modeled on International High School have been established, and many of the teaching faculty have gone on to assume a range of leadership roles throughout the New York City public schools (conversation with Eric Nadelstern, November 12, 2004).

### **3. Conflict Management**

Clearly, conflict management/resolution is a skill all educators need to learn, value, and cultivate throughout their schools. Instituting such a program for, and with, students can be an important way for young people to practice respecting and protecting people, and to learn why such values are vital to the health and wellbeing of themselves as well as their school. At the same time, such learned strategies must not avoid recognizing student-student or student-teacher conflicts and grievances as indicative or symptomatic of wider systemic or social inequities. Conflict resolution identifies and raises for examination by the school community those rules, roles, and relationships within which conflict is embedded. Valuing posing as well as solving problems, it operates within and responds from a set of moral and political understandings.

Developing forums for these kinds of conversation to occur is crucial. At Scarsdale Alternative High School, for example, two administrators write: “At weekly Community Meetings students and teachers work together to discuss and make decisions regarding many areas of school life, including rule formation and discipline” (Klemme & Arenella, n.d.). Howard Rodstein, the current director and a Bank Street graduate, believes, “Only through developing rules and norms in response to the issues present in an individual, particular school can students learn how to fulfill their civic responsibilities. Standardization of curriculum eliminates the possibility of responding to these concerns” (conversation with Howard Rodstein, November 10, 2004). Teachers at the Scarsdale Alternative High School, he emphasized, are more than deliverers of instruction.

In Core Group, a smaller, more intimate setting with fifteen students and an advisor, students can develop trusting, personal relationships. Core provides a space for more introverted students to speak up about their concerns. Both personal and institutional issues “bubble up” in Core that may (or may not) reach the larger

Community Forum. Rodstein recalled that last year, for example, the subject of cheating was raised and discussed in Core and then brought to Community Meeting. A committee composed of both students and teachers was then established to develop a school-wide policy. This policy on cheating was then taken up in all classes and refined to suit the particular situations that exist in each room. All advisors meet individually with their advisees once every two weeks, as well. Started in 1972 and guided by the research, teaching, and direct involvement of Lawrence Kohlberg, this school explicitly identifies itself as a moral community. It lists as its first goal, “To establish a workable, democratic school governance system, a *‘just community’*” (Klemme & Arenella, n.d.).

#### **4. Communities of Inquiry**

Schools must be communities of inquiry and for ethical, pedagogical, and political reasons, they must take up the deliberate, systematic investigation of questions, concerns, and hopes generated from the perceived needs of its members. This is particularly true if teachers and administrators are to contend purposefully and productively with student resistance in its multiple forms. Teacher/administrator site-based research can capture in vivid, compelling ways the grievances, concerns, pain, and anger students express in the range of resistant actions they undertake. It can convey how power, position, and perspective exist in a school, and how they can spark student resistance. It can speak, as well, to students’ resiliency and civic courage. Kincheloe (1991), for example, makes a strong case for the teacher as researcher when he comments:

*The words of students are the core of teacher research. From this core, the teacher as researcher extracts valuable insights into the students’ cognitive levels, their pedagogical intuitions, their political predispositions, and the themes they consider urgent (p. 22).*

#### **Conclusion**

Given the troubling, disabling state of test and curricular standardization we are presently in, we educators cannot afford simply to dismiss or mitigate the multiple, varied forms of student resistance that present themselves. Through dialogue, frank exchange, and self-examination, we need to consider how, or if, eruptions or disengagements on the part of students are embedded in, and emerge out of, iniquitous, harmful conditions in need of repair. How do resisting students call on us to question our practices and to broaden the context of what we take to be meaningful teaching and learning? How might these acts be crucial opportunities to promote a student’s moral, political, and intellectual development?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In the context of this paper, I rely mostly on the term “progressive” as Rubin does in her article, Unpacking detracking: When progressive pedagogy meets students’ social worlds, *American Educational Research Journal*, Summer 2003, Vol. 40, No. 2. Progressive practices, she writes, are “learner-centered, designed to engage students in the active construction of knowledge, and intended to build on student interests” (p. 551). I would, though, supplement her definition by saying that progressive practice remains mindful of the inequities that exist in society at large, and seeks to contest their reproduction in schools.

