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"YOU MUST SAY GOOD-BYE AT THE SCHOOL DOOR"
REFLECTIONS ON THE TENSE AND CONTENTIOUS PRACTICES OF
AN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER-MOTHER
IN A NEOLIBERAL MOMENT

Abstract

In this essay I draw on encounters where I negotiated the public role of feminist educational researcher and the private role of mother. I attempt to connect them to broader structural issues affecting education and women's paid and unpaid labor, specifically, in a global neoliberal reform context. I do this by sharing encounters from two contexts in which I negotiated these public / private roles--Argentina and the United States--as a means of a) critically reflecting on my positionality in multiple education contexts including K-12 schools and academia; b) illustrating that the personal is political in ways that reflect broader structural politics; c) foreshadowing the ways qualitative educational research can be deeply connected to macro-level—and transnational—social, political, and economic trends related to education, labor, and policy; and, d) bringing gender into conversations about the impact of neoliberalism on educational work.

I am a researcher, an educational researcher. I study the relationship between gender, teachers' work, and educational policy. I am also a mommy. I have fulfilled these two roles within the United States (US) and Argentina during the course of my academic career. Throughout my career, I have paused to reflect on the challenges involved in negotiating the public role of educational researcher and the private role of mother. In this essay I draw on several such encounters connecting them to broader structural issues affecting education and women's paid and unpaid labor in a neoliberal moment. I will do this by sharing encounters from both contexts in which I negotiated these public / private roles as a means of a) critically reflecting on my positioning in the research contexts in relation to K-12 school and university work; b) illustrating that the personal is political in ways that reflect broader structural politics; c) foreshadowing the ways qualitative educational research can be deeply connected to macro-level—and transnational—social, political, and economic trends related to education, labor, and policy; and, d) bringing gender into conversations about the impact of neoliberalism on educational work. The lessons I have learned from my

encounters are many, even though they were often times negative engagements, tense and contentious. Overall, they forced me to critically reflect on the complex relationships researchers have with educational institutions, sometimes their own child's, and the ways those seemingly micro-level or personal relationships are manifestations of broader struggles related to education and work.

Two points are particularly important to isolate and explain in order to understand the complex relationship of researcher-mother in the contemporary context. First, practicing the researcher mommy in the US and the researcher mommy in Argentina involves gender politics that are at once intimate, or personal, *and* bigger than just me. These politics undergird an academic work / life conflict deeply linked to practices, identities (embodied or otherwise), relations, and patterns of masculinities and femininities. Personal experiences of the academy are manifestations of larger structural arrangements of paid and unpaid labor. They also are transnational in nature and are, at least from the two contexts, influenced by neoliberal reforms of economies, of State institutions, and social relations too. Neoliberal education reforms encompass schools from PreK through university. The insertion of economic principals and of new forms of governance seep into the education researcher-mother's work and life, intensifying historical and socio-cultural conflicts between the two.

By gender politics I am referring to organized power relations reflecting gendered identities and interests. I also am referring to State activities that have an effect on gender relations, and mothers' work, such as the funding (or more often non- or de-funding) of childcare and public education; maternity leave; healthcare; support and enforcement of an Equal Rights Amendment in the US and Argentina; and, the acute intensification of labor globally (Chen, Vanek, Flund, & Heintz, 2005; Standing, 1999). While such cuts in funding of social welfare programs and work protection affect men and women, they affect women in particular who are already situated with unequal access to power and privilege in patriarchal societies.

The broader politics affecting work as an academic include the global de-funding of higher education, which creates and intensifies competition for funding and jobs; the US federal government's attempts to legitimize only evidenced-based research that takes the medical model as its example of how education research is to be conducted and limits the questions that are to be posed; added layers of bureaucratic work to ensure transparency and efficiency, but which in reality enforce fear and compliance; and, pervasive gender inequity throughout academic institutions as evident in unequal salaries, tenure attainment, and work demanded (see for example Dillabough & Acker, 2010). These higher education politics are just as evident in the K-12 education system. This means that my experiences as an academic are also the experiences of educators that I study and that teach my children.

Second, saying goodbye—or at least attempting to say goodbye—to my socio-culturally specific ways of knowing and being has at times enabled me to learn more about how gender relations shape neoliberal reform and in turn myself. This has enriched my research and provided me with new perspectives that are useful for undoing or interrupting inequities surrounding education and work in a global era. Part of the political work of confronting neoliberal education reform demands saying goodbye (and hello) to positions within public schools where my children are educated and where I conduct research. Another part of that political work requires confronting the resurgence of a limited notion of intellectual, strategically pushing back against pressures to say goodbye to ideals about a public and caring academic engaged with social and political life beyond technocratic responsibilities.

