RESISTANCE AS A COMPONENT OF EDUCATOR PROFESSIONALISM

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The critical resistance to normalization stems from the sense that normalization has spread too far in our lives, and is blocking many other viable forms of life.…

the point of critique is to enhance the lives and the possibilities of individuals, to allow them the space to try to create themselves as works of art.

David Couzens Hoy, Critical Resistance

In this essay I look to varied conceptions of resistance with the aim of explaining how resistance might most helpfully be incorporated into a notion of educator professionalism. I contend that high-stakes accountability policy poses a complicated set of power relations for professional educators. In another essay, I focus specifically on the ways in which high-stakes accountability policy has led to normalizing disciplinary practices that are problematic for the constitution of subjects. Both students and educators are problematic as constituted subjects, but I am here most interested in teachers’ positions in multiple relations of power as adults in positions to discipline and be disciplined, to resist and be resisted.

The challenges to educator professionalism are many, and some have argued rather forcefully that the profession of teaching lacks key characteristics attributable to professions, such as codes of ethics and autonomy. I am hopefully sidestepping that debate for now, although eventually the results of this project may include something to say about moving teaching more toward professionalism, in perhaps ways different from the credentialing approaches we have seen typically in movements such as tightening accreditation standards for teacher education.

It is my contention that it is our role as professional educators to prepare teachers, administrators, and other school personnel for resistance to normalization, and that the task has several fronts, including what David Couzzen Hoy distinguishes as social resistance and ethical resistance. For now, my focus is on resistance to the normalizing technologies authorized by high-stakes accountability policy, not only the legally mandated procedures, such as sanctions for low-performing schools and graduation tests and preferences granted to experimental research and direct instruction curricular methods. Also significant are the exercises of power in various sites states, school districts, schools, and classrooms that persons make in response to policy. Well-documented is a “manure pile” of effects that reflect decisions curriculum narrowing, teaching to the test, scuttling recess, test
cheating made for tangled reasons. These ancillary exercises of power effect a reversal of power of the technology of the examination, predictable through the work of Michel Foucault and further normalizing and disciplinary, reaching to the point of self-discipline, self-surveillance, and redeployment of spectacle.4

I propose the following as a brief list of specific problematics that a conception of resistance would need to address. I am drawing here from personal conversations with teachers and administrators and from extant literature on the phenomenon of high-stakes accountability: (a) establishing relations with parents that enable collaboration toward treating students as ends; (b) conceptualizing teacher practice as continually developing; (c) planning curricula wherein goals are substantively rational; (d) treating students as ends; (e) creating new educative spaces; (f) responding to and dialoguing with questionable decisions made above, below, and beside them; (g) developing enough institutional awareness to know what fights are worth being fought; (h) cultivating politically savvy educational leaders; (i) expanding comfort with the central importance of resistance and expanding notions of what counts as resistance; and (j) articulating a relation between professional judgment and scientific authority. The list is by no means exhaustive, but the breadth of concerns mentioned here suggests the extent to which high-stakes accountability complicates the professional roles of educators and compromises their opportunities to exercise professional judgment.

I do believe that such resistance is possible, owing to the theoretical consideration herein that resistance is always present in relations of power (and as Hoy argues, power is dependent upon the possibility of resistance). I currently work with teachers and administrators who exercise resistance in ways described in (a) through (j) above, but at the same time, there are others who cannot. My current concern is the struggle to figure out ways in which to tie their notion of professionalism to a complex understanding of resistance and to cultivate resistance among more of them, among more educators, and among a greater number of other members of school communities.

