

Educational Resistance in a Runaway World: Poetic meditations on power and surveillance
La résistance pédagogique dans un monde sans balises : méditations poétiques sur le pouvoir et la surveillance

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Article abstract

It is becoming clear that standard, linear solutions to the problems of resistant children are problematic because they imagine a world of schooling in which place and power do not matter. Poetry can challenge the typically linear, prescriptive, and modernist assumptions that are central to much educational theory and practice. In this article, drawing on original poetry composed in and around schools, I analyze a series of reflective disruptions in the interplay of strategy and tactics in my own teaching career. The broad argument of this paper is that educators ought to recognize, promote and embrace the messiness and complexity of our work rather than retreat into simplifications and technical fixes.

EDUCATIONAL RESISTANCE IN A RUNAWAY WORLD: POETIC MEDITATIONS ON POWER AND SURVEILLANCE

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ABSTRACT. It is becoming clear that standard, linear solutions to the problems of resistant children are problematic because they imagine a world of schooling in which place and power do not matter. Poetry can challenge the typically linear, prescriptive, and modernist assumptions that are central to much educational theory and practice. In this article, drawing on original poetry composed in and around schools, I analyze a series of reflective disruptions in the interplay of strategy and tactics in my own teaching career. The broad argument of this paper is that educators ought to recognize, promote and embrace the messiness and complexity of our work rather than retreat into simplifications and technical fixes.

LA RÉSISTANCE PÉDAGOGIQUE DANS UN MONDE SANS BALISES : MÉDITATIONS POÉTIQUES SUR LE POUVOIR ET LA SURVEILLANCE

RÉSUMÉ. Il semble de plus en plus évident que les solutions standard et linéaires aux problèmes des enfants résistants sont problématiques puisqu'elles supposent un environnement éducatif dans lequel la place et le pouvoir n'ont pas d'importance. La poésie peut remettre en question les hypothèses linéaires, normatives et modernistes typiques qui sont au centre de la plupart des théories et pratiques pédagogiques. Dans cet article, j'analyse une série de perturbations liées à la réflexion dans l'influence réciproque de la stratégie et des tactiques de ma propre carrière en enseignement, en puisant dans une poésie originale composée dans le cadre d'activités scolaires et parascolaires. Dans l'ensemble, cet article soutient que les éducateurs devraient reconnaître, promouvoir et accepter le désordre et la complexité de notre travail, plutôt que de se complaire dans des simplifications et des correctifs techniques.

Introduction

In this essay I present a series of five poems which serve as a linked meditation on the persistent problems of resistance and control in schools. This work attempts to offer a more or less open-ended and unresolved look at resistance and control from a poststructural perspective. The inevitability of both power and resistance seem to me to create an ongoing play of forces that challenge and at the same time animate educational sites. As power is increasingly coded in terms of high stakes documentation, surveillance, and data collection, the pedagogical act tends to be removed from its human moorings and placed in a technical-rational and clinical framework. The focus in these statistical analyses and their associated clinical diagnoses, and the technical engagement they often prescribe is some form of resolution which is defined as a lesson learned, an outcome achieved, and a data point recorded.

By contrast, everyday practice in schools defies clarity, simplicity, and quantifiability because it is founded on messy human relationships and the immediacy of practical logic (Bourdieu, 1990). Resolutions are at best partial and always temporary. Learning occurs, but often in unpredictable ways. Students make what they will of teachers' lessons and teachers make what they will of students' agency. Thus, life in schools goes on, a rhizomatic network of learning which can be described as an interplay of strategy and tactics. This persistent and inevitable dance of power, situated in changing pedagogical and curricular frames, serves as the backdrop for this analysis. As data I use poems constructed out of critical moments drawn from a 20-year public school teaching career to illustrate the irresolvable play of power which is at the heart of authentic pedagogical engagements. By documenting these sorts of complex human engagements I wish to suggest that poetry can provide a way of both illustrating uncertainty and understanding tensions inherent in the complex human interaction which characterizes all educational exchanges.

