

Resisting the Neoliberal Ambush of Public Education

A Review of *Educational Courage*

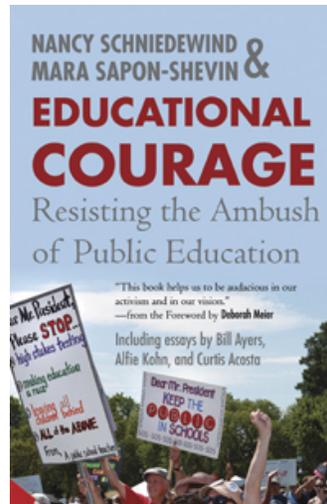
by Nancy Schniedewind and Mara Sapon-Shevin

Review by Brandy S. Wilson

NEOLIBERAL ATTACKS ON PUBLIC EDUCATION have eliminated the concept of the public good by transforming test scores into the proxy for learning, teaching, and growth; demonizing the collective voice of teachers; and handing over public interests to be privately managed. These efforts have been seductively nestled in the education-as-marketplace metaphor. Although illuminating and critiquing these issues are imperative, offering possibilities and tools for educators, students, families, scholars, and policymakers to respond to the serious and detrimental flaws in our current system is also crucial.

In *Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education*, Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin assemble¹ the voices and stories of students, parents, educators, education scholars, administrators, and other stakeholders who successfully and meaningfully resist the neoliberal ambush of public education, individually and collectively, privately and publicly. Indeed, Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin avow that the “book is a chronicle of courage, hope, and inspiration. It offers the voices of those who are resisting legislation, policies, and practices that are inconsistent with a democratic vision of education and society,” a vision that centers a “meaningful, challenging, and equitable education for all students” (p. xxi). The major threat to the democratic vision of education and society, they argue, are educational policies that have become undergirded and driven by market concerns (i.e., merit pay, high-stakes testing, and private corporate and mayoral control), ultimately leading to the privatization of public education. The goal of *Educational Courage*, then, is to share the voices of those who resist top-down agendas and demonstrate the potential for public education.

The book is divided into four parts. In “Is This What We Call ‘Education?’” Schniedewind offers a brief history of the ambush on public education since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, including the current Race to the Top initiative, and the ill effects of misguided federal legislation on education’s stakeholders. Subsequent to Schniedewind’s brief history, the voices of a teacher



and a parent illuminate the detrimental consequences of current educational policies on children and teachers.

“I Won’t Be a Part of This!” represents the stories of those who have resisted the ambush of public education in the form of resignation, organization, and writing op-ed pieces. A particularly powerful chapter in this section of the book captures the injurious effects of standardized testing from the perspectives of students with disabilities. Though this chapter might better round out the first part, the editors consider the students’ act of writing as a refusal of the current system, thus a fit for this second section of the book. Kohn’s chapter is timely as he resists the

commonly touted claim that the new solution for school reform—Common Core Standards—is not reflective of anyone’s individual beliefs and, therefore, is objective. Thus, Kohn points to policymakers’ flawed notion that education can and should be neutral. In addition to these chapters, this section includes other stories of resistance such as an education professor’s eleven-year-old son who publicly refused to take his state-mandated test, a teacher who resigned from a charter school gone corporate, and two educators who built a powerful partnership around their refusal to comply with mandates of NCLB and ultimately walked away with their values intact. While these stories are powerful examples to inspire many others to refuse the ambush of public education, we must also consider the various positions of privilege that allowed these resisters to reject the current system. How might children of parents with low-status jobs and with positions of little power

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negotiate their resistance? What about educators who do not have the privilege of walking away from oppressive structures with their values intact?

“Resisting by ‘Working in the Cracks,’” the book’s third part, may answer these questions, as this section describes how educators create space for meaningful teaching and learning in the current system despite the testing and accountability frenzy. The writers in this section illuminate ways in which they center social justice and relevant curricula in their classrooms. Davidson describes how she infuses social justice into mathematics curricula. To be sure, Davidson’s chapter is an important counterpoint to many educators’ claims that social justice perspectives are not relevant to math and science. In the next chapter, Klonsky, an eleventh-grade English teacher in a low-income, predominantly Latino school in Brooklyn, details her process of including a writing curriculum about the war in Iraq in preparation for the state exit exam. She offers a rich and detailed account of her students’ desire to learn more about the war and of the justifications for her decisions while developing the lesson. Klonsky’s thorough account is meaningful for educators who desire to incorporate creative, cross-disciplinary, and socially just perspectives into their teaching.

