Toward the Separation of School and State

An abridged version of the 1997 NCTE Convention Inaugural Address

by Sheridan Blau

My Antipathy for Political Discourse

Like many English teachers of my generation—a generation that graduated from college after the intellectual and ethical atrocities of the McCarthy era but before the Peace Corps and the anti-war marches on Chicago and Washington—I don’t like to talk much about politics. Aside from what I believe to be a healthy distrust and distaste for political discourse, I find events on the political scene trivial compared to the consequential matters that are at issue in moral discourse or the discourse of literature. Literature, Ezra Pound insisted—Ezra Pound, who was wise about literature but foolish about politics—“Literature,” he said, “is news that stays news.” Political goings on
are news but, unlike literature, news fittingly reported in the daily newspaper and just as fittingly discarded with the daily trash. The discourse of politics is no more likely to offer us wisdom for life than the discourse of the popular or fashionable. For political opinion like public opinion in general, is often fickle, subject to manipulation by the media or else designed to do the manipulating, and frequently — always in the case of mobs and groups of extreme partisans — not subject to governance by reason, rules of consistency, or reflection.

The Current Scene in the Politics of Education

Yet those of us who teach in the field of English and the language arts have lately seen our subject and our teaching enter the discourse of politics and become the topic for popular discussions about the crisis in public education (a
crisis that some of our most thoughtful colleagues have demonstrated was largely invented by the popular press) so much so that we find ourselves caught in a tide of public opinion that is rising against much of what we stand for intellectually and professionally. Nor is there any shortage of politicians with fingers poised on the public pulse, ready to turn popular prejudice into public policy, especially if they can do so in the name of reliable, replicable scientific research. Such challenges require us to abandon our diffidence and, however reluctantly, address the political issues.

In state houses, on local school boards, and in Congress legislators and other policy makers are busy trying to rescue American education by mandating how children should be taught reading, what bodies of research should inform teaching practice in the teaching of reading, and who should be allowed to teach reading teachers and prospective teachers. California has adopted legislation (already successfully copied in the House of Representatives) that would fund inservice programs only when the providers of inservice pass tests — not of their academic credentials but of their subscription to certain acceptable theories of learning, research findings, and instructional practices — forsaking all alternative theories, bodies of research, and unapproved practitioners of research and instruction.

Such legislation serves not merely to privilege particular versions of science and scientific truth over others, but to suppress or disenfranchise alternative accounts of what is true and to discount entirely all research or evidence that derives from research methodologies that do not fit a reductivist, positivist, quantifiable, behaviorist version of scientific research. In the name of education and science, policy makers and a few of their scientific cronies (most of whom appear to be financially linked to textbooks and publishing companies whose reading programs claim to be based on quantifiable research) are conducting a campaign for intellectual control and the repression of alternative views that not only threatens the principle of academic freedom, but stands opposed to the true aims of science and education themselves. Intellectual suppression can produce only false knowledge (a knowledge that prevents further learning) and a science that substitutes the idolatry of orthodox belief and political expediency for fidelity to the disinterested advancement of learning.

If political history and the history of ideas in the western literary and religious traditions teach us anything, it is to distrust those who not only claim to own the exclusive truth, but who insist further on suppressing or punishing all messengers of alternative versions of truth. One of the surest signs of false science has always been its attempt to suppress the arguments and research of those who would challenge its conclusions. Another has been its alignment with sources of political power from which the suppression of alternative ideas always flows. Think of the political figures and governments of the past that have embraced one group of scientists to the exclusion of all others and you will have a catalogue of demagogues and shameful public policies that have used science to justify slavery, racism, genocide, the incarceration of dissidents in mental hospitals, and a host of other injustices.

But let us not overstate the case. Can government agencies and policy makers really be accused of suppressing ethnographic research, case study research and most teacher-research — virtually all qualitative research — merely by deciding that the only fundable inservice programs are those based on quantitative, behaviorist, research (which is what the California legislature has done and the House of Representatives has approved in House bill HR 2614)? Only if the prejudice of government policy-makers translates into diminished opportunities for certain researchers and research-based programs to find support and obtain a hearing within the educational community. And that, of course, is precisely what is happening, quite aside from the diminished opportunities that are legislatively mandated for politically unacceptable
researchers and curriculum specialists. With stories that remind us eerily of the red-baiting days of the 50s, we now hear regularly of incidents like one recently reported on e-mail networks about a small Central California town in which the superintendent of schools canceled a scheduled presentation by a leading language arts researcher (whose publications are widely respected) merely because a couple of teachers complained that she was "too whole language." The superintendent claimed that he didn't know anything about the speaker he had canceled, but the accusation about her professional affiliation was enough for him to withdraw an invitation, to break a contract, to suppress the dissemination of findings from a professionally respectable line of research.

The Professional Debate vs the Political Debate

Let us be clear about what we stand for and oppose. As a profession and professional organization we are not combatants — despite the desire of journalists — in any war between the proponents of a whole language approach to literacy and a phonics-based approach. Researchers and practitioners who are experts (as I am not) from both sides of this artificial divide demonstrate in most of their writing and presentations that they represent different emphases and different research traditions in a field that can accommodate and benefit from a variety of research perspectives and a rich variety of instructional approaches. Responsible researchers and teachers who tend to favor either method have been known to use the results of research that supports the other.
school of thought regularly employ methods and findings identified with the other.

In a responsible and responsive professional community we will find teachers consulting research and employing teaching strategies that work effectively for the particular children they teach. Shelly Harwayne, principal of the Manhattan New School, a public elementary school in the heart of New York City, reports that she is often asked, especially by the press, whether her award-winning inner-city school is a whole language school or a phonics school. She invites the press to visit and they, after visiting classes and finding they are still unable to determine if it is a whole language or phonics school, ask her again: “what kind of reading program does this school have?” Her answer is that if she has 40 children in her school who need special help in learning to read, then she has 40 reading programs, each one identified by the name of a child and each one drawing what is
most needed by a particular child from whatever bodies of research and teaching strategies happen to work most effectively for this particular child at this particular moment.