When I first presented this idea to a class of doctoral students, several practitioners in K-12 and higher education expressed concern with (and resistance to) the term “resistance,” which suggested to many of them that I was advocating them to be uncooperative in their work settings. One student put it concisely by saying she saw herself in what I was advocating as resistance (she is by every appearance a sophisticated and successful operator in her institution’s politics), but she rejected the word “resistance.” It was clear to me that more work needed to be done to trouble commonsense notions of resistance if this idea was going to work, because I would suggest that we cannot speak of professionalism in education without having a fundamental role for resistance. It is also possible that renaming is called for, at least for particular audiences.
In relations of power such as the ones we are observing in schools subject to high-stakes accountability, one must at least theoretically consider what Foucault’s notion of resistance provides as an alternative. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, many have. Briefly, Michalinos Zembylas demonstrates how educators may reclaim emotional discourses to reconstitute their experiences of being normalized (the effort is difficult and seems to require the assistance of critical others).\(^5\) Frank Pignatelli argues for the importance of particular kinds of educational sites, such as small schools, for dealing with problematic power relations.\(^6\) Justen Infinito advocates disrupting pedagogical strategies for promoting ethical “self formation.”\(^7\)

Foucault himself wrote very little about resistance and even less about resistance in educational practice, and so Foucault scholarship has taken resistance on as a project. For this essay, I turn in particular to a formulation of “critical resistance” by Hoy, who considers Foucault and other critical and poststructural theorists in a new frame he calls post-critique. Hoy provides multiple ways for imagining aspects of resistance that might be responsive to the domination and normalization associated with high-stakes accountability. Hoy is particularly concerned that resistance not be conceptualized as entirely reactive, for instance, and like the educational philosophers using Foucault’s work to theorize resistance, Hoy is concerned that a notion of resistance be clear on action. Along with Hoy, I wish to argue that we are called to attend to an ethical resistance as well as social/political resistance. What I want us to build toward is a robust notion of accountability-as-responsibility, grounded in ethical resistance.

**Resistance in Pedagogy**

I start by revisiting some older work by Henry Giroux, who was one of the first educational theorists to be concerned explicitly with using postmodern notions of power relations to augment the modernist project of critical pedagogy.\(^8\) He and Maxine Greene lay out the regulative ideals for a project of resistance for professional educators.\(^9\) In their work, they imagine emancipatory roles for educators while taking seriously the limitations and challenges that power relations present for enacting them.

In an essay where Giroux first elaborates his notion of border pedagogy, he explains his desire for a critical project that combines the most useful aspects of modernism and postmodernism:

> We need to combine the modernist emphasis on the capacity of individuals to use critical reason to address the issue of public life with a postmodernist concern with how we might experience agency in a world constituted in differences unsupported by transcendent phenomena or metaphysical guarantees.\(^10\)

Here Giroux expresses well the tensions that any theorist faces when he or she takes seriously the limitations of theoretical concepts such as critical
consciousness. Giroux specifically addresses resistance in a chapter co-written with Peter McLaren, in which they propose counterhegemony as an alternative to resistance. With this concept, Giroux and McLaren aim to maintain the notion of critique inherent in the concept of resistance, but more than that, to effect “new social relations and public spaces that embody alternative forms of experience and struggle.” At this point in their work, they are less specific about the characteristics of these new relations and experiences, but in a sense they are drawing from poststructural theorists, such as Foucault, who posit a subject as being constituted through power relations, both in terms of domination and emancipation. The 1988 essay captures a tenuous and tentative alliance with emerging social theory, more fully articulated in Giroux’s 1991 article.

Together, these pieces can be taken as the articulation of desired attributes of a critical postmodern resistance for educational practice. The framing is as border pedagogy, an evolution of critical pedagogy, taking seriously a series of critiques about its limitations as an enacted practice. Giroux wants to take account of desire, differential power relations between various identity groups, and the paralyzing inertia associated with mere critique. Giroux sets out a bold and ambitious set of desired states of affairs, arising from his basis in the philosophy of Paulo Freire, for cultivating humanity, respecting human unfinishedness, and promoting critical consciousness. The ultimate service is not to Freire’s notion of humanity or to Greene’s term—a dialectic of freedom—but to radical democracy, drawing mostly from Chantal Mouffe for its definition. At this point in Giroux’s work, it seems that the notion of resistance Giroux proposes is ultimately self-critical, for throughout his work he wishes to avoid the dangers of reinscribing domination, not only in practices he mentions but also in his own formulations. I read Giroux here as an idealist in this sense, vigilant to a “greater danger” of which Foucault speaks.

