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Critical curriculum studies and the concrete problems of curriculum policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I share a number of thoughts and concerns about the current and future status of a field in which I have been a participant for five decades. I know that many others share these worries as well. Speaking honestly, I am deeply concerned that too much of the field of curriculum has lost its way. Too much of it is characterized by a condition of historical amnesia. It has too often forgotten the key questions about what and whose knowledge should be official. It has become lost in postmodern abstractions and deconstructive despair. It is hermetic in too many ways and has in the process lost its ability to speak clearly about some major problems facing schools, teachers, students and communities. With neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist, and new managerial forces increasingly occupying the space of real policies and practices, we have little voice in the public debates over the realities of schooling and the decisions of curriculum policies and practices. The field of education deserves more.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum research; theory practice relationship; social action; curriculum politics

Asking powerful questions

Before I became a university professor, I was an elementary and secondary school teacher and the president of a teachers union. Thus, part of my commitment has always been to work at the intersections of theory, policy, and practice and to expand the sphere of critical educational efforts at each of these levels. I mention this because in my work with schools, teachers, social movements, dissident groups and community activists, I have been deeply impressed with the courage of committed educators, community activists and students in these schools and communities. Such courage is even more important today.

As you know, I have grounded my work in the belief that it is absolutely crucial to understand the social realities of schooling. What is happening today makes these analyses even more significant. Although as I have shown it is not neoliberalism and its attendant policy initiatives alone that are changing our commonsense about education, its imprint is everywhere. Such things as audit cultures, performance pay, never ending competition, privatization, attacks on teachers and teacher unions, raising standards while reducing support for public schools, a climate of anti-immigrant sentiment and white supremacy, a culturally restorative project to reinstall what is assumed to be high-status knowledge in schools, defining "important" knowledge as only that which serves the limited needs of economically powerful groups, and similar 'reforms' are increasingly transforming what counts as a 'good' school, a good teacher, a good curriculum, a good

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parent and a good student, a good community, legitimate culture, important evidence, etc. (Apple, 2006). Education has once again become a site of crucial struggles over authority and identity, indeed over both the very meaning of being educated and who should control it.

All of these reforms have particular histories; and all of them are driven not only by technical considerations, but also profoundly by cultural, political and economic projects and by specific and often unquestioned ideological and valuative visions of what schools should do and whom they should serve. We have an ethical obligation to challenge these positions and to defend a robust education that is based on human flourishing.

Those of you who are familiar with my work may know that I ask 'simple questions'. Thus, rather than simply asking whether students have mastered a particular subject matter and have done well on our all too common tests, we should ask a different set of questions: Whose knowledge is this? How did it become 'official'? What is the relationship between this knowledge and how it is organized and taught and who has cultural, social and economic capital in this society? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge and who does not? What are the overt and hidden effects of educational reforms on real people and real communities? What can we do as critical educators and activists to challenge existing educational and social inequalities and to create curricula and teaching that are more socially just? Fundamental to both asking and answering these are the complex and at times contradictory relationships among 'legitimate' (and at times 'sacred') culture and 'popular' (and at times 'profane') culture (Apple, 2014).

However, for me one other question has been central. Indeed, it is the basic issue that guides any critical education. Can schools change society? This is the fundamental question that has guided almost all of my books and much of my political and educational action.

A little educational history of the United States may be helpful here, as I gladly state that I am part of very long tradition both inside and outside of education. In the 1930s, George Counts, one of the most famous radical educators in the United States, electrified an audience of progressive educators with a stirring call. He was responding to what he saw as the nearly total dominance of the governance and outcomes of education by economically powerful classes. Dominant classes had gained control of schooling and the economy, and this situation must be fought so that schools could lead the way towards a more democratic society. The title of his lecture and the published work that came out of it was a simple question: Dare the School Build a New Social Order? (Counts, 1932). This was at one and the same time a call to action and, so it seemed later, a naive claim. Could schools actually alter a social order? Did they have any independent power—what was later called the problem of 'relative autonomy' in critical social theory? If so, what constituted such power? If not, what relations did schools participate in that made such independent political action impossible or at least unlikely? Of course, these kinds of issues had been consistently raised by organic intellectuals in oppressed communities and especially in communities of colour for a very long time (Au, Brown, & Calderon, 2016; Warmington, 2014). Although I have tried to answer these questions myself in *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013), in the process of struggling with these issues one thing has become very clear to me. It is a truly difficult question both to ask and to answer.¹

Yet, although important, questions such as 'Can schools create a new social order?' and 'What is their role in social change?' in a number of ways are actually premature. Before we can begin to answer them, we need to more fully understand the ways in which the curricular, pedagogic, and evaluative principles and practices that go on within schools are 'determined'? Thus, speaking metaphorically, prior to asking about education's 'inside-to-outside' relationship, we need to ask about the 'outside-to-inside' connections. We cannot be reductive either in our questions or our answers.

