RETHINKING SCHOOLS. (2006). WHOSE WARS? TEACHING ABOUT THE IRAQ WAR AND THE WAR ON TERRORISM. RETHINKING SCHOOLS, LTD.

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Whose wars? Teaching about the Iraq war and the war on terrorism, is an educational resource compiled by the editors of the quarterly magazine, *Rethinking Schools.* The title leaves no mystery as to the theme of this particular issue and its publication in 2006-- four years after the beginning of the Iraq war-- seems long past due. For socially conscious educators this issue is an exciting and important teaching tool. The seventy- page text is divided into fifteen chapters written by teachers who contribute articles, letters and lessons designed to stimulate critical thinking and discussion among students concerning various aspects of the United States' controversial "war on terror."

A self-proclaimed "activist publisher," the editors of Rethinking Schools project an unequivocally strong stand against the policies that have led the United States to invade Iraq and wage a prolonged war against the specter of an inconsistently defined "terrorist threat." In his opening editorial, co-editor Bill Bigelow acknowledges, "teaching during a war magnifies a dilemma for educators: how to deal with controversial matters in the classroom" (p. 1). Though few teachers have qualms discussing current events, especially with older students, many in the mainstream may take issue with the notion of teaching what they would consider a "politicized" curriculum.

One of Rethinking School's primary aims, then, is to mitigate the "controversy" dilemma, not only by providing detailed, inquiry based activities and materials, but by offering a strong rational for teachers to take an anti-war stance by squarely rejecting the specious notion that any teaching can be considered "neutral." As Bigelow explains, "Every curriculum begins from certain assumptions about the world, even if these may not be conscious…teachers make countless political decisions every day" (p. 1). Thus, instead of expecting teachers to teach an "uncontroversial" or "neutral" curriculum, the editors propose designing curriculum based on a "social justice approach," which "invites diversity of opinion but does not lose sight of important aims of curriculum: to encourage deep questioning, to alert students to global injustice, to seek explanations, and to nurture activism" (p. 2).

Each chapter in *Whose War*…is dedicated to the description of a single lesson or unit, an article, speech or letter. A theme woven throughout the chapters is the significance of historical events in the lead up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In his chapter, "The United States and Iraq: Choices and predictions," for instance, author/teacher Hyung Nam has students "look back at…history…in order to better understand U.S. objectives today" (p. 13). Polly Kellogg's chapter, "Drawing on history to challenge the war," describes how she had her college students examine media coverage of the first Gulf War from a range of sources in order to encourage her students to "think critically about the war plans and to seek out alternative media perspectives" (p. 35). In a departure from the tone of the preceding chapters, the editors wisely choose to close the issue with the ever-relevant words of Martin Luther King, Jr. Though excerpted from his speech, "A revolution of values" delivered in 1967, King seems to be speaking directly to our current involvement in Iraq, as he states, "Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war" (p. 69). Of course, the war he was referring to was then raging in Vietnam, and, as the final page is turned, one is left to contemplate the parallels between U.S. foreign policy past and present.

Presenting the title in the form of a question is appropriate to the overarching theme of this issue. That is, all of the lessons are inquiry based and prompt students to think deeply about complex issues. In chapter 8, Bigelow has his students do a simulation of a press conference in which he plays Bush reading his fateful 2003 State of the Union Address, and students play hard nosed reporters posing tough questions following the speech. Bigelow collaborates with teachers Sandra Childs and Julie O'Neill in chapter 13 to describe a full unit on critically analyzing the often predatory recruiting strategies of military recruiters who target high school students in poor and working class neighborhoods. Teacher/author Bob Peterson addresses another of the overarching themes, "What is the human cost of the war." In chapter 11: "Math and Fahrenheit 9/11," he writes about how his students worked in groups to solve sets of math problems under the headings such as "How much does the war in Iraq Cost?" and, referring to polling scandals in Florida during the 2000 elections, "Whose Vote Counts?."

As a former elementary teacher of six years, I was especially interested to read about lessons teachers had done with young children. But aside from "Dear Parents," an example in chapter two of a letter from teacher Ann Pelo, with advice on how to respond to young children's questions about the war or violent play, and "Learning from the past, talking about the present," an

article about discussing the war with students by fourth-grade teacher Kelley Dawson Salas, all the other lessons are geared toward high school or college students. While the two pieces mentioned above are useful, and some of the other lessons could be modified, the emphasis on older students is undeniable. If the editors had marketed this issue toward secondary and college teachers, I would have no complaint. The editors do not specify a target audience, however, and the implication of dedicating only two out of 15 chapters to working with young children inadvertently reaffirms the commonly held belief that Salas refers to in the beginning of her article – that political topics are best raised with older students, and that it is "taboo" to discuss them with elementary age children.

