PART I

Beginning the Journey: Thinking about Our Thinking

When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly I cannot teach them well.

PARKER PALMER

"The Heart of a Teacher"

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CHAPTER 1

Starting Points: Assumptions and Alternatives

I think that it is a profoundly democratic thing to begin to learn to ask questions.
ANTONIO FAUNDEZ

My dad's been dead a long time, but one piece of his advice still kicks in every time I get behind the wheel of a car: *Pat, never trust a blinker.* I never do. As a result (and unlike my husband), I have never found myself in the path of a car coming straight at me after failing to make the turn promised by its cheerily flashing—and lying—blinker. I'm still acting on Dad's instructions, though I don't generally get into the car chanting *Don't trust a blinker . . . Don't trust a blinker. . . .* Long ago I translated his principle into what is now my automatic behavior.

All of us move through every day exhibiting countless similar behaviors, habits we acquired from someone, somewhere, that now seem simply the best or right way to do something. Driving easily offers many more examples: Maybe we never exceed the speed limit, or routinely exceed it by five miles per hour. Maybe we never let the gas gauge fall below a half or quarter tank, or maybe we routinely wait until it falls to the E line.

What's interesting and important to notice about these habits—and what also has important implications for educators, as I'll explain shortly—is that they resulted from someone or other, at some time or other, making some assumptions, or holding some beliefs, or reaching some conclusions, about the nature of the driving experience. My dad assumed, for example, that other drivers are not trustworthy, and so he always drove defensively. Many people assume that all laws should be obeyed, to the letter, at all times, whether they deal with driving or stealing, and so

they automatically obey the speed limit just as they automatically return lost wallets and tell the whole truth on their income tax returns. Other drivers assume that the police ticket only drivers exceeding the speed limit by more than five miles an hour, and so they speed by just that much. Still others assume that all automakers set the fuel gauge to register E long before a tank is actually perilously close to empty.

The point here is simple but essential: Our lives overflow with countless daily acts that are essentially habits, actions we take without thinking about them. We no longer question whether the assumptions underpinning them are sound—if, in fact, we ever did think about those assumptions when authorities like parents were schooling us in certain behaviors (like not trusting a blinker—certainly I never asked my dad for his evidence that other drivers were untrustworthy). And yet, unexamined assumptions are critical; they shape our behavior, and our behavior has consequences for ourselves and others.

For example, a driver who assumes that the speed limit is really five miles over the posted limit may be headed for an expensive encounter with a police officer; a driver who believes the E on a gas gauge meaningless may be in for a long walk. While we generally choose actions we believe are safe or productive, what we actually experience depends on whether the assumptions behind our actions are sound. My dad, an authority figure I never doubted, was usually right—but that's just my good luck. Other authority figures, including adults who insist that it's safe to speed moderately or that a car will never stop running until the gauge registers below empty, are often wrong.

It's essential, then, to take a conscious look at our assumptions because they largely determine the effectiveness of our strategies and the quality of our results: sound assumptions usually lead us to effective actions and satisfying results, whereas unsound ones more often prompt unwise actions and unhappy consequences. Driving habits are a simplistic example, but the principle is a sound one that applies to far more important examples. Most especially, assumptions about schools, students, teaching, and learning all influence teachers' actions—and teachers' actions have enormous consequences not only for the students whose future they shape, but also for the American society those students will eventually join as workers and democratic citizens. Most of us can afford a speeding ticket, but this text will argue that we can no longer afford schools peopled by educators who act without being conscious of their assumptions, their choices, and the likely consequences.

Why Theory and Philosophy Matter: From the Abstract to the Practical

Having themselves been students for at least eight to twelve years, and possibly sixteen years or more, most people have countless ideas about what constitutes the

right or best things for teachers, students, and parents to do: Teachers should talk, and students should listen. Teachers should assign homework, and students should do it. Teachers should give tests and assign grades, and parents should accept the grades as good indicators of what a child is or is not learning. Teachers should tell parents what their children need to do, and parents should impose the teacher's strategies on their children.

Precisely because these routines have been part of American public education for so long, teachers might be hard pressed to explain the assumptions underpinning them, even though they've probably completed several courses on teaching and learning. It is not difficult, however, to discredit many assumptions once they are exposed. For example, once I was working with a group of student teachers who complained vehemently that their students would not do homework. In response, I asked why they were assigning homework—and they were, to a person, baffled by the question. *What do you mean?* they asked. *We have to give homework.* When I asked why again, the best they could come up with was *Because that's what teachers do* (Hinchey 1992).

As my own research has indicated, however, many widespread but unconscious assumptions about the need to assign homework can be identified: *assigning homework ensures that students get essential practice,* for example, or *assigning homework is an effective way to keep students, who have too much time on their hands, out* of *trouble after school.* Once exposed, many such assumptions are easily refuted with readily available, abundant evidence to the contrary. For example: simply assigning homework does not mean students will benefit from doing it (Strauss 2002). Common homework assignments often force students to practice a skill they have long-since mastered, as when senior high students are routinely required (as are third graders) to underline subjects and verbs or to circle adjectives in sentences; tasks like these are also time-wasters because they are not useful in life outside the classroom. Moreover, many students are already heavily scheduled with sports, church, work, parenting and other activities, so that their problem is too little discretionary time rather than too much. And, these examples merely scratch the surface of why there is often a great deal more sense in students' refusal to do nightly homework than in teachers' insistence on assigning it.

