RIGHTING WRONGS
AND INTERRUPTING THE RIGHT

Michael W. Apple

Culture Counts
Over the past decade, I have been engaged in a concerted effort to analyze the reasons behind the rightist resurgence—what I call “conservative modernization”--in education and to try to find spaces for interrupting it. My aim has not simply been to castigate the right, although there is a bit of fun in doing so. Rather, I have also sought to illuminate the elements of good sense, not only bad sense, that are found within the various factions of the rightist alliance of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives, and some members of the managerial new middle class. I have a number of reasons for doing so. First, people who find certain elements of conservative modernization relevant to their lives are not puppets. They are not dupes who have little understanding of the “real” relations of this society. This smacks of earlier reductive analyses that were based in ideas of “false consciousness.” My position is very different. I maintain that the reason that some of the arguments coming from the various factions of this new hegemonic bloc are listened to is because they are connected to aspects of the realities that people experience. The tense alliance of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious activists, and the professional and managerial new middle class only works because there has been a very creative articulation of themes that resonate deeply with the experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams of people as they go about their daily lives. The

See, for example, Michael W. Apple, Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality (New York: Routledge, 2001).
right has often been more than a little manipulative in its articulation of these themes. It has integrated them within racist nativist discourses, within economically dominant forms of understanding, and within a problematic sense of “tradition.” But, this integration could only occur if they were organized around people’s understanding of their real material and cultural lives.

The second reason I have stressed the tension between good and bad sense–aside from my profound respect for Antonio Gramsci’s writings about this–has to do with my belief that we have witnessed a major educational accomplishment over the past three decades in many countries. All too often, we assume that educational and cultural struggles are epiphenomenal. The real battles occur in the paid workplace---the “economy.” Not only is this a strikingly reductive sense of what the economy is (its focus on paid, not unpaid, work; its neglect of the fact that, say, cultural institutions such as schools are also places where paid work goes on, etc.),

it also ignores what the right has actually done. Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the common-sense of society. It has worked in every sphere--the economic, the political, and the cultural--to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives. It has established new identities. It has recognized that to win in the state, you must win in civil society. The accomplishment of such a vast educational project has many implications. It shows how important cultural struggles are. And, oddly enough, it gives reason for hope. It forces us to ask a significant question. **If the right can do this, why can’t we?**

I do not mean this as a rhetorical question. As I have argued repeatedly in my own work, the right has shown how powerful the struggle over meaning and identity can be. While we should not want to emulate their often cynical and manipulative processes, the fact that they have had such success in pulling people under their ideological umbrella has much to teach us.

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Granted there are real differences in money and power between the forces of conservative modernization and those whose lives are being tragically altered by the policies and practices coming from the alliance. But, the right wasn’t as powerful thirty years ago as it is now. It collectively organized. It created a decentered unity, one where each element sacrificed some of its particular agenda to push forward on those areas that bound them together. Can’t we do the same?

I believe that we can, but only if we face up to the realities and dynamics of power in unromantic ways. As I argued in Educating the “Right” Way, the romantic possibilitarian rhetoric of some of the writers on critical pedagogy is not sufficiently based on a tactical or strategic analysis of the current situation nor is it sufficiently grounded in its understanding of the reconstructions of discourse and movements that are occurring in all too many places. Here I follow Cameron McCarthy, who wisely reminds us, “We must think possibility within constraint; that is the condition of our time.”

We need to remember that cultural struggles are not epiphenomenal. They count, and they count in institutions throughout society. In order for dominant groups to exercise leadership, large numbers of people must be convinced that the maps of reality circulated by those with the most economic, political, and cultural power are indeed wiser than other alternatives. Dominant groups do this by attaching these maps to the elements of good sense that people have and by changing the very meaning of the key concepts and their accompanying structures of feeling that provide the centers of gravity for our hopes, fears, and dreams about this society. The right has been much more successful in doing this than the left, in part because it has been able to craft—through hard and lengthy economic, political, and cultural efforts—a tense but still successful alliance that has shifted the major debates over education and economic and social policy onto its own terrain.

Evidence of this is all around us in the terms we use, in the arguments in which we engage, indeed even in many of the cultural resources we employ to imagine alternative futures. For example, as I am completing the writing of my latest book, one of the top selling books on The New York Times fiction list is Tim LaHaye (yes, the same Tim LaHaye) and Jerry Jenkins’s The Indwelling, the seventh of a series of books about “true believers” who confront the “Antichrist.” The imagined future is a time of “rapture” where the good are taken up to heaven and the bad are condemned to eternal damnation. Who each of these groups are is predictable. In a number of ways, then, the authoritarian populist “outside” has moved to become the inside. It has creatively learned how to use the codes of popular adventure and science fiction novels to build an imaginatively space of possibility, and a “muscular” yet sensitive Christianity, that gives meaning to people’s daily lives and hopes.

