

The Shifting Ground of Curriculum Thought and Everyday Practice

I spend a lot of time in Chicago public schools. It is a world I live in, and this is some of what I see:

•Visiting a fourth-grade class, I was greeted by the teacher. "Welcome to our class," she said. "I'm on page 307 of the math text, exactly where I'm supposed to be according to board guidelines."

There was not much going on—two students were asleep, several were looking out the window, a few were reading their math books. I discovered later that virtually every student in the class was failing math. But this teacher was doing her job, moving through the set curriculum, dutifully delivering the material, passing out the grades. If the students did not learn math, that was not her responsibility.

•Attending a local school council meeting, I listened as people debated how to spend funds designated to help poor students achieve. Some wanted to buy specific curriculum materials, others to hire two part-time classroom aides. In the end the money went to buy metal detectors to keep weapons out of the school, and to hire a guard to monitor the entrance.

•Working together, a group of progressive public school teachers devised a set of more learner-centered and teacher-friendly alternatives to the standard report cards to parents, and struggled to get them accepted as options in several schools. It was an uphill battle, but they succeeded in some instances. One teacher told the group, "I'm so exhausted from this one fight at my school that I've caved in on a hundred other fights that I could have had and should have had."

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We need to look at the world as it is, to attend to its variety and complexity, its idiosyncrasy and its particularity. Each of the examples above contains a contradiction. The math teacher is oppressive and oppressed, the school council is wise and limited, the progressive teachers are daring and conventional.

Schools and school systems turn teachers into clerks. Curriculum is the product of someone else's thought, knowledge, experience, and imagination. It becomes the package developed somewhere out there. The teacher takes the package and hands it on to the students. Everyone is passive, everyone a consumer, everyone deficient and dependent.

A teacher told me recently a tiny tale of liberation. Her second-grade class was supposed to do a 2-week unit on rocks. She walked with her class to a pond to collect some samples, but the children's imaginations were captured by their frequent sightings of minnows and carp: "There's one!" "Where did it go?" "What do they eat?" "When do they sleep?"

Throwing caution to the wind, and following the lead of her students, this teacher built a project of inquiry around fish: fish pictures, fish prints, fish observations, fish in history, the life cycles of fish . . . "But you know," she told me, "The whole time we were doing fish I felt guilty about the rocks."

Her concern was only partly that she would be discovered. She was also worried that she was somehow doing a disservice to the students. Was she cheating them out of information

they needed? Would they be ready for third-grade science? Of course this whole approach to curriculum assumes that knowledge is finite and knowing passive—never mind that people get Ph.D.s in rocks as well as fish—the scope and sequence and plan are in control. Some academic, state bureaucrat, researcher, or publisher must know that the second grade needs rocks and not fish, or fish and rocks and not stamps.

The curriculum is the stuff that is taught in urban, public schools. The curriculum is a thing, something bought and sold, packaged and delivered. The teachers are the clerks, the line employees doing their jobs. There is virtually no talk among school people of the curriculum as interactive or constructed, of teachers as transformative intellectuals or moral agents.

Talk of school improvement generally means buying a different package and inserting it into the existing structures, cultures, and realities. Ideas that are potentially transforming—for example “whole language,” “cooperative learning,” or “Afro-centric curriculum”—become thus reduced to fit into mindless, airless spaces: “We have a critical thinking unit first thing in the morning,” or “We do character ed. just before lunch.” The name remains, but the larger reality has overwhelmed whatever might have been hopeful there.

It is not simply the expensive, command-style central office that is killing city schools. Teaching itself is a victim of bureaucratization. It is the acceptance of the model, the reduction of teaching, for example, to a set of regulations to be spelled out as a result of negotiated conflict, and the recreation of bureaucracy (with its focus on procedure and function and interchangeable parts) into the classroom itself, that distorts teaching and destroys teachers and students alike.