In writing this essay that refers to personal experiences, I also aim to actively critique the boundaries of reflexivity and research to illustrate the connection of institutions and persons with the reproduction of the very inequality and subjectivity that reflection was meant to address. To understand broader politics and policies in which researchers are all enmeshed, we need to begin at the personal as a place and space of conflict. Qualitative reflection should also reveal structural forces that are at play, played with, and inconsistent or shifting (see for example Weiner-Levy, 2009). I share the gender politics surrounding my research and parent work as a means of meeting this challenge.

In the essay that follows, I convey the Argentine and US experiences as if they are separate stories. However, the experiences only take place in separate contexts. Argentine and US schools are linked by

global education reforms negotiated and contested in both spaces. I also convey the stories of mother work and researcher work separate too. Thus discussion of my personal experiences often resonates with or speaks across presumably imagined national and public-private boundaries. After describing researcher-mother experiences in Argentine and US schools, I tease out the social, political, and economic trends that impact the gendered nature of paid and unpaid education work.

Argentina and saying good-bye

During the second week of an Argentine school year, my oldest child's teacher pulled me aside to say, "You must say good-bye at the school door." I was entering the school everyday and saying good-bye to my child at the classroom. I observed that most mothers did not do this. (I am a qualitative researcher and my observations of social life are not turned on and off like a light.) However, I continued past the Argentine parents anyway. My US and Costa Rican¹ school experience taught me that parents could access their children's schools and classrooms. In fact, I was accustomed to having direct access to my child in US educational settings. I also was accustomed to visits to my Costa Rican classroom from parents and community members. Yet on that day in Argentina, I was being told that unless my child was emotionally distraught, I should say good-bye at the street.

In hindsight, I was being asked to act like the Romans, to use the common metaphor. I had to adapt my maternal practices to the context in which we were living, in which my child was schooled. My family and I were in Buenos Aires while I conducted extended ethnographic fieldwork.² After my initial anger over being told what to do in relation to my child (an important reaction which I do not explore here), I came to appreciate the command as an important cue early in my fieldwork experience: I needed to say good-bye to how I positioned myself—physically—in relation to schools and seek out new positions from which to be the mother of a school-aged child. I also needed to learn new socio-cultural norms related to the parent-teacher relationship. As a mother of a child who was comfortable with and happy to be in this Buenos Aires school, I needed to learn the performance of an Argentine parent. I learned that if I could position myself differently in relation to my child's school, my positionality could shift and potentially would continue to do so.

At this same moment, I was expanding my expertise as an educational researcher, conducting an ethnography on teachers' work in the neoliberal reform context. I had to access Argentine schools as a researcher. I could not say good-bye at the school doors and expect to finish my investigation. For example, I could not walk away when a school gatekeeper did not recognize me, potentially denying me the chance to interview and observe teachers. Instead I made strategic choices each and every time to negotiate access, to not say goodbye at the sites of my research. At times I positioned myself as an authority figure; the title of researcher (*investigadora*) had cache in city schools (Tilley, 1998). Yet other times, I espoused a more demure, feminine position simply stating my name and a meeting time with a particular faculty or staff member (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Each time, my tone and the way I carried myself shifted to accommodate the position I hoped would be read by the gatekeeper (Mazzei & O'Brien 2009). All of these negotiations cost much time and effort of the gatekeeper, of the teacher who had to explain who I was and why I was (again) there, and of me desperately trying to respect arranged meetings with busy teachers and school directors.

To gain access to another high school, I was asked by a researcher to reposition myself as a wife, or at least, a protected woman. Initially, the researcher requested that I travel with a man to the site. "I would never forgive myself if something happened to you!" Situated in a working poor-to-impooverished neighborhood, the school and the surrounding blocks were eerily familiar to me. Unlike the researcher

¹ The author taught for the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education through Harvard's Institute for International Development Program, Enseñanza Mundial.

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from a more affluent background albeit Argentine one, I grew up in a working class or blue collar neighborhood during the collapse of the manufacturing economy in the US. Surrounded by the empty shells of factories and houses in various states of disrepair, the Argentine school community felt at once familiar. Simultaneously the context was strange because although similar to remnants of my life experiences, this was not where I came from.