Just as these spaces create imagined futures, so too do they help create identities. Neoliberalism creates policies and practices that embody the enterprising and constantly strategizing entrepreneur out of the possessive individualism it establishes as the ideal citizen. Neoconservatism creates imagined pasts as the framework for imagined and stable futures, futures in

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iv Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, The Indwelling (New York: Tyndale, 2000). Tim LaHaye is the husband of Beverly LaHaye, both deeply conservative religious and political activists.

v Of course, people read all kinds of fiction and are not compelled to follow its precepts. Thus, people can read hard-boiled detective novels in which women and men detectives often engage in violent acts of retribution. This does not necessarily mean that the readers are in favor of such acts. The politics of pleasure follows its own relatively autonomous logic. Most people engage in what have been called “guilty pleasures” and reading books like The Indwelling may fall under that category for many readers. However, the fact that it is a national best seller still has considerable importance.
which identities are based on people knowing the knowledge and values that neo-conservatives themselves have decided “have stood the test of time.” Authoritarian populist religious conservatives also have an imagined past where a society, based on God’s knowledge and values, has pre-given identities that enable women and men to rearticulate the neo-liberal ideology of “choice” and to act in what are seen as godly ways toward bringing society to God. And managerialism establishes new identities for the professional and managerial middle class, identities that give new meaning to their lives and enable them to recapture their feelings of worthiness and efficacy. Out of all of these multiple spaces and identities, and the conflicts, tensions, and compromises that their interactions generate, policies evolve. These policies are almost never purely from only one of these elements within this bloc. Rather they often embody a rich mix that somehow must accommodate as many themes as possible from within the multiple forces of conservative modernization—without at the same time alienating those groups believed to be significant who are not yet integrated under the hegemonic umbrella of the right but who the right would like to bring under its leadership in the future.

This is a truly difficult task and it is filled with contradictory impulses. Yet, even with its contradictions and tensions, it has moved the balance of forces significantly to the right. Educational policies have been part of that move. In fact, education has not only been drawn along by the pressure of these rightist waves, it has actually played a major role in building these waves. The conservative alliance has paid attention to education—both formal and informal—and it has paid off for them. Indeed, in most of the critical discussions in the academic and popular literature of the effects of neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and managerial policies and practices in education in a number of countries, it is their policies that have provided the outlines of the debates in which we engage—vouchers, markets, national standards, high stakes testing, and so on.

Contradictory Reforms

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, policies often have strikingly unforeseen consequences. Reforms that are instituted with good intentions may have hidden effects that are
more than a little problematic. I have shown that the effects of some of the favorite reforms of neo-liberals and neo-conservatives, for instance--voucher plans, national or state-wide curricula, and national or state-wide testing can serve as examples--quite often reproduce or even worsen inequalities. Thus, we should be very cautious about accepting what may seem to be meritorious intentions at face value. Intentions are too often contradicted by how reforms may function in practice. This is true not only for large scale transformations of educational policies and governance, but also about moves to change the ways curriculum and teaching go on in schools.

The framework I have employed to understand this is grounded in what in cultural theory is called the act of repositioning. It in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power. That is, every institution, policy, and practice--and especially those that now dominate education and the larger society--establish relations of power in which some voices are heard and some are not. While it is not preordained that those voices that will be heard most clearly are also those who have the most economic, cultural, and social capital, it is most likely that this will be the case. After all, we do not exist on a level playing field. Many economic, social, and educational policies when actually put in place tend to benefit those who already have advantages.

Apple, Educating the “Right” Way.

The parallels between this position and standpoint epistemology should be obvious. However, there is a long history of this claim that goes back many years before the development of such even more nuanced positions within feminist discourse. See Sandra Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Gyorgy Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971)
These points may seem overly rhetorical and too abstract, but unfortunately there is no small amount of truth in them. For example, in a time when all too much of the discourse around educational reform is focused on vouchers and choice plans on the one hand and on proposals for national or state curricula, standards, and testing on the other, there is a good deal of international evidence now that such policies may actually reproduce or even worsen class, gender, and race inequalities. Thus, existing structures of economic and cultural power often lead to a situation in which what may have started out in some educators’ or legislators’ minds as an attempt to make things better, in the end is all too usually transformed into another set of mechanisms for social stratification. While much of this is due to the ways in which race, gender, class, and “ability” act as structural realities in this society, some of it is related to the hesitancy of policy makers to take seriously enough the complicated ways in which education is itself a political act.

Near the end of the introductory section of a recent volume on the politics of educational policies and practices, Learning as a Political Act, the editors state that as progressives they are committed to an “intellectual solidarity that seeks to lay bare the ideas and histories of groups that have been silenced in mainstream educational arenas.”