Critical Questions

Schubert (1986) describes the kinds of questions that concern critical theorists, for example:

- How is knowledge reproduced by schools?
- How do students and teachers resist or contest that which is conveyed through lived experience in schools?
- Whose interests are served by outlooks and skills fostered by schooling?
- When served, do these interests move more in

the direction of emancipation, equity, and social justice, or do they move in the opposite direction?

- How can students be empowered to attain greater liberation, equity, and social justice through schooling? (p. 315)

If taken seriously and pursued vigorously, questions such as these go to the very heart of the crisis in urban education today. Of course, the questions are not new, they were raised powerfully through the stories of Herb Kohl (1967), Jonathan Kozol (1967), and other teacher-authors in the 1960s and 1970s, and they were addressed, as well, in the work of Caroline Pratt (1948), Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1959), and other progressives in the 1920s and 1930s.

The critical theorists of today stand on these shoulders, of course, and trace their roots directly to the work of John Dewey, the “original critical theorist,” according to Schubert (1986, p. 331). Schubert argues that Dewey’s philosophy of education is a “thorough basis for praxis,” and that Dewey as philosopher, social critic, sensitive practitioner, and social activist understood that a “philosophy of education is never complete except as developed and refined in the continuous flow of experience” (p. 331).

It is a commonplace for academics to be dismissed by school teachers as being impractical, theoretical, philosophical—“That sounds very fine, but this is the real world.” Equally common (but less discussed at the university) is a practically universal condescension and patronization toward teachers, toward the practical. Their experiences are not particularly worthwhile, it is assumed, since they are deficient, lacking knowledge or correct curriculum, and in need of our interventions and ministrations. Academics barely see them and rarely hear them—they are silent shadows in our consciousness. This is as true for critical theorists as for empirical analytical academics.

In fact, the entire reward structure at most colleges of education pulls faculty away from any direct contact with schools or school teachers. Younger and newer faculty, graduate students, and adjuncts interface with schools; their more senior colleagues disappear into research and writing.

It is a neat split—if an old one—this mind/body duality. Education fractures along lines of thinking and doing, venues and concerns divide, everyone’s vision and capacity narrows.

We become Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid—the classic macho male relationship—either all brains or all body in a sick symbiosis. The tragic consequences of this dualism for teaching are as predictable as the movie's bloody ending.

The questions Schubert enumerates are significant. The problem is that unlike the "critical theorists" of the 1920s or the 1960s, those who profess critical theory today are most likely to do so in a language that is arid and arcane, and from the relative safety of academe. Critical theorists espouse praxis, a complex integration of political action with intellectual inquiry, but tend to be heavy on the latter and light on the former. Where are the voices of classroom teachers struggling with these questions? Where are the insurgent alternative schools? What role do critical theorists have in making any of this happen?

People involved in changing schools have taken an important first step, a step away from the taken-for-granted, a step into the unknown. They are searching for new ways of thinking and doing, and they are moving with courage and hope. In this context I have found that no question is too radical, none too provocative. In fact, I have consistently been pushed by parents, students, and teachers to see the workings of politics and power in schools in much greater detail. I often ask school people whose interests are being served here, and I consistently find a complex grasp of the subtleties of control embodied in the lunchroom and the playground as well as the classroom.

Empowering

In a sense all education is about power—its goal is for people to become more skilled, more able, more dynamic, more vital. Teaching is about strengthening, invigorating, and empowering others. People may not agree about how to get there, but there is general accord that good teaching enables and strengthens learners.

While education is about empowering people, the machinery of schooling is on another mission altogether. Schooling is most often about obedience and conformity; it is about crowd control, competition, hierarchy, and one's place in it. It is rule-bound and procedure-driven. Schooling fosters dependence, passivity, and dullness. In fact, many normal, discerning students, wondering what kind of intelligence will

be rewarded in school, conclude that being quiet, dull, and invisible is the dominant expectation, and act accordingly.

