

Critical Dialogue, Securitization Rhetoric, and Affirming Teaching: A Philosophical Exploration

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IN ANOTHER LIFE, I was a high school teacher in Baltimore City. I say another life because, even though it was not so long ago in years, it belonged to a different time with regards to the expectations of students and teachers in the context of education. I taught in the age of standards, but not the implementation of No Child Left Behind. I taught before standardized testing dominated the educational landscape. I taught before fear subsumed teaching. I did not teach before high expectations for students. I did not teach before audacious goals for learning. I did not teach for mediocrity.

While I was teaching, I also coached policy debate, an activity where participants present two different arguments on the same topic, the affirmative and the negative, exploring both sides of an argument in a way that discourages dogmatism and encourages critical thinking (Author, 2012). This experience with debate offered me the opportunity to observe a setting where dialogue became a space of expansion rather than limitation, where some (although by no means all) participants identified this as an activity where they learned to think more broadly. In the context of debate, discussion and dialogue became the space of analysis and exploration of divergent ideas.

Although debate is an example of a place where dialogue expands and unfolds in front of us, it is not the only place. The Jewish religion conveys the same perspective through the idea of midrash, supplements to the Torah that explains concepts that are not made explicit in the scriptures, "filling in the gaps in the narrative text" (Boyarin, 1995, p.130). In a sense, the midrash offer a way of layering interpretation of a text in order to come to many understandings rather than one truth. Expansive understandings are not seen as divisive, but rather as a sign that thinkers are engaging carefully with the text. As an additional example, the Supreme Court uses the inclusion of both assents and dissents to record both agreement and disagreement around a central and controversial topic.

These assents, partial assents, dissents, and partial dissents offer us a way of honoring nuance in critical thought, and provide a place where those very fine-grain explorations of controversial ideas build a foundation for future thought.

The purpose of this paper is to explore, in an abstract way, the concept of critical dialogue, and then to use that notion to frame the understanding, critique and resistance of the current language around the securitization of schools. The discussion of securitization operates as an example of critical dialogue, with spaces for both agreement and disagreement, and for what I consider caring critical literacy (Author, 2015).

Critical literacy, critical dialogue

Critical literacy is defined as “habits of thought, reading, writing and speaking which go beneath surface meaning... to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action” (Shor, 1992, p. 129). This articulation of critical literacy explores how the individual orientation to texts allows a reader to operate within a thoughtful stance not only on texts but also on the social interactions he or she has in life. Within the frame of critical literacy, engagement with texts gets integrated into notions of social justice such that the arguments of the text are incorporated into latter choices about how to live with intentionality, focus, and reflection. In my own work, former debate participants refer to both the research into topics and discussions that occur during the debate rounds as nascent locations for later ethically based life choices such as veganism and social action broadly construed (Author 2010).

Critical literacy goes beyond the consideration of ideas as precursors to action, however-- Morrell (2007) and Fisher (2008) argue that the notion of literacy in general and critical literacy specifically is always linked with action, particularly for historically marginalized communities who have had less access to formalized literacy instruction and for whom literacy has been used as a means of denial of rights (McHenry and Heath, 2001). Sociocultural literacy theory reminds that literacy has never been separate from associated notions of power (Gee, 1996/2011), and this is especially true in historically marginalized communities where obstacles such as literacy tests have operated as gatekeepers to political engagement (Perry, 2003). Critical literacy is not simply a way of considering text, but is also a way of pushing back against inaccurate representations or limited notions of what it means to be literate.

What does critical literacy as dialogue look like? First, critical dialogue is bidirectional and multifaceted, not as a feedback loop of confirming what one already believes but as place of considering and honoring difference. This dialogue is not reinforcement of our interaction with those of like minds—it is a dialogue that challenges implicit assumptions, and asks hard questions of both the initiator of the conversation and those engaged with the conversation. Additionally, the notion of critically literate dialogue emphasizes that dialogue is ongoing. As events in the world unfold, the discussions and questions asked in a classroom should also evolve. For example, participants in a critical dialogue can integrate a discussion about U.S. hegemony with the emerging situation in Iran and deliver nuanced explorations of the implications of various U.S. actions. Teaching this type of dialogue emphasizes for students that knowledge is not static, and that critical thinking is an iterative process.

