Susan Ohanian: Rabble Rouser, Conspiracy Theorist, or Teacher Who Gives a Damn?

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Longtime teacher and current Senior Fellow at the Vermont Society for the Study of Education, Susan Ohanian has authored twenty-three books and over 300 articles published in both reputable and radical journals alike. With such titles as One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards, Caught in the Middle: Nonstandard Kids and a Killing Curriculum, and Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?, her books clearly demonstrate that she is one of the most vehement and vocal critics of contemporary education in the United States. In fact, she is a member of the governing board of the Educator Roundtable. This group was formed to counter the efforts of the Business Roundtable, a group that has proven to be quite a powerful voice in determining education policy today. Ohanian maintains a website that functions as a forum for teachers and stakeholders to voice their concerns over practices inflicted by organizations like the Business Roundtable and policies such the No Child Left Behind mandate.

Before she became No Child Left Behind’s number one enemy, Susan Ohanian dedicated many years to teaching in urban school districts. It was a circuitous route that brought her to the profession. Upon earning a master’s degree in Medieval Literature, she set out for New York City in hopes of beginning an important journalism career. She accepted a position in the television department of a large advertising agency, but after only three weeks, she decided this was not the kind of important career she had imagined; she felt she needed “something more worthwhile for my life’s work than creating Listerine and Ford commercials” (Masternak, 2005, 51). She applied for and was granted emergency credentials from New York City’s Board of Education. Soon thereafter, she took a position to teach English in an inner city high school.

As a teacher labeled “progressive” by some (“paranoid” by others), Ohanian’s classroom career path is strewn with feathers ruffled from her fervor to defend the rights of teachers and students to determine the curricula that best suit their individual needs. This fervor is clearly illustrated in One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards. Published in 1999, it was Ohanian’s first book-length criticism of the standards movement initiated earlier that decade. She says she wrote this book to “speak out for the weird kids, the obnoxious kids, the kids who, for whatever reason, are not successful in school” and show that “when these kids are offered alternatives they can make a turn-around” (Stager, 1999, p. 20).

Ohanian asserts that a teacher’s need to exercise individual choice in terms of curriculum is more vital today in light of the society in which we live. She refers to teachers as “nurturers,” who “must care more about how often our graduates read to their children than whether they have deconstructed The Scarlet Letter or Tale of Two Cities” (1999, p. 20).

Opinions of One Size Fits Few are widely varied. In his review, Ruenzel (1999) calls the book a “spiteful . . . diatribe,” and states that “Ohanian comes across like a hectoring right-wing radio host” (p. 56). He goes on to say that her “self-righteous, sarcastic tone” detracts from her “often legitimate, if overstated points” (1999, p. 56). On the other hand, Kline (2000) compares the theme of her “pugilistic prose” to that of Kohn’s in The Schools
Both books emphasize the “humanistic purposes for schooling” rather than the approach favored by policy makers today who possess “a penchant for fitting kids into pigeonholes” (Kline, 2000, p. 20).

Susan Ohanian’s next book, *Caught in the Middle: Nonstandard Kids and a Killing Curriculum*, is a natural outgrowth of its predecessor. Published in 2001, it is a more personal account of her experience with urban seventh-graders, students for whom the label “difficult” would be a euphemism. Through accounts of both her successful and failed attempts at helping her students achieve academic growth, she maintains a tone that is as humorous as it is heartening.

Ohanian’s clever criticism is apparent in chapter seven, which she opens with an exchange of memos between the administration, the union representative, and herself. The purpose of the correspondence is to determine whether or not Ohanian should be granted a request to sponsor a writer’s workshop during her planning period. Consistent with the experience of many teachers, her simple request was met with obstacles in every direction. The union was afraid that her volunteer spirit would lead administrators to expect similar unpaid efforts of her colleagues; the administrators suspected that she would eventually demand supplemental pay for this expanded role; and the teachers thought she was losing her mind. All she wanted to do was to escape lavatory duty by giving students an opportunity to write rather than spending their lunch period in the noisy cafeteria. After jumping through all the requisite hoops, Ohanian’s request was finally granted, albeit begrudgingly, and the writing workshop was born.

As an author, Ohanian’s strengths lie in her ability to laugh at herself. After her writing program was approved, she took the opportunity to thumb her nose at the principal who had caused her a great deal of frustration by wearing a tee shirt emblazoned with the message “support teachers.” To avoid being reprimanded for unprofessional attire, Ohanian had sewn lace onto the sleeves and collar of the tee shirt.

