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# Introduction: Rethinking Resistance in Schools

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## 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

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