Most importantly, critical literacy imagined as dialogue is fundamentally an exercise in listening. Paolo Freire (1998) argues:

Only the person who listens patiently and critically is able to speak with the other, even if at times it should be necessary to speak to him or he. Even when, of necessity, she/he must speak against ideas and convictions of the other person, it is still possible to speak as if the other were a subject who is being invited to listen critically and not an object submerged by an avalanche of unfeeling, abstract words. (p. 11)

Without careful listening, the nuances of an argument are lost, and those nuances are the spaces where rich dialogue occurs. Careful and engaged listening provides youth with a model of intellectual and personal investment in careful and precise language that counters the polarizing rhetoric so often seen and heard from political actors. Additionally, defining dialogue by its relationship to listening also provides a model of how to engage in disagreement without resorting to language of violence and fear. The act of listening to divergent views does not necessitate the labeling of disagreement as threat – although we as a society have chosen that path, it is not the only one.

Using the concept of critical dialogue to explore securitization and testing

The first section of this paper defines critical dialogue as a frame that helps us understand how discussion and dialogue can be a form of critical literacy. My notion of critical dialogue includes two segments: agreement/disagreement, and resistance. Agreement/disagreement sets aside the space for deep listening, while resistance allows us to move towards the activism that has historically defined critical literacy. In this section of the paper, I explore how critical dialogue can help us reconsider the rhetoric of securitization currently permeating education, particularly in the realm of education. It is important to recognize that the listening for what people say and do not say, and for the words chosen and left unsaid, are the spaces where critical dialogue becomes a tool for questioning decisions and rhetoric about securitization and testing.

Agreement/Disagreement

Securitization and security policy have historically been set as “the result of the rational assessment, by knowledgeable analysts, of a universe of potential threats, of varying risk, to which a country might be subjected” (Lipschutz, 1995, p.6). Implicit in this definition is the idea that governing bodies and policymakers use conceptions of security as reasons for protecting borders, building fences, and identifying threats. By placing more barriers to entry to and participation in the state, both physical and structural, security policies attempt to protect those already on one side of a clearly defined line. In this case, the goal of securitization in its broad notions of protection is almost a noble one – security allows us to protect those things we find valuable within the defined frame, whether that be a nation or a school system. For advocates of the security rhetoric used in the context of schools, the goal of securing the school is to protect.

I started thinking about this more recently in the context of testing – first, can we draw a parallel between this idea of securitization and the high stakes testing movement, and second, how can critical dialogue allow us to explore and resist securitization across educational contexts? Regarding the literal securitization of schools, Kang-Brown et al. (2013) describe a Texas study where "a single suspension or expulsion for a discretionary offense that did not include a weapon almost tripled a student's likelihood of becoming

involved in the juvenile justice system in the following academic year" (p. 5). While a deeper discussion of the literal securitization of schools, including zero tolerance, resources officers, and metal detectors, is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that we have a history of limiting freedom in order to make physical spaces safe and that these limits often result in unintended negative consequences, including the school to prison pipeline (Miners, 2007; Winn, 2011). For purposes of this article, I limit my analysis to the securitization of schools through testing, the idea that we can assess and evaluate teachers and students in order to protect schools, students and teachers from the insecurity of failure. Although I recognize and hear the reasons for testing and assessment, in the process of engaging in critical dialogue I find testing to be a procedural barrier that divides educators, students, teachers, and policymakers, resulting in the destabilization of the educational system.

What is securitization and how does it connect with testing?