In the book’s fourth and final part, “Not My Voice Alone,” the stories of students, parents, educators, and members of the community illustrate how these stakeholders have envisioned and fought for a different kind of public education through organized, collective, and public forms of resistance. For example, in one chapter, Coleman and Mayorga reflect upon their involvement with New York Collective of Radical Educators and their collaboration with colleagues to resist the city’s proposal for teacher merit pay based on student test scores. Other stories of resistance in this part of the book include teachers’ refusal to administer standardized testing; one coalition’s struggle against mayoral control in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; parent collaboration to resist neoliberal policies; and other voices of activism. Ayers brings the section to a close with a reminder that hopefulness “holds out the possibility of change” (p. 194), that education is not about winners and losers, and that life in a democratic society is powered by the reciprocal development between individuals and society.

In addition to reading the stories they assembled for the book, Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin encourage readers to visit the *Educational Courage* website for further stories and voices of resisters. And they invite readers to consider their own stories and accounts of resistance to promote change. They state, “We believe that, despite the grave threat to public education today, we can collectively turn the tide. We hope the vision in this book will encourage you to hold on to hope and join with others to reclaim public education for the public good” (p. xix). Taken as a whole, the book called to my attention my own resistance and activism and led me to the iterative question: Am I practicing what I preach? In other words, the marginalization of my critical social justice teaching and scholarship, by existing market-based education policies and practices, can be so lonely and demoralizing, it is sometimes tempting to forego the fight. Yet I continue to encourage and guide future teachers in the development of critical

perspectives in hopes that they will become empowered to act as agents of change. It was my engagement with *Educational Courage*, then, that reinvigorated the self-reflection necessary for me to re-realize that I can and should do more to model the resistance and activism that I attempt to inculcate in my students.

I believe that *Educational Courage* can and will reach a wide audience and may be particularly valuable for education majors to gain perspective on ways to simultaneously work within and resist the system. Importantly, however, it might behoove teacher-educators to supplement the book with readings and other teachings to provide students with a foundation of the critiques of neoliberalism, as the book falls short in its explanation. An additional critique, in general, is that *Educational Courage* fails to address how the most marginalized and vulnerable students have been affected by the neoliberal ambush of public education. Certainly, testing mania produces detrimental consequences for all students, but students of Color², students facing economic hardship, and those living in poverty face unique and more difficult challenges in the current market-driven system (i.e., the shift of already limited educational resources toward test prep materials; the loss of the arts, music, and recess; and deepening racial and socioeconomic segregation). The connectedness of neoliberal education policies with neoliberal economic and social policies that perpetuate inequitable and inhumane treatment of society’s most vulnerable should not go unexamined in a book intended to resist “legislation, policies, and practices that are inconsistent with a democratic vision of education and society” (p. xxi).

Despite this limitation, I believe that *Educational Courage* offers invaluable insight and hope. Several of the chapter authors offer powerful suggestions to resist the neoliberal ambush relative to their stake in the current system. Editors might have enriched their suggestions for activism by offering readers a culmination of ideas in the postscript. In addition, the postscript might have been an appropriate place for editors to offer readers advice on how to determine well-intentioned, but incomplete, reform movements, as well as movements or reform programs that, while cloaked in common-sensical language, perpetuate the ambush of public education.

Meier, in the foreword, states, “We desperately need democratic schools. Democracy was invented as a form of accountability. By listening to and valuing every voice, we make it much more likely that we are paying attention to what’s really happening and are being responsible to those with whom we interact” (p. x). Meier refers to the stakeholders’ stories in this book as “alternative data” or “real data” that evidences the detriments of current educational policies for students, teachers, and the educational system. Additionally, *Educational Courage* contributes stories of possibility and educational transformation, stories insightful for my own and others’ teaching and hopefully for my students’ developing pedagogies.

References

Schniedewind, N. & Sapon-Shevin, M. (2012) *Educational courage: Resisting the ambush of public education*. Beacon, MA: Beacon.

Notes

1. Though APA guidelines direct authors to use past tense or present perfect tense to describe earlier research, I believe that the use of present tense is more powerful when referencing ideas and theories that remain relevant to the issue at hand. Further, present tense encourages us (as readers, educators, and scholars) to think about the ways in which prior research and scholarship continue to play a role in the current system.

2. The organization of society under Eurocentric racial ideologies produces a racial binary that conflates a wide range of

diverse groups of people into two groups—European Americans/Whites and people of Color. Because the consequences of this racial binary privilege Whites, people of Color (as a group) often share experiences of racism and oppression. It is because of this binary and the shared experience of oppression for people who are often categorized into one group that I capitalize “Color,” just as one would capitalize White or Black (or possibly Brown) to identify individuals and groups.