In the drive for idealistic self-critique, Giroux at this point does not yet reconfigure himself in relation to the modernist elements that he wishes to maintain. The value of the work is in the ambitious goals he lays out for redefining, rethinking, and reimagining concepts, relations, and practices. The detail work remains to be done, however (and indeed, that’s what Giroux calls us to do). On the road to radical democracy are significant iterative steps. What I mean by that is exemplified in the following passage, wherein Giroux imagines how Foucault’s notion of countermemory might be put to use in border pedagogy:

it is imperative for critical educators to develop a discourse of countermemory, not as an essentialist and closed narrative, but as part of a utopian project that recognizes “the composite, heterogeneous, open, and ultimately indeterminate character of the democratic tradition.” The pedagogical issue here is the need to
articulate difference as part of the construction of a new type of subject, which would be both multiple and democratic.\footnote{13}

Unclear in this rationale for using countermemory is articulation of what he means by a subject being multiple and “democratic.” It seems to me that Giroux is advocating a notion of self-constitution through engagement with difference. Democracy seems imprecise here, although it may be that the innovative possibilities are in figuring out what a democratic self would look like. I would argue that Giroux has provided a fundamentally more radical notion of subject constitution here, which, at least in this quotation and in many other places in his work is embedded in his concern with democracy. For most other theorists, notions of agency, the subject, or the self hold that place. I suspect it is because Giroux’s emphasis is on political/social resistance, particularly in the form of social movements. In that sense, we miss a crucial piece in Giroux’s formulation.

Green provides a contrast. Writing at about the same time, Greene takes a different approach. She is similarly concerned with a project of naming the limits on freedom of educational reform that began brewing in the 1980s, and which, if we follow the trail laid out by the contributors to Kenneth Sirotnik’s collection of essays on accountability, can be seen to culminate in the high-stakes accountability movement and the No Child Left Behind legislation.\footnote{14} Greene points to the growing subjection of public schooling:

The language of contemporary schooling…emphasizes something quite different….unable to perceive themselves in interpretive relation to it, the young (like their elders) are all too likely to remain immersed in the taken-for-granted and the everyday.\footnote{15}

Greene imagines something quite different as an aim for schooling—\textit{the} pursuit of freedom—\textit{and} her formulation of freedom draws on Freire’s notion of human unfinishedness and Foucault’s (and others’) notions of the constitution of the subject and the significance of possibility.\footnote{16} From Freire, she takes the notion of humans as subjects as opposed to objects, as “men and women in the striving toward their own ‘completion’—a striving that can never end.” Greene’s conception of freedom comes through when she posits it as follows: “We might, for the moment, think of it as a distinctive way of orienting the self to the possible, of overcoming the determinate, of transcending or moving beyond in the full awareness that such overcoming can never be complete.” But she also suggests that self-creation is co-extensive with the search for freedom, when she says that “It is, actually, in the process of effecting transformations that the human self is created and re-created.”\footnote{17} With this definition of freedom, Greene captures the hopes of what Hoy calls a post-critical resistance.

Greene addresses a few specific roles of teachers in this conception of freedom, suggesting a number of features that represent exercises of freedom. I
take these up later also and mention them now as a way to begin thinking about what resistance might look like in a professional educator. One fundamental insight is the role that engagement in communities of difference plays in imagining responses to obstacles. She is also concerned that promoting freedom in students is rather impossible if the teacher is not likewise engaged in his or her own project of freedom. And without citing Emmanuel Levinas (as Hoy does), she is concerned for the sense of responsibility for the other that comes with true freedom, drawing from Thomas Jefferson the sense in which freedom is dependent upon collaboration and mutual concern.

**Foucaultian Resistance**

In light of the theories of Foucault, it is important to see the ways in which one’s own practice is enmeshed in power relations, that one’s actions are exercises of power. As Hoy says, in summarizing Foucault, “Power can be productive if it opens up new possibilities, but it turns into domination if its function becomes entirely the negative one of shrinking and restricting possibilities” (CR, 66).