There are a number of key concepts in this quote—intellectual solidarity, laying bare, silencing. Each speaks to a complicated history, and each phrase again says something about our understanding of democracy. They are “keywords.” They come from a very different tradition than that provided by the linguistic mapping of markets. They also speak to a different politics of official knowledge.

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that the school curriculum has become a battleground. Stimulated in large part by neo-liberal complaints about “economically
useless” knowledge, neo-conservative laments about the supposed loss of discipline and lack of "real knowledge," and by religious authoritarian populists’ relentless attacks on schools for their supposed loss of God-given "traditional" values, discussions of what should be taught in schools and how it should be taught are now as contentious as at any time in our history.

Evidence of this is not hard to find. In his repeated call for a return to a curriculum of "facts," E. D. Hirsch, Jr. argues that schools have been taken over by progressive educators from Rousseau to Dewey, ix a claim that has almost no empirical warrant at all and largely demonstrates how disconnected he is from the daily life of schools. Most schooling in the United States is already fact-driven. In addition, school districts throughout the country are constantly looking over their shoulders, worried that their reading, social studies, or mathematics programs will be challenged by the forces of the authoritarian religious right--although as I demonstrate Cultural Politics and Education, sometimes schools systems themselves create the conditions for the growth of rightist anti-school movements in their own communities by being less than democratic in their involvement of the community. x Other evidence of such contentiousness is visible in the fact that the contents of the mathematics curriculum was even recently debated in the editorial pages of The New York Times, where spokespersons for constructivist and traditional curricula went head to head. Many more instances might be cited. But it is clear that the debate over "What knowledge is of most worth" has taken on more than a


few political overtones.\textsuperscript{xi}

Much of the debate over this goes on with little empirical substance. For example, the argument that we must "return" to teaching, say, mathematics in "traditional" ways is obviously partly an ideological one. (We need to restore discipline; students have too much freedom; “bad” knowledge has pushed "good" knowledge to the sidelines.) Yet it is also based on a claim that such a return will lead to higher achievement and ultimately to a more competitive economy. Here, neo-liberal and neo-conservative emphases are joined with authoritarian populist mistrust of child-centeredness. This is where Jo Boaler's recent richly detailed qualitative and quantitative comparison of mathematics curricula and teaching enters.\textsuperscript{xii}

Boaler engages in a fine-grained analysis of two secondary schools with decidedly different emphases. While her book is based on data from England, its implications are again profound for debates over curriculum and teaching in the U.S. and elsewhere as well. Both schools are largely working class, with some minority and middle class populations as well. Both sets of students had attended our equivalent of middle schools that were dominated by more traditional academic methods. And both had similar achievement profiles. One school overtly focused on preparing its students for national tests. Its program was almost totally teacher directed, organized around textbooks that were geared to the national tests, ability grouped, and run in such a way that speed and accuracy of computations and the learning of procedural rules


for dealing with mathematical problems were highly valued--all those things that traditionalists here say that are currently missing in mathematics instruction. Furthermore, the boundary between mathematics and both the real world and other subjects was strong. The other school did not group by ability. It was decidedly more "progressive" both in its attitude toward students (there was a more relaxed communication style between teachers and students; student input was sought on the curriculum) and in its mathematics program. In this second school, the instruction was project-based, with a minimum of textbook-based teaching and a maximum of cooperative work among the students. The boundary between mathematics and "real world" problems was weak.

The first school was quiet, on-task, well organized--the very embodiment of the dream of nearly all elements of conservative modernization.. The second was more noisy, students were not always fully on-task, and had very flexible time schedules. Both schools had dedicated and hard working teachers. Yet the differences in the results were striking, both in terms of overall achievement and in terms of the differential effects of each orientation on the students themselves.

The more traditional school, with its driving concern for "covering material" that would be on the test, stressed textbook knowledge and moved relatively rapidly from topic to topic. The more student centered approach of the second school sacrificed some coverage, but it also enabled students to more fully understand the material. By and large, students in the first school actually did less well on the standardized tests than the second, especially but not only on those parts of the tests that needed them to actually think mathematically, in large part because they could not generalize to new contexts as well as did those students who had used their mathematics in more varied (though more time-consuming) projects. Further--and of great

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In Basil Bernstein’s terminology, we could say the curriculum and teaching in this instance were strongly classified and strongly framed. See Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes, and Control, Volume 3*, 2nd Edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).
importance for equity—young women in the second school did consistently better in a more cooperative atmosphere that stressed understanding and use rather than coverage. The same held true for social class. Working class students were consistently disadvantaged in the more pressered and text-and test-based agenda of traditional mathematics instruction.