Despite the power of such faulty assumptions to shape classroom habits, and despite the frustration those ill-founded routines often produce, there are several reasons that practitioners rarely articulate and examine the unconscious ideas driving their practice. First, American schools have changed little in over a century (Cuban 1993), making for very long and very ingrained traditions. Second, teacher education courses focus most often not on the *whys* but on the *hows* of schooling: not on why to assign homework or to use multiple choice tests, but on how much homework to assign and on how to word a distractor on an exam. And, the *hows* are usually presented as prescriptions from educational researchers who have tried

to attain the institutional status of natural scientists by conducting research in pursuit of definitive findings about what is called "best practice." As a result, much of their work reaches teachers in the form of authoritative directives to be followed, not ideas to be examined. The teacher is not to probe Bloom's Taxonomy for weaknesses, but to be sure that questions on an exam go beyond recall to other levels of cognitive skill; the teacher is not to question limitations of the Skinnerian principle of positive reinforcement, but to provide stickers to students who have spelled every word correctly.

And finally, even if teacher educators were inclined to ask students to examine the theory and assumptions underpinning practice (as they often are not), experience tells me that it is exceedingly difficult to get students to take theory and philosophy seriously (Hinchey 1992). As they approach the terrifying prospect of being alone in a classroom with thirty unpredictable young people, education students themselves generally demand recipes for what to do and scorn abstractions offered for thoughtful reflection.

The result is, naturally, a lot of people going through motions they do not fully understand and have never consciously chosen, a situation unlikely to produce results matching even the best and most earnest of good intentions. It is this situation that provides the impetus for this book, which asks readers to take time now, wherever they may be in their careers, to think through a variety of educational ideas that have startlingly different implications for classroom action. Our assumptions, beliefs, theories, and philosophies about schools and learning have a direct impact on how we conduct ourselves in classrooms, consciously or not; every action we take reflects some particular line of thinking and eliminates another at the same time. If we assume we have to assign homework, for example, then we won't have classrooms without it, whether it's effective or not.

Developing a Personal Stance

This being the case, I suggest that all educators need to start thinking much more consciously about classroom routines they've accepted as desirable or necessary without scrutinizing them, simply because they constitute "what teachers do." Given that assumptions produce behaviors and behaviors have consequences, educators need to make informed choices for themselves. Instead of passively accepting classroom advice and practices as revered hand-me-downs from teachers who have come before, or routinely assuming that distant experts like Bloom and Skinner always know better than a parent what a particular child may need, teachers need to think for themselves in terms of what to believe about, what to offer, and how to treat the children who actually populate their classrooms.

This text offers readers an opportunity to identify their own assumptions, to explore alternatives, and to make conscious choices about their own practice—although it does so in a context that unabashedly endorses the choices of the critical educator. Despite the philosophical orientation of this work, however, the choice of where to stand ultimately will be the reader's own. Perhaps even more important than which stance a reader chooses is the act of consciously choosing a stance, rather than mindlessly defaulting to one out of habit.

A first step toward careful reflection and choice is recognizing that consciously or not, anyone who has ideas about what schools "should" be or do is already aligned with one paradigm of education or another. Accordingly, the balance of this chapter will sketch two competing paradigms, providing a context for readers to begin reflecting on their own past and future alliances. Identifying an existing alliance is only a preliminary step, however. To begin evaluating their initial inclination, readers will need to understand the assumptions that undergird it—and that means, in turn, that they need to understand how particular kinds of life experiences shape the thinking of teachers and students alike. Chapter Two, therefore, focuses on teacher experience and thinking, while Chapter Three focuses on the life experiences of students who often come from very different backgrounds, and so experience the world very differently, than their teachers. Taken together, these three introductory chapters are intended not only to help readers become aware of the nature and sources of their thinking, but also to help them expand their thinking about teachers and students different from themselves.

In addition to better understanding and expanding their own thinking, readers working to choose consciously between paradigms need an in-depth understanding of how their objectives and consequences differ. Therefore, Chapters Four and Five offer a detailed look at the rhetoric and results of dominant educational rhetoric and policy, while Chapter Six offers a more detailed look at elements of the critical alternative sketched below. These last chapters will make clear that the choices teachers make between paradigms not only dictate very different behaviors on their part, but also promise dramatically different consequences for students as well as for the future of American democracy. For those who begin identifying themselves as critical educators, an appendix listing resources and allies provides an immediate bridge to next steps in developing a personal critical practice (or *praxis*—action based on conscious reflection).

Following below, then, are preliminary overviews of deeply rooted historical assumptions embedded in contemporary American educational practice as well as of critical theorists' starkly contrasting vision. Both sketches are necessarily oversimplified, intended to provide only a skeletal framework for the chapters that follow.

Historical Possibilities: Traditional Goals

The influence of historical thinking on contemporary education is strong, as recent legislation illustrates. As the twenty-first century opened, politicians of every persuasion took every opportunity to echo widespread voter dissatisfaction with public schools (Robelen 2000), and over time, standards and standardized testing emerged as popular responses to perceived problems with student achievement. That President George Bush succeeded in promoting legislation forcing each state to implement statewide testing (Robelon 2001) suggests that many people see little problem with the task of identifying what students should learn and then assessing their learning through standardized tests. Generally, the thinking behind such testing seems to be *We pretty much know what students need to know, and we know how to find out if they've learned it; we just need accountability to keep teachers and students on task in classrooms.* As is common in much public discourse, the assumptions behind this assertion are unarticulated (and unsupported).