I begin with an analysis of the ubiquity of power in specific locations of educational engagement. Drawing on poststructural concepts of power and resistance, I analyze a poem that describes an incident in which a child is being disciplined and isolated from peers in an administrative office in an elementary school. From here the second poem attempts to draw out the implications of a poststructural view of power at the level of institutional and professional practices which locate the resistant child (like the one introduced in the first poem) into a pathological dreamscape. The third poem addresses the formalization of the dreamscape in measurement practices which tend to both mimic and reflect measurable economic inequality. The fourth poem addresses the space between marginal home places and school using the image of children falling into cracks between the data-fixated institutional dreamscape and concrete experience in a particular kind of community. The poem wonders where and what is "between the cracks"? The final poem returns to the

ultimate insolubility of the sort of problems raised in a poststructural analysis of power. This ambivalent conclusion, however, does nothing to diminish the necessity of going on anyhow as best we can.

In the office of the vice-principal: A resistant child

Schools, like all sites of social engagement, are spaces of negotiation. One of the most important contributions of poststructural thought from Foucault and onward is the seminal idea that power is not exercised in a one-way flow from those who possess it to those who do not. Part of the problem of schooling is the ongoing dilemma of securing active, productive compliance from children and youth. The growing field of childhood studies has begun to explore questions and trouble established and unified conceptual constructions like “childhood” (Buckingham, 2000) and “adolescence” (Lesko, 2001) arguing that they circumscribe the experience of the young within questionable biological and psychological assumptions. As a result, the complexities of power and context tend to be subordinated in the mainstream of the field of child studies to questions of biological or neurological causation. Adolescents, for instance, are constructed as impetuous and difficult to manage because of their teenage brains.

Current studies of childhood have highlighted the importance of place, space and context (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Aitken, 2001; Thomson, 2002; Katz, 2002). Rather than being a “moratorium” space, (employing Lesko’s [2001] reworking of Erik Erikson’s [1968] classic formulation) where nothing significant is supposed to happen, and where the good adolescent simply waits to be “allowed to” experience adult pleasures, recent studies illustrate the diversity of experience differently “placed” young people enact. The complicated and allegedly ineducable “urban/rural” child (Popkewitz, 1998) reflects the damaged physical and social geography that produced him/her. This damaged child is evaluated and set up against the absent present of the “real child” whose life, behaviour, demeanour, and school performance reflect normal developmental expectations which themselves serve as code for the cultural practices of privileged social groups. Beneath all of this is the problem of power and the nostalgic view that childhood is a unified space that exists outside social relations of power.

In the *Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel deCerteau (1984) counterpoised two dynamics that he saw animating the negotiation of power in everyday life. On one side is strategy and on the other, tactics. Those in positions of institutional authority attempt to exercise power by developing strategies of control aimed at achieving certain kinds of predefined outcomes. Facing these strategies and the strategists who deploy them are those who resist and who develop tactics in the face of strategic incursions. Tacticians are never powerless; on the contrary, their exercise of agency is precisely what animates and shapes the

work of strategists. DeCerteau understood power as a complex negotiation of strategy and tactics. There are no spaces outside power, no safe foundations upon which we can place the child.

Power is never complete, it never finishes its job. Instead, these multiple dynamic encounters of strategy and tactics represent an endless negotiation for space and place. Furthermore, the positions from which various agents negotiate can shift as compromises are worked out in the practice of everyday life. For instance, the classic interaction of preschool boys and their female teacher documented by Valerie Walkerdine (1990) demonstrates how at any moment the strategic power position of “teacher” can be challenged by allegedly powerless four-year-old male students who have already learned strategies of their own for dominating women. Walkerdine shows how even in the preschool, power cannot be understood simply as the exercise of control by the powerful (teacher/man) over the powerless (student/woman).