<sup>2</sup> Giroux (1983) writes compellingly on this point of citizenship education: “In the classical Greek definition of citizenship education, a model of rationality can be recognized that is explicitly political, normative, and visionary. Within this model, education was seen as intrinsically political, designed to educate the citizen for intelligent and active participation in the civic community. Moreover, intelligence was viewed as an extension of ethics, a manifestation and demonstration of the doctrine of the good and just life” (p. 168).

<sup>3</sup> See, “Talking Back: The Portrait of a Student Documentary on School Inequity,” in *Experiencing Diversity: Toward Educational Equity*, Frank Pignatelli and Susanna Pflaum, eds., Corwin Press, Inc., 1994.

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## TEACHING MY CHILD TO RESIST IN KINDERGARTEN

**christine ferris**

As a teacher, I always had a few kids in my class who would resist the classroom norms. They didn't want to do what everyone else did. They weren't necessarily confrontational; sometimes they would quietly go about building guns out of math manipulatives or drawing comics instead of writing a book report. Other children would loudly refuse to discuss their conflicts with other children and whack them instead. When I spoke with the parents of a child who was displaying resistant behavior in my class, sometimes it would also be clear that the parents were actually supporting their child's behavior. This baffled me. Why, I wondered, would you set your child up for conflict and problems in school?

Now I don't wonder anymore. Soon after my son, Owen, started kindergarten in our area's local public school, I not only supported his resistant behavior, I began teaching him new ways to resist the classroom norms. I was setting him up for failure in that class; I was undermining the teacher's authority; and if my child were still in that class, I'd do it again.

In the first week of kindergarten, Owen came home every day with a star cut out of construction paper that was his reward for doing a good job. As a Bank Street graduate and a veteran progressive educator, I'm not enamored of extrinsic reward systems. I think they undermine children's abilities to develop their own motivation. So right away, I began to chip away at the power that this reward system might have over my child. I told him that although I was glad that he liked his star, I didn't think it was very important. Indeed, it would be okay with me if he came home one day without a star. I then asked him how he would feel if he didn't get a star. A good problem solver, he said, "It would be okay because when I get home I can cut out my own star because we have lots of colored paper."

A few weeks into the school year, when the day came that he didn't get a star, he was devastated. He told me that he had to hold his breath so the whole school wouldn't hear him crying. I hugged him and reminded him that the star didn't matter to me. I did not ask him why he hadn't gotten one. I reminded him too that we could cut out our own star at home. He was soothed by this idea and the next time he didn't get a star he proudly announced to me that he hadn't gotten a star but that he wasn't upset about it.

Owen is a very quiet and agreeable child, who never had behavior problems in preschool and is eager to help around the house. He is also creative and enjoys making his own plans. The star reward system was applied to everyone in the class, regardless of his or her normal behavior. Most of the group got stars every day. In his four months at the school, Owen failed to get a star only on a handful of days. When I went to the parent conference, the only negative thing that the teacher told me about his behavior was that sometimes during long lessons on the carpet he leaned over to one side too much. I bring this up only because I felt the reward system was particularly inappropriate for my child, as he was generally well-behaved, and the missed star only made him feel unhappy. It certainly did not impact his behavior in class.

Owen's kindergarten class completed a great volume of worksheets each day, and the teacher sent home more each week for him to do as homework. Initially, I hounded him to finish his homework, but as the pile of worksheets grew into a stack and he began to complain about how boring they were, I stopped making him do them. Besides the fact that I am a believer in hands-on, interactive learning, the worksheets were often far below his capabilities (*e.g.*, working on the numbers one to five when he can count to 100), or developmentally inappropriate (*e.g.*, requiring him to practice printing upper and lower case letters on very small-lined paper). At first I played games with Owen that reinforced the same skills as the assigned worksheets. He would turn in the writing and drawing that he had done about patterns he'd found in our house, or how he'd sorted and graphed some of his toys. The teacher sent these back without comment. Then Owen stopped completing his worksheets in class. He would turn the paper over and draw a picture or a map on the back. The teacher would send them home with a note asking him to complete it for extra homework. I would talk with him about his interesting drawing and not send it back to school. Owen also complained that he never got to work with the other children, or even talk to his classmates except at recess. I set up some play dates to help him get to know his classmates, but I also encouraged him to talk in school, especially during "independent work time," when the children were supposed to be doing worksheets in silence while the teacher met with a small reading group in the back of the class. "Just whisper," I told him. I wondered how would these children ever would learn to work together in groups.

