



2015

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Recommended Citation

Chinnery, Ann (2015) "Precarity and Pedagogical Responsibility," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol9/iss1/10>

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Precarity and Pedagogical Responsibility

Ann Chinnery
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Introduction

Despite good intentions, No Child Left Behind (2002) and other initiatives aimed at leveling the playing field in American society have arguably had more harmful than positive effects on children's learning in schools. According to some critics (e.g., Au, 2004; Glass, 2007; Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001), if we scratch beneath the surface of these initiatives, we often find discourses that pathologize certain children or groups of children, and a reluctance to look critically at the social, political, and economic conditions (such as hunger, homelessness, and lack of adequate health care) under which some children struggle to succeed in school while others flourish. But as Ron Glass (2007) argues, instead of blaming children for the detrimental effects of circumstances and experiences beyond their control, we need to start holding to account the adults who could in fact make a difference in those children's lives. I share Glass's view, and in what follows, I want to move away from the prevailing discourses of cultural deprivation and deficit, turning instead to the recent scholarship on vulnerability and precarity in order to reframe our conception of pedagogical responsibility in today's increasingly diverse classrooms.

My entry point is some of Judith Butler's recent work (Butler, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b) on Occupy and other political street protests in which she emphasizes two key themes that emerged in and from these movements. The first theme is precarity (the condition of living without security or predictability),¹ and the second is the lived experience of bodies coming together in shared space, in what she calls experiences of "up-againstness." The paper is structured as follows: I first give a brief description of vulnerability and other related terms, and the ways in which these terms relate to the category of students we currently call *vulnerable learners*. Next I say a bit about "up-againstness" and the implications of that experience for day-to-day life in schools. Finally, I attempt to bring the two strands together in order to investigate how we might begin to rethink pedagogical responsibility, especially for those students who live on the margins in North American society and in classrooms within our society. Throughout, I draw primarily on ethical, social, and political theory rather than on the psychological discourses that currently hold so much sway in education. For the discussion on precarity and vulnerability I refer to the work of British economist Guy Standing (2001a, 2001b), rhetorician and activist Judith Butler, and political scientist Isabell Lorey (2011); and for the discussion on bodies coming together in public space I draw mainly on Butler, political theorist Hannah Arendt (1959, 1963, 1961), and philosopher George Yancy (2002).

Vulnerability

One of the key differences that separate Butler, Lorey and Standing from their counterparts in psychology is their respective conceptions of vulnerability. From a psychological perspective, vulnerability is seen as a trait or problem of particular individuals that can be remedied by those individuals' developing resilience so they can overcome whatever obstacles are standing in the way of their success. This individualized conception of vulnerability appears in the educational literature at least as far back as the "child-saving" movements of the late-19th and early-20th centuries (Platt, 2009), through the work on "at-risk" students in the latter part of the 20th century (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001), and, most recently, in the discourse on "vulnerable learners" (e.g., Stormont Espinosa, Knipping, & McCathren, 2003). However, for the scholars I will be using here, vulnerability is neither an attribute of particular individuals, nor is it a problem to be solved; rather, it is an inescapable feature of the human condition. Vulnerability is what makes us open to being affected—to being touched, moved, and potentially wounded by the other. But there is an important difference between the shared existential condition of vulnerability that characterizes all human lives and the material ways in which some people are rendered more vulnerable—and their lives more precarious—than others. So let me say a bit about that distinction before turning to the implications for education.

Precarity and a Class-in-the-Making

In sociology, economics, and political theory, the term *precarity* is used to highlight the insecurity that comes about not as a result of individual weaknesses or failings, but as a result of what Butler (2012b) calls the unequal political distribution of vulnerability. As Lorey (2011) explains, *precariousness* (a basic vulnerability) is an existentially common dimension of life for both human and non-human beings. Significantly, however, this precariousness is always relational. It does not exist in itself, in the philosophical sense, but is rather a kind of "socio-ontological 'being-with'...with other precarious lives" (Lorey, para. 3). In other words, we all share an existential condition of precariousness because we are fundamentally relational beings. *Precarity*, on the other hand, Lorey (2011) says, is "a category...that denotes the effects of different political, social and legal compensations for a general precariousness" (para. 4). So while we are all vulnerable to the whims of fortune, health, violence, and natural disasters, there are some people whose social, economic, or political status renders them more vulnerable, more precarious, than others. A third related term, *precarization*, refers to the governmental or structural ways in which precariousness is distributed and managed (Lorey, 2011, para. 5). It is the process by which the shared existential condition of vulnerability or precariousness becomes a condition of precarity for some people. Perhaps the most obvious example of precarization is the destabilization of labour, a process that has given rise to a new economic class: *the precariat* (a play on *proletariat*).