The political as well as academic implications of this are significant, as it asks us to be very cautious of easy and overly rhetorical answers. Anyone who knows me also knows that I am definitely *not* asking for quiescence or inaction. Far from it. However, I do insist that we be mindful of complexity and contradiction, of hidden relations and effects. This is crucial if we are collectively

and individually to successfully challenge the neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist, and managerial agendas that are making it very hard to build and defend an education worthy of its name. (Of course, it should not surprise you if I also argue that the test of whether ‘we’—a very dangerous word actually—can create an education that acts back against dominance has to be answered through critically reflective political/educational *practice*.)

Beyond the rhetorical

It has become something of a truism in the literature in analytic philosophy that language does and can do many things, all of them valuable. It can be used to describe, explain, control, critique, legitimate, affiliate and mobilize (Austin, 1962; see also Wittgenstein, 1963). Rhetorical language is associated with legitimation, affiliation and mobilization; but it is often a poor tool for the other tasks that language must perform. This is an important point that bears on the arguments I have made over the years, arguments that can be traced to one of my teachers, Jonas Soltis, when I originally studied philosophy at Columbia, and to critical cultural and political theorists such as Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall who have strongly influenced me (Apple, 2019). All too many parts of the critical education traditions and all too much of the current literature in curriculum studies seem to be content with rhetorical slogans, rather than examining the complicated and multiple structures and power relations that exist in the real world and the full range of possible tactics that might be employed to change them. Moreover, too much of it sees its role as only deconstructive.

This is a pity since this lack has a number of negative effects. It weakens the explanatory potential of critical analyses. It paradoxically helps those who wish to marginalize critical analyses at exactly the same time as they are of even more importance. Finally, such rhetorical positions lack the strategic sensibility that is so crucial in what Antonio Gramsci called a ‘war of position’, a nuanced understanding of the actual possibilities of doing critical work in multiple sites (see, e.g. Gramsci, 1971).

This is not true of all of the critical traditions of course. From its very beginning, some of the most interesting work in critical education was and is much less rhetorical and is grounded in the concrete understanding of and action in and with communities, cultural activists, practicing educators at all levels of the educational system, and social movements (see, e.g. Freire, 1970; Watson, 2010; Apple, 2010; Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2009; Ferman, 2017). Much of the more robust and nuanced theoretical and political analyses that have emerged on the state, on the complex relationships among culture, politics, and the economy, and on the ways in which educational sites and institutions can be worked on—and worked with—that have been developed during the past decades of intense conceptual and political progress (see, e.g. Apple, 2006, 2012; Lipman, 2011; Wright, 2010) have been produced by committed people in multiple nations. Many of them exemplify the role of the critical scholar/activist for which I have argued in *Can Education Change Society?*

Because of such efforts, there have been real successes that give me reasons for optimism. However, to be honest, I worry about some of what counts as success. During a series of lectures and some work with critical educators in a country in Asia, I spent a good deal of time with graduate students. Many of them had been or still were teachers in the public schools of that country. We talked about many things and I was deeply impressed with their knowledge of a large array of work in critical educational theory and research. During our conversations, they told me that one of the reasons they were more than a little familiar with some of the core work in critical education, including much of my own, was because it was included on the standardized tests that teachers and graduate students had to take as an official part of their program.

This is a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it clearly shows that what Isaac Gottesman (2016) calls ‘the critical turn’ in education has been integrated into the formal corpus of official programs in education throughout the world. I am certain that this was not an easy thing to do and it constitutes a victory. On the other hand, as Geoff Whitty has noted, such incorporation may also signify a process of cooptation, of taking insurgent knowledge and turning it into simply one more

academic area that needs to be studied for examinations, thereby severing its connections to its political roots (Whitty, 2006). This is something I too have worried about publicly, since rather than politicizing the academic, it simply academicizes the political (Apple, 2013; Apple et al., 2009). This is indeed something to truly be concerned about.

Thus, similar to the rest of the world we live in, critical education is caught up in contradictory relations of power. However, a realization of these contradictions must not cause paralysis or cynicism. It should drive us to constantly remember and reconnect with the critical impulses and commitments that have led to the growth of critical analyses of and action in education.

At the very root of these concerns are two simple principles. First, we must think and act *relationally*. That is, all of our institutions and sets of social relations—and even our very identities—need to be seen as intimately connected to the inequalities that structure our society and to the movements that seek to interrupt such inequalities. Second, to understand and act on education in its complicated connections to the larger society, we must engage in the process of *repositioning*. It will be hard, but we should constantly try to see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive conditions. This repositioning concerns both political and cultural practices that embody the principles of critical education; but it also has generated a large body of critical scholarship and theory that has led to a fundamental restructuring of what the roles of research and of the researcher are (see, e.g. Winn & Souto-Manning, 2017; Smith, 2012).

This has often led to some truly serious conflicts within the critical *traditions*. (The plural is crucial here and is a strength not a weakness.) Yet this too can create real problems. This often meant that small differences got magnified into chasms so wide as to be unbridgeable. One of my objectives has always been to argue against such chasms. In this regard, the Right has demonstrated something of considerable importance in its formation of a hegemonic bloc that includes neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives, and a particular fraction of the professional and managerial new middle-class that believes so strongly in measuring anything that moves in classrooms. It has often been willing to compromise among its varied tendencies to push education in particular directions and to use education as part of its larger strategy to radically transform the larger society. As I say elsewhere, if the Right can do this, why cannot progressives? This means that there must be more openness, more willingness to form alliances across our differences, than has often been the case (Apple, 2013; Apple, Gandin, Liu, Meshulam, & Schirmer, 2018).