However, any assertion about what students should learn in schools depends ultimately on the answers to other questions: *What, exactly, are schools for?* That is, what are they supposed to accomplish? For example, a school whose primary purpose is to prepare students for jobs immediately after graduation, as technical schools do, would define "what students need to know" very differently from a school whose primary purpose is to prepare them for application to Ivy League universities, for example, as Stuyvesant High School in New York City does. As this example demonstrates, there is (or should be) a direct link between a school's goals, or what it intends for students to be able to do or be, and its curriculum, or what information and practice students need to realize the school's goals.

The fact that politicians have imposed statewide testing despite the obvious diversity of individual public schools (where a single district may house separate vocational and academic high schools, or may have a concentration of English-speaking students in one elementary school and Spanish-speaking students in another) indicates an enormous assumption on their part: *however different individual schools and students may be, we can expect thousands of American schools to share some inherent crucial goal or goals that can be met if all students and teachers are forced to focus on a single core of information and skills*. What kind of goals could be so critical and so widespread as to justify statewide testing? What curriculum is likely to ensure that those goals are realized? The answers lie in historical conceptions of the purposes of public schools and traditional notions of curriculum.

Many people have heard the United States described, as it so often is, as a melting pot, but few are likely to have thought much about what that phrase signifies: gathering together a diverse group of individuals, applying a process intended to blend the individuals into one mass, and eventually producing a homogeneous standard product. Historically, and for clear political purposes, public schools have

been responsible for the process of transforming individual students from a wide variety of backgrounds into some ideal *American.*

While the United States has always prided itself on welcoming immigrants, it has also historically preferred that immigrants be white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant (WASP)—or, in the case of non-Protestants, Native Americans and other people of color, to immediately learn to look, sound, and behave as if they were WASPs. The country has never welcomed any cultural elements (language, for example) from those outside that mold, because the Founding Fathers placed all social, political and economic power into white, male, Anglo-Saxon Protestant hands. Not surprisingly, those hands have historically kept a firm grip on their power. In fact, the white, male elite specifically looked to the first government-sponsored schools, common schools, to ensure that the social structure and values they endorsed remained dominant. As increasing tensions developed between the Anglo-Saxon community and between immigrant Irish, enslaved and free African-Americans, and Native Americans, there was growing worry about the possibility of intermarriage and contamination of Anglo-Saxon blood and culture by "less civilized" others. The common school was intended to defend the theoretically superior Anglo culture from the influence of these others by educating the young as the Anglos thought desirable (Joel Spring 1997, 79). In this tradition, schools were expected to demonstrate to students the *American*—or right—way to think and act, erasing the traditions of their native cultures.

While the historical goal of producing a homogenous American citizen is certainly linked to bigotry, many offer a more defensible rationale for political purposes in schools, including efforts to promote an American identity among diverse student populations. For example, violence is common among disparate groups competing for survival in a new environment, and there are always such groups in American society; once they were Irish and Polish, and now they are perhaps Hmong or Palestinian, but immigrants are always with us. Many still believe that schools can reduce violence among ethnicities by encouraging immigrants to shed their old identities in favor of becoming *American.*

Moreover, no government can exist indefinitely without a loyal citizenry, and governments everywhere—in Japan and Germany and Saudi Arabia as well as the United States—have used schools to inculcate the young with political doctrine. All leaders, monarchists and socialists and democrats alike, want to stay in power and maintain political stability, and that is possible only if the young in every country grow up believing that their particular political system is the best possible political system. To that end, schools are expected to produce citizens who trust and support their government and its policies.

It is easy to see that such political purposes as cultivating a national identity and encouraging enthusiastic patriotism have produced many of the strongest traditions in American public schools. For example, teachers lead students daily in

pledging allegiance to the flag, and every February profiles of national heroes George Washington and Abraham Lincoln mushroom in school windows nationwide. History books highlight military might and glory to stimulate pride, and simultaneously ignore the country's less glorious moments, like the genocide of Native Americans, to maintain trust in government authority. The curriculum becomes a list of sanitized and carefully selected facts that all Americans are supposed to know: *Who was the first president of the United States? When was the Declaration of Independence signed? What is the significance of December 7, 1941?* Political purposes, then, are always embedded in public schools and account to some degree for lawmakers' confidence that a one-size-fits-all curriculum and accountability system is feasible.

Closely related to the political goal of creating loyal citizens, and also essential to maintaining the country's status quo, is the economic goal of creating loyal capitalists. In the United States, democracy has become synonymous with capitalism, which schools are to promote as the American way. Essentially, schools are expected not only to extol the merits of capitalism, but also to produce hard workers and energetic consumers.

In practice, these goals shape the curriculum via exclusion: no criticism of capitalism is allowed in schools. Perhaps the strongest example of historic intolerance is an attack on a social studies textbook written by Harold Rugg, who was a professor at Columbia University when the controversy started in 1939.