In the first year of the Chicago school reform, the dramatic decentralization of the city schools, the parent-led local school councils were free to seek "training" and education from any source they chose. At the end of the year, many council members had two complaints: (a) They had inadequate knowledge and training to do the job; and (b) they had been worked to the bone and trained to death.

This paradox can be understood, I believe, by looking at the nature of the training experience and the expectations of the participants. There was a strong sense that some piece of skill or knowledge was out there that should be given to council members. In fact, however, no training would have been adequate prior to the actual doing of the job. That is, being a council member was itself the only true training for being a council member. Where specific knowledge or skills were needed (e.g., making a budget or writing a funding proposal), specific experts could always be brought in. This was not, in the main, what happened.

Typically councils were offered packages—a curriculum on hiring the principal, a curriculum on law, a curriculum on budgeting—and these were built on the top-down, either-or, we-know-you-don't-know, theory-practice paradigm. Even the more enlightened curriculum on school improvement planning suffered this orientation. The hidden curriculum in these instances is invariably powerlessness.

If we want to participate fully in the revitalization of teaching and curriculum, we will need to conceive of ourselves and our work in new ways. We will have to move beyond brilliance, beyond living in our heads, beyond an exclusive focus on correct ideas. We will have to address all the destructive dualisms, the either-ors, that obscure our vision. We will have to create a holistic language, a language both clear enough and complex enough to capture the realities and possibilities of teaching. We will have to reinvent our profession if we hope to help reinvent schools.

Theory *is* important. Theory helps us to organize the world, to sort out the details, to make some coherent sense out of a kaleidoscope of sensations. Without theory we would collapse exhausted from our encounter with experience,

and this is precisely what describes some forms of mental disease. From the toddler playing peek-a-boo and struggling to understand her vanishing and reappearing mother to the physicist imagining that high energy particles are invested with "charm"—making theory is simply what human beings do.

Living in the world is also what we do (and all our worlds are real worlds—even the world of the college classroom, even the world of our imaginations). Our theories are neither a reflection of the world nor a logical rendering of it. Einstein, in fact, once pointed out that theory-building requires intuition and a sympathetic understanding of lived experience, for there is no absolute, logical, theoretical bridge between phenomena and theory (Pilsig, 1974, p. 99). Theories, then, adjust, change, and shift in relation to our feeling for living—or they do not. And here is part of the problem. Too much adjusting, changing, and shifting and we have no framework of sense-making; too little and we are descending into dogmatism.

For example, we often find ourselves not much different from the apocalyptic Christians standing in the Indiana cornfield waiting for the world to end. Our ideologies—whether well-defended by a blizzard of inaccessible theoretical and statistical data, or revealed truth, or simple common sense (which can be as dogmatic and totalizing as any religion or political affiliation)—hide the truth. They cut us off from the very detail that could be our true salvation. They become an obstacle.

We should be reminded (as the women's movement so powerfully taught) that the personal is political, that we embody a stance and a social statement in our experiences, our choices, our daily lives. We should also know that there is no politics without people, that what we do or do not do matters in its detail. We can, then, stop waiting for the big moment when we can be strong, courageous, and correct, and get on with the business of living as if it made a difference.

We can resist the notion that ideas flow from thinkers to doers. Again, the modern women's movement is a case in point. Although feminist thought, literature, and theory is extensive, the movement arose largely from the meeting of women's daily lives with the increased political activity around civil rights and peace. Women did not bring the feminist thinking of

intellectuals into their daily lives in a one-directional way.

We should resist dogma—theory as a closed, justifying framework that hides reality. We should stay alive to questions, to contradiction, to ambiguity, to the next utterance in the dialogue. And, yes, to spontaneity. We should be for intellect, for a continual desire to see more, to know more. And we should be for a morality linked to action.