I also was challenged inside the school walls I was conducting research. Teachers participating in my study wanted me to break from my education researcher position to reveal what other positions within a school I had fulfilled before they felt comfortable discussing their work and it was important that I was married and had children too. Being from a working class background also offered a presumed shared set of experiences of post-industrialism and life in a neoliberal context in which a very limited space and place was being afforded working class communities. Knowing what my experiences within educational institutions were was as important as my positions held outside of them. These are political interactions, efforts to find shared experiences, and (potentially) related struggles surrounding paid and unpaid labor, status, and prestige.

My experiences were connected to structural issues within the educational field and related to teachers at all school levels. For example, teachers' work has increasingly intensified around the parent-educator relationship, which is a time-consuming task for both parties. Through my research and parenting, I came to understand this facet of professional work as exhausting care work (Robert, n.d.) that was—like so much other work relegated to women—intensifying in light of changes to social welfare and economic institutions (Chen et al., 2005). This is especially true in a moment of increasing social inequality when parents in the Argentine and US contexts demanded more of schools and teachers across the socio-economic spectrum.

Teacher-parent relationships are not isolated from what is happening outside of school and even beyond the primary focus of the relationship: the education of the child. As poor families struggle to find and maintain work, they turn to schools for assistance feeding and nurturing their children (Robert, n.d.). They also turn to school professionals for assistance navigating ever more complicated and retracted state services (Robert, 2008). Middle class families turn to schools to help maintain their social status and also to seek ways of building their child's war chest of knowledge and credentials, to prevent a slippery slope down the socio-economic ladder. Thus, when possible, teachers must prioritize their responsibilities and micro-manage their precious time to focus on educating students. Whether I was in the school as a mother or researcher, interacting with me on a daily basis took time away from interacting with students and daily lesson preparation.

Second, teachers' skills continue to hold the spotlight and are under siege around the world (Compton & Weiner, 2008; Robert, Pitzer, & Weiner, 2012). Their professional knowledge and training are questioned in mass media (Robert, 2012) and daily conversations. Teachers regularly have to defend their professional prestige on a personal and group level. In my role as a parent I recognized that my child was treated well, she was learning—evident in work sent home, what my child communicated to us, and daily school-family notebook communication—and my child enjoyed going to school; I had no reason to question the classroom environment. As a researcher, criticism of teachers' skills added a sense of urgency to my own research; it was important to teachers who participated in the ethnography that a public beyond those engaged in educational endeavors learned about their dedicated and difficult work. They had very little time to dedicate themselves to countering mass media and general public perception of teachers.

Third, teachers' and caregivers' work has intensified. As state services are cut back, permission to drop off a child at school enables caregivers to get on with their other work. There is well-documented intensification of women's paid and unpaid labor in the global context for all except elite classes. I will say my case differs here from many Argentine (and US) mothers because my partner was (is) primarily responsible for picking up and dropping off our school-aged children. Most days I could not take responsibility for this care activity if I was to conduct research. For teachers with children, making it to their child's school and then to their school on time was a daily challenge repeated again at the end of the

day. Thus, when my child's teacher told me that I should (or could) leave, this gave me extra time to work. The teacher was giving me permission to get on with my day. School days in Argentina are very short (3-5 hours / day) with few options to extend. This was extremely important since my work had to be done during the school day too.

I had to switch between multiple roles and relations of power in my exchanges with teachers and schools, and I did so within a "foreign" context. During my international fieldwork, I had to expand my practices of the educational researcher-mother and actively struggle for positioning that offered access to a research site and denied it to my child's school yet somehow the arrangement created balance in what is often framed as work-life conflict.

The gender politics involved in practicing this dual role beg critical reflection of the researcher-researched relationship and the parent-teacher relationship. These are very complicated relations (or should be complicated), particularly for members of dominant social groups studying the "Other" (Patai, 1994). In my case, I was—and still am—the white, heterosexual woman from the "Empire" studying the Latin American Other. However, as my experiences suggest, I was not always in a position of power in either role, regardless of my relation to hegemonic social groups. Contrary to Patai's argument that the outsider should perhaps not do research and unlike Naples (1996) finding that most participants in her study framed themselves as outsiders, I was not unwelcomed and not always positioned as an outsider by those being researched. I did say good-bye at the school door, framing myself as the outsider to my child's school. That outsider status, of staying physically out of my child's school, disappeared during parent-inclusive events. At the schools where I did researcher, the participants sought to link me to their school community and profession. Through these experiences I said good-bye to some of my own ways of knowing and being while conducting research and navigating my child's schools. I was told to and learned from it. Upon reflection, this simple command assured me I was fulfilling my parental duties and allowed me to fulfill my work responsibilities.