Believing that schools should educate students to be intelligent and critical consumers, Rugg designed several lessons on those topics. His cautions to consumers inflamed the Advertising Federation of American, which issued a pamphlet titled "Facts You Should Know about Anti-Advertising Propaganda in School Textbooks." To support the charge that the textbook was anti-American (anticapitalist) propaganda, the pamphlet cited an exchange between two men from Rugg's book in which one man dismissed advertising claims that a motor oil was superior, noting that when he personally tested the oil on copper, it proved corrosive (Spring 1996, 251). The combined efforts of the Federation, the Hearst newspapers, and B. C. Forbes himself reduced sales for Rugg's text from 289,000 in 1938 to 21,000 in 1944—and prompted the spectacle of the Binghamton, NY school board calling for the books to be burned (Spring 1996). The late 1990s demonstrated that the same spirit of censorship is functioning today, when school officials in Ridgewood, NJ, on three days' notice, canceled the performance of an original fourth-grade play critical of Nike and Disney's exploitation of Third World labor (Rana 1998).[1] As demonstrated here, critics of questionable business practices have been traditionally, and strenuously, excluded from American public schools.

Other elements of the economic agenda for schools are less explicit but nonetheless pervasive. If capitalism is to thrive, it must not only have workers, but it

must have workers ready, willing, and able to do whatever work businesses need done. And, it needs a large pool of appropriately trained labor in order to keep wages down. When common schools were founded, the country was moving from an agrarian to an industrialized economy, and factories needed hordes of docile workers prepared to accept long hours of tedious labor. Rote and restrictive routines in the form of lining up, marching, and maintaining silence were considered beneficial training for the routines of factory life. Much of modern schooling comes from this tradition.

The authoritative teacher (like the factory supervisor) set tasks and determined how long the obedient students (like employees) worked at them. If students found every day filled with repetitive and boring labor, if their own interests and opinions were rigidly excluded from the classroom, and if they complained—well, what of it? Such was life, in schools and factories both, and students might as well get used to it. In fact, such *is* life in schools, which Bowles and Gintis have described—in their original 1976 text as well as subsequent editions through intervening decades—as "prepar[ing] people for adult work rules by socializing people to function well and without complaint in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation" (1).

So pervasive and tenacious is the rhetoric exhorting students to prepare themselves for tedious and uninteresting work that many readers, no doubt, will hear their own parents and teachers echoed in common and apparently timeless injunctions: *Of course it's not fun, it's not supposed to be fun—learning is hard work. . . . I go to the office/plant/store and work and get paid in money; you go to school and work and get paid in grades. . . . The teacher isn't there to entertain you, s/he's there to teach you, so just do as you're told.* By the time students reached the factory (or the corporation), they were (or are) well-trained to quietly endure its tedious labor and authoritarianism.

The idea that schools should shape workers is also evident in the ubiquitous tracking system, where curricular options like the college preparatory track or the vocational track are designed to prepare students for the next step toward their work life, whatever it might be. Indeed, the schools' responsibility to prepare workers to fill labor needs of all kinds is so zealously embraced that it sometimes manifests itself even in the lowest grades of elementary school. I actually know a kindergarten teacher who, forced by administrative injunction in the late 1990s to design vocational education for five-year-olds, settled on having the children try on different hats. Of the school's many possible and historical purposes, preparing students for jobs is among the most entrenched. It would be no surprise, then, for both the twenty-first century lawmakers who mandated statewide testing and the state officials who designed those tests to simply take for granted that any state curriculum *will* include basic job training, however that might be defined.

Finally, schools have traditionally been expected to prepare students appropriately for social life in the democracy, adopting mainstream values that, again, keep

daily life—and the status quo—humming: respect for authority, for example, and belief that hard work and education provide a sure route to success. The country needs citizens who can live together peacefully, who respect laws, who cause others no problems, and schools have a very long tradition of working to produce such citizens. According to Spring (1996), sociologist Edward Ross first conceived of education as serving a police function by inculcating values that had formerly been imposed by church and family; if schools could do a good enough job at what might be called character education, citizens would learn to police themselves (12). Schools, then, appeared to be potentially useful mechanisms for producing the kinds of people that certain elements of society deemed desirable.

Certain personal characteristics have always been hallmarks of Protestantism and what is thought of as "the American character": hard work, competitiveness, self-reliance, pursuit of wealth, respect for authority. While these may not appear on the official curriculum, much of school routine still certainly intends to instill these values—which, not coincidentally, also work to reinforce capitalism. If all it takes to succeed is hard work, for example, then anyone who is poor must be lazy—an idea that helps protect the economic status quo from criticism, despite some harsh social realities. In 1999, for example, nearly one-third of all children in the United States under age 18 were living in poverty (very conservatively defined), with nearly twelve percent of them experiencing moderate or severe hunger (Trends 2001).

The idea that schools can and should work to instill values that will keep American society healthy and happy explains why so many topics outside the traditional academic curriculum have been adopted by schools over the years: driver education, values clarification, sex education . . . any social imperative that arises. However, precisely because many social topics, especially as they relate to sex—AIDS, homosexuality, birth control—are highly controversial, state and local authorities face enormous challenges when specifying topics for official curricula. Often, such decisions are made in a heated, circus-like atmosphere that leaves communities deeply divided. This was the case in New York City when Chancellor Joseph Fernandez introduced the draft of his Rainbow Curriculum, a multicultural effort intended to alleviate ethnic strife, and lost not only the ensuing curricular battle but also his job. Fernandez was attacked and driven from office because a very few paragraphs in the plan's several hundred pages suggested that schools acknowledge homosexual families (Kelly 1993). Contemporary calls for a more liberal social agenda in schools have consistently been rabidly opposed by many who endorse the traditional, conservative mindset reflected in such curricular classics as *The Scarlet Letter*.