Beinfeld and Korngold (1991) remind us that "by choosing between mutually exclusive either-or options, we splinter our world into winners and losers, masters and slaves, superiors and inferiors, haves and have-nots. Such hierarchical divisions are reinforced by a self-serving morality" (p. 381).

We can fight for a stance of interconnection, commitment, struggle, and continuity. We can integrate an understanding that the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions, and that experience (our own as well as others') is a powerful teacher if we will only wake up and pay attention.

Doing It—Collaboratively

All of this leads me to think that there is no proper way to ground curriculum thought in school practice outside of the doing of it. That is, we need to reorganize and restructure and rethink the entire educational enterprise, top to bottom, if we are to make a real difference. Instead of university faculty and school staff as fragmented parts of a whole, for example, we can think of teachers as working now at the university, now in a public school.

Magdalene Lampert (1985) at Michigan State, whose scholarship is based on her ongoing practical work as a fifth-grade math teacher and whose teaching is informed by her continuing scholarly inquiry, perhaps provides an incipient model to examine. Or, perhaps educational resources can begin to be reorganized to provide for teacher-researchers rather than the currently constituted cadre of researchers above the army of teachers. Good teaching is always in pursuit of improvement, after all; teacher-researchers inquiring into the improvement of teaching may be a sensible goal.

Some are searching for ways to build a collaborative process of inquiry, one that explicitly serves the needs of teachers and students rather than the more self-absorbed goal of

"knowledge production" disembodied from conduct (Schubert & Ayers, 1991). They are dissatisfied with knowledge as industry, or as top-down and objective, or as something to be divided up. They are interested in linking inquiry and action, thought and conduct, theory and practice. They want to participate in a process in which people define both the questions and seek the solutions for themselves.

Noddings (1986) argues that researchers "have perhaps too often made *persons* (teachers and students) the objects of research. An alternative is to choose *problems* that interest and concern researchers, students, and teachers. . . . Such research would be genuine research *for* teaching instead of simply research *on* teaching" (p. 394). Paley (1979), to begin, may be a helpful example of this integration. Paley is a classroom teacher whose inquiry into her own teaching has resulted in a steady stream of compelling ethnographies. In any case, academics and researchers can stop hiding behind their sanctified methods, their exclusive resources, their impenetrable rhetoric. They can give it all away now.

In the current upheaval in the Chicago schools, I have mainly run to keep up. I have attended every meeting, rushed from place to place, observed, recorded, and written down all that I have seen. Still something was incomplete. Somewhere I shook loose, and an idea planted in my head by a group of teachers took root and grew. The idea was to become a principal, to gather a group of progressive teachers together, to create a model of a dramatically different, learner-centered, and successful school for urban kids.

Five years ago, the idea would not have found fertile soil—a principalship was my idea of hell. But in the reconstituted context of Chicago schools and in the company of these teachers it seemed doable, possible, and then right. So far it is just an idea, but we have written down our thoughts on schools and I have dragged myself through the tedious and wacky world of certification. And now I am late for an interview with a local school council. I've got to go.

Note

1. On December 12, 1988, Illinois Governor James Thompson signed Public Act 85-1418, and the most

far-reaching mandate to restructure a big-city school system in American history became law. The Chicago School Reform Act called for the creation of strong local school councils made up of parents, teachers, citizens, and principals at each schoolhouse. Each council consists of six parents, two teachers, two community representatives, and the principal. Council members are elected by their constituent group (that is, parents of children attending the school elect parent representatives, and so on) except the principal, who is hired by the local school council.

The intent of the law was crystal clear: Power was to shift from a large central office to each local school site, and a bureaucratic, command-oriented system was to yield to a decentralized and democratic model. The traditional pyramid-shaped organizational structure was to be inverted. It was widely acknowledged that this shift would be complex and difficult under any circumstances. In a situation of wildly divergent interpretations, long-standing political rivalries, and deeply entrenched patronage and power relationships, the contention was certain to be fierce, and the resulting upheaval dramatic.

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