This is a complex situation and Boaler is talking about general tendencies here. But her overall conclusions are clear and are supported by a very nice combination of data. In sum, the claim that a return to (actually, given the fact that most mathematics instruction is still chalk and talk and textbook based, it would be much more honest to say the continuation of) the traditional mathematics programs that the critics are demanding neither increases students' mathematical competence nor their ability to use their mathematical knowledge in productive ways. While it may keep classrooms quiet and students under control, it may also systematically disadvantage young women—including as Boaler shows the brightest young women—and economically disadvantaged students.\footnote{Finally, it may have one other effect, a strengthening of students' dislike of mathematics and their feelings that it is simply irrelevant for their future. If this is true for mathematics, it is worth considering the hidden negative effects of the more general policies being proposed by neo-conservative reformers who wish to return to what they have constructed, rather romantically, as "the tradition" in all subjects.}

If Boaler's conclusions are even partly generalizable, as I think they may very well be, the hidden effects of certain reform movements may not be what we had in mind. Tighter control over the curriculum, the tail of the test wagging the dog of the teacher and the curriculum, more pressure, more reductive accountability plans—all of this may lead to less equitable results, not more. Boredom, alienation, and increased inequalities are not the ideal results of schooling. Once again, looking outside of our usual all-too-limited and parochial boundaries can be more

\footnote{The focus on keeping youth “under control” is connected to a long history of the fear of youth and of seeing them as constantly in need of regulation. For an insightful discussion of this history, see Nancy Lesko, \textit{Act Your Age!} (New York: Routledge, 2001).}
than a little beneficial. The careful research underpinning Boaler’s volume needs to be taken seriously by anyone who assumes that in our unequal society there is a direct relationship between policy intentions and policy results. There isn’t.

One of the most important tasks of critical education, therefore, is an empirical one. Just as Boaler did, we need to make research public not only on the negative effects of the policies of conservative modernization, but just as importantly on the positive effects of more socially and educationally critical alternatives. A good example of this is the SAGE program in Wisconsin where significantly reducing class size within schools that historically have served a larger portion of dispossessed people has had much more robust results than, say, marketization and voucher plans. This is one form of interrupting dominant discourses and policies and much more of it needs to be done. However, in doing this we cannot simply rely on the dominant forms of what counts as evidence. In Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s words, we need “decolonizing methodologies.”

Making Challenges Public

My arguments in the previous section of this paper have been at a relatively general level because I did not want us to lose sight of the larger picture. How else can these retrogressive movements be interrupted? Let me now get more specific and tactical, since I am convinced

\[\text{See Alex Molnar, Philip Smith, John Zahorik, Amanda Palmer, Anke Halbach, and Karen Ehrle, “Evaluating the SAGE Program,” Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 21 (Summer, 1999), pp.165-177. See also Alex Molnar, Vouchers, Class Size Reduction, and Student Achievement (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Education Foundation, 2000).} \]

that it is important to interrupt rightist claims immediately, within the media, in academic and professional publications, and in daily life.

One crucial example of such interruption is found in the Educational Policy Project formed under the auspices of the Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation. This involves the ongoing construction of an organized group of people who are committed to responding very rapidly to material published by the right. This group includes a number of well-known educators and activists who are deeply concerned that the right has successfully used the media to foster its own ideological agenda, just as it has devoted a considerable amount of resources to getting its message to the public. For example, a number of conservative foundations have full-time staff members whose responsibility it is, for example, to fax synopses of reports to national media, to newspapers, and to widely read journals of opinion and to keep conservative positions in the public eye. Progressives have been much less successful in comparison, in part because they have not devoted themselves to the task as rigorously or because they have not learned to work at many levels, from the academic to the popular simultaneously. In recognition of this, a group of socially and educational critical educators met first in Milwaukee and has been continuously meeting to generate an organized response to conservative reports, articles, research, and media presentations.

A full-time staff member was hired by the Center to focus on conservative material, to identify what needs to be responded to, and to help edit responses written by individual members of the group. A website has been developed that publishes these responses and/or original publications of more progressive research and arguments. The project also focuses on writing “op.ed.” pieces, letters to the editor, and other similar material and on making all of this available to the media. This requires establishing contacts with journals, newspapers, radio, and television, and so on. This is exactly what the right did. We can and must do similar things. It requires hard work, but the Educational Policy Project is the beginning of what we hope will be a larger effort involving many more people. The reader can see the kinds of things that have been done by going to the following website for the Educational Policy Project of the Center for
Are Vouchers Really Democratic?
A Response to "Are School Vouchers Un-American?" By Gary Rosen
By Michael W. Apple
February 2000

Over the past decade, conservative groups in particular have been pressing for public funding for private and religious schools. At the forefront of this movement have been voucher plans. Voucher proponents argue that only by forcing schools onto a competitive market will there be any improvement. Writing in the neo-conservative journal Commentary, Gary Rosen attempts to synthesize the arguments for vouchers and against public schools and teachers.1

Voucher proposals do not stand alone. They are connected to other widespread attacks on public institutions and public employees. This more extensive agenda--often not available for scrutiny -- shows itself when one looks carefully at Rosen’s position.