In his 2011 book, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Standing (2011a) notes that the term *precariat* was "first used by French sociologists in the 1980s to describe temporary or seasonal workers" (p. 9). But Standing uses the term more broadly, describing the precariat as a "class-in-the-making," not yet a "class-for-itself" in the

Marxist sense (p. 7). On a scale of relative security, Standing positions the precariat below the elite (whom he describes as “the tiny number of absurdly rich global citizens”), below the “salarariat” (which includes those who are employed in stable full-time jobs, largely concentrated in the big corporations, government agencies and public administration), below the “proficians” (a combination of *professional* and *technician*, which Standing uses to describe those who earn high incomes on contract or as consultants). In terms of security and stability, the precariat is also positioned below the shrinking core of manual labourers (the traditional working class) (pp. 7-8). Despite attempts to level the playing field through such things as better access to education and job training, Standing notes that the precariat is actually growing. He estimates that, as of 2011, in many countries, at least a quarter of the adult population was in the precariat (p. 24).

Broadly speaking, this class-in-the-making is composed of three main groups of workers. The first group is those who are, as Standing (2011b) puts it, “falling out” of working class communities and traditions. These are typically young people whose parents were members of the working class, but who don’t themselves have a working-class identity. The second group is composed of those who have, at least in a thin sense, opted into the precariat because it is better than what they had before—for example, migrant workers for whom even unstable, poorly paid temporary labor is better than no work at all. And the third group, which is relatively new as a social category, is composed of educated, progressive young people who have been taught to aspire to an occupational identity, but who find, upon completing their higher education, that there is, in fact, no identifiable future for them. As evidenced by the May Day protests that began in Milan in 2005 and quickly spread to other cities, this last group has been the most vocal (Standing, 2011b). But what does this socio-economic analysis have to do with education in general, and with pedagogical responsibility in particular?

The Educational Precariat

Even though most theorists writing about precarity focus on the adult world of precarious workers, I think there is a parallel precariat in schools. This category of students—whom I will call *the educational precariat*—is made up of those who currently come under the umbrella term, *vulnerable learners*. So, while Standing’s focus is on the precariat as an economic category in the adult world of work, I want to extend the term *precariat* to include the child’s world of schooling. Depending on where one lives, the educational precariat might include recent immigrants, indigenous students, students who are gender-nonconforming, or who have special learning needs, or who live in poverty, or who are children of the precarious workers I described a moment ago—or even those young people who, for whatever reason, are “just not school-shaped” (Williams, 2013, p. 32).

For example, for the past seven years, I have been working in a teacher education program that prepares teachers for work in a large urban school district with over 70,000 students and approximately 5,000 teachers. As of 2012, 32% of the district’s students were designated as vulnerable learners, and that number continues to grow (Surrey

Libraries, 2012; UBC Early Learning, 2011). Of these vulnerable learners, 600 live in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development—which is to say they live in foster homes or group homes rather than with their own biological or adoptive families. Another equally pressing concern is that only 54% of Aboriginal students in the district complete high school within the normal time frame. While this figure is an improvement over previous years, it is still nowhere near an acceptable rate, and Aboriginal elementary students' mathematics scores continue to decline (BC Ministry of Education, 2012).

Obviously, schools cannot be expected to solve the larger global problems of economic and social inequity, but I do believe that the classroom experiences of those students I am calling the educational precariat fall squarely within our purview as educators and teacher educators, and I believe that the literature on precarity might help us begin to shift our understanding of pedagogical responsibility for the so-called vulnerable learners in our classrooms.