These, then, are the essential historical purposes of schools: the political, which ask schools to indoctrinate patriotic citizens; the economic, which ask schools to train compliant, productive workers and acquisitive consumers; and the social, which ask schools to nurture hardworking, self-reliant, law-abiding community members. In every instance, the intention is to preserve the American

status quo. These ideas—these assumptions—about what schools should accomplish are so ingrained that they function today as taken-for-granted and self-evident facts, sufficiently ingrained to allow lawmakers to confidently impose state curricula and testing.

How these traditional political, economic and social goals are embedded in contemporary educational rhetoric and reform schemes will be detailed in Chapters Four and Five. However, this abbreviated sketch provides enough background for the reader to appreciate the stark contrasts of the alternative, critical vision of goals for schools which follows.

An Alternative Agenda: Critical Goals

Like traditionalists, and for fairly obvious reasons, critical theorists are interested in maintaining a democratic political system. What is very different, however, is how this overarching purpose translates into specific educational goals. Whereas schools have historically focused only on producing a kind of autopilot patriotism *(My country, right or wrong—but it's always right)*, critical theory suggests that schools instead try to educate active and thoughtful citizens, interested in having a voice in government and prepared to do so intelligently. Rather than defining patriotism as unquestioning loyalty, the critical theorist assumes a position articulated by John Dewey decades ago that suggests democracy is best protected not by rabid flag-wavers but by an active and skeptical public:

> Only through constant watchfulness and criticism of public officials by citizens can a state be maintained in integrity and usefulness. (1927, 69)

From this perspective, nurturing a patriotic citizen means encouraging a young person to actively question, rather than blindly obey, authority. In this vision for schools, educators act on the belief that the survival of democracy depends not on "bloated calls to force students to say the pledge of allegiance," but instead on schools' ability to nurture active and engaged citizens who will "be informed, make decisions, and . . . exercise control over the material and ideological forces" that shape their lives:

> [D]emocracy is not simply a lifeless tradition or disciplinary subject that is merely passed on from one generation to the next. . . . . [but something that] encourages all citizens to actively construct and share power over those institutions that govern their lives. (Giroux 1993, 12–13)

From this perspective, democracy is not a thing to revere, but a way of living.

In keeping with this definition of democracy as something to be lived rather than studied, a critical curriculum replaces the mindless parroting of patriotic rhetoric (which has taught countless children to pledge allegiance "to the republic of Richard Sands") with efforts to promote genuine civic understanding. Prominent educator Theodore Sizer both details such understanding and sees its potential for shaping a better United States when he argues that students must develop:

> a grasp of the basis for consensual democratic government, a respect for its processes, and acceptance of the restraints and obligations incumbent on a citizen. . . . if all American citizens had mastered at the least the complex principles [in the Bill of Rights], this would be a more just society. (1985, 86)

That the society could, and should, be more just is an integral tenet of critical theory, for reasons that will become evident in the following paragraphs.

To help students grow into knowledgeable and engaged citizens, the focus in a critical classroom is not on memorization but on questioning, on examining existing conditions and proposals with a skeptical eye—on the "watchfulness and criticism" that Dewey advocated. Always, the critical educator encourages such questions as *Who made this decision, who devised this plan, based on what criteria? Who will gain what from it? Who will lose what?* From a critical perspective, such questioning is essential because the status quo always privileges one segment of society over another, and the goal of the critical theorist is to promote a more genuinely equitable society—a society that more closely resembles the promise of democratic rhetoric, equal opportunity to all. The critical educator strives to ensure that every group of young people, the disenfranchised as well as the privileged—poor as well as rich; black and red and yellow as well as white; gay as well as straight; female as well as male—enjoys equal opportunity to pursue a better future through education. To that end, critical questioning purposefully challenges the status quo by examining it through the lens of the less privileged.

In schools, such questioning leads to challenges to long-revered curricular assumptions and routines:

> Whose history and literature is taught and whose ignored? Which groups are included and which left out of the reading list or text? From whose point of view is the past and present examined? Which themes are emphasized and which not? Is the curriculum balanced and multicultural, giving equal attention to men, women, minorities, and nonelite groups, or is it traditionally male-oriented and Eurocentric? Do students read about Columbus from the point of view of the Arawak people he conquered or only from the point of view of the Europeans he led into conquest? Do science classes investigate the biochemistry of the students' lives, like the nutritional value of the school lunch or the potential toxins in the local air, water, and land, or do they only talk abstractly about photosynthesis? (Shor 1992, 14)

The curricular implications here are clear and in sharp contrast to tradition.

The traditional educator, wanting students to support the status quo, will continue to quote T.S. Eliot and to insist that students can spell photosynthesis, as teachers have done for decades. In contrast, the critical educator, wanting students to broaden their experience and thinking, will introduce the voices of Sojourner Truth or Lame Deer, since a commitment to non-mainstream groups makes multiculturalism essential. Additionally, in a critical classroom, research becomes not something done by distant authorities in white lab coats, but by students themselves. As Freire suggests, for example, students might research local living conditions:

> Why not, for example, take advantage of the students' experience of life in those parts of the city neglected by the authorities to discuss the problems of pollution in the rivers and the question of poverty and the risks to health from the rubbish heaps in such areas? Why are there no rubbish heaps in the heart of the rich areas of the city? (1998, 36)

Incorporating such changes is a difficult process, however, because it threatens many, teachers and students alike, who are privileged by the status quo.