The history of education can be seen as a junkyard of failed attempts to keep up with the social dynamics that motivate youth and that animate communities (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). At the level of policy and norms of professional practice, institutional players in the command posts of state and system administration attempt to control and articulate educational practice with emerging economic, social, and political conditions. In the process, this macrostrategy encounters the macro-tactics generated in diverse micro-communities where the liberalized markets of fast/disaster capitalism (Agger, 1989; Klein, 2007), consumerism, and choice (Bauman, 2004) incessantly generate evolving models of selfhood and everyday practice that confound the most ambitious attempts of educationalists and sociologists to map what is going on. Education, like most social processes, is in an important sense fundamentally out of control in what Giddens calls the “runaway world” (1999).

If the “one best system” (Tyack, 1974) was ever a sensible dream, it certainly is not today. Education presents the kind of problems that are never solved once and for all. Rather, the everyday give-and-take of complex negotiations (that operates from the level of the most mundane playground interchange, to the level of school league tables and school choice markets, to the level of the politics and legislative dreams of the international accountability movement) mark the always uncertain dynamics of power. The anarchy outside school illustrated by the runaway proliferation of literacies and spaces on the internet (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, etc.) confronts the ever-increasing technical-rational attempts to achieve particular policy strategies (e.g., No Child Left Behind [NCLB]). It is my own sense that attempting to solve complex educational problems through the application of generic technical language, strategies, programs, and teacher training (both pre- and post-service) is a foundational problem in education that typically propels us toward self-generative language games of programmatic reform. That these technical programs generally fail

to achieve their ends is part of an ongoing power game in which populations of teachers and students are unendingly formed and reformed in discourse. It is said that “every child can learn.” Yet, continuous failure and keeping the game in motion are as much a part of contemporary educational discourse as solving educational problems. Like other forms of consumerism and commodification, the production of waste (Bauman, 2004) and failure provide fresh opportunities for the production of an ongoing proliferation of new educational products and knowledge.

On the working surface of this space of educational knowledge production, youth in diverse communities meet the strategy represented by educational policy and curriculum, and indeed, by teachers themselves. These classroom working surfaces contain multiple poetic interchanges. In his recent work of popular biography, former teacher Frank McCourt (2005) describes a process of coming to understand that effective teaching in a working class neighborhood is best understood as an engagement with resistance and key tactical moves like forging excuse notes. McCourt found poetry in his students’ tactics. In this way he engaged his students in their own poetic negotiations for space and power. I wish to make the argument here, using creative pieces that focus on power in schools, that poetry might also serve as a vehicle for understanding chronic resistance in schools. At the very least poetry can help us act more thoughtfully, survive, and perhaps even laugh. I also want to argue that playful, probing, poetic engagements in educational contexts can both count as research and can strengthen teachers and sensitize us to the contextual complexities and ambiguities that give life to work in schools. As Leggo (2005) points out, poetry is one way to live well in a postmodern world where nothing is any longer simple and where our techniques and solutions are always haunted by a fundamental ambivalence generated, ironically, not by ignorance, but by knowledge. As Anthony Giddens puts it:

Interestingly, some of these uncertainties come from the very sources that were supposed to make the world predictable. If you look, for example, at the role of science and technology from our vantage point, this far on in the development of modernity, no one would argue that science and technology simply make the world in a linear sense more predictable. Science and technology introduce uncertainties which no one has had to face before, often unintended ones. If you consider the debate over global warming, for example, it is a debate precisely about the impact of science and technology on the natural world. The global warming debate is riven with uncertainties: is global warming a reality, what will it do to the world, how should we respond? Once you penetrate this phenomenon you find that even science itself is much closer to uncertainty than we used to imagine. (1999)

Recent calls for a data-driven or evidence-based educational science are but the latest manifestations of this technical-rational discourse in education (Lather, 2003; Clegg, 2005). This burgeoning educational science notwithstanding, problems only seem to deepen. I suggest that part of the dilemma is the way

in which data and analysis are understood within the narrow forms of social science research that seek to emulate practices in the natural sciences. In the United States, the power to generate authoritative evidence and credible educational research has shifted away from qualitative and critical analysis toward quantitative work that emulates the classic double-blind experiment. In the process, complex human problems are reduced to variables to be operationalized and hypotheses to be tested. Ordinary players' visceral, qualitative sense of what is going on is also pushed to the side and essentially treated as extraneous and confounding. Alternatively, I argue, core educational problems are best addressed through complex judgment, multiple lenses and, I argue here, problematic (and inevitably poetic) hands-on human engagement in real educational sites where established categories (like teacher, principal, specialist, professor, and student) are challenged, negotiated, shaped, and reshaped anew.

