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# Everyday Tactics and the Carnavalesque: New Lenses For Viewing Resistance in Preschool

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**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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