A group of authors is considered to frame a more directly Foucauldian notion of resistance in regard to human freedom. Educational such as Gert Biesta, Infinito, James Marshall, Pignatelli, Sharon Welch, and Zembylas have articulated a Foucauldian notion of resistance for social action and educational praxis. These theorists take on Foucault’s notion of the care of the self, a poststructural project of the constitution of the self, as a manner in which the subject resists subjugation. Pignatelli wonders what form of agency is left for actors subject to the normalizing power of public schools. In another essay, I argue for two projects of the constitution of the self vigilance against subjugation through critical reflection and intersubjective social engagement. There are many other examples also.

As Hoy explains, Foucault also saw his methodological project of genealogy as a form of resistance, for through genealogy, the subject may be open to possibilities otherwise unavailable. Through a genealogical project, “We will not be able to go back to the past or to step out of our culture entirely, but we may be able to find the resources in ourselves to save ourselves from the destructive tendencies that the contrast reveals” (CR, 63). Genealogy, in other words, helps the subject to be vigilant against subjugation.

Similarly to Greene, Foucault is interested in ways in which a subject may be able to see possibilities that technologies of normalization would otherwise foreclose. Disciplined selves are complicit in their own subjugation when as modern subjects they comply with the procedures of self-discipline and the comparison of one’s traits to social norms. Teachers and administrators find themselves in multiple relations of power in this formulation. They are both normalized and normalizing, due to the constraints placed upon them, but also their positions in relation to students and each other. The need is crucial,
therefore, for educators to be able to see themselves in these rather complicated relations of power and the ways in which they may be complicit with subjugation.

For Foucault, resistance is ever present, for power relations cannot exist without it. As Hoy explains, if it were not for the potential of resistance, there would be no need for the exercise of power. Domination is in essence an attempt to exercise restraint upon resistance. In a school context, a restrictive or prescriptive curriculum, for example, subjugates to the extent that it obviates alternatives. A test regimen subjugates because it leads to restricting possibilities.

Resistance emerges from critique, with Foucault placing genealogy in a prime place for exposing the historicity of normalizing practices. While Hoy seems to suggest that only genealogy leads to critique, it is clear to me that in school settings, partial critiques emerge that are just as significant for resistance. Without elaborate genealogical understandings of the progression of the technology of the examination, for example, educators can clearly launch critiques of the normalizing practices that arise in response to high-stakes accountability. Educators can tap into other possibilities; through philosophies of education and other discourses, such as those surrounding instruction in the arts, educators are daily able to identify strategies of resistance to normalization.

This resistance may fall short, and indeed it is falling short on a daily basis. What Hoy terms as social/political resistance amounts to the marshaling of resources and institutions to change oppressive social relations. Foucault’s notion of resistance provides essential theoretical support for this form of resistance. In regard to professional practice, we need something more than moments of individual actions. We need instead something like a stance, a set of habits that places an educator in a position of constant vigilance against normalization. Hoy speaks of this by engaging Foucault and Judith Butler on the cultivation of virtue: “If Foucault’s idea of connecting the critical attitude to virtue is to reinforce the idea of practice, virtue in general would then be the result of constant attention to the habits that would build the critical attitude more deeply into our conduct” (CR, 96). Giroux’s underlying notion of self-critique is particularly relevant here, but Hoy also helps us here by drawing attention to what critique means for self-creation: “the point of critique is to enhance the lives and the possibilities of individuals, to allow them the space to try to create themselves as works of art” (CR, 92).

Staying focused now on this notion of constant vigilance, Hoy is helpful for addressing the limit work that critique necessitates:

For Foucault, the force of critique is that the encounter with one’s limits dissolves one’s background belief that there are no other ways to experience the phenomena in question. Insofar as the dissolution of this background belief amounts to dissolving
fundamental beliefs about oneself, it opens up other possibilities and reshapes one’s sense of what can be done. Critique is thus a crucial condition of freedom. (CR, 92)

Unpacking this excerpt now, we can see essential elements of the critical stance we want: the awareness of possibilities we have already identified, the challenge to one’s background beliefs, a different but related aspect of self-critique, and the “sense of what can be done,” implying the articulation of possible actions. We also see with these elements a reconnection to Greene and her notion of freedom.