Reflecting and acting on the Argentine teacher's command to say goodbye at the school door was not only about a loss of power over how I managed my child, and not only about me. It enabled me to see how practicing my public and private roles was connected to larger trends surrounding issues of labor in and out of schools and the neoliberal policies that intensified that labor.

The United States and saying good-bye

The metaphor of saying good-bye at the school door is equally useful in reflecting on the tense and contentious relationship of the US-based researcher-mother. Unlike in Argentina, however, I am not asked to say goodbye at the school door. Instead, teachers, administrators and parent groups demand attendance at meetings, involvement in fundraisers and school events, and even coordination of everyday activities in the classroom. I have not been asked to say goodbye at the school door, but rather to enter it regularly as a classroom volunteer.

Weekly volunteer time, however, means time missed at paid work. Not all parents can miss work or organize their work schedules to volunteer for recess time, even if the parent believes it to be important. Gendered and classed assumptions are built into the implicit demand for parents to come and help in the classroom and an endless flow of school-wide activities from fundraising-to-during- and after-school special events. One assumption is that parents are available. With mothers holding a majority of responsibility for engaging with young children's schools, this responsibility falls on their shoulders (see Stambach & David, 2005, for a discussion of unequal gendered expectations of engagement with schools built into neoliberal policies).

Gender- and class-based identities are also built into the notion that I can and should be involved more and can give more time, money, and social connections needed for fundraising and for seeking resources for schools (see Astiz, 2006, for an example from Argentina). Not only is volunteering in the classroom encouraged, so too is participation on any number of school committees dealing with more well-known

topics as fundraising to strategic academic achievement plans. As Astiz found in her study of school democratization reforms, rather than create more democratic school-level decision-making, these decentralization measures reinforce broader socio-economic hierarchies. And from my experience such reforms also reinforce traditional demands for mothers' unpaid work.

Parent involvement is a key determinant in a child's school success. However, the meaning of involvement has exploded far beyond attending parent-teacher conferences, getting your child to and from school, attending school events as audience, and communicating as needed with the teachers and administrators. The intensified and expanded duties are a manifestation of budgetary cuts and the growth of alleged parental choice in public schooling (see, for example, André Bechely, 2005).

Expectations for parental involvement also add another duty to the classroom teachers' work: managing adults. To layer parent management duties on top of the increasingly demanding work of educating in US public schools overlooks the gender dynamics at play. Apple (1983) and Lather (1994) describe this dynamic as the absent presence of gender shaping conceptualizations and the nature of teaching work. Contrary to the Argentine teacher being able to maintain a focus on students by asking parents to remain outside the classroom, the US teacher must find a way to incorporate parents of varying educational experiences into the classroom community and learning. Along with the explicit expectation of parental involvement is the implicit expectation that a) teachers are prepared to integrate parents into classroom learning as sort of quasi-professional educators and b) the work of integrating parents into classroom learning does not involve time, effort, and energy. Indeed parents do play a role in educating their children, but the work of parenting and the work of formally educating a child are very different tasks, not the same.

Unlike in Argentina, the US teacher must manage me within the classroom and changes to curriculum and evaluation of their work. While teachers should continue to learn and grow in their profession, new Common Core Standards accompanied by revised testing means that the teaching facilitated in the classroom must change. Again, this must be done all the while that I am in that classroom asking for projects or how might assist in learning. New teacher performance evaluations also signify another intrusion into classroom work of administrators. The classroom rather than being occupied by the teacher and students is becoming crowded.

As I watch first hand the intense and contradictory demands placed on my children's teachers and those of teachers I study, I too have had to navigate the same in my work in the neoliberal academy. Tenure track has changed in the past decade. Publications needed for tenure have increased in terms of quantity (how many) and quality (where published). This occurs at the same time that publishing timelines have increased; it takes longer to get an article into print than in previous tenure track cycles.

Increased publishing demands and timelines are also accompanied by a constrained hierarchy of knowledge. As mentioned earlier, particular methodologies are of greater value in multiple ways to the current tenure track faculty member. For one, some methodologies produce data quicker and do not require the negotiation of social relationships or access to social institutions.