Another problem I found was that many of the articles – especially those by Bigelow who authors eight of fifteen in this issue – employ precisely the methods for which the mainstream media is criticized. That is, they frequently provide students with selective information and steers them toward a pre-determined conclusion. The lessons that I find most problematic are those that teachers design around "factual" scenarios they write describing complex world events in a way that reflects their own political views. Although I know that nothing is neutral, and everything is written from *someone's* perspective, as much as possible, I believe that teachers have a responsibility to avoid interpreting information for students. Instead of rewriting events, it would make more sense to have students read segments taken from a range of periodicals representing all political leanings – right, left and center and then to pose the excellent questions that Bigelow offers in chapter one: "who benefits from this situation? Who has the most to lose?" Or "what questions do you need to ask to understand this situation more fully?"

Bigelow creates several such scenarios in his lessons, as do some of the other authors in this issue. Instead of re-writing (and thus, re-interpreting) news events for students, it might be more impacting to follow the lead of other authors in this issue who have students analyze and respond critically to actual media, such as news stories, brochures and TV commercials. Kellogg's "media project," for example, required college students to "collect examples of how both mainstream media and the alternative press were covering the war build up" (p. 35).

Salas also prompted discussion with her fourth graders using an actual news story about local high school students demanding that their school put time aside for all classes to discuss the war. She asked her students "whether they thought it was a good for kids to study war in school" (p. 41). She then describes some of the responses and questions that students had. What stands out most in Salas' article is that she includes a range of student responses, from "…families need to know about the war in order to prepare for an attack on their homes…" to "…if students learn about the war, they might be able to learn how to…avoid wars in the future" (p.41) without comment or judgment. Clearly, the purpose of her lesson was to promote discussion and to have students hear each others' perspectives. Further, she shows a genuine interest in understanding how her students think about the topic as opposed to "teaching" them *how* to think about it.

Though Bigelow also asks his students provocative questions and pushes them to think deeply, his language often has a more politically deterministic tone. When he reports, for instance, "I was pleased…that students were able to be so critical of the Bush resolution…" it could be read as trying to convince students to be critical of a particular resolution put forth by Bush, as opposed to helping students to think critically in general, and to apply their critical thinking skills as they themselves see fit. I am not implying that teachers should not discuss politics with students or even that they should attempt to conceal their own views. I do, however, expect educators to teach students to be independent thinkers, which seems antithetical to being "pleased" or "displeased" with students' political views in the classroom.

Bigelow's approach may be attributed to his interpretation of what "balance" in teaching means. In more than one article he declares "we are not going for balance here" which he associates with avoiding controversy. Indeed, Bigelow defines balance as "reducing social conflicts to just two sides" (p. 1). While I agree that complex issues should not be addressed as neutral, pro-con scenarios, I believe that Bigelow's definition of balance ultimately leads him to do something much worse – that is, to present social issues as having just *one* side. I assert that balanced teaching involves teachers making an effort to present as complete a picture as possible by not intentionally leaving out information simply because it does not fit with what s/he is trying to convey. Ultimately, balance means not going into the lesson hoping to convince students of a particular opinion. Given the power dynamic inherent in teacher-student relationships, educators have a responsibility to at least strive to present information in a balanced manner.

Bigelow's stance clearly comes from a place of passion and resistance to minimizing the gravity of the war. Unfortunately, however, his passion often comes across as unapologetic bias, threatening to overshadow the invaluable work that he does with students and the really fine overarching questions that he urges students to ask when tackling complex issues.

Ultimately, *Whose Wars?* is as powerful as it is timely and important. As citizens of a country that is at war, teachers would be irresponsible at best if they did not engage students in critical analysis of our role in the conflict. Overall, I found most of the lessons and articles to be well conceived, if in need of a little tweaking, and educators will have little trouble mining this rich source for the pieces that resonate with them. Hopefully, those who might otherwise be put off by the, at times, ideological tone of some of the writing, will nonetheless be inspired to use what works from these lessons, modify them or create their own ways

of addressing the difficult, but vital questions surfaced in this issue.

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