This first poem is an attempt to capture the dynamics of negotiation between a vice-principal and a highly resistant six-year-old. In the interchange, the boy shifts a strategic question posed by the vice-principal (a question designed to help the boy achieve an appropriate reflective and penitent perspective on the self) to a spatial question. The boy transforms the question of "why" to a question of "where" and he shifts the lens of ethical responsibility for his incarceration around on the vice-principal. The child's spatial inversion grounds the interchange in the embodied experience of his physical containment and removal from the playground rather than the anticipated penitence and interiorization of the problem. In other words, the child refuses to become docile, introspective, and to locate the problem within himself choosing rather to focus on how the principal physically removed him from his proper place, re-placing him in the office. As such he positions himself as a power strategist in much the same way that the principal does with him.

Your cheese and salami sandwich

*You're not allowed to stray far today
Because you struck two children this morning
Following a pattern you've developed this year
So you sit quietly in the principal's office
Dissecting your cheese and salami sandwich
With delicate, six year-old intensity
And crooked, white fingers*

*And when you're asked why
You say you don't know where you are
And suddenly
You turn and say, "I'll tell"
And in a measured, clear voice announce
That you will call the police*

*And the principal will wind up in jail
For the way he picked you up
And brought you here
In an unceremonious and rude fashion*

*A small bead of snot runs from your nose
And falls on the sandwich
While you continue your legal argument
With a wide-eyed passion,
Idiosyncratic reason,
A thorough knowledge of your rights,
And a thorough blindness to
Your wrongs*

*When you have made your case
You return to your gastronomic project
And pick a thin fragment of salami
Between your fingers
Dangle it in the air above your head
And drop it into your open mouth
Never taking your eyes off
The school principal
Who dares not take his eyes
Off you*

Mapping the resistant child in discourse

This resistant child refuses being positioned as a wrong-doer. He refuses to assume the posture of the reflective, penitent, bad child who might be trusted to re-enter life in school, and he is becoming increasingly common. He now carries labels and diagnoses. Professionals specialize in his condition and generate knowledge about him and others like him. What are the methods and techniques to solve this level of mundane problem once and for all? Can such children be repositioned as receptive moral subjects whose world-view and sense of their own agency and selfhood articulates minimally with the intentions of those in authority? This is the negotiation played out in multiple settings in contemporary schools. In the television show *The Simpsons*, Principal Skinner and Bart Simpson are positioned in a similar way as strategy meets tactics. Usually tactics win out. The game is never finished by any final strategic checkmate. If it were, the television program would become predictable and uninteresting. The point is to keep the game in motion.

Keeping the game in motion creates something for everyone to do. Keeping the game in motion forces the system to expand to meet the mounting challenges of emerging spaces in which established order and forms of domination and subordination have broken down. It is important I think to remember that in negotiated spaces, novel tactical forms emerge with regularity, only to be

mapped, assessed, and treated by new strategic knowledges about emerging tactical forms. Monitoring and assessment systems emerge to generate quantifiable (and ultimately “reifiable”) data. Professional specialists keep generating new knowledge about the populations created by the definition of problems. But the illusive balance is never achieved and the strategies of those interested in control engage in an endless dance with the tactics of those who resist being controlled. But of course, these do not exist. In my view, the strongest educators realize that professional judgment is all about learning to read children, classrooms, schools, communities, and curricula which are a creative poesis. In teacher education, the most difficult lesson to teach is that to succeed as a teacher one must figure out how to respond creatively in emerging tactical engagements. Classroom management and discipline are art forms which involve open-ended, creative strategizing.