However, this creates a dilemma. For me, too much of what counts as the Left in education is either overly economic and formulaic or as I noted earlier simply rhetorical. I fear that too many arguments and tendencies in the curriculum field and in education in general do not have a substantive epistemological, political, theoretical, or just as importantly the very practical understanding of the foundational materials that are supposedly being drawn upon. Crucial issues involving cultural struggles, the state, the need for much more nuanced understandings of class formation and mobilization, the very real complexity of the economy, the relative autonomy of gender and race, the structuring of commonsense, and the list goes on and on—all of these are treated as epiphenomenal, dealt with in slogans, or simply ignored. Sometimes it is as if post-modern and poststructural abstractions have led to amnesia, to forgetting the very real structures that organize this society. Perhaps even more problematic is the loss of memory of the crucial importance of the school as an arena of and for cultural and social mobilizations (Apple, 2013; Apple et al., 2018). This is deeply disrespectful as it marginalizes a good deal of practical work in schools and communities and substitutes a search for purity—or for the cultural capital simply of ‘theoretical elegance,’ to be used as a conversion strategy for status attainment in the world of the academy (Bourdieu, 1984a, 1984b)—for the messy stuff of actually collectively and individually building curricula, literacy practices, critically democratic modes of teaching, and working with communities on issues of class, gender, ‘race,’ sexuality, ‘ability’ and more. It also is epistemologically suspect, because for me the best theory is built in relation to its object—the past and present of schools, curricula, teachers, policies, communities and so much more.²

In my mind, this implies that one of the most important roles we need to play is not what Karl Mannheim once called the ‘unattached intelligentsia’ (Mannheim, 1936). Rather than someone who basically ‘stands on the balcony’ above it all, it is wiser to see oneself as a ‘public intellectual,’ or as I call it elsewhere, the critical scholar/activist (Apple, 2013). This requires that we have organic connections to these schools, teachers, curricula and communities—and to social movements that seek to interrupt the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society.

The role of the critical scholar/activist in education is of course a complicated issue. It is something that I have elaborated on in much greater detail elsewhere in *Can Education Change Society? The Struggle for Democracy in Education*, and elsewhere (see Apple, 2013; Apple et al., 2018; Lim & Apple, 2016). Moreover, it clearly deserves considerably more discussion of its implications and dilemmas in a time of conservative advances.

Is this enough? Of course not. Will speaking out and acting back at times be difficult and risky. Definitely. However, non-action is an action. The difficult but ultimately fulfilling role of being a ‘public intellectual’ demands more.

Conclusion

In my brief comments here, I have shared a number of thoughts and concerns about the current and future status of a field in which I have been a participant for five decades. I know that many others share these worries as well. Speaking honestly, I am deeply concerned that too much of the field of curriculum has lost its way. Too much of it is characterized by a condition of historical amnesia. It has too often forgotten the key questions about what and whose knowledge should be official. It has become lost in postmodern abstractions and deconstructive despair. It is hermetic in too many ways and has in the process lost its ability to speak clearly about some the major problems facing schools, teachers, students and communities. With neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist, and new managerial forces increasingly occupying the space of real policies and practices, we have little voice in the public debates over the realities of schooling and the decisions of curriculum policies and practices. The field of education deserves more.

Notes

1. It could be argued that places such as Singapore and similar nations have expressly employed education to transform society. This is of course true. But much of the weight of asking the question is to focus on whether *fundamental changes* are made in what Nancy Fraser calls the politics of redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser 1997). Singapore has made substantive gains. But many educators have a romantic view of the ways in which strong states employ education for social change. This rather uncritical view is also the case for places such as Singapore, since there is a substantive debate about the realities of inequality there. For the larger issue, see, for example, Lim and Apple (2016) and for Singapore see Yenn (2018).
2. While I have serious worries about the at times anti-theoretical uses to which Joseph Schwab’s arguments in *The Practical: A Language for Curriculum* (1970) have been put, his reminder of the epistemological importance of practice as a fundament for curriculum studies is worth revisiting. His caution about the dangers of having a single theoretical tradition dominate the field is also worth taking seriously. For him, all theories are “incomplete.” However, let us also remember that at the time he was writing, rather reductive behavioral and psychological approaches tended to be the grounding of a good deal of the field. This was part of the reason he raised these cautions. Yet there are dangers of forgetting the phenomenological principle that “truth” is constructed from the multiplicity of perspectives one can bring to bear on something. But this can lead to a vulgar form of relativism that once again can cause us to forget about the very real relations of dominance and subordination that characterize societies. I have dealt with the theoretical and political issues surrounding this issue in greater detail by calling for a commitment to “decentered unities” in our commitments (see Apple 2013).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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