At this point you may be wondering why, as a Bank Street graduate, I sent my child to this school. I will say that the saddest part of this story to me is that the school is reputed to be one of the best in the area. We moved to the neighborhood just so our children could go there. It has a very active PTA; music, art, and science classes; and small class size. It doesn't adhere to a scripted, phonics-based language arts curriculum, as does most of Los Angeles. Its students had high test scores, but the school also had received distinguished school awards and blue ribbon awards for involving the parent community, having peer mediation training, and having highly trained teachers.

Knowing that a great public school is not necessarily a progressive one, I had talked with an acquaintance who was a progressive educator, herself. Her sons had attended the school, and she assured me that “It is a wonderful community.” I neglected to take into account that her sons had graduated from elementary school over five years ago, and that in the intervening five years, school “reform” in California had been relentlessly pressuring all schools to focus more on testing and scripted curriculums, and less on community building, developmentally appropriate practice, and experiential learning, while simultaneously stripping away school resources. I wasn’t expecting whole language and block building, but I had expected social interaction, community building, and some art. I also expected my bright, kind, quiet son to have some fun and success in kindergarten.

Owen became increasingly uncooperative and moody at home and would sometimes hide or cry when it was time to go to school, and I became increasingly desperate to find another option for my child. I began by meeting with the principal, in hopes that we had a particularly traditional teacher and that Owen could switch to another class. I’d had a positive interaction with her in the first week of school when the school secretary told us that we couldn’t ride our bikes to school because it wasn’t allowed for kindergartners. When I explained that I, of course, rode with him, she remained adamant that it was school policy that K through second graders couldn’t ride bikes to school. In another lesson on resistance, Owen and I wrote a letter to the principal asking for an explanation of this policy, and requesting permission to ride our bikes despite the policy. The principal had agreed to meet with us both, and said that of course we could ride bikes to school. She even tried to arrange a way for us to park the bikes on campus without irritating the school secretary. I had been heartened by her direct response, and the fact that she had included Owen in the meeting. It made me think that perhaps the problems I was noticing in Owen’s class were really problems with one particular teacher, rather than the school as a whole. When I asked the principal about the possibility of Owen’s changing classes, she quickly offered to give me a tour of the school to show me some of the classrooms she felt were the most successful. We viewed room after room of children silently working alone on worksheets and walls posted with identical “artwork.” I went home and cried and started looking for alternatives: independent schools, charter schools, home-schooling—anything but this.

Owen’s final lesson in resistance came just before we pulled him out in December, when he came home with a lollipop in his backpack. I asked him where he got it and he explained that in addition to the stars, the teacher was now awarding table points for groups of kids who were the quietest, and that whichever table had the most points by the end of the week got to have candy. I asked him if the other groups got candy and he said no. I asked him if that felt fair to him and he said no. I spoke with his teacher saying I felt using candy as a reward was problematic because of the epidemic of eating disorders, childhood diabetes, and childhood

obesity. I told her that as a family we felt that candy should not be given as a reward, and that I hoped she would consider using other types of rewards. She agreed to use stickers instead, and I thought we'd resolved it.

Two weeks later, Owen came out of class crying. Everyone at his table had gotten candy and he'd gotten a very small, smiley-face sticker instead. Outraged, I took him by the hand and marched into the class demanding an explanation. Although we had been working at cross-purposes for months, the teacher and I had not had an outright confrontation before. She defended herself saying that I had wanted him to get a sticker instead of candy. I was shocked to realize that consciously or not, she had, in fact, punished my child for my "interference" by giving him such a clearly unequal reward compared with those of his peers. She then said she didn't think we should be having this conversation in front of my child. If I had cared at all at that point about upholding her authority in the eyes of my child, I would have agreed with her. Instead, I was happy to let Owen know just how wrong I thought she was.

