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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.)

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.² 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.³ 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), 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

¹ 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.

² 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).

³ 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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