Questions like those above, for example, are considered "'in bad taste,'" as Freire himself notes (1998, 36); they call attention to conditions that citizens living in clean and safe neighborhoods would rather not think about. And, including multicultural voices in the curriculum suggests that other cultures may well have valuable ideas to offer. Honoring other cultures, however, challenges the presumed superiority of Anglo Saxon culture and implies that it's time for the mainstream to stop dismissing members of other cultures as uncivilized or savage. Some discomfort for those who currently enjoy a variety of privileges is inevitable, and so resistance is to be expected. Such resistance will be exacerbated as psychological discomfort is compounded by the prospect of economic change.

To suggest that business decisions should be based less on profitability and more on potential health and environmental concerns, for example, challenges the dominant assumption that profitability always matters most. The assumptions that critical educators challenge, like "We have the world's greatest culture" or "We *must* maximize profit" have been used by the powerful to their own advantage, often at significant material cost to the less powerful. For example, the unquestioned primacy of the bottom line allowed politicians in the 1980s to suggest that ketchup might count as a vegetable in school lunches, and even now, it allows American industries to continue puffing toxic gases into the air of industrial areas far removed from the sheltered enclaves of the wealthy and their children. The cigarette industry has profited from its blatant disregard of human health for decades, and the meat packing industry has similarly found it acceptable to maximize profit through unsafe practices that routinely not only injure but maim and kill employees (Killing

Zone 2002). The critical educators' agenda directly challenges the conditions produced by exclusive focus on profitability and in doing so, it threatens to decrease not only the sense of cultural superiority that the privileged enjoy, but also the excessive profits that allow for their material well-being.

The rhetorical results of such challenges to existing privilege are not surprising. (The same is true of practical results, but they will be detailed in later chapters.) Despite their commitment to sustaining democracy, critical theorists are often charged with "politicizing" education and promoting unpatriotic practices. Critical theorists themselves, of course, consider such charges nonsense, and they generally answer with the words of Paulo Freire: "education *is* politics!" (Shor & Freire 1987, 46, emphasis added). That is, there is no way to keep politics out of schools. There is also no way to disentangle political goals from economic ones. When schools support the status quo, as they have for almost two centuries, they are in fact supporting the political and economic goals of supporting current distribution of wealth, prestige and power; when they challenge the status quo, they are in fact pursuing a more equitable distribution of wealth, prestige and power—"a different distribution of material force and well-being than that which satisfies those now in control" (Dewey 1927, 119). Far from being unpatriotic, critical educators intend to make the democracy healthier by uncovering societal inequities and biases, promoting social responsibility, and effecting a more just and equitable society. Critical educators insist on including in classrooms the very criticism of the status quo that traditionalists work so hard to exclude.

Inevitably, such criticisms threaten both assumptions and practices essential to maintaining existing privilege. Not only do they call into question the current emphasis on maximum profitability at any cost, as indicated above, but they also challenge the deeply ingrained assumption that schools should be devoted to job training—especially to training hordes of docile workers to the specifications of business and industry.

As Joel Spring notes, "It is not necessarily true that what is good for American business is good for American schools and students" (1996, 24). Among the several reasons Spring offers to support this assertion, the most important is that when schools offer a curriculum specifically designed to meet the needs of employers, the effect is to help business ensure that they'll keep wages as low as possible—good for business, perhaps, but not for the students who will be tomorrow's workers. Wages often depend on the supply of labor; obviously, the more workers trained in a particular skill available to employers, the lower wages employers need to pay. From the standpoint of business, the ideal situation for hiring is a large pool of applicants that will allow business to pay the lowest wages and select the best worker. For example, in the 1950s business put pressure on the schools to educate more scientists and engineers and by the late 1960s there was a surplus of scientists and engineers, causing low wages and unemployment.

Rather than assuming that businesses have the right to dictate to schools the kinds of workers that are needed, critical educators ask questions about what kinds of jobs businesses are trying to fill and whether the worker or the employer is most likely to benefit substantively from such job preparation at public expense. The reality is that most public schools, especially in poor and working class neighborhoods, serve business interests rather than the interests of their students, increasing profits for employers while doing little to help workers significantly better their lives. (Contemporary examples of this assertion are detailed in Chapters Four and Five.)

Helping businesses keep wages low not only disadvantages students economically, but it often harms them psychologically, even spiritually, as well. It's all very well and good to say that hard work and a high school diploma lead to success, but when a particular region and a high school diploma offer graduates only jobs paying minimum wage—a wage that does not even allow a single parent to pay for child care during work hours—young people stop believing traditional rhetoric, and they stop trusting teachers and other authority figures who promote it. This disillusionment partly explains why so many disadvantaged students leave schools without graduating, virtually ensuring they will never legally improve their lives and simultaneously increasing their alienation from mainstream society.