Rosen seeks to rebut arguments that vouchers for religious schools violate the US constitutional principle of church-state separation, and arguments that they

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Rosen, “Are School Vouchers Un-American?” An edited version of my response, along with many others that were critical of Rosen’s position, was published in the journal in the next issue. See Michael W. Apple, “Response to Gary Rosen,” Commentary 109 (June 2000), p.20.
would have a corrosive effect on common public education and therefore would undermine national identity and unity. Such arguments by public school partisans, Rosen asserts, are self-serving; private schools, he claims, do a better job of civic education and are more racially integrated than public schools. Private school vouchers, he concludes, can reverse a trend in which growing numbers of minority inner city teenagers emerge unprepared from today’s urban public schools -- by providing some of those students an alternative, while goading public schools to improve for the rest. "What could be more democratic--or more American--than this?"

While he is very selective in those arguments against vouchers to which he chooses to respond, Rosen presents them as simply a tool to improve the lives of inner city students. While that may be the aim of some voucher advocates, it ignores the realities of the larger voucher movement, which has a much more ambitious agenda. In Wisconsin, Polly Williams, a Democratic, African American legislator, allied with the Republican governor a decade ago to craft a voucher plan limited to poor children in inner city schools in Milwaukee. She assumed that its aim, as Rosen states, was to give African American and poor parents the right to exit public schools. Yet once the State Supreme Court, in a close vote, ruled the program was constitutional, conservative proponents of the program began calling for its expansion to include all parents -- a clear, direct attack on public schools while providing public money to support even affluent parents who wished to pull their children out of public education. Ms. Williams, though still a supporter of vouchers targeted only to low-income families, attacked her erstwhile allies, accusing them of not having the interests of her constituents at the heart of their policies.

The issue is not simply one of competing social beliefs, though. It is also about what research actually says. Voucher proponents are extremely selective in
their use of data to support their cause, and Rosen in his essay is no exception. Rosen points to Paul E. Peterson’s data on the "success" of vouchers and then quotes from the recent long term study of these programs by John Witte to further bolster the argument. Yet, Rosen does not report Witte’s own conclusion that vouchers are not necessarily effective in raising achievement and that the research does not clearly support vouchers at all. At best, the available research is still quite unclear. It cannot be used to give a ringing endorsement to vouchers.

Witte’s cautions are not alone here, though. Internationally, a number of studies have powerfully demonstrated the effects of policies to privatize schools and turn education into a market-driven institution. Study after study has shown that, except for a very limited group of students, placing schools on a market merely reinforces existing hierarchies, further stratifying education. Poor and working class children are even more marginalized. While a small number of children of color do get the right to exit, the vast majority of these same children either gain no benefits whatsoever, or they and their schools are left in even worse condition than before.

The data also indicate worrisome effects on teachers and administrators. While Rosen, without supporting data, claims that vouchers do not cause added hardship for schools, an extensive body of international research on placing schools in a competitive market can lead to exactly the opposite conclusion. Much more time is spent on maintaining the image of a "good" school, with much less time spent by teachers and administrators on curricular substance. Since it is comparative test scores that determine whether a school is "good" or "bad," children who do perform well on such reductive tests are seen as welcome. Those who do not are often discouraged or are marginalized. Once again, the vast majority of children harmed by such reforms are exactly those whom Rosen and others state they are supporting. These conditions exist not because teachers do
not already work extremely hard or are uncaring. Rather, markets in schools seem to worsen, rather than improve, work load, pressure, and access to resources.

The issue of teachers is significant. Rosen’s essay not only fails to report much of the countervailing data, but it is clearly an attack on teachers and on teachers unions. Words and phrases such as teachers’ “mock concern” and "disingenuous" behavior point to a powerful antipathy to public employees. This is unfortunate, since any institution that acts in dismissive and undemocratic ways to the employees who work everyday in it cannot be considered democratic.