Hoy explores an example that comes from Butler’s engagement with Foucault. As Hoy explains it, Butler speaks of how the subject is at once limited and enacted by domination. She suggests that owning one’s domination, redefining it, enables the subject to resist. Hoy’s summary of her point: “Only by accepting, occupying, and taking over the injurious term, says Butler, ‘can I resist and oppose it, recasting the power that constitutes me as the power I oppose’” (CR, 98).  

This reinforces the utility of having educators engage their very subjection, naming the terms of their subjection and redefining them. This resistance might be imagined quite literally as redefining key terms, such as “accountability,” a project Sirotnik undertakes by attempting to redefine and expand it as “responsibility accountability.” More so, the terms of one’s subjection should come under scrutiny. Hoy sums up what he means by that:

Virtue in general, then, would be the practice of risking one’s deformation as a subject by resistance not to the constraining principles per se, but to one’s attachment to them insofar as they constitute one’s identity. (CR, 100)

Unfortunately, as Giroux and Greene noted many years ago, educators are underprepared to negotiate their roles in the inadequate and unequal situations in which they find themselves. Teachers lack the key features of self-constitution deemed essential for the creation of humane and freedom-forming educational practices. Taking just the three considerations Greene mentions, we can see first that teachers lack experience engaging in communities of difference. Getting those experiences, even prior to teacher education programs, seems important; Gloria Ladson-Billings describes situations in which teacher education students who already come into their programs with experiences working with diverse communities are readily able to put those experiences to work toward greater collaboration with communities of students and parents who are different from them.

Second, as Greene notes, the teacher who is engaged in his or her own project of freedom is the teacher most likely to encourage the same in a student. As Foucault notes, the care of the self, as a project of self-constitution, relies greatly on the modeling and mentoring of care of the self. Conditions that
reflect centralized control of curriculum in order to meet expectations of high-stakes accountability systems work against this. Exercises of power that center control for curriculum and instruction in state legislatures or district offices do little to promote the educator’s modeling of freedom.

Third, Greene is concerned with the ways in which her notion of freedom implies responsibility for the other. To engage the failings in this aspect of self-constitution in public schools, we need to turn to Hoy’s notion of ethical resistance.

**Ethical Resistance**

I would argue that it is more difficult for educators to conceptualize what Hoy terms as ethical resistance. Particularly problematic for the context of high-stakes accountability are the changing relations between teachers and students and between teachers and parents. Biesta characterizes these changing relations as economic, pointing out through the use of Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of responsibility an ironically decreasing notion of public responsibility for universal education in the enactment of high-stakes accountability. Sirotnik similarly notes shifting patterns of responsibility for equitable public education away from the public and onto scapegoats. Sandra Mathison and Melissa Freeman note the ethical dilemmas faced by elementary teachers in their struggles regarding test preparation. In their study, teachers chose rote methods over educational practices they preferred (and believed to be more educational valuable) to protect students from the consequences of doing poorly on standardized tests.

Not all educators see such situations as ethical dilemmas, of course. However, I would argue that the impulse to think of such situations as ethical provides a promising starting point for cultivating resistance. Hoy turns to Levinas and Jacques Derrida for his discussion of ethical resistance as a way of establishing a nonfoundational basis for ethics. Ontologically prior is the ethical obligation placed upon us by the other, according to Levinas. As Hoy states, “For Levinas ethics is most primordially involved in the encounter with the face of the other” (CR, 152). Ethical resistance, for Levinas, is the inescapable resistance exerted by the completely powerless, the face of which never dies, amounting to “perhaps paradoxically the most powerful form that resistance can take” (CR, 16).