What lessons did I, as an educator, learn from this experience? What was I teaching my child when I encouraged him to resist the cultural norms of his school and then took him out of it altogether? Wouldn't it have been a better lesson if I'd gotten involved in the PTA, or worked with the teachers to help change the school? It would have been, if I'd believed that change there was possible. The school still has an excellent reputation in the community, and most of the parents are quite happy with it. The prevailing wisdom is that because the students get high test scores, the school must be doing something right. The suburban community in which the school is located is conservative, and the school philosophy is a good match for many of the families there. It was not such a good match for our family. Instead, we have found a new public charter school with a strong progressive philosophy. We are moving again so our children can attend it. There, we can join with others who are resisting the cultural norms to create a positive and vibrant place for our children. Helping to build this new school is a much healthier way for our family to resist. But we also learned some important lessons at our first school.

I learned that it is a painful experience to be on the outside of the value system of a school. When our dissatisfaction with the school philosophy became evident, we were quietly shunned by most of the other families in the class. The teacher invited the principal to our parent-teacher conference, because, I am sure, she feared I would verbally attack her. I had become the parent I had most disliked working with as a teacher. Suddenly, I had an understanding of the position of these "difficult" parents. The school's values were so far from my values as a parent, that I could not support my child in conforming to the classroom norms without seriously compromising myself as a parent.

Surely, in every school community, whatever its underlying philosophy, there are families who find that the school does not support their family values, whether

they are conservative Christians, or African-Americans, or recent immigrants, or liberal-white-middle-class families such as my own. I cannot speak for other families about why a progressive school might feel alienating, but I do know families who have felt that when I was their child's teacher. These families would be guarded in their interactions, listen to my suggestions, and respond without committing to try any of them. And of course, they ignored the notes I sent home—the same way I had ignored my son's teacher's notes about making him complete the worksheets he had left unfinished in class. I do know that it is painful and ultimately untenable to place your child in a position where you must choose between helping your child to succeed in school and raising your child in a way that reflects your deepest-held beliefs about what is best for him or her. And I don't think any family should be stuck with that.

As an educator, I have clear ideas about what I consider to be best practice, and before becoming a parent, I advocated that all schools should be reformed to reflect my progressive educational philosophy. Now it seems much less clear to me. While I do believe that there are certain values that should never be sanctioned by the educational system—such as white supremacy, for instance—I am not as confident that my educational philosophy is appropriate for all children and their families. At the same time I realize that families may not understand the long-term ramifications of different educational practices, or even what alternatives there might be to traditional curriculums. Perhaps more opportunities for dialogue and true shared decision-making between parents and teachers would result in schools that could better support children and families. Meanwhile, as a society, we are continuing down the path of standardized testing, prescribed curricula, and less local control, resulting in a monolithic sameness in public schools. Given our country's diversity, this means that more and more families are caught in schools that don't reflect their value systems. While charter schools, independent schools, and home schooling are viable alternatives for some, many families don't have these options available. I am sure that this absence of choice is damaging for the children, the parents, the teachers, and the schools.

My own child now eagerly attends Valley Community Charter School. He has a great appreciation for the opportunities he has there to make choices, to build with blocks, to write his own stories, to play and work with other children. He knows it is a special gift to be here in a way my second child will probably take for granted. He also knows that not every adult is right, that not everyone shares our value system, that being different isn't easy, and that when you stand up for what you believe in, you don't always prevail. In the end, it wasn't part of the state-prescribed curriculum, but it was experiential learning.

## Endnotes

I want to thank Jane King and Steve Quester, members of my Bank Street conference group, for their help in writing this essay and for our continued friendship, despite the distances between us.

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*“JANE KING” graduated from Bank Street College in the early 1990’s. She taught in the School for Children for several years before moving to the Northwest. For reasons that will become obvious, “Jane” has chosen not to use actual names of people or places in this article. She was a member of Steve Schultz’s conference group during her year of student teaching. Discussions begun during that year continue to guide and inform her teaching, parenting, and acts of resistance*

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ISBN 1-932121-153