Much of the literature in support of vouchers assumes that the root cause of the supposed decline in education is directly related to unprepared teachers and overly bureaucratic schools. There undoubtedly are some ill-prepared teachers and there are schools districts that are overly bureaucratic. To place the blame only on teachers and schools, however, ignores the larger structural realities that have nearly destroyed public services in our inner cities. It is simply not possible to understand what has happened in education unless we honestly link schooling to the growth of poverty. One of the most consistent research findings over the past decades has been that income inequality and other social and economic factors--not type of school--have the most power in determining success in schools.6 This is not to ignore the role of schooling in enhancing mobility, but it does ask us to be very honest. It was not schools that caused the massive decline of respectful jobs with decent pay in our inner cities, thereby creating a crisis in faith about the future among generations of parents and children. It was not schools that caused capital flight as factories fled to non-unionized, lower paid parts of the world. And it was not schools that led to the willful neglect of the families, health care, and decent housing in these inner cities. To blame teachers for this is to live in a world divorced from reality.
Yet, even given the unfortunate relationship between schooling and an unequal economy, there are things that can be done and that have been proven to work. Effective schooling does not necessarily mean turning our schools over to a market. There are other, and even more proven, choices. The democratic schools movement growing throughout the country shows how educators and local communities can jointly build responsive and effective education that makes a real difference in the lives of children, teachers, and communities. Schools such as Central Park East in New York, Fratney Street School in Milwaukee, and the Rindge School of Technical Arts in the Boston area all provide telling examples of public schools that treat their teachers, students, and local communities with the respect they deserve. Programs in Tennessee and Wisconsin to reduce class size have shown a much more robust set of results than any of those reported for voucher plans.

Most of the debates about vouchers have been conducted around one issue, whether or not they raise scores on standardized tests. There are other crucial issues that must not be ignored, however. Voucher plans, like all market-driven and privatized models, are part of a larger and quite aggressive ideological movement to change how we think about our society and our participation in it. They assume without question that public is by definition bad and private is by definition good. Instead of collectively building and rebuilding our institutions, voucher plans are part of the larger effort by conservatives to change the very meaning of citizenship. Citizenship is now to be defined as simply consumer choice. The unattached individual makes choices about her or his life, without caring what its effects are on the rest of society. The reduction of democracy to selfish individualism may in fact be Un-American. I doubt that this is what we as a society want.
ENDNOTES


2. Ibid.

3. It is important to understand as well that many of the same foundations that are pouring money into the campaign for voucher plans are those which provided financial and logistical support for such volumes as Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, The Bell Curve (New York: Free Press, 1994). Widely discredited in the scientific literature, the volume claimed that African Americans were on the whole less intelligent than European Americans. While this does not discredit all of the arguments in favor of vouchers, it should make us extremely cautious about how voucher plans fit into the larger sets of social commitments that guide many of their proponents.


5. See the following:


   David Gillborn and Deborah Youdell, Rationing Education: Policy, Practice, Reform, and Equity (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000).


This is just one example of one strategy for bringing what we know to parts of the public in more popular forms. There are many other examples posted on the website and published as reports, responses in journals, letters to the editor, and op.ed. pieces. While this project is relatively new, it shows considerable promise. In combination with the use of talk radio, call-in shows, and similar media strategies in multiple languages, these kinds of activities are part of a larger strategy to bring both more public attention to what the dangers are in the “solutions” proposed by the right and to what the workable alternatives to them might be. Integrating the educational interventions within a larger focus on the media is absolutely crucial.

For example, in one of the “teach ins” in which I participated in preparation for the anti-WTO mobilizations in Seattle and Washington, DC, very few people had thought about the integration of Spanish language newspapers, television, radio, and websites in building support for the movement. Yet, these are among the fastest growing media in the United States and they reach an audience that is suffering deeply from the effects of globalization and economic exploitation.

For analyses of the unequal ways the media are now controlled and for proposals to reconstruct these processes, see Robert McChesney, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and John Bellamy Foster, eds. Capitalism and the Information Age. New York: Monthly Review
Learning From Other Nations

During one of the times I was working in Brazil with Paulo Freire, I remember him repeatedly saying to me that education must begin in critical dialogue. Both of these last two words were crucial to him. Education both must hold our dominant institutions in education and the larger society up to rigorous questioning and at the same time this questioning must deeply involve those who benefit least from the ways these institutions now function. Both conditions were necessary, since the first without the second was simply insufficient to the task of democratizing education.

Of course, many committed educators already know that the transformation of educational policies and practices--or the defense of democratic gains in our schools and local communities--is inherently political. Indeed, this is constantly registered in the fact that rightist movements have made teaching and curricula the targets of concerted attacks for years. One of the claims of these rightist forces is that schools are “out of touch” with parents and communities. While there are elements of insight in such criticisms, we need to find ways of connecting our educational efforts to local communities, especially those members of these communities with less power, that are more truly democratic than those envisioned by the right.

