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# Finding Meaning in the Resistance of Preschool Children: Critical Theory Takes an Interpretive Look

Steven Schultz

*Bank Street College of Education*

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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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