The unmentioned tension to publish is accompanied by the realization that there are many less opportunities to move on if tenure is denied. This is particularly acute in many areas of education that have lost tenure lines with retirements and, if at all, been replaced by adjunct faculty. Schools of education are as much under assault in the United States context as public K-12 schools (see Ladson-Billings, 2006, for a thought-provoking critique of all things public, especially public schools and Labaree, 2004, for thoughtful critique of Schools of Education). For my work with benefits, I must jump higher, stay in the air longer, and smile about it because tenure lines are precious and lines of eligible candidates for positions are long and deep. While I may desire to produce quality, to cultivate ideas that contribute to important conversations about improving education, I must do so at a rapid pace and perhaps sacrifice the quality to keep up the pace.

Funding cuts have hit public and private universities in the on-going global economic crisis so much so that even the market cannot (and also will not) save institutions of higher education. Tenure lines are

diminishing, as mentioned above, as is hiring of staff to support faculty. Faculty and staff must carry the burden of increased service loads including demands for higher enrollment.

Technology does not in some cases lighten the burden either. In many instances it serves to harness the professor to that work. With the Internet, access is or is supposed to be less of an issue. In the tenuous tenure track of the neoliberal moment, having senior colleagues suggest that faculty must be more accessible to students, responding to their emails within 24 hours (weekends and holidays included) intensifies and increases work hours. When students do not get their response in 24 hours (or less) and begin to send emails to colleagues and staff, that intensification also has potential consequences for tenure.

Saying goodbye to schoolwork is increasingly more difficult due to the quantity of responsibilities and the nature of technological progress in more ways than the demand for quick email response times. Tracking faculty's publishing, teaching, and service work is measured by efficient algorithms. Personal Web "branding" – is the norm, as well as electronic courses, including online ones and the materials for the ones not online too. Annual reports are to be posted for review so that minute details of productivity can be scrutinized. The purpose of such reports may or may not be clear, may or may not ever be reviewed, and may or may not be linked to tenure decisions, salary raises, graduate student support, and sabbatical decisions. One may say goodbye at the school door, but only to reopen its virtual counterpart at any hour and from any place with an Internet connection.

Lessons earned and learned

I chose these examples as part of an offensive strategy. When this essay was first drafted and presented,³ I cautiously omitted the deep personal commitments related to my research choices. I had rarely talked about my family. I found myself sterilizing my work to reflect a limited definition of intellectualism. This was not an easy task.

It also did not reflect my research interests. In fact, when I chose this tact I was not representing me. I have made personal and professional choices that throw me into an academic work / life conflict marked by gender politics because I cannot and do not wish to choose between researcher and mother, but rather see them as intertwined and enabling roles to being good at both. I respect the choice not to have children; I expect the same and demand nothing in return. However, my experiences as an engaged parent of school-aged children influence my educational researcher identity and vice-versa and therefore cannot and should not be seen in isolation. The tense and constraining nature of gender politics surrounding the neoliberal reform of schools and of universities means that my work as a researcher and as a mother should be explored extensively in order to understand how neoliberalism creates instability, insecurity, and invisibility.

Additionally, I actively choose to conduct international research. I want to learn about global political-economic trends in relation to schoolwork in Argentina and the United States. I also want to bring international perspectives to bear in my North American classroom. Specifically, I want to insert transnational feminist conversations into North American education while engaging with those global discussions. Yet, the rhetoric of internationalization of US universities does not necessarily coincide with the intensified demands of publishing and conducting pre-tenure research projects to demonstrate one's independence and research might in the same timeframe allotted to previous generations of tenured faculty. International fieldwork and qualitative endeavors, specifically, take time because they demand personal relationships be forged, research sites be negotiated; they demand shifting positions and politics that are part of human interactions. What's more is that despite notions of expanding learning beyond

³ Invited Presidential Symposium. "Chances and Choices of a Lifetime: Work / Family Conflict, the Academy, and the Public Interest." American Educational Researcher Association Annual Conference. San Francisco, CA, 2006.

borders, knowledge is circumscribed to limited questions, places to seek out answers, and standpoints from which to explore those answers critically.

I have chosen to say goodbye at the school door at times for personal and professional reasons. Yet at times, I have also realized that saying goodbye is not (or should not be) the only option if I am to practice the educational researcher-mother. Most important though, what I have learned from reflecting on my public / private roles is that my choices and their outcomes are intimate manifestations of broader structural changes impacting education and women's paid and unpaid labor in a global era. My research and my work within and for my children's schools and my own school, the university, is a testament to that hard earned and learned lesson.

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