There is a good deal of efficacy in turning to the experiences of other nations to learn

Press, 1998. See also Douglas Kellner, Media Culture. New York: Routledge, 1995. A useful guide on how to employ talk radio for progressive purposes is Ellen Ratner, 101 Ways to Get Your Progressive Issues on Talk Radio (Washington, DC: National Press Books, 1997). Discussions of the roles that “public intellectuals” can play here have been varied. Among the more interesting recent discussions is Pierre Bourdieu, Acts of Resistance (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998). Talk radio is not alone here, of course. Once again, creative uses of the world wide web can be very useful. The Institute for Public Accuracy, for example, acts as a central link to a large number of progressive reports, media, and activists. Its website is < institute@igc.org >.
about what the effects of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies and practices actually are. Yet there are many more things that we can learn from other nation’s struggles. For example, currently in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the policies of participatory budgeting are helping to build support for more progressive and democratic policies there in the face of the growing power of neo-liberal movements at a national level. The Workers Party (“PT” as it is known there) has been able to increase its majority even among people who had previously voted in favor of parties with much more conservative educational and social programs because it has been committed to enabling even the poorest of its citizens to participate in deliberations over the policies themselves and over where and how money should be spent. By paying attention to more substantive forms of collective participation and, just as importantly, by devoting resources to encourage such participation, Porto Alegre has demonstrated that it is possible to have a “thicker” democracy, even in times of both economic crisis and ideological attacks from neo-liberal parties and from the conservative press. Programs such as the “Citizen School” and the sharing of real power with those who live in “favelas” (slums) provide ample evidence that thick democracy offers realistic alternatives to the eviscerated version of thin democracy found under neo-liberalism.\textsuperscript{xx} Just as important is the pedagogic function of these programs. They develop the collective capacities among people to enable them to continue to engage in the democratic administration and control of their lives.\textsuperscript{xxi} This is time-consuming; but time spent in such things now has proven to pay off dramatically later on.

\textsuperscript{xx} This is described in Porto Alegre City Secretariat of Education, “Cycles of Formation: Politic-Pedagogical Proposal for the Citizen’s School,” Cadernos Pedagogicos 9 (April 1999), pp.1-111.

\textsuperscript{xxi} Diane Elson, “Socializing Markets, Not Market Socialism,” in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds. Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias (New York: Monthly review Press, 1999), pp.67-85. Elson’s entire essay on the criteria that should be used to socialize markets is very thoughtful.
A similar story can be told about another part of Brazil. In Belem, a “Youth Participatory Budget” process was instituted. It provided resources and space for the participation of many thousands of youth in the deliberations over what programs for youth needed to be developed, how money should be spent, and over creating a set of political forums that could be used by youth to make public their needs and desires. This is very different than most of the ways youth are dealt with in all too many countries, where youth are seen as a “problem” not as a resource.\textsuperscript{xxii} A similar instance is found in New Zealand, where under the original leadership of the International Research Institute on Maori and Indigenous Education, multi-racial groups of youth are formed in communities to publicly discuss the ways in which youth see their realities and advance proposals for dealing with these realities.\textsuperscript{xxiii} In this way, alliances that begin to cut across race, class, and age are being built. There are models, then, of real participation that we can learn from and that challenge the eviscerated vision of democracy advanced by neo-liberals by putting in place more substantive and active models of actually “living our freedoms.” The issue is not the existence of such models; it is insuring that they are made widely visible.

**Thinking Heretically**

In order to build counter-hegemonic alliances, we may have to think more creatively than before–and, in fact, may have to engage in some nearly heretical rethinking. Let me give an example. I would like us to engage in a thought-experiment. I believe that the right has been able to take certain elements that many people hold dear and connect them to other issues in ways that might not often occur “naturally” if these issues were less politicized. Thus, for instance, one of the reasons populist religious groups are pulled into an alliance with the right is because such groups believe that the state is totally against the values that give meaning to their

\textsuperscript{xxii} See, for example the discussion in Lesko, *Act Your Age!*.  

\textsuperscript{xxiii} Material on this can be gotten from the International Research Institute on Maori and Indigenous Education at the University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.
lives. They are sutured into an alliance in which other elements of rightist discourse are then able to slowly connect with their own. Thus, they believe that the state is anti-religious. Others also say that the state seeks to impose its will on white working class parents by giving “special treatment” to people of color and ignoring poor white people. These two elements do not necessarily have to combine. But they slowly begin to be seen as homologous.

Is it possible that by taking, say, religion out of the mix that some parts of the religious community that currently find collective identities on the right would be less susceptible to such a call if more religious content was found in school? If religious studies had a more central place within the curriculum, is it less likely that people who find in religion the ultimate answers to why they are here would be less mistrustful of the state, less apt to be attracted to a position that public is bad and private is good? I am uncertain that this would be the case. But I strongly believe that we need to entertain this possibility.