The philosopher perhaps best known for connecting vulnerability and responsibility is Emmanuel Levinas (1981, 1995), and while a full description of Levinas's work goes beyond the scope of this paper, there are two key points that are helpful for our purposes here. First, contrary to prevailing conceptions of self-other relations, which begin with the self and move outwards, Levinas claims that we come into being as subjects—as beings who can say “I”—only in responding to the other (Levinas, 1981). Responsibility is therefore not something one chooses to take on or not; it is the very foundation and precondition for selfhood. Second, for Levinas, the ethical force that draws me out of my self-interested projects into responsibility to and for the other is not the other's real or imagined power over me, but rather his or her fragility and vulnerability. Paul Ricoeur (1996) explains it this way:

Consider the birth of a child—its mere existence obliges. *We are rendered responsible by the fragile.* ...[In] the appeal coming from fragility... the question becomes, what shall we do with this fragile being, what shall we do for her or him? We are directed towards the future of a being in need of help to survive and grow. (p. 16, emphasis added)

According to Ricoeur and Levinas, in the encounter with the fragility and precariousness of the other, we are called into a relationship of responsibility that we have not chosen, but neither can we refuse.

I have long found Levinas's emphasis on the encounter with the vulnerability of the other as the foundation for ethics compelling, and I also think his ethics makes an important contribution to our understanding of pedagogical relations. But when we shift our attention from responsibility for the other's vulnerability/precariousness to responsibility for his or her *precarity*—that is, to responsibility for the unequal social and political distribution of precariousness that unnecessarily renders some people more vulnerable than others—Levinas's ethics might not take us quite where we need to go. What I mean is that in responding to *precarity*, we are called not only to respond to the vulnerability of the particular other in front of us here and now, but to the broader social and political

context.

So what kinds of experiences might it take for us, as educators, to see the call to pedagogical responsibility as a call to respond to the precarity of those who have been designated vulnerable learners? In the next section I turn to the experience of bodies coming together in public space as one potential site where that recognition might occur.

Bodies Coming Together in Public Space

At Occupy Wall Street in October 2011, Butler said:

It matters that as bodies we arrive together in public, that we are assembling in public; we are coming together as bodies in alliance in the street and in the square. As bodies we suffer, we require shelter and food, and as bodies we require one another and desire one another. So this is a politics of the public body, the requirements of the body, its movement and voice. (2011b)

Now it might seem hopelessly old-fashioned in our digital age to appeal to physical proximity as an important site of ethics and politics, but I share Butler's belief that there is something important about the experience of bodies coming together in shared space. I am not naïve about the potential for violence to erupt in such situations, and as Butler herself made clear with regard to political protests, there are "risks in putting ourselves out there, on the street, in the world, among others we cannot know and fully predict" (2010, p. 14). There are risks to bodies coming together in classrooms too, but I believe that spending time in physical proximity with those who are distant from us in other ways, whether race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, or ability, might open us up to new ways of perceiving those other (and othered) bodies.

Our visceral responses to other people—whether desire, disgust, or, perhaps even more telling, when we register no physical response at all—reveal a lot about our relationship to those others. In a keynote address to the North American Philosophy of Education Society, George Yancy (2012) offered a phenomenological account of his experience as a black man riding alone in an elevator with a white woman. As the elevator ascends from one floor to the next, so too the tension between Yancy and the white woman rises, as each silently inscribes the other with well-rehearsed assumptions about the differences that define and divide them. But, "What if the elevator broke down for six hours?" Yancy asks. Could this create a space for the assumptions about each other to begin to crack, even slightly? Yancy's bigger project of addressing embedded racism extends beyond what I can do justice to here, but I want to pick up on his suggestion that in order to teach and learn across differences of race—and we could add class, religion, sexuality, and ability—we might need more experiences where, as he puts it, "the spaces we inhabit break down—like the elevator, spaces where we 'dwell near'" (p. 52).

Unwilled Proximity and Unchosen Cohabitation

Let us return to Butler again for a moment. In her lecture titled, “Precarious Life: The Obligations of Proximity,” delivered at the Nobel Museum in the spring of 2011, Butler (2011a) drew on both Levinas and Hannah Arendt. She used Levinas to argue that ethical responsibility comes to us as an obligation that binds us outside any social contract, decision-making, or choice. And she used Arendt’s claim that we do not get to choose with whom we share the world as a “guideline for particular forms of politics” (Butler, 2011a, pp. 11, 13). “The necessity of cohabiting the earth” with those we do not choose, Butler says, “is a principle that, in [Arendt’s] philosophy, must guide the actions and policies of any neighborhood, community, or nation” (p. 13). And I think we could extend that principle to publicly funded school classrooms.