What I take Hoy to mean by this is that the ontological connection between the self and other, characterized by one’s awareness via the face of “the other as like the self but different from the self” as a primordial condition, provides a pull of some sort from the other not to be dominated (CR, 152). Resistance is somewhat like a plea from the other that cannot go answered. Hoy explains it this way:

Instead, resistance is experienced as a summons from the other precisely not to do violence to the other. Resistance is thus
fundamentally ethical, and *ethical* resistance is primordially non-violent: “the ’resistance’ of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical.”

He further goes on to depict the approach to the other that is relevant to resistance: “Contrary to Hegel, I do not first feel myself threatened when I confront the other; instead, I realize that I threaten the other and that the other is my fundamental responsibility” (*CR*, 182).

Understood this way, ethical resistance as a component of teacher professionalism is not so much about how teachers are subjected in structures of domination, but the ways in which their practices with students subjugate students’ ethical resistance. Called for then is a rather fundamental notion of professional ethics, a fundamental turn to the relation of the self and other that addresses the potential for threat and violence between the self and the other.

Hoy positions Levinas as believing that ethical resistance is a necessary precondition of social resistance. “Why would power be exerted in the name of social emancipation, the Levinasian might well ask, if this exercise of power were not at the same time a recognition of the obligation to the powerless” (*CR*, 182)? Hoy makes the further point that while these ethical obligations are fundamental, they are also unenforceable and therefore the province of the ethical. As he says, “Obligations that were enforced would, by virtue of the force behind them, not be freely undertaken and would not be in the realm of the ethical” (*CR*, 185).

**A Tentative Conclusion**

With this formulation, Hoy provides me with exactly the rationale I need to frame educator professionalism, for he lays out the necessity for both social resistance and ethical resistance. I can imagine promoting social resistance through providing students with genealogical or quasi-genealogical accounts of high-stakes accountability policy that expose the foreclosed possibilities. Further, I can provide students with experiences of collaboration and communication across difference, which provide them practice with self-constitution not just within themselves but in communities that provide connection.

Imagining what we may do to promote ethical resistance is a more challenging task, particularly since philosophy of education has become increasingly marginalized in the preparation of teachers, educational administrators, and other school personnel. The study of ethics is too often geared toward the expectations and standards of professional associations, who have a much different sense of obligation than Hoy draws from Levinas. As Hoy advocates, ethical resistance is a fundamental component of resistance, and as I have argued, it is therefore a crucial component in the resistance to normalization wrought by the phenomenon of high-stakes accountability.
For teacher education students, my best attempt would be to connect to their impulses for wanting to teach, taking advantage of their missionary zeal to develop a sense of appreciation for the power dynamics built into that zeal and helping to question how they are conceptualizing the other in that dynamic. Incorporating this work into field experiences, as Ladson-Billings demonstrates, would be essential to cultivating ethical resistance as an orientation toward the other.29 In this way, I have a chance to help them see their work as something like a Foucauldian project of self-constitution, wherein they improve themselves as selves through their interaction with others.

For graduate students already with experience in education, I can more easily tap into their notions that their profession has shortchanged them on enactments of their ethics. For them, the task is similar to my own Greene’s call to “reawaken the consciousness of possibility.”30 Here actually is where I believe we have our best work to do, because we have in our colleagues who are graduate students in school leadership and other relevant fields bodies willing to imagine a subject position for themselves that fosters ethical resistance not only in themselves, but their colleagues and students. They have come to this point because of the startlingly overreaching exercises of power that make them partners in the domination of students. They largely know that their work has been made unsustainable ethically, and they are eager to see the possibilities that have been foreclosed. Hoy suggests that genealogy and deconstruction are the methods for making this happen. And I suggest that even a little of that enough to give them a sense of how they might constitute themselves differently as ethical subjects and resistant professionals will go a long way.

NOTES

1. David Couzens Hoy, Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004). This work will be cited in the text as CR for all subsequent references.


22. Hoy quotes here from Butler’s The Psychic Life of Power.


29. Ladson-Billings, *Crossing Over to Canaan*.