The next poem was written in the late 1990s when I was struggling as a teacher to keep up with the growing list of syndromes and disabilities deployed to explain and treat bad behaviour and low academic achievement in identified or diagnosed “populations.” As a teacher, I wondered about the entrepreneurial side of all of this and the way that the persistent problems of schooling were increasingly corralled within the specialized discourses of clinical experts whose knowledge lies not in the concrete geography of classrooms and communities, but in a deep theoretical understanding of norms of development, behaviour and deportment, cognitive functioning, mental health, psychoeducational assessment instruments, or other generic features of the equally generic idea of childhood. In these discourses, the teacher, the intimate knowledge of the individual child, and the specifics of family, neighborhood, and community were positioned as subsidiary and second class knowledge. In the runaway world, it comes as no surprise that teachers (especially beginning teachers) look for guidance from the experts. In the process, the creative poetics of teacher judgment tends to be subordinated to programmatic pedagogies, curricula based upon pre-formulated outcomes, standard assessments, and clinical judgments of the child expert.

Dream Children is a poem that takes up these themes.

Dream children

*When human scientists dream
Monsters assemble in distant hollows
And terror reigns.
With great care, instruments are assembled
In obscure closets in the dusty corners
Of scientific laboratories.
And placed in the eager hands of brave clinicians
Who sally forth
And put these tools to work.*

Soon bunches of dangerous and deviant beasts,
Are dragged writhing into the light
Huddled together cursing, spitting and striking out,
Spawn of dangerous families
Hidden in dogshit neighborhoods
Behind a patina of fast-food grease, alcohol and misery.

Slowly words are made flesh;
Alas, they take differentiated shape
And lo', specialized battalions are conjured.
Like vampires to roam the earth
Sucking data from the human form
Only to resurrect the emptied husk
Through the magic of
A specialized curriculum,
A tiny a pill,
A phonetic drill that rewires the brain.

Measuring children: Thinking differently

Educational sociologists typically argue that teachers and researchers encounter differently positioned children whose academic achievement and behaviour are best understood through the lens of social analysis. Educational problems are generated in their most extreme and persistent forms by social conditions that inhibit individuals from reaching their educational and human potential (Berliner, 2005). A couple of recent meta-analytical pieces have reinforced this for me (Sirin, 2005; Berliner, 2005). The powerful connection between standardized test scores and SES was illustrated recently in a meta-analysis of some 74 studies (1990-2000) published in the *Review of Educational Research* (Sirin, 2005). The ostensible finding of this analysis is that the strength of the influence of SES on educational achievement shows a "slight decrease in average correlation" (Sirin, 2005, p. 417). The trouble is that among the 74 studies, researchers looked at a wide range of measures of SES, and even wider range of achievement measures (state achievement tests, teacher grades, criterion referenced tests, aptitude tests, etc.), and a number of different age/grade level groups ranging from children in kindergarten to the twelfth grade, and a range of different community types (rural/urban, ethnic composition, etc.).

The influence of SES on achievement in these studies ranges from negligible to profound, with most of those studies in the profound category occurring with older children, and particularly those studies conducted in high schools. The other trend I observe is that the relationship tends to be strongest in those studies that use standardized tests as the benchmark of academic achievement. Sirin's data suggest that a high school student's standardized test scores are predictable using standard measures of SES. These tests are instruments of sorting and selecting of winners from losers with largely unsurprising results.

As I have written elsewhere, their results can be reasonably well predicted by postal code on the basis of income level (Corbett, 2006). They are instruments of power. They measure and mark the distribution of cultural capital in the social body. They certify the deficiencies of the poor and the working class as though they were objective measures of a process that is fundamentally fair.¹ They claim to show “the public” what it was unable to see before. This is constructed as accountability.

It is well established that standardized tests measure more than objective academic achievement. These tests also tend to measure parental wealth and education (Berliner, 2005; Riordan, 2004). I am also interested in the way that the measurement of learning through massive testing, data-gathering, and reporting represent an advanced stage of commodification and reactivity (Espeland & Sauder, 2007) in which the construction of education as quantifiable production and consumption supports a broader acquisitive consumer mentality. In other words, young people are taught to gather scores and credentials in a self-involved and detached way that is similar to the collection of other commodities in what Zygmunt Bauman (2004) and Chet Bowers (2000, 2003) describe as an environmentally destructive culture of waste.