She provides a laugh for both herself and the reader as she describes the principal’s reaction to her sarcastic stunt. Never mentioning the tee shirt, he appeared at the door to her writing workshop class the next day with a drove of the school’s most obnoxious students, lunch trays in hand. Since she had said that the class was open to any student who wished to attend, she could not turn them away. She was forced to endure them while they threw all manner of food items over the balcony and onto the floor of the media center below. This account demonstrates that, while the author is very serious about her subject, she is not afraid to take bear the brunt of a joke.

While injecting humor into the anecdotes of *Caught in the Middle*, Ohanian never wavers from her rigid stance against the conformist practices of what she recognizes as standards-based education. In defense of her beliefs, she says

I only know that if you don’t recognize and accommodate and nourish uniqueness, you don’t have any chance to educate the children in your care—not for writing, not for anything. And to recognize a student’s uniqueness, you have to offer him choices. Real choices (2001, p. 98).

Ohanian further asserts that teachers must be assured the freedom to make choices as well, and a teacher who is allowed to make choices “is a teacher who is still alive” (Ohanian, 2001, p. 98).

Susan Ohanian partnered with Kathy Emery to write her next book-length criticism of contemporary education practices. *Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* was published in 2004. Unlike her previous books, this volume is based not on personal anecdotes, but rather on an extensive review of current research and real data with regard to the business sector’s involvement education policy-making. It is a cry of alarm intended to raise public awareness of what the authors suggest is a scheme on the part of industry leaders to undermine public education.
Chapter one, “Whose Words These Are I Think I Know,” resembles a dictionary of fashionable education phrases found in today’s media. The authors contend that these phrases appear innocent, but they actually mask sentiments that are often less than honorable. Take the phrase “failing schools,” for example. These words are uttered countless times daily by politicians, journalists, and education officials. Ohanian and Emery posit that this is similar to sending a subliminal message to convince the public that America’s schools are beyond hope. They believe that members of organizations such as the Business Roundtable want the public to believe that schools are failing for two reasons. First, it would drive parents to enroll their children in private schools, where someone would make a profit. Also, they believe that those in control of large companies will use the notion of “failing American schools” as an excuse for sending countless jobs overseas.

The authors also question the comparison between schools and business. In 2003, Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence issued a press release entitled “Tough Financial Times Offer Great Opportunity for No Child Left Behind.” The group announced that “it may be appropriate for schools to eliminate past practices that no longer produce the kind of academic gains required by NCLB” (p. 9). Ohanian and Emery (2004) believe that this is nothing but an excuse to cut beneficial programs such as physical education, the arts, libraries, and kindergarten napping.

Reviewers have offered mixed reactions to Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools? Harding (2005) admits that she “initially found the tone of the book off-putting,” but that the book would be useful to inspire “increased activism and a review of current policy” (as cited in Alexander, Harding, Weiss, Brown, & Young, 2005, p. 1428). Karen Hall (2006), on the other hand, is convinced that the authors have uncovered something akin to a conspiracy. She asserts that “Emery and Ohanian show that when education serves the interests of the empowered, the oppression of the disempowered increases” (pp. 38-39). Impressed with the volume of credible evidence cited by the authors to support their theory, she discloses that “these are details I could definitely make use of in future research” (Hall, 2006, p. 40).

As for my own impression of Susan Ohanian, unlike some critics, I neither see her as a lunatic nor as a shrew. I have to admit, though, that at first I did raise my eyebrows at some of her assertions. Being a Southern woman living in the South, I am not accustomed to the candor and vigor with which Ohanian voices her convictions. Southerners have the reputation for avoiding conflict, often choosing to ride out the storm rather than to make more waves. But after further reading and reflection, I have come to admire her passion and courage. She is not just a teacher; she is an advocate for all students at a time when many teachers are content to sit complacently, waiting for the next shift in educational philosophy to come down the pike.

Whether or not they agree with Ohanian’s views, educators would do well to follow her example of activism. Teachers must recognize the power in their individual, as well as collective, voices. We must learn to engage our voices beyond the confines of the teachers’ lounge if we want to effect the kind of change that makes a real difference in the lives and learning of our students; we must re-acquaint ourselves with the passion that brought so many of us to the profession in the first place.

References


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