The Politics of Education
TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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*An Introduction*

Tony Monchinski

*City University of New York*
For Ellie.
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INTRODUCTION

In the year 416 B.C.E., the island of Melos finds itself invaded by Athens. The Peloponnesian War has been raging on and off for thirty years, its cause, according to the Greek historian and general Thucydides, being “fear of the growth of the power of Athens” (1954, p. 49). Democratic Athens, head of the Delian League, has emerged as an imperial empire, crushing resistance and adding to its territorial empire.

Although nominally aligned with Athens’ rivals, Sparta and the Peloponnesian League, Melos has tried to remain neutral. Thirty ships of the Athenian navy with almost three thousand hoplites—infantrymen—and archers arrive in Melos, ostensibly to talk, but the Melians realize they’ve come for war (1954: 401). The Melians argue in favor of “fair play and just dealing,” but the Athenians aren’t buying. Instead, the Athenian delegation make them an offer they think the Melians can’t refuse: become our slaves or die.

With their destruction looming over their heads, the Melians make various appeals. Show us mercy, and Athens will win more friends. Be careful, Athenians, for the Gods will protect us. If you attack us, the Spartans will come to our aid. The Athenians dismiss the Melian appeals out of hand, writing off Melian hope as “an expensive commodity” and explaining that “the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (1954, p. 402).

The Melians refuse to surrender and the Athenian assault begins. In the end, Melos falls to Athens. Its military-aged men are executed. Its women and children forced into slavery to serve democratic Athens.

At its heart, this book in your hands concerns a very simple concept: power. Power exists. We can’t always put our finger on it, but it permeates our lives, relationships, and psyches. Some people have power, others don’t. As the Athenians in the example of the Melian dialogue spell out, those with power can do what they want to do. Yet the powerful are rarely up front with the claim that, “We’re strong enough to do whatever we want!” Instead, they offer other justifications for their actions. The Athenian destruction of Melos isn’t part of an imperialist conquest; it’s a pre-emptive strike based on the self-defence of the Athenian polis.

Athens is called out for its naked imperial ambitions and defers to history: “Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it” (1954, p. 404). What’s done is done. That’s just the way things are. There is no alternative. The Peloponnesian League’s weapons of mass destruction or whatever the Athenians feel threatened by never turn up, but in the end Sparta and her allies prevail.

Power operates in a dialectic, operating within and upon the individual. The dialectical interplay of power is between those who control the means of physical force (e.g., the police; the court system; the Athenian navy) and the means of producing wealth (e.g., capital; factories; forcing underdeveloped countries to privatize their industries; taking over territory). In our modern societies these are
INTRODUCTION

usually the same groups of people. Piven and Cloward explain that “since coercive force can be used to gain control of the means of producing wealth, and since control of wealth can be used to gain coercive force, these two sources of power tend in time to be drawn together within one ruling class” (1979, p. 1). The powerful know they are powerful and they know what they have to do to protect their power. They are acutely class conscious (Mills, 1956, p. 283).

Power is reflected in our lives and the institutions structuring them. Our education and our schooling reflects power at work. For example, an education that produces individuals who will make obedient workers reflects the power of the business class and the fulfillments of its needs. An education that teaches that the world was created in seven days by some supernatural being reflects the power of one group of people over others. When two students enjoy active sex lives, but one is considered and considers himself a playboy or player and the other is derogated as a slut, power is at work. Power plays itself out in all realms of human life. Education is but one of the terrains in which the making and contestation of power unfolds.

This is a book about the politics of education. It is concerned with the power relations at play in education. Chapter One asks us to consider what politics looks like when it is played out in education. We consider bullying as both a micro-level (student against student; boss against workers; spouse against spouse) and a macro-level phenomenon (structural inequalities such that the victims of inequality blame themselves). It introduces the concepts of critical pedagogy and challenges us to hold our assumptions about education and schooling up to these concepts. The second chapter discusses education as a form of social engineering. From Plato’s Republic to “standard” English, education reflects certain beliefs and values that are not neutral. Because education is natural and necessary, uncovering the powers behind education is essential. Chapter three delves into the content of what we teach. Kurt Vonnegut warned that “we are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be.” This chapter examines what our schools claim to cherish and shows how these ideals are or are not delivered.