Our profession as seen from inside teachers' lounges and in the conversations of professionals and in the presentations and workshops of our conferences is not a bloody battleground of competing ideas, but it has been made to appear so by a press hungry for dramatic stories and by impatient policy makers and a frustrated public looking for the same kind of simple answers that popular opinion often demands — answers that offer scapegoats and saviors... The true ideological battleground for our profession is not in the field where teacher-educators and teachers debate about the most effective teaching strategies nor in the labs and research sites where scholars offer different theoretical perspectives, different methodological procedures, and competing findings. Disagreements in these arenas can and do lead to dialogue and thereby to the advancement of learning.

The battleground on which we are obliged to make our stand is the political battleground where we are losing ground to policy makers and legislators who seek to usurp the professional authority that belongs to teachers and professional educators in matters having to do with curriculum, teaching methodology, and materials. What business do legislators in California or in Congress have in deciding on an approved curriculum for inservice programs for teachers of reading? What moral or ethical or intellectual justification can they offer for arrogating to themselves the authority to declare with respect to a field of specialized learning that one research paradigm and one set of research findings is valid and all others invalid, when the world's most widely respected and most extensively published scholars in the field are engaged in a continuing scholarly debate on those very questions?

Collegial Responsibility

That legislators have been encouraged by a handful of reading researchers to act with such usurpacious arrogance is much to the discredit of those researchers, though it may testify more to their naiveté than their vulnerability to the attractions of power or the temptations of consulting fees and royalties. Yet surely they must see or we must ask them to recognize that there is something deeply wrong professionally and ethically when one group of researchers in an academic field supports a congressional bill that declares other respected scholars in the field — including many of the most distinguished and revered figures in literacy studies — figures like Shirley Brice Heath, Judith Green and Gordon Wells — scholars whose work has appeared in our most distinguished journals — unacceptable as sources of knowledge or expertise. As a matter of principle having to do with academic freedom (not to mention respect for colleagues), all scholars in the field of literacy studies, no matter what research paradigms or teaching practices they subscribe to, must stand together and call in one voice for the deletion of any clause in any piece of legislation that has the effect of declaring any group of professionally respected scholars as not deserving of professional respect or attention by virtue of their intellectual orientation. If ethnographic researchers and constructivist theories of learning can be stigmatized today, then behaviorists can be stigmatized tomorrow.

How Can We Respond to Current Political Outrages?

How can we respond to the misdirected policies enacted or threatened by presumably well-meaning legislatures or to the misguided understanding represented by popular opinion? Surely, we can and must communicate with our legislators to represent our opposition to laws that would interfere with the right of educators to engage in their professional work according to standards

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any less in need of protection against well-intentioned legislators and misguided majorities that would seek to serve their own political or ideological ends through the control of curricular content, teaching methods or texts. Indeed, in recent years we have seen processes as basic as textbook selection in many cities and states become political spectacles featuring power contests between various groups of parents and political stakeholders rather than thoughtful processes of deliberation among professionals about the materials that would most effectively serve legitimate educational aims. It is time to rescue education from the politicians who are endlessly seeking to save it and from the fickle fashions of public opinion. It is time to offer to schools and to teachers something like constitutional protections so that they may work in the service of a well-informed professional vision without being subject to sabotage at every turn by the latest fetish of one or another political party or pressure group...

Let us specifically explore mechanisms, including legislation, to protect schools from the sort of legislative and public interference that has created such uncertainty and so threatened both the richest traditions and the most intellectually progressive ideas in public education. If it seems doubtful that our richest traditions could be in jeopardy (along with our most progressive ideas), visit Florida, where legislators and other policy makers are proposing in the name of educational utility the marginalization of literary study, so that literature will be taught only in elective classes, while required English classes focus only on reading practical texts like warranties, scientific reports, and directions.

Will our next political campaign have to be in Florida to stop legislators from enacting a policy that could be supported only by persons with extremely limited experiences with literature and little understanding of the nature of literary study? That such semi-literate persons, however well-intentioned or morally upright, could be in a position to dictate curriculum or educational policy in English studies is a perversion of democratic principles and an absurdity of the kind that a Renaissance rhetorician might refer to as an outrage against nature—equivalent to the idea that the foot should rule the head or that “the bounded waters should lift their bosoms higher than the shores and the rude son should strike his father dead.”

In the meantime, we can all take heart from noting that NCTE has launched what we are calling a Reading Research Strike Force consisting of some 15 internationally respected scholars who will be issuing White Papers and preparing briefing documents in response to distorted accounts of scientific research that have been widely circulated by lobbyists who speak for various political and ideological pressure groups. Our straight-talking and illuminating documents will be widely available to classroom teachers for use in local schools and communities...

What changes in political opinion might follow upon strong research reports calling into question the research upon which politicians and much of the public have mounted their calls for repressive reforms? Would it be reasonable to assume that the growing number of studies discrediting the research base for educationally intrusive legislation on reading will now lead political leaders to acknowledge that they might have been guilty of premature legislation or that in future it might be wiser to protect schools and teachers from politically charged intrusions rather than try to regulate them legislatively in matters of teaching methods and materials? It is doubtful that any such concession will be forthcoming. Yet the new studies may be preparing the way for a political sea change in which those who have been living under water may be able to surface for a short breath of fresh air.

A full-text version of this address appeared in the February issue of NCTE’s Language Arts Journal.