It is important to note that when Arendt used the terms “unwilled proximity” and “unchosen cohabitation,” it was in the context of her condemnation of Eichmann’s desire to get rid of those he thought unworthy of sharing the earth (in Butler, 2011a, p. 11). She claimed that Eichmann refused to see that plurality and sharing the world with those we do not choose are the very conditions of our existence as ethical and political beings, and that, while we should be free to choose with whom we want to share private space—for example, those with whom we want to share a household or go on holiday—that freedom does not extend to the public sphere (Arendt, 1959, p. 52).

Obviously, in any discussion about education, it needs to be noted that the public-private distinction that Arendt described and defended with regard to schools in her essay “Reflections on Little Rock” (1959) does not hold—and she has been widely critiqued on that point. However, in preliminary remarks she added to the article when it was finally published in the journal *Dissent*, she acknowledged that when she first wrote the “Reflections,” she had not “take[n] into account the role education plays, and has always, played, in the political framework of [the United States]” (p. 46), and she fleshed this point out more fully in her essay “The Crisis in Education” (in Arendt, 1961).

I mention this because it is precisely the role of education—and, in particular, the role of publicly funded schools in pluralist democracies—that is central to our discussion here. Schools and classrooms within those schools are neither fully public, in that not just anyone can come into the space, nor fully private, in that they serve a broader public mandate and cannot exclude students on the basis of cultural, racial, or religious difference. For the purposes of this paper, I consider them more public than private spaces, and, as a result, it seems to me, that Arendt’s terms “unwilled proximity” and “unchosen cohabitation” come back into play as apt descriptors for the ways in which students and teachers, especially at the elementary level, occupy classroom spaces. Students are grouped together by an administrator and assigned to a teacher who may also have little choice in that assignment. In general, this does not need to be seen as a problem to be solved. Of course, there may be instances of truly counter-productive groupings, but I want to suggest that it is precisely in the experience of “dwelling near” (to use Yancy’s term) or living “up against” (to borrow from Butler, 2011a) those we have not chosen—and perhaps even those we might in other contexts seek to avoid—that we might find a new way to think about pedagogical responsibility.

Proximity and Pedagogical Responsibility

I realize that in arguing that we need more experiences of “up-againstness” and “dwelling near” in education, I am not suggesting anything particularly radical—but it does go against the current trend toward more and more online education, even at the elementary and secondary levels. My main concern is that when we remove from education the requirement of spending time in physical proximity with those we might not normally choose to spend time with, we risk missing something important about being human. We risk forgetting that vulnerability is a characteristic of all human lives, not something we can contain or avoid— and that our very subjectivity is tied to the other to whom and for whom we are responsible. We risk forgetting, in other words, that any experience of being is an experience of being-with.

As I mentioned above, there are no guarantees that spending time with others will be a positive experience, nor that physical proximity will necessarily facilitate the development of particular moral emotions or political commitments. And public school classrooms, especially in large urban centers characterized by cultural, religious, economic and racial diversity, can be very complicated spaces indeed. But, consistent with Dini Metro-Roland and Paul Farber’s (2012) work on cultivating civic virtues, I believe that one of the important roles of public schooling is to offer opportunities for students and teachers alike to experience up close the many divergent, and often equally defensible, ways that human lives can be lived. Drawing on Arendt and moral philosopher Julia Annas, Metro-Roland and Farber argue that

schools provide a separate place for sustained relationships where virtue is practiced in a theater of mimesis and innovation, action and reflection, giving and receiving, watching and being watched. . . . a place where students have time and space to overcome their initial reservations and discomfort and, in the presence of passionate teachers, encounter new and old ideas and aspire to learn and share their understanding in ways that contribute to their own flourishing and the flourishing of those around them. (2012, p. 436)

However, pedagogical responsibility as a response to precarity means that, as educators, we must not only provide our students with these experiences of “up-againstness”; we must also change the social and political landscape of our classrooms so they become spaces where equality is not just talked about, but enacted on a day-to-day basis.