Chapter four looks at the ways we teach and the politics of our methods. It shows how a banking system of education, technical controls, and multiple intelligences support neoliberal positivism. Chapter five discusses the many ways in which education undermines democracy while claiming otherwise, from an over-reliance on standardized tests to a relentless competition that pervades our schools.

The final chapter discusses the political dynamics of hope and an ethics of care. It discusses democratic virtues and makes suggestions about how we can really bring meaningful democracy to our schools and our lives.

What were the Athenian hoplites thinking as they murdered the men of Melos and took the women and children for bondage? What kind of education had these soldiers had and what role had their education played in facilitating their actions? How might the prominence of an ethic of care have changed their actions? Was care of value in their societies and their educations? Where did their standard of justice come from? Is it truly an immutable, a historical fact of life that the
powerful do what they can, or may we hope for better? By dismissing hope as a commodity who’s price is too high, what message were the Athenians sending? And should we hope, what comes next? Mustn’t we act to see our hopes realized? What kind of democracy acts the way the Athenians did? These are some of the questions this book seeks to have us mull over.
Bullying is extremely prevalent. 75% of students in American schools are bullied sometime in their elementary, middle and/or high school years (Hoover, Oliver, and Hazler, 1992). Bullying is believed to play a part in the Japanese phenomenon of hikikomori, or complete social withdrawal where young men and women isolate themselves in a room for six months or more (Jones, 2006). In Great Britain, the term “school refusal” was coined to describe the actions of students who won’t go to school due to emotional distress. Bullying is one of those things that many acknowledge has always been going on in our societies and our schools, but for the most part a blind eye was turned to it in the past.

Society teaches us that bullying is wrong. At the same time we are taught that we can’t be bullied unless we allow it, so different cultures encourage standing up to the bully, either physically by “toughening up” and “taking our licks” (i.e., getting beat up) if need be or by reporting the bully to someone (a parent, a teacher) who wields more power than the bully. The message seems to be clear: if you are being bullied, it is up to you to do something about it. If you don’t, well, you shouldn’t be surprised if you continue to be bullied. That’s only common sense, right?

This blame the victim mentality ignores the institutional context in which bullying takes place. It ignores the factors that allow bullying to occur and often even encourage its perpetuation. Instead, the individuals being bullied are looked upon as deficient, as weak, as just needing to stand up for themselves. The person doing the bullying is viewed as having something wrong with his or herself. She’s sadistic; maybe she’s abused at home. Nowadays we are encouraged to address bullying not just for the sake of the bullied, but also for the needs of the bully. Bullies are often the victims of bullying themselves. Bullying those weaker than themselves allows them to exert power and feel good about themselves in some way.

Bullying in schools is recognized as wrong. Our better natures, our caring natures, tell us that children shouldn’t feel threatened, anxious, or scared. But the phenomenon of bullying isn’t something that occurs only among school children on playgrounds. We are all aware of spouses that bully their wives or husbands; of co-workers and supervisors who do their best to make work hell for others; of parents who seemingly trade filial love for sadism.

Bullying in a general sense occurs in society when the strong use their power to attack the weak. The strong can be individuals, groups, classes or institutions, as can the weak. The attack can be physical, mental, emotional and financial. By the
CHAPTER ONE

time we’ve made it out of childhood and school, bullying has usually evolved beyond mere brute force and the imposition of one’s physical will on another. Yet bullying continues, even if it is not recognized as such.

Education is a constant scene of bullying. Problems in society are often attributed to failures in a culture’s educational system. When a country’s economy lags behind its neighbors, when crime or some other social ill is widespread, when student test scores aren’t as high as we are told they should be, causes are sought. The causes usually defy simple answers, but the bullying mentality seeks out simple solutions amongst weaker scapegoats. Thus when education comes under fire the usual victims are the teachers (not intelligent enough or adequately qualified to teach their subjects; on top of which they’re overpaid, untouchable, and complacent because of their unions) and/or students (again, not intelligent enough; complacent when they should be complaisant; they don’t adequately appreciate the value of an education).