These worlds of commodity fetishism and consumer dreams are indeed experienced by many young people as the real world, whether or not they are in a position to live as full participants in a hyper-real consumer culture (Baudrillard, 1988; Giroux, 1999; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997). Here I use the poem *On Accountability* to dream my way into another educational world outside current accountability frames.

On Accountability

*I propose this for the public schools
In the name of accountability:
The ecological footprint curriculum
In which we teach children how to reduce the size
Of their environmental shoes
Where we hold children and teachers to account by
Constructing ways of measuring the size of a child's ecological footprint
Rewarding those children who have the smallest feet
And those schools that produce small-footed children
Who walk lightest upon the earth
Who consume the least.
And who contribute the most to the sustainability of the planet.*

*Surely this will delight all Christian peoples
(Didn't Jesus speak of the poor inheriting the Kingdom?)
And the rich struggling like big-footed camels through the eye of a needle)
Yes the poor would get their reward, not in heaven, but in school*

*Tiny-footed peasant and beggar children
Would become the learned ones
Who know what needs to be known
As though by nature, without schooling
We would call then "bright" and certify their advantage.
Our leaders would lament the incorrigibility of the
Children of the rich with their large ungainly feet
Who fail utterly
At the hands of negligent parents who
Showered them with useless trinkets, rapidly transformed into waste
Dooming them to failure in the ecological footprint school*

*The liberals might assign remedial programs to teach
Big-footed children to better themselves
(They might call the programs: No Child Left Ahead)
And some few of them may even rise above their station
To live sensible, decent, sustainable lives;
Thus, our accountability scheme, our schools and our curriculum
Would contribute directly
To actively addressing the ecological crisis
Education and life would blend seamlessly together
And the numbers we generate about student performance
Will finally represent something important.*

The resistant child falls between the cracks

*There are cracks in everything;
That's how the light gets in. (Leonard Cohen)*

A second meta-analytic piece was written by David Berliner based on his presidential address to the American Educational Research Association and published in the *Teacher's College Record* (2005). In this essay, Berliner argues that the persistence and growth of poverty in specific and identifiable communities in the United States explains the bulk of the differences in educational performance. The core materials for Berliner's piece are hard data, but his presentation is humorous, hard-hitting, relentlessly critical, and I would argue poetic. Berliner invokes the image of the 600 pound gorilla sitting in the middle of educational thought, research and, ultimately, the classroom and it is a beast that we have sadly misunderstood or more commonly, ignored. The gorilla is poverty. The gorilla is social class and its influence on educational outcomes.

This is a classic Marxist argument that essentially recapitulates 1970s reproduction theory. Despite widespread and well-known criticisms of the arguments of reproduction theory, the essential power of the claim that social class privilege is mirrored by differentials in educational performance continues to be supported by the literature. The grand irony of programs like NCLB, and the strong move

toward high stakes standardized testing in most Western educational jurisdictions, is that there is considerable evidence that these tests actually legitimize and certify social class advantage. So while NCLB is ostensibly designed to name and shame underperforming schools and either improve or close them, the program may produce a very different set of actual outcomes. Schools seem to improve by jettisoning underperforming students (and by cheating [Levitt & Dubner, 2005, pp. 19-39]). The only people who are “shamed” in the process are those youth who abandon school. So pedagogical practices solidify and become more narrowly focused on the achievement of standardized outcomes. The economically marginal simply tend to leave school. They “fall through the cracks,” it is often said. But what is between the cracks?