Lipschutz (1995) defines "discourses of security" as "neither strictly objective assessments nor analytical constructs of threat, but rather the products of historical structures and processes, of struggles for power within the state" (p.8). Security is an articulated goal, a desire tied to a history of threats against state power and agency. Securitization as a theory reflects the faith that we can control variables and draw boundaries in ways that protect us, in ways that make us safe, even in the face of historical evidence that those boundaries are permeable. Krístrún Gunnarsdóttir (in press) challenges the definition of safety, pointing out one of the foundational concerns with the idea of security:

Security is the watchword with which to refer to matters of public safety, economy, transnational markets, democratic values and 'our way of life'. It eludes definition however, in the sense that it is increasingly more difficult to say with any clarity what *being secure* actually stands for. (p. 1)

In other words, we invoke security concerns whenever anything threatens our perception of safety. The idea of perception is key – Gunnarsdóttir makes no distinction between the way nations act when safety is actually threatened and when there is only the perception of a threat.

Giorgio Agamben (2001) critiques the fundamental notion of safety, looking at how we manufacture boundaries of safety in order to draw circles of belonging and isolation:

Politics secretly works towards the production of emergencies. It is the task of democratic politics to prevent the development of conditions which lead to hatred, terror, and destruction and not to limit itself to attempts to control them once they have already occurred. (p.1)

Agamben's examples of conditions which lead to hatred and terror include policies that reflect inclusion and exclusion. Inner and outer circles reinforce an "us vs. them" mentality that allows us to more easily dismiss other parties as less than human and, by association, dehumanize all parties. Benjamin Muller (2010), writing particularly

about citizenship and security, calls this the "what's left?" of citizenship, "[suggesting] some process of decomposition, where the original 'citizen' or 'sovereign' or 'authority' has decayed, leaving the slightly recognizable carcass to be contorted to suit contemporary political ends" (p. 279). What both Muller and Agamben center is the idea of what we trade for protection – for Agamben, it is a philosophical death, while for Muller, it is the death of individual agency.

When applied to testing, securitization rhetoric emerges in the implementation of No Child Left Behind, an act that identified as part of its purpose (Sec 1001, Statement of Purpose, NCLB, 2002):

- 4) ensuring that high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging State academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement;
- (5) holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students, and identifying and turning around low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students, while providing alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education;

In this purpose statement, the Act articulates the desire of the legislature to provide quality assessment and instruction and a desire to evaluate schools based on how well they meet the purpose of educating youth equally. The second component embeds securitization within the ideals of the Act – in order to ensure that people meet the established goals, there must be accountability. The accountability becomes the securitized safety boundary that ensures that teachers will teach and students will learn, and this securitization rhetoric becomes the common narrative about success and failure in schools.

When we embrace securitization as the appropriate common narrative, we desensitize ourselves to the number and level of atrocities committed against whatever we deem the other. This is the area where testing becomes most aligned with the securitized binaries of belonging and isolation. We are familiar with how successful students are considered an example of effective education, and teachers of successful students are seen as evidence that we can ensure that no child will be left behind. However, the exact opposite is also true – teachers and students perceived as failing are seen as somehow different and "other" from the successful; this labeling pathologizes performance and institutionalizes isolation for both the teachers labeled as struggling and those labeled as successful. One key example of this occurred in Los Angeles in 2010, where the Los Angeles Times published the value-added scores of all teachers in the district and identified specific teachers who were successful and unsuccessful based on seven years of value-added test scores (Felch, Song & Smith, 2010). Reporters then observed in those classrooms, describing what they perceived to be the reasons why students were struggling in individual teachers' classrooms and succeeding in others. Although the argument for public exposure of these measures of effectiveness is

accountability, there are unintended consequences for both students and teachers. In the article, one of the teachers interviewed described how "in the past, if I were recognized, I would become an outcast" (Felch et al., 2010, p.3). With regards to testing, those who succeed are pitted against those who fail- although the rhetoric at the time of NCLB was a rhetoric of supporting more youth to succeed, testing has subsequently demonstrated the development of a culture of fear.

How does securitization relate to testing, education and critical literacy?