Pedagogical responsibility in this vein means that, as educators, we must use our speech to make space for those who are denied the right to speak, we must listen to those who are deemed unintelligible, and, as Levinas (1993) puts it, we must “invest our freedom and rights in the freedom and rights of the other” (p. 125). Pedagogical responsibility as a response to precarity thus means that we need to examine the educational systems, policies and practices that render some students unnecessarily vulnerable, and which categorize certain ways of being as inherently at risk. It is not about denying difference,

but rather about what we *do* with those differences.

Butler, Standing, and Lorey focus quite rightly on the need to address precarity in the larger political arena rather than on the individual level, but I also believe that there are times when smaller acts and one-to-one encounters can contain the seeds of political transformation. And I want to suggest that there are smaller interventions we can take in the context of our own classrooms that, while not explicitly addressing the larger political conditions, do, in fact, move us closer to, rather than away from, equality and justice. Therefore, let me close by recounting a seemingly small act that teacher Vivian Gussin Paley (1992) made in her classroom that helped to change the social and—even though it was with kindergarteners, I would say political—landscape of her classroom. I quote her at some length here. “Turning sixty,” she writes, “I am more aware of the voices of exclusion in the classroom” (p. 3):

By kindergarten... a structure begins to be revealed and will soon be carved in stone. Certain children will have the right to limit the social experiences of their classmates. Henceforth a ruling class will notify others of their acceptability, and the outsiders will learn to anticipate the sting of rejection. Long after hitting and name-called have been outlawed by the teachers, a more damaging phenomenon is allowed to take root, spreading like a weed from grade to grade.

Must it be so? This year I am compelled to find out. Posting a sign that reads YOU CAN'T SAY YOU CAN'T PLAY, I announce a new social order and, from the start it is greeted with disbelief.

Only four out of the twenty-five in my kindergarten class find the idea appealing, and they are the children most often rejected. The loudest in opposition are those who do the most rejecting. But everyone looks doubtful in the face of this unaccountable innovation.

...Fervently the children search for detours and loopholes as we debate the issues and, eventually, I bring the matter before the older students in the school. They too cannot imagine such a plan working. ‘You can’t say you can’t play?’ It is very fair, they admit, but it just isn’t human nature. (pp. 3-4)

On one level, Paley’s intervention might simply look like a way to make the children be nicer to each other, but I think there is more to it. Whether or not Paley would put it this way, I want to suggest that the declaration, “You can’t say you can’t play,” is first of all an affirmation of Arendt’s claim that plurality and sharing the world with those we do not choose are the very conditions of our existence as ethical and political beings. Secondly, the experience of “dwelling near” that was a result of the rule “you can’t say you can’t play” exposed both the students and Paley herself to the shared condition of vulnerability that binds us all as human beings; and perhaps most importantly, it called into question the established patterns of privilege and exclusion that had rendered some students in the class more vulnerable and others more powerful than their peers, so they had to work out new ways of being together in the shared space of the classroom.

As I mentioned above, there is no guarantee that perceiving another person’s fragility and suffering will lead to our recognizing our responsibility for that other. For those who have

sadistic tendencies, for example, another person's fragility or suffering is a source of pleasure; and, more commonly, when we encounter someone who is vulnerable or fragile, it is tempting to simply turn away, perhaps grateful that it is the other who is suffering, and not me. But there is also the possibility, as Levinas, Butler, and others suggest, that we might awaken in those moments to a new awareness of our responsibility for the other. Paley's proscription, "You can't say you can't play," was not about denying the tensions and power struggles that arise in classroom life, but about calling both her students and herself into a new way of being with and being for each other—to a way of responding to each other that cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance, but which emerges only in the moment of response.

Obviously, there are no easy answers; there is no one right way to enact pedagogical responsibility. But, in light of the increasing precarity in what were once relatively stable and secure societies—and increasing precarity in schools within those societies—I think we might need to investigate more deeply the particular responsibility we are called to in our work with those who are designated vulnerable learners, lest they become the next precariat.

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¹ Butler had first addressed the notion of precarity in the title essay of her collection *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), in which she draws on the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to argue for a recognition of our shared vulnerability as the key to unlocking a recognition of our ethical responsibility to and for precarious others. I will return to that connection in the last section of the paper.