A number of qualitatively-oriented educational researchers have tried to answer this question, notably Lois Weis (2004), Annette Lareau (2003); Pierre Bourdieu (1984); Mike Rose (2004); Shirley Brice Heath (1986); Deborah Hicks (2002); Corbett (2007); and Paul Willis (1977). Their analysis takes us out of the school and into the lives of people whose family traditions in institutions of formal education typically involve educational failure and falling through the cracks. These ethnographic analyses introduce young people for whom protracted education is not part of family and community traditions and who hang on precariously in school at the best of times. These researchers show us how educational failure effectively places working class and poor youth into working class and poor communities. There is more going on here than the reproduction of a mechanism for the production of capital: between the cracks we find the complexity of culture, the ubiquity of what Bourdieu calls “the likes of us,” the pedagogical power of available adult communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and the seductive power of desire (Kelly, 1997). The following poem peeks between the cracks.

Cracks

*“I’m afraid Billy (it’s almost always a boy)
Is falling between the cracks.”
Falling where?
For years we have tightened
The mesh in the grate
Meant to catch him and to recover him from himself.
Yet from beneath
Life seems to rip and claw
And when it hauls him through that crack,
Life won’t let go and his ears and mouth fill
With full-blooded wine and salty meat
Then Billy is beyond us and can not hear us cry
Stay in school!*

Standing at a safe clinical distance
I have seen many children fall through cracks in school
I have seen where they fall.
It is not cold there
I have observed no one to die.
These lost children
Fall into kitchens smelling
Of laundry soap, coffee, cigarettes, and orality
Whose walls resonate
Sounds of care, scheming, conflict and country music
The sound of a fist on flesh and of furtive copulation.
They fall onto factory floors, boat decks
Into call centres, fast-food outlets
And behind shopping plaza cash registers

They fall among grown men and women who welcome them
Speaking in their mother tongue
Who teach them how to be grown-up
Whose pedagogy
Assumes the ambivalent form of strength and pain.
Between the cracks, the time-tested learning tools are
Money, myth, sex, drugs, cigarettes, contraceptive advice
And the knowledge is welcome and learned in nuance and detail
For between the cracks there is no irrelevance
Every lesson has its purpose

Between the cracks
There are families who need members,
There are babies glimmering in fiery eyes,
There are owners looking for hands
Where exploitation puts on the cloak of freedom
Addiction mimics pleasure
And where slavery masquerades as desire.
In the long schoolroom hours
The mind wanders to those familiar faces
Whose failure seems heroic and liberating
Whose faces gaze out from deep behind the blackboard
Beckoning

In this poem I am trying to illustrate the importance of understanding context. The cracks through which children fall are social cracks, they are holes in the bounded vision of middle-class reality represented by the school.

The resistant child comes home

By zooming in to ground zero, to the strip of salami dangling above a child's snotty nose, we can see possibilities, we can see complexity, we can see decision, we can see rage, we can see redemption or at least we can yearn for it.

Reducing this incident to a data point, a report about one child's behaviour, to be analyzed, mapped, and categorized, it is my sense that we are more likely to see a technical problem to be solved rather than a child to be understood. Nearly two decades ago, Frank Smith (1983) wrote that education backed the wrong horse by choosing psychology as its foundational discipline. He recommended anthropology for the job because he understands learning as something that happens fundamentally in cultural spaces rather than in the psychometrically mapped territory of the individual head.

The interaction between the strategy of the state, the intentions of teachers, and the desires of children represents the broad space of negotiation in which power is played out by actors who deploy resources and identities in multifarious ways. The sociological regularities I have sketched here using the work of Sirin and Berliner, and by alluding to the work of the qualitative sociologists of education, seems to continue to paint a picture of education as an iron cage of social class reproduction. Yet, there is always room for negotiation and for creative resistance to the predefined futures encoded culturally in Bourdieu's (1984) *habitus*, in Bernstein's codes (1990), or structurally in Althusser's (1971) ideological state apparatus, or in (Bowles & Gintis' 1976) reproduction. The poetic act is one way to problematize the desires of predictability against the backdrop of the challenge of teaching a school-resistant child to read, the 600 pound gorilla that poverty represents, the rich life between the cracks, the complex disciplinary interchange with the salami and cheese boy,² and all of the other nuances that get obscured when a child is reduced to a data point.