> Teenagers are a throwaway generation, and they resent it. It is not for nothing that no age group has a higher crime rate. . . . In spite of the rhetoric to the contrary, they are largely tracked by social class and gender. Too few adults believe that poor kids or minority kids can make it. Don't educate their minds, the conventional wisdom goes, because they aren't interested, and anyway, we do them a big service by preparing them for (semiskilled) jobs. (Sizer 1985, 220)

As Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) so richly demonstrates in *Nickel and Dimed*—an account of her efforts to exist while working at a variety of minimum wage jobs—graduating from high school, qualifying for and obtaining the kinds of jobs abundantly available to the poor may not ensure them even minimal housing. Treating students so shabbily, offering them such a bleak and limited future, educators should not be surprised when disadvantaged young people start considering school and schooling irrelevant. For such students, the dreams of democracy become the dreams of the privileged Other, a fantasy—a lie—that the poor cannot afford to sustain.

Such disillusionment, the critical theorist would argue, poses the most significant threat to democracy. When the economically and educationally disenfranchised stop believing that our much vaunted democracy offers them real hope, then the entire society is at risk. If the dream of democracy is a fraud, why continue to support the existing government? If educational and economic opportunity is a

myth, why not turn to welfare and welfare fraud, to drug use, to drug sales, to rioting, to looting—to countless activities that undermine the fabric of society? If, in fact, the American dream is a lie, if the existing system does not offer equal opportunity to those who not already in power, we should not be surprised when the disadvantaged use any means at their disposal to protest mainstream complicity in their disenfranchisement. After all: what do they have to lose?

Again, from a critical perspective the only hope for the future of the democracy is to encourage marginalized groups to develop the power and political will necessary to effect change in the existing systems that serve to keep them in their current places. This goal makes imperative an entirely new social agenda promoting a much wider range of values and viewpoints.

For example, rather than functioning as norms, docility and passivity become the enemies in a critical classroom, characteristics to be replaced with students' critical questioning and quest for self-determination. Rather than believing economic success comes only from hard work, and failure only from laziness, students must learn to ask what *besides* laziness might explain so many families living in poverty and the widening chasm between our wealthiest and poorest citizens. Rather than learning to *go along to get along* in a world not of their making, students must learn to decide for themselves what kind of future might best serve them, their families, and a country that promises equal opportunity to every constituent group.

The critical focus on questioning and self-determination inevitably produces a new social agenda for schools, because critical questioning applies to values as well as to everything else. Inevitably, such questioning challenges traditional values as solitary and unimpeachable criteria for decision-making. For example, as noted above, a willingness to work hard is considered an essential part of American character. However, in contemporary society the definition of a good person/worker as someone willing to work really, *really* hard has allowed many businesses to impose a "normal" work week of 60–80 hours on workers—to the enormous benefit not of the workers themselves, but of stockholders and other elite. "Mandatory overtime" has become routine in many industries, where workers have not had the option of a 40-hour work week in years. Two workers who each work 60 hours per week provide the company with an additional 40 hours of labor, allowing the company to hire one less person and to save the associated cost for benefits, always a major expense. Workers are forced into an unreasonable work schedule because it helps management save a great deal of money; any cost to the workers is considered unimportant next to the financial benefit to the company.

Currently, the idea that working hard means relinquishing an excessive amount of one's time is so widespread that even organizations beyond business have begun to capitalize on it. College football coaches have been skirting NCAA regulations intended to protect players' health and welfare by scheduling "voluntary" practices

beyond the hours allowed. Officially, players don't have to attend, but they know that if they don't attend, they are likely to be punished by not playing. Like factory workers, players have accepted the need to give more of themselves than is reasonable. Only the related deaths of two Florida players within five months have brought such "voluntary" practices under public scrutiny (Berkow 2001).

While the current cultural definition of "hard work" has become a very profitable tool for authorities, abuses like those above prompt the critical theorist to question various facets of the contemporary veneration of "hard work": What is the cost of current practices to workers in terms of their health, personal interests, relationships, and family lives? By what right does any authority presume the right to such a vast proportion of anyone else's life? Do work contracts make clear how much of a worker's life will be required? Or, do unwritten and unspoken rules allow authorities to consume the lives of others and undermine their well-being even as they trumpet their commitment to the welfare of those under their control?

Such questions propose not that we discard such traditional values as hard work, but that we consciously examine how they are being defined and implemented. The critical theorist urges that we consider balancing them against other values that are equally legitimate: the need to work hard with the need to maintain a healthy and happy personal life; the need to compete with the need to cooperate; the need for business to make a profit with the need for business to behave ethically; the need to obey laws in a civilized society with the need to challenge and change unfair and unjust laws; the need to cultivate a common American identity with the need to ensure that that identity comfortably fits all of our many citizens. These kinds of balance, often fostered by examining the values paramount in other cultures (like the Native American emphasis on conservation) will open new possibilities much better calibrated to serve the needs of all American constituencies, not just a powerful few.

In this insistence that education serve the interests of the many rather than the few, the critical theorist offers a vision and an agenda far more democratic and patriotic than its privileged critics will ever admit.

The Why and How of Praxis

Unlike the contemporary politician, the critical theorist does not believe that a productive one-size-fits-all curriculum and assessment system is possible. Of course all students need to learn to read and write and calculate, but those processes are far less defined than many assume. What are students to read? (the *Scarlet Letter* and *Tale of Two Cities*? Chief Joseph's last speech? *The Joy Luck Club?* editorials in the local newspaper?) What are they to write? (answers to factual questions about the Globe Theatre? answers to textbook questions in the words of

the text? original poetry? their own letters to the editor?) What are they to calculate? (how soon two speeding trains will pass in the night? household budgets for a single parent earning minimum wage? the number of children who go to bed hungry based on national poverty percentages?)

