

Anti-Reproductive Schooling and the Necessary Radical Politics

By Richard A. Brosio

I wrote the following as an American Educational Studies Association vice-presidential candidate during the autumn of 1997: "My reading of teacher education causes me to hypothesize that the teaching, scholarship, and even some of the service we perform must be supported by progressive persons/organizations outside of higher education. The reproductive function of schooling—including higher education—has been challenged most effectively when educators entered into alliances with other citizen-workers who were interested also in analyzing and overcoming the asymmetrical relations of power, wealth, access, and privilege in the United States and elsewhere. We must officially...reach out to those who are struggling for social class, racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation justice."

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My experiences as a secondary social studies teacher as well as a teacher educator have taught me that, overall, in spite of the fact that most K-12 teachers are profoundly committed to caring for and wishing to help their students, all too many have neither the education, training, nor working conditions necessary to facilitate thinking systematically

about the relationships between intramural concerns and those characterizing the larger society. Relatedly, teacher education is dominated by what many have called "apprenticeship or vocational training"; although, those who dominate the profession would argue that they are, in fact, working hard in order to professionalize teacher education.¹

My reading of "apprenticeship" does not seek to discredit this form of preparation; instead, I argue that it best suits situations in which it is reasonable to help improve a system that is working justly and well. Because I am convinced that our K-12 public schools are wittingly or unwittingly serving an unjust reproductive function (according to social class, racial/ethnic, gender—and sexual orientation identities), it is imperative that teacher education be reformed fundamentally in ways that equip our students to see problems and possibilities more holistically, historically, critically, interpretively, and normatively. Teacher educators must help prepare their students—our future teachers—to consider seriously whether, or not, the K-12 public school can successfully overcome its: (1) correspondence with the capitalist economy, the related social class stratification, including how it is inextricably interactive with racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation identities; and its (2) historic reproduction of these asymmetrical relations of power, privilege, wealth, and access. It is necessary for progressive teachers to "want good things to happen to kids"; however, this admirable attitude is not sufficient for the kind of educator I champion. First of all, there are competing, conflicting, and perhaps incompatible interpretations of "the good"; furthermore, affect alone cannot enable us to analyze well the social and physical barriers that have frustrated well-intentioned teachers throughout history. We do not need Forrest Gump as a mythical model.

More specifically in reference to Alan H. Jones' fourth point concerning campus versus school site, I wish to share the essence of a position paper I wrote in the winter of 1997 during a debate about "in the schools," as compared to the need to develop perspectives from outside. What follows is a paraphrase of the original document. Although I think that home-school-community partnerships can help bridge the gap between theory and practice if supervised closely by teachers who understand the Deweyan connection between the two, I do not support a program that relinquishes the crucially important university classroom experiences. Drawing on Neil Postman, I pointed out that "the classroom is...one of the few social organizations left to us in which sequence, community, experience, social order, hierarchy, continuity, and deferred pleasure are important."² Postman goes on to explain that the classroom is a special environment, one that privileges the use of intellect as well as the necessary civil spaces within which reflective dialogue can occur.

Obviously, being in a classroom setting does not ensure that this kind of dialogue will occur; just as "being in the schools," or "in the field" cannot alone guarantee that s/he who is within a place called school can or will understand what

has not yet been studied in depth and breadth. Peter McLaren has written: "There is a perception that professors of education are always one or two steps removed from the real work of school reform.... But this prevailing view establishes an invidious ranking system based on physical proximity.... Here it becomes important to break through the captivity of binarisms...and understanding that school reform involves crossing and sometimes collapsing...multiple borders.... [Furthermore,] it behooves us as radical scholars not to retreat from the politics of theory into a particularist politics of the personal."³ Few people can understand the regime of capital after a bit of training and a series of visits to a shopping mall!

Dewey has taught us that knowledge is never immediate; in fact, things in their immediacy are not easily understood. "Knowledge can never be the direct grasp of reality because raw occurrence must be placed into a cause and effect continuum in order for an experience to be meaningful for s/he who undergoes it. One must place what is undergone into a broader and longer course of events; connecting what is already apparent to that which is not."⁴ Dewey articulated his disappointment with self-styled progressives who misunderstood what he had said, "observation alone is not enough. We have to understand the *significance* of what we see, hear, and touch."⁵ He adds, "over-emphasis upon activity as an end, instead of upon *intelligent* activity, leads to identification of freedom with immediate execution of impulses and desires."⁶

It is my view that in order to best understand issues of school and society holistically and in depth, one must rely importantly on the social foundations of education. Moreover, use of this discourse is one of the best ways to link progressive school struggles to extramural ones. Alan R. Sadovnik, Peter W. Cookson, and Susan F. Semel have written: "The foundations perspective is a lens for viewing the schools analytically from a variety of approaches that, taken together, provide the viewer with an understanding of the connections between teacher, student, school, and society. The foundations perspective also serves to relate educational organization and processes, and educational theory and practice. Most importantly, it links the understanding of these relationships to meaningful activity...[hopefully] the improvement of...schools."⁷

Unfortunately, many teachers, administrators, school board members, and even some teacher educators are uncomfortable with, and even suspicious of, teacher-scholars who are "theorists of educational activity."⁸ John I. Goodlad writes about how he has heard the following at a conference: "'Let's get off this philosophical kick [and] into the practical. I came here to learn about something new to use next week.'"⁹ Joe L. Kincheloe argues that, "Teacher education...often serve[s] the hegemonic role of adapting novices to the existing forms of power that dominate the schools...without a critical system of meaning and a vision of an egalitarian future, students in teacher education are merely adapted to the brutal competition of the existing school and society."¹⁰

