What does it mean to be an educator in a time of war?
Since 9/11, and more urgently in the UK following the events of the seventh of July, we are faced with the question of how to respond to terrorism and the war on terror. Steve Seidel, director of Project Zero, reflects on the challenges faced by teachers at this time, and shares the response of a group of educators in Boston to the question -*What can we teach that has relevance and value in a time of war?*


Steve Seidel

Presentation by Steve Seidel

"Liberating Hopes for a New Human Culture of Childhood"

For the last eight years, I have been the convener and facilitator of a monthly meeting of educators from the Boston area—teachers, administrators, researchers, parents, and sometimes even policy makers. The format for our conversations is always the same though the topics are diverse. Our hours together are spent in close examination of things children make in school and in dialogue about troubling puzzles that emerge in our practice as educators. This was our pattern for five years and these were wonderful conversations—stimulating, thoughtful explorations grounded in the experience of teaching and children's creative work.

This format has had only one significant change in the eight years and it took place in our meeting on the first Saturday of October, 2001. Gathering for the first time since the tragedy of September 11th, I had the same feeling many people expressed that somehow life was irrevocably changed, yet working at Harvard and living with the privileges of race and class that I have in the United States, I had the uncomfortable sense that, in fact, I could go on living much as I had been living before and on September 10th. And, indeed, though the world has changed remarkably, my daily life has not.

Yet going to that October meeting of our educators group, I knew that something had to change, something had to be different about what we did with our time together. With no better idea, I suggested that we end the meeting with some time to sit with the question of what it means to us to be educators in a time of war. People could share their thoughts if they wanted to or simply sit and reflect on this question.

We took time that day to sit with that question and we have continued to do that in every meeting in the two and a half years since. People have shared confusions, frustrations, and stories—sometimes very sad stories—about how their lives or their student's lives have been affected by the various wars which have been waged since September 11th. Sometimes people have cried; sometimes people are angry. There is often a palpable sense of pain and confusion. Sometimes we just sit silently.

I've realized two things, at least, since October, 2001. First, that we are certainly educators in a time of wars and the aggression of the United States—my country—against other nations. But also that there are many other wars going on as well, other forms of systematic violence—wars on the spirit and consciousness of whole groups of people, wars between social classes, racist wars, wars of widespread and systematic violence against children within and across nations of which we have heard testimony in each plenary of this conference.

What I've also realized is that we should have been asking ourselves this question in every session of our educators group since we started in 1996 and that we will most likely need to take this time for reflection on the very same question—what does it mean to be an educator in a time of war?—even if we continue to meet for the rest of our lives.

I make no great claim for the effects of these conversations once a month among this group of a few dozen educators. Surely, reflection does not guarantee action and I can not know if any of our actions have been significantly changed as a result of our participation in these conversations. Slowly, though, I believe I've come to understand a bit more about the complexity of this time for educators and the special responsibilities we share. I see and feel more of the everyday fact of these responsibilities.

For at least a short period once a month, in a public space I share with other educators, I acknowledge this responsibility and my confusions. It feels to me like a kind of prayer for strength and clarity and also a time for remembering, not only, or even particularly, the past, but even more for remembering the challenge of the present and the future. It is also a time in which we try not to run away from the problem, but to sit with it and see what we can feel and understand about it.

One of the questions we have wondered about is what to teach that could have relevance and value, even usefulness, in this time of war. There are no clear answers, but I often think of the following lines from the great American poet, William Carlos Williams, written in 1955 in the poem, *Asphodel, That Greeney Flower*.

It is difficult
To get the news from poems
Yet men die every day
For lack
Of what is found there.

What is found there—in poems?

I'm not sure, but I think that some of what is found in poems is a very close observation and description of moments of human experience, the "minute particulars" as William Blake said, of human life. Also "found there," and of great importance, are observations of nature and, with those, an idea about the relationship between people and the natural world—a kind of ecological meditation on connections and interdependence. And, further, in every poem there is, I believe, an effort to communicate which is an effort to connect. There is also in every poem an effort toward the creation of a thing of beauty.

I believe each of these efforts is an act of hope.

I've been coming to think of hope as a practice, a discipline, and a responsibility that must be exercised in acts and projects on a daily basis. New initiatives, works of art, the creation of new schools and new programs within old schools, new projects with and for children. And on and on…there are countless forms of action that imply hopefulness.

To me, the title of this conference, "Crossing Boundaries," also suggests another possible dimension of the discipline required for sustaining hope—that is, the crossing of boundaries. Of course, these include geographic boundaries as well as boundaries of class, race, age, gender and culture. Many of these boundaries are not simple to cross or even to reach across, filled as they are with false images, distrust, anger, guilt, fear, and painful history.

But the conversations of the last three days suggest another form of boundaries that are essential to cross—the boundaries we create around our understanding of certain ideas, especially the way in which we dichotomize and set ideas in opposition, creating paralyzing either/or distinctions and false choices when they may not need to exist at all.

I'm thinking of ideas like play and work, teaching and learning, imagination and reality, art and science, mind and body, self and other, visibility and invisibility, possibility and impossibility.

Moment after moment during this conference, I've been challenged to question the boundaries I create around the meanings of these words, around these ideas, and challenged to cross those boundaries. This is part of the special genius of our Reggio colleagues—this ability to get so many of us to question

very basic ways in which we construct our understandings of not just education, but our whole lives, our whole view of the world and our place in it.

The small, almost microscopic, observation I have to report is that at every moment that I actually do make even a small movement across the boundaries of meaning I've created around these ideas, I feel this little lightness inside me, this slight lifting up, this momentary sense of doing something impossible, this hopefulness.

I do think there is a discipline demanded if one is to sustain hopefulness, a kind of discipline I think we've been trying to practice for these four days in this remarkable space here in this beautiful city. It is so much better to practice it with others, both those one has known for some time, but also with others one has just met. The challenge is to continue this practice—daily.

I'm so grateful for the opportunity to be here. Thank you so much.

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Project Zero, a research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has investigated the development of learning processes in children, adults and organizations for over three decades. PZ's mission is to understand and enhance learning, thinking and creativity in the arts and other disciplines, both at the individual and the institutional levels.