Establishing that the goal of securitization is control, the same perspective applies in testing – if we test enough, we will gather enough data and evidence to put in place scaffolds/punishments that ensure that schools function, teachers teach, and students learn. Agamben's critique holds here, as well – in putting these high stakes tests in place, we are creating an adversarial relationship between politicians and high level administrators on one side and teachers on the other, and the divide we create actually makes our students less secure as learners. Securitization is an attempt to control variables that are in some ways uncontrollable, and testing tries to do the same thing. The end results of both are isolation, limits, and rising unrest.

Why are we so susceptible in education to testing couched in securitization rhetoric? The answer is simple: both securitization and testing rhetoric feed on fear. Claudia Eppert (2008) explores in detail the way fear permeates both American society and American education:

The energy of fear projects itself in experiences of frustration, blame, anger, worry, insecurity, distrust, and sorry; in thoughts of protection, superiority, judgment, hatred, and evil; and, finally, in actions of physical and/or symbolic defense, aggression, withdrawal and flight. (p.56)

Eppert goes on to remind us that "the chase for security... in the belief that obtaining these will lead to permanent happiness and will bring relief from restless desire, inevitably breeds a paradoxical insecurity that inspires dynamics of fear" (p. 62). When we begin to explore how securitization and testing rhetoric align with this increased sense of fear in the schools, we see that testing becomes our chase for security, and subsequently results in all of the elements identified above.

We have institutionalized fear for students, parents and teachers through the policies we enact. One of the strongest examples of policy-driven fear-mongering emerges when we look at the institutionalization of evaluation systems linking teacher evaluation with student performance. In 2011, Florida governor Rick Scott signed a bill linking teacher pay to student test scores (Postal, 2011). More recently, Maryland delayed implementation of a teacher evaluation that used student test scores as twenty percent of a teacher's score (Bowie, 2014). These policies create a direct link between the performance of a student on an external test and the economic safety of a teacher. Once the security of one member of the educational community of a classroom is threatened, the other members of the community are destabilized as well. In other words, it is more difficult for a teacher who does not feel supported to create a safe space or teach with confidence. With respect for the idea of measurement as a way to understand what is happening in schools, we have instead created a culture of fear.

What does social justice look like in an age of educational securitization?

Although schools are moving towards a culture of fear amidst the high stakes testing environment, there is still the desire for schools to operate as spaces of social justice. NCTE/NCATE recently included a standard solely devoted to the idea of "knowledge of how theories and research about social justice, diversity, equity, student identities, and schools as institutions can enhance students' opportunities to learn in English Language Arts" (2012). We want to believe that teachers see schools and their own teaching as places for advocacy and agency, and the standards established by governing bodies of teacher education reflect that desire. However, as mentioned previously, there is a divide between politicians and administrators setting policies and the teachers and students implementing those policies. This is the space where critical dialogue has disintegrated – the bidirectional listening that would support collaboration and careful reflection has instead become a binary where society either supports testing and believes in students or supports teachers and wants students to fail. Gledhill (2008) argues that "when an issue is 'securitized' it passes from the realm of ordinary politicized questions into an issue that threatens the very survival of states and their citizens" (p. 1). Educational securitization is not social justice, and I would argue that it does threaten the survival of democratic education. However, educational securitization is not our only alternative – we can imagine a more just space of learning.

First, we can actively refuse to engage in securitization behavior and rhetoric. Instead of teaching our teachers and students that their work and value can be tied to a metric, we can teach them to critically evaluate what it means to engage in learning and thought. We can teach them to question the focus on testing, and to engage in "democratic dissent," the nonviolent protest of a thought or idea (Ivie, 2005). In *Pencils Down* (2012), Wayne Au and Melissa Bollow-Tempel compiled a series of critical responses to testing, an act of resistance that pushes back against the idea that testing itself is inevitable and that teachers must adjust to these new evaluations. The collection of teacher stories, researcher critiques, and recommended alternatives offers multiple ways to challenge the inevitability of testing, both as individuals and as members of the larger community. Additionally, organizations such as the Opt-out movement offer us ways to resist testing as teachers, parents and students. The United Opt-out movement is particularly important for disseminating information to all concerned parties about how permeable testing requirements are. More importantly, these community resistance organizations demonstrate how to engage in conversations with school personnel and other community members about their roles and responsibilities in creating caring schools where youth are supported as they grow (Noddings, 2005).