Do not misunderstand me. I am decidedly not taking the position that we should use vouchers to fund private religious schools; nor am I saying that the authoritarian populist religious right should be pandered to. Rather, I am taking a position similar to that espoused by Warren Nord. Our failure to provide a clear place for the study of religion in the curriculum makes us “illiberal.” Yet, I do not want to end with Nord’s position. Rather, I see it as a starting point. In earlier books, I have argued that at times people “become right” because of the lack of responsiveness of public institutions to meanings and concerns that are central to their lives. Teaching more about, not for, religion doesn’t just make us more “liberal” in Nord’s words. It may also help interrupt the formation of anti-public identities. This has important implications for it can point to strategic moves that can be made to counter the integration of large numbers of people under the umbrella of conservative modernization.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, people often become right at a local level, not through plots by rightist groups but because of local issues and sentiments. Making schools more responsive to religious sentiments may seem like a simple step, but it can have echoes that are profound since it may undercut one of the major reasons some populist groups who are also
religious find their way under the umbrella of rightist attacks on schools and on the public
sphere.

I am not a romantic about this. I do think that it could be dangerous and could be
exploited by the religious right. After all, some of them do have little interest in “teaching
about” and may hold positions on Christianity and other religions that both construct and leave
little room for the “Other.” Yet the centrality of religious sentiments need not get pushed toward
neo-liberalism. It need not be connected to a belief that public schools and teachers are so totally
against them that marketization and privatization are the only answers. Thus, I’d like us to think
seriously–and very cautiously–about the possible ways members of some of the groups currently
found under the umbrella of the conservative alliance might actually be pried loose from it and
might work off the elements of good sense they possess. In saying this, I am guided by a serious
question. In what ways can religious commitments be mobilized for socially progressive ends?
Our (often justifiable) worries about religious influences in the public sphere may have the latent
effect of preventing such a mobilization by alienating many people who have deep religious
commitments and who might otherwise be involved in such struggles. If many evangelicals do
commit themselves to helping the poor, for example, in what ways can these sentiments be
disarticulated from seeing capitalism as “God’s economy” and from only helping the “deserving
poor” and rearticulated toward greater social and economic transformation. It would seem well
worth studying the recent histories of religious involvement in, say, the anti-WTO struggles to
understand this better. At the very least, we cannot act as if religious beliefs about social and
educational justice are outside the pale of progressive action, as too many critical educators do.
A combination of caution, openness, and creativity is required here.

Yet another example is to take advantage of the shared elements of good sense among
groups who usually have very different agendas in order to work against specific policies and
programs that are being instituted by other elements within the new hegemonic alliance. That is,
there are real tensions within conservative modernization that provide important spaces for joint
action.
This possibility is already being recognized. Because of this, for example, there are some truly odd political couplings emerging today. Both the populist right and the populist left are occasionally joining forces to make strategic alliances against some neo-liberal incursions into the school. For instance, Ralph Nader’s group Commercial Alert and Phyllis Schlafly’s organization the Eagle Forum are building an alliance against Channel One. Both are deeply committed to fight the selling of children in schools as a captive audience for commercials. They are not alone. The Southern Baptist Convention has passed a resolution opposing Channel One. Groups such as Donald Wildmon’s American Family Association, and even more importantly, James Dobson’s powerful organization Focus on the Family, have been working with Nader’s groups to remove Channel One from schools and to keep it out of schools where it is not already established. This tactical alliance has also joined together to support anti-gambling initiatives in a number of states and to oppose one of the fastest growing commercial technology initiatives in education–ZapMe! Corp. ZapMe! provides free computers to schools at the cost of collecting demographic data on students which it then uses to target advertising specifically at these children.xxiv

The tactical agreement is often based on different ideological positions. While the progressive positions are strongly anti-corporate, the conservative positions are grounded in a distaste for the subversion of traditional values, “the exploiting of children for profit,” and a growing rightist populist tension over the decisions that corporations make that do not take into consideration the “real folks” in America. This latter sentiment is what the rightist populist and nativist Pat Buchanan has worked off of for years. In the words of Ron Reno, a researcher at Focus on the Family, we need to fight “a handful of individuals exploiting the populace of America to make a buck.”

This teaming up on specific causes is approached more than a little cautiously on both sides, as you would imagine. As Ralph Nader says, “You have to be very careful because you

can start tempering your positions. You can be too solicitous. You have to enter and leave on your own terms. You tell them, ‘Here’s what we’re doing, if you want to join us fine. If not, fine.’” Phyllis Schlafly portrays her own reasons this way. “[Nader and I] agree that the public schools should not be used for commercial purposes. A captive audience of students should not be sold for profit. I agree with that. I don’t recall his objection to the content of the news, which is what stirs up a lot of conservatives.”