David Blacker has written an informative and frightening analysis of how the

current, capitalist world order has rendered all too many persons, including youngsters, redundant; therefore, not even exploitable as workers. These hyper-victimised, young losers in the new world order are not even subject to the kind of reproductive education which has historically earned the justifiable wrath of radical democratic, educational critics. Presently, many working-class students will not even be able to secure employment among the ranks of what used to be called working-class jobs. Those who have become the "road-kill" on the information highway are "living out their days in a world that by design makes them useless. From this point of view, [Toni] Morrison...was not merely provocative in making her now notorious Holocaust parallel."¹¹

Blacker argues that the history of Europe demonstrates that it can be a very short trip from the ghetto to the concentration camp. Savage inequalities cause teachers to become necessarily engaged in extramural political activities in order to help their students survive, let alone do academic work. Blacker articulates the following: The problem of the teacher becomes "analogous to that of a community health worker in an economically stressed neighborhood who faces chronic shortages of machines, equipment... As [Amy] Gutmann...wrote, a full-bodied commitment to democratic education requires that when certain limits of moral conduct are transgressed at the societal level, 'revolution' or 'civil war' is necessary for the very conduct of education in any meaningful sense. Things may reach a point where teaching in the narrow sense bounded by such things as classrooms...and one's individual students—the ways in which [more than a few] teachers and...administrators are prepared to think of teaching—is no longer enough."¹²

Goodlad has commented on faculties of schools and colleges of education in terms of how psychology, administration, curriculum, and instruction are dominant. He claims that all of the above "devote most of their attention to things that fit into or advance the system. A faculty of 60 or so members commonly has only one philosopher ...one historian...perhaps...two or three sociologists. Those specialists and generalists most likely to study and raise questions about the system and its functioning are missing or in short supply."¹³ The social foundations of education field(s) and discourses are uniquely qualified to challenge the limited range of consciousness and interests among all too many students who are preparing to become professional teachers. Foundations inquiry can help teacher educators and their students develop a more intellectually rigorous and critical view of the necessary preparatory work being done—work that Goodlad claims might be limited unnecessarily to fitting into and/or advancing the system as it is.

Drawing upon a study done of my own struggle for foundational study and inquiry to be given a more prominent role in a particular teacher education program, I offer the following in response to Jones' "Ten Points of Debate." Perhaps this will be read by some as being outspoken, insistent, and/or even passionate! If teacher educators are to be more effective in the development of students who understand and are committed to democracy, equity, diversity, a moral economy, a polity where

it is safe to act altruistically, and a formal school system that corresponds to such a good society, they must promote educational experiences that offer the necessary and commensurate theoretical tools with which to match their avowed commitment to helping these students. Moreover, these experiences must be radical, in terms of allowing students to penetrate into the roots of the matters being interrogated. Hopefully, this radicalness will be complemented by the nurturing and caring parts of their characters. Field experiences must be conducted according to rigorous nonpositivist scientific criteria as well as enlightened by sound theory. All of this must be applied to understanding critically the underlying assumptions and institutional realities of our schools and society.¹⁴

It is my view that the great political and educational challenge of our time is to develop portrayals of socioeconomic and political realities that structure our students' lives. Capitalism's totalizing power seems unrepresentable at this time; therefore, the ability to successfully move the democratic imperative forward upon the State, school, and other contested terrains may be thwarted as we approach this century's and millennium's end. What is to be done? Obviously diverse responses are needed; however, there is a history of struggle for the possibilities of living lives in greater security and dignity from which to draw upon. The social foundations of education allow us to study the historical struggles for the kind of society necessary to support schools where "good things happen to kids."

Notes

1. For an interesting debate revolving around what I consider to be a proposed furthering of an apprenticeship model for teacher education, see: David F. Labaree & Aaron M. Pallas, *Dire Straits: The Narrow Vision of the Holmes Group*; Frank B. Murray, *The Narrow and Broad Readings of Tomorrow's Schools of Education*; and Labaree & Pallas, *The Holmes Group's Mystifying Response*; all in *Educational Researcher*, 25, 5, June/July 1996, 25-32 & 47.
2. Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1979), 202.
3. Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 1994), 275-76.
4. Richard A. Brosio, *The Relationship of Dewey's Community to His Concept of Community* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Social Foundations of Education Monograph Series, 1972, No. 4), 30.
5. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (London, UK: Collier-Macmillan, 1938), 68.
6. *Ibid.*, 69.
7. Alan R. Sadovnik, Peter W. Cookson, & Susan F. Semel, *Exploring Education: An Introduction to the Foundations of Education* (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1994), 12-13.
8. G. Max Wingo, *Philosophies of Education: An Introduction* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1974), 4.
9. John I. Goodlad, *In Praise of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 9.
10. Joe L. Kincheloe, *Toward a Critical Politics of Teacher Thinking: Mapping the Postmodern* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 227.

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11. David Blacker, Teaching in Troubled Times: Democratic Education and the Problem of "Extra People," *The Teacher Educator*, 32, 1, Summer 1996, 69.
12. Ibid., 70.
13. Goodlad, *In Praise of Education*, 15.
14. Richard A. Brosio, The Battle for Social Foundations: A Report from the Middletown Front, *Vitae Scholasticae*, 12, 2, Fall 1993 (published in 1996), 36-37.