

## Creating Spaces of Resistance to Counter Belligerent Citizenship: The Context of Teachers' Work

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Sigal Ben Porath has written an interesting and thought-provoking essay, arguing that, given the role schools must play in preserving democracy, educators must deny belligerent citizenship and create spaces of resistance in public schools. While I agree with her assertion, I question whether it is reasonable to expect this and I wonder what import this has for our responsibilities as philosophers of education.

In ordinary times, schools and the teachers within them must perform a difficult dance, one that James Baldwin speaks of in his 1963 address, "A Talk to Teachers."<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, he writes, the "whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society." Schools are institutions that have been established to transmit the cultural capital that a society deems important. Schools can and do reflect the predominant ways of seeing and being. On the other hand, a primary purpose of education, according to Baldwin, is to create individuals who have "the ability to look at the world for themselves, to make their own decisions, to decide for themselves whether something is black or white, whether there is a god in heaven or not."

This dance becomes even more complex when it takes place within a society that would be democratic and which has undergone a shift to belligerent citizenship. Like any society, ours seeks to perpetuate its predominant ways of seeing and being through its schools. Shortly after September 11th, an *Education Week* reporter observed that a resurgence of patriotism was already underway in United States schools. Surveying classrooms, she reported "flag-draped auditoriums hosting student assemblies, 'God Bless America' messages bedecking hallways, and principals and speakers rallying students."<sup>2</sup> School boards dusted off policies for teaching patriotism. In Nebraska, a local school board reminded districts of a policy requiring that students be taught "the benefits and advantages of our form of government and the dangers and fallacies of Nazism, Communism, and similar ideologies."<sup>3</sup> Yet this shift threatens the ability of future citizens to develop the capacities they need for the long-term preservation of a democracy, as Ben Porath argues.

Is it reasonable to expect many teachers to be willing and able to engage in this complex and dangerous dance that Ben Porath argues teachers must perform? My more cynical side leads me to think that when the multitude makes the movement to belligerent citizenship, teachers will be swept along with them. Can we expect that teachers will hold themselves enough apart that they can make the judgment that the movement to belligerent citizenship threatens the civic education that students receive and consequently the future of democracy? Will they be able to resist the public as Ben Porath argues they must?

While teacher education may help teachers realize their moral responsibilities as educators in a democracy, I think it is reasonable to question whether it is powerful enough and its effects broad enough to help most teachers resist. I also question whether many teachers will be willing to place their careers on the line. Refusal to follow the Nebraska law, for instance, is considered grounds for dismissal.

An additional challenge exists. The current education policy context has eroded the capacity of educators to counter belligerent conceptions of citizenship and to create spaces of democratic resistance in our schools and classrooms. Over the last decade, there has been a shift in education policy and education policy discussions that has important ramifications for the classroom. Discussions about what we should or should not do in our schools are no longer framed in such a way that it is within the parameters of the discussion to object to ideology and practices that threaten the democratic mission of the public schools.

Consider, for instance, *No Child Left Behind*, the most recent reauthorization of the landmark 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act.<sup>4</sup> This policy requires that students be tested in core subject areas and that schools demonstrate, through test scores, that students are making adequate yearly progress toward achieving proficiency. Schools that do not achieve adequate yearly progress are subject to serious sanctions. This policy and discussions of this policy largely omit references to the purposes of public education. Education is about learning to read and to do math and then testing to ensure that teachers have done their jobs and all children have acquired these skills. No rationale is given for why these things are important, why other things that might go on in a student's education are important, or even why we should be committed, as a democratic society, to making sure that all students learn certain things.

Many school principals and teachers have accepted this reframing of the discussion and allowed it to shape their thinking and practices. At a recent Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting, for instance, I listened as the principal argued that snow days should be made up by lengthening the school day rather than adding additional days at the end of the year. What was the rationale for this position? Days added at the end of the school year would have no "educational value," since they would take place *after* the state's high stakes tests. In such a context, it is difficult, to say the least, for an educator to stand up to the shift to belligerent citizenship and assert that the political purposes of education in a democracy or the civic mission of public education require her to resist the anti-democratic patriotic fervor expressed by parents and the nation. Such comments are not even comprehensible within the current framework.

Policies like *No Child Left Behind* have had another chilling effect on schools. Teachers and administrators are under enormous pressure to produce the required improvements in test scores and this has led to a narrowing of the curriculum that constrains the capacity of teachers to create spaces of resistance in their classrooms.<sup>5</sup> For instance, even as the nation headed into war this past year and students practiced drills on what to do in the case of a chemical or biological attack on their neighborhoods, the principal of a middle school in the Washington D.C. area

reported that “We’re pretty much going on with our normal curriculum. We’ve got a lot of work to do with the missed snow days to get ready for the state exams.”<sup>6</sup> While students themselves were anxious to discuss the war in Iraq, teachers in northern Virginia were being told to limit class discussion of the war so that their students would not fall behind in their preparation for upcoming high stakes exams.

All of this is not to say that teachers should not take on the difficult task of resisting the movement to belligerent citizenship; it does give some indication that the task we are expecting teachers to perform is extremely challenging. I think that it also indicates that we cannot expect teachers to take it on alone. Many of us, in our professional and personal lives, have made a commitment to democratic education. In our classrooms, we work with prospective and current teachers, helping them to realize the moral role of educators in a democracy and perhaps giving them the tools of critical theory that Ben Porath mentions. Given our current situation, however, I do not think this is sufficient. Ben Porath argues that educators should assume the role of public intellectuals. I agree. But I think this indicates a moral responsibility for us as well, as philosophers of education. We can and should, if we agree with Ben Porath, work to support the ability of teachers to create spaces in their classrooms in which to resist belligerent citizenship. To do so, however, it is not sufficient to speak out solely in academic forums or to express ourselves in complex arguments and obscure language. We need to speak plainly, publicly, and, dare I say, persuasively, in PTA meetings, in letters to the editor, and in education policy forums. Just as teachers must become public intellectuals, we too must become public intellectuals.

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1. James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” in *Sources*, ed. Fred Schultz (Guilford, Conn.: Dushkin, 1998), 175.

2. Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, “Education Experts Expect Resurgence of Patriotism in Nation’s Classrooms,” *Education Week* 21, no. 4 (26 September 2001): 10.

3. Scott Bauer, “Nebraska Board of Education to Examine Policies Regarding the Teaching of Americanism,” *The Associated Press*, 5 October 2001.

4. See George W. Bush’s policy statement, “No Child Left Behind,” available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/no-child-left-behind.html>. For the full text of the law, see Public Law 107-10, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (3 January 2001), *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

5. Heather Voke, “High Stakes Accountability Strategies” *Infobrief* 31 (Washington, D.C.: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, October, 2002).

6. S. Mitra Kalita and Vikki Ortiz, “A Subject Students Can’t Ignore,” *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, 26 March 2003, Sect. B.