Resistant children refuse to be reduced in this way. Many of them are uninterested and incapable of becoming what we want them to be. They won't fit. They force us to continue to dream them into therapeutic boxes. Like some poems, they challenge the equally fictitious policy narratives that imagine and privilege the ideal-type normal child built out of the messy multiplicity of real children, all the while holding up the two-dimensional regression-line child who never wrote the test, yet whose score is the most important of all. In the face of surveillance, the accountability craze (O'Neil, 2002), network society with its multiple information technologies, the globalization of capitalism, the restructuring of the state, the human face (Levinas, 1997), and identity (Giddens, 1991; Castells, 2004), a pervasive foundational ambivalence (Bauman, 1991) looms in the background haunting contemporary efforts to manage risk and exercise social control. Educational sites are rife with the tensions such transformations introduce.

This final poem recounts and problematizes one of my own personal dreams, raises questions about power and knowledge, and at the same time instantiates an example of what I consider to be my own learning. Educational engagements, like all of our most profound human engagements, often involve loss, despair, and chronic trouble that simply cannot be fixed. What we must

do is go on, improvising as well as we can, with as much integrity as we can muster, and living as poetically as we dare (as Leggo suggests) in a complicated and problematic runaway world (Giddens, 1999). Learning to live and to see poetically comes both from failure and from success, from pain and from pleasure. This poetry offers no answers except to say that these are the things I had to write in my own struggle to survive. In life, in power, and in poetry our challenges persist like the snow in a Canadian winter, notwithstanding normalizing dreams.

Snow removal

*He was the local fire chief
When it was still a volunteer service
And by the time I managed to get my galoshes on
He was finishing up,
Gathering loose bits of snow from the
Flat surface of his paved driveway
Stopping briefly to appraise perfectly carved walls
Carefully cut cubes piled into mountains,
Before he brushed snow from his coveralls
And disappeared into his warm kitchen*

*I was left to gawk
At the wide vehicle path and
The narrow tunnel walkway to his garage entrance
Smooth and clean as alabaster walls.
Bob was an artist;
Bob cared about the aesthetics
Of a task I loathed and avoided
Until my mother booted me outside*

*When Bob got a snow scoop
And moved enormous mounds of snow
Into piles beside the driveway
I wanted one too, and I was sure
I understood Bob's secret: the right tools.
When my father brought home
A heavy, galvanized tin scoop
I learned that such a large amount of snow
Took a large amount of energy
And strength to move
Too much for me
Eventually I moved on,
Grew strong and for a time
Made my living with a shovel
Moving gravel with a gang of men
Whose job it was to repair railway track.*

*In time I finished university
Bought a home, had children, a car
And my own driveway and path*

*I started, like Bob,
With a long-handled shovel
But soon graduated
To the same galvanized metal scoop
I watched him push with apparent ease
And indeed, that's what I did too
Because finally, like Bob,
I am able.
And I too care about the quality
Of this menial job
I want straight snow walls and wide paths
In my neighborhood, I am Bob
The first guy out to clear the snow
And seize control of nature*

*In time, Bob's wife developed a disease
That robbed her of her mind
And one of my own children has had
A similar diagnosis;
In the end neither of us were in control
Despite our efforts.
The last time I saw Bob
He was helping his wife Claudia
Climb very slowly into their car;
"She's not too good"
My mother said as we passed by.*

*And today shovelling my driveway
I thought of what I learned from Bob,
From this man I barely knew as a child
Who in my recollection
Never spoke more than a dozen words to me.
Yet Bob Gouthreau taught the man
That grew out of that tired and grumpy adolescent boy
Through the poetry of his work
About care and hope,
About doing a job well for its own sake
Even if the work is as relentless, frustrating and chronic
As dealing with a wife with Alzheimer's
A child with schizophrenia
Or the inevitable onslaught of snow
In a northern winter.*

NOTES

1. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) called this veiled yet disingenuous process, “symbolic violence” because of the way cultural and social dispositions rooted in a child’s (social) class position become the raw material for academic sorting and selection.
2. Which I am happy to report is being resolved more or less successfully by caring educators on the basis of human judgment more than programmatic, technical intervention.

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