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The War and Our Students

Rethinking Schools editor Bill Bigelow interviews Sandra Childs, a social studies and English teacher at Franklin High School in Portland, Ore. They spoke about some of the challenges of teaching about the war in Iraq.

Summer 2003

By Bill Bigelow



As *Rethinking Schools* goes to press, Saddam Hussein's regime has collapsed and the United States has begun to establish a new government under the command of a retired U.S. general. This interview was conducted in late March, in the midst of the war.
— Eds.

Sandra Childs
-photo: Steve Farris

Bigelow: I know that you did most of your teaching about Iraq before the war began. Now that the war is underway, what do you think is important for your students to understand about the conflict?

Childs: My students need to be reminded of their critical thinking skills and have opportunities to apply them to the corporate media presentation of this war. I want my students to understand the use of propaganda and the silencing of dissent. The reason I taught my unit well before the invasion began (in September) was because I was afraid the propaganda machine would make it difficult for students to engage in critical analysis. I was afraid that blind patriotism would prevent students from seeing and thinking clearly. I was afraid that dissent would be seen as treachery and that supporting our troops requires supporting the war.

I recommend a wonderful piece by Barbara Kingsolver on this issue, "And Our Flag Was Still There" in her collection of essays called *Small Wonder*.

Even though I started my unit at the beginning of the year with a lesson that encouraged students to come up with a broad definition of patriotism that included practicing the First Amendment vigorously [see www.rethinking-schools.org/war/], I thought that as the war started I needed to revisit that point. Sen. John McCain provided a great starting point. As "Operation Iraqi Freedom" began McCain said, "The time for debate is over." So, on the morning after the bombs began to fall in Baghdad, I asked my students whether they agreed with Sen. McCain. We discussed the value of dissent, debate, and critical questions.

I then asked students what information, images, issues, and ideas they hoped would be presented in the media coverage of the war. After making and sharing their lists — which included reports from Iraqi citizens, images of bombing sites after an attack, civilian casualty numbers, discussions about depleted uranium, tape of U.N. debate on the war, interviews with citizens from other countries on their view of the invasion, interviews with protesters about why they are against the war — I asked students to make a list of what they had been hearing and seeing. One student said he felt like he was watching Sports Center or a video game. Another mentioned that he only heard from retired generals. We began to dissect what information was constructed and what was absent. As spring break began, I gave the students a list of websites that included alternative media and social justice sites [www.rethinking-schools.org/war/resources/]. They had to visit and evaluate at least three sites over the break. I hoped that this would encourage them to compare the kind of presentation and information they could get from independent reporters compared with embedded network reporters.

Finally, I think that perhaps the most basic thing that students must understand is that people are dying.

Bigelow: On our first day back from spring break I asked my students to write briefly about what they had been thinking and feeling about the war. I simply wanted to provide a place where they could pause and think for a moment and then to have a conversation. One of the things that struck me was how a weariness had gripped many students. The networks have been all-war- all-the-time, and it seems that even for my most compassionate students, it has had a kind of numbing effect. How can we get students to understand that people are dying, as you say, but in a way that doesn't pound the empathy out of them?

Childs: First of all, our students had a very cruel reminder that war means death because a recent Franklin High graduate, Brandon Tobler, died last week in Iraq. Many current students knew Brandon. This war has come home for many of them.

But every day I ask students what they have heard and what they have learned and what questions they have. Usually someone mentions the new civilian casualty numbers. Or someone brings up an "accident" like the Toyota SUV full of women and children killed at a checkpoint by U.S. soldiers.

But numbers aren't enough. Last year during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan I found a website that showed civilian casualties and had students write interior monologues based on the pictures [see *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 16, No. 2]. Students got inside the imagined lives of these people and had a chance to honor, acknowledge, and voice their suffering. I am having students do the same this year. Even our local newspaper is beginning to show pictures of wounded civilians or mourning parents. But by now the various websites have more graphic, uncensored pictures [www.iraqpeaceteam.org/pages/al_kindi_hospital.html]. This may seem like a morbid activity, but it brings home the important fact of war and death while urging students to stay in their feelings.

Since the war has started, students have expressed frustration at not knowing what is going on for Iraqi citizens. Even before the war began students knew that the mainstream media were not sharing the voices of common Iraqis. And I wanted them to remember how destructive sanctions have been. If President Bush keeps insisting that the government's motivation for this war is to ease the suffering of the Iraqi people, I wanted my kids to remember that U.S. policy has been the cause of great suffering. So I showed them *Greetings from Missile Street*, a film documenting a month-long visit of people from Voices in the Wilderness to families in Basra [see "Teaching about Gulf War II," *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 17, No. 3].

Now that Basra has been the site of intense fighting, the students have names and faces to go with the fear and pain and horror of war. And they have the knowledge that the United States might not have the Iraqi people's best interest at heart when executing foreign policy. Any film that allows students to "meet" the people of Iraq takes this war out of the abstract.

Bigelow: In the mainstream media, there is lots of focus on military technology and strategy, with an infinity of retired generals laying out game plans. The alternative media critiques the mainstream coverage. It emphasizes the civilian casualties, the use of depleted uranium, anti-war activism, and even the beginnings of war resistance in the military. But neither mainstream media nor alternative media have done a good job evaluating the causes of the war, raising the fundamental question: Why is this happening? An important part — perhaps the most important part — of critical teaching involves equipping students to make explanations of social phenomena. How can we engage students in a "pedagogy of explanation" around the war?

Childs: Providing opportunities for students to ask and answer that question is the key. If I tell them, "It's about oil. It's empire building. It's about U.S. global domination," then they can just discount these vague assertions as the ranting of their crazy-lady teacher. Getting the students to rediscover that question, "Why is this happening?" is vital. I gave them an article from *The Washington Post*, "Some Evidence on Iraq Called Fake," by Joby Warrick (3/8/03). The article reveals that key pieces of evidence linking Iraq to a nuclear weapons program were determined by U.N. inspectors to be fake. After reading the article, Meggan immediately asked, "Okay, if Saddam Hussein is not a nuclear threat, then why are we doing this?" Then I asked them the same question.

But unless students are grounded in a deep critique of globalization, they are not going to be able to come up with an in-depth analysis on their own. That is why I am anxious to continue my teaching on globalization. This is how they're going to come to understand the war. Students need to see/read/understand how transnational corporations and U.S. policies have operated and are operating around the world. They need to understand the dynamics of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Remember, I have already spent six weeks teaching about the possibility of war in Iraq. But it was so early in the year, I don't think students had enough understanding about how the global economy operates — about how government policies favor corporate profit and power — to understand fully that this war is, in many ways, an extension of U.S. economic policy.

Of course, if we want students to come up with a coherent explanation of this war, we have to have one ourselves. And that's what we need to help each other develop.

Bill Bigelow (bbpdx@aol.com) teaches at Franklin High School in Portland, Ore., and is an editor at Rethinking Schools. Sandra Childs can be contacted at sjchilds@spiritone.com.

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