This book isn’t an attempt to get students, teachers and schools off the hook. Individuals are responsible for their actions, and to try and excuse the actions of individual schools, students, teachers or administrators does no one justice. Individual agency is, however, often proscribed by institutional factors. For example, when a student cheats on an exam because he needs a good grade, we feel he’s done something wrong. When teachers and administrators tamper with standardized test scores, we also recognize that a wrong doing has occurred (Winerip, 2006c). But why don’t we recognize as flawed systemic relations where so much rides on the outcomes of exams? Why aren’t we morally outraged as these relationships encourage individuals to do whatever they can get away with to get higher grades? The aim of this book is, in large part, to critically examine the institutional attributes that make some things possible in education and other things not; that encourage some behaviors but quash others.

POLITICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION

This is a book about political issues in education. In a country like the United States a good deal of people are apathetic when it comes to politics. The word political conjures up something boring and esoteric, maybe something we think we should care more about but don’t. Mention political issues in education and undoubtedly a collective groan will go up from many folk.

What are some political issues in education? Saudi Arabia’s public school curriculum promotes religious intolerance, teaching fifth graders that it’s “forbidden for a Muslim to be a loyal friend to someone who does not believe in God and his prophet, or someone who fights the religion of Islam” (Fattah, 2006). Chilean high school students go on strike, walking out of classes and occupying their schools, demanding smaller classes, the elimination of college entrance exam fees and government financing to reduce inequality between the poor and rich (Rohter, 2006). In France, children of blue-collar workers make up 2% of the student body in the grandes ecoles, the “great schools” from which many of the country’s leaders graduate (Smith, 2005). In Nebraska, a black state senator
champions a law that would re-segregate Omaha’s public schools with black students attending black schools with black staffs, white children white schools with white staffs and Hispanic kids Hispanic schools with Hispanic staffs (Dillon, 2006c). In New York State, the State University of New York (SUNY) system, which is 80% white, is funded at $10,677 per student by that state’s legislature; the City University of New York (CUNY), of which 70% of students are non-white, is funded to the tune of $5,046 per student (Siegel, 2006).

Although the above-mentioned are international and national issues in education, some of which may have little real impact in your day to day life, consider some local political issues in education. An American school district discontinues its holiday wreath-selling fundraiser; the school superintendent doesn’t want to risk his district’s appearing to ignore the separation of church and state his liberal industrialized country cherishes and enforces by law. Teachers gather at a silent rally outside their district’s administrative building one morning before work to show solidarity during contract negotiations that are dragging on with no end in sight; parents dropping their kids off at school that morning yell out their support — “What can I do to help?” — or opposition — “Get back to work!” — I have witnessed both of these events in my school district.

These are also political issues in education. But they’re potentially very boring issues if you’re not a student or teacher in one of the above schools, or if you’re not a taxpayer or parent in the district or the state. This is because surface issues like these are often of little interest to people who have successfully made it through school and might not have school-aged children.

There are, however, deeper issues, five-hundred pound gorilla issues that go seemingly unnoticed, or, if noticed, uncommented on and taken for granted. Consider a first year middle school teacher who embraces a scripted DISTAR reading program as freeing her up from having to prep another class. Consider the teacher who allows students to call him by his first name and isn’t averse to answering appropriate personal questions that kids just love to ask so long as time permits. Consider the teacher who rewards her students’ hard work and effort with decent grades, but then questions her grading practices when her students go on to score miserably on state mandated exams. Consider the school staff member who feels awkward when her colleagues stand up every second period to accompany the vice principal over the public address system in the daily recitation of the pledge of allegiance, but she doesn’t. Consider the teacher who prepares lessons he knows his students are going to find boring, but what can he do? These are all prosaic things that go on in classrooms, and they are all political issues in education.

Education is inherently political. Joe Kincheloe (2004) notes “that every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces.” “There can be no educational practice that is not directed toward a certain objective, which does not involve a certain dream, an idea of utopia,” explains Freire, “The direction of educational practice explains its political nature” (1996, p. 127). Whether we see it or not, whether we agree that it is or not, education always is political, always has been, and always will be. Aldous Huxley was of the opinion that “Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.”