Critical educators believe that all such curricular decisions must be based on classroom context. Many choices, of course, are between the content of a traditional curriculum and the content of a critical curriculum. But even within a critical classroom, there are no standard answers. For example, while it is equally important for both privileged and non-privileged students to understand current inequities, their different life experiences require different pedagogical approaches. Students in Oregon might gain a better understanding of their own lives by reading from the speeches of Chief Joseph, while students in California might reach the same goal more efficiently by reading works by Amy Tan or Richard Rodriguez. Classroom discussions informed by such works would also vary. While privileged students might ask themselves how their mainstream status protected them from challenges minority writers faced, marginalized groups might focus instead on the price of trying to remake themselves in the mainstream WASP image.

For this reason, and to the chagrin of many traditionally educated teachers, critical theorists and educators have no standard curriculum and pedagogy to offer. Instead of saying, as traditionalists so often do, "Here's the way to do *xyz* in the classroom," critical educators speak instead of *praxis:* action based upon reflection, the kind of reflection this text supports. No one can tell a critical educator what issue will be most compelling and which strategies most productive in his or her individual classroom. Instead, each teacher must develop individual praxis by first analyzing his or her own context and then designing appropriate, context-specific curricula and strategies.

Recently, good books that describe individual critical classrooms and pedagogies have become available (Shor & Pari 1999, for example). However, it is important for readers to understand that such books do not provide formulas for critical pedagogy. Instead, they tell the stories of how individual teachers arrived at praxis for their own classrooms. The value of these narratives is not in offering class plans for duplication, but in illustrating the path to praxis. This path is always individual, and it always begins with a classroom practitioner identifying a compelling issue in his or her own classroom. For J. Alleyne Johnson, for example, passing by the scene of a shooting led to a new awareness of how death pervades her students' lives and how difficult their lives are. Haunted by the incident, Johnson eventually acted by offering her students a voice in curriculum and they chose to develop a class newspaper. The final product contained several carefully crafted student pieces relevant to the relentless presence of death in their lives. Johnson ends the narrative not by suggesting that all other teachers rush out and begin assigning class newspapers, but instead by stressing the importance of praxis. Rather than

trying to impose a single standard and curriculum on students, as the traditionalist educator insists, Johnson stresses the need to adapt classrooms to the specific students who people them, as critical educators urge:

> Whether we as teachers choose to address it or not, students' lives come with them to school, death and other aspects of students' realities come into our classrooms. Instead of wishing for other students, let us gear our work towards the students we have. (49)

Recipes simply are not possible in a critical classroom. Each teacher must undertake a conscious analysis of every element of an individual teaching situation and design action based on that analysis; that is to say, again, every teacher must develop a personal praxis.

The process, however, is fraught with both difficulty and danger, and so educators who choose a critical path must do so with eyes wide open, with the thorough understanding of practical consequences that this text seeks to nurture. Many teachers, for example, are privileged themselves, and they need first to develop an awareness of their own privilege, a difficult and threatening undertaking detailed in Chapter Two.

It's easy to say we all want the poor to have more—much harder to accept the reality of others having less as a result. It's easy to say we want to end discrimination—much harder to accept that the *Koran* and the *Dhammapada* merit places alongside the *Bible*. It's easy to say that students must learn to use their own voices—much harder to give up our own authority over curriculum to students.

And, the educator who implements critical pedagogy is likely to incur the resistance of privileged Others—colleagues, administrators, politicians and religious groups among them—at considerable professional risk. It's easy to say that the disapproval of others will be no big deal—much harder to maintain a new pedagogy when former friendly colleagues become lunchroom adversaries, or when administrators and parents turn hostile in a meeting challenging classroom activities.

Readers will find much in later chapters that is discouraging, because the forces shaping existing conditions are well-funded, powerful, and deeply entrenched. However, readers who see the advantages of critical alternatives but nevertheless fear that their reform efforts might be futile or too costly need to remember this: accepting traditional practice without resistance also has a very high cost. Since education *is* politics, no choice is neutral, and all choices have consequences—and so there simply is no neutral ground for an educator to stand on. Teachers who just go along, who never think about the assumptions underpinning their practice, in effect drift with local current, and by their drifting they travel a route charted by others. Teachers committed to a higher standard of professionalism must instead thoughtfully choose a direction, must mindfully and consciously enter one of two metaphorical rivers Shor sketches:

> Two great rivers of reform are flowing in opposite directions across the immense landscapes of American education. One river flows from the top down and the other from the bottom up. The top-down river has been the voice of authority proposing conservative agendas that support inequality and traditional teaching; the bottom-up flow contains multicultural voices speaking for social justice and alternative methods. These two rivers represent different politics, different models for teaching and learning, and finally different visions of the people and society we should build through education. Will conservative agendas succeed in imposing more control, more rote learning, and more unequal funding on public education? Or will emerging groups and networks democratically remake school systems especially divided by race and class, from impoverished inner cities to affluent suburbs to depressed rural areas? (Shor & Pari 1999, vii)

While this may not be a choice that education students and today's educators bargained for when they decided to enter the profession, it is an inescapable choice nonetheless.

In its entirety, this text seeks to provide sufficient impetus and information for readers to choose thoughtfully and consciously.

Note

1. Students were subsequently invited to perform the play at Broadway's Roundabout Theater and did so to a near capacity crowd.

For Further Reading

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