We also need to return to the practice of affirming teaching. In *The Coming Community* (1993), Agamben argues for the idea of affirming life as "seeing something in its being-thus—irreparable, but not for that reason necessary; thus, but not for that reason contingent, is love" (p.106). Agamben's discussion of life as irreparable is not a condemnation of the fact that we cannot repair, but rather a critique of the perspective that we should repair. Using this frame, the idea of affirming teaching allows us to recognize that teachers do not reach perfection, nor should we ask for perfection. In a sense, what we recognize and acknowledge is the minute by minute exercise of teaching;

this is not the same as accepting “bad” teaching, but is rather the recognition that teaching is both being and becoming (Freire, 1970). Instead of attempting to quantify and rate teaching quality, we need to go back to a place where we believe in teaching (and by extension, teachers). We are at a loss regarding the language and rhetoric we use about teachers. We believe data will save us—instead, our use of data obscures what we know about individual students and what we believe our teachers can tell us about their teaching of individuals. More importantly, it obscures the nature of teaching as work, as negotiation, and as growth for all involved.

We can also commit to constructing classrooms based on critical dialogue. Instead of attempting to identify the key benchmarks of a well-rounded education, instead of attempting to parse out what makes competency in a teacher, we need to live a life of examination, as students, scholars, and teachers. We need to live a life of exploration, of questions, of dialogue across contexts. We need to commit to understanding where people come from and where they are going. We are not asking for much—we are asking people to come to the table with a respect for and deep interest in crossing divides, in learning from others, and in placing dialogue and thought at the center of improving education. We cannot do this through testing, measuring and evaluating-- we do this through discussion and careful consideration, through exploring reasoned arguments on both sides.

We have created a war on education through both rhetoric and politics-- we are living in an age of accountability that has pushed us towards an ever-deepening spiral of fear and failure. There are casualties on all sides: students spend three weeks of every year in a space of high-stakes evaluation, teachers are threatened with pay cuts or joblessness if their students do not perform, and many parents believe that test scores reveal the schools that can save their students' souls. To be sure, this characterization is dramatic, and ignores the very real ways that students, teachers, and parents reclaim care and authenticity outside of data. Just recently, activists in the United Opt-out movement organized a national opt-out conference and published a handbook for expanding activism across the country (McDermott, Robertson, Jensen & Smith, 2014). Still, the pervasive level of mistrust in teachers, students and schools is unsustainable and counter to the idea of democratic schools (Dewey, 1916; Noddings, 2013). The only way to return from that brink is to affirm teachers, love students, and commit to dialogue.

Miners (2007) reminds us that "in cities starkly divided by race, class, language, religion and more, initiatives that mobilize people to reclaim public issues they have a stake in, and to dialogue, argue and struggle to educate one another, are increasingly rare and valuable" (p. 186). Her comment, coming from a place where she sees the connection between the securitization of schools and the mass incarceration of youth, reminds us that the call for dialogue as resistance is not a theoretical engagement. We do not create secure, safe teaching environments, full of the vibrant failure and intellectual resiliency that characterize both teaching and life, through fear, testing, and rigid evaluation. We do so through resisting those forces that incite fear, through infusing critical literacy in our classrooms and in our teachers, and through fostering spaces of dialogue that inspire listening and true engagement with varied perspectives. bell hooks (2003) refers to this as “radical openness,” or the idea that perspectives should be fluid and should change with new information. Critical dialogue is what is missing. We create

a space where students want to interrogate ideas and grow as intellectuals, where the conversations in the classroom ask big questions instead of focusing on preparation for the test, where the big questions lead to changes in how we engage with our life both inside and outside of schools. This is how we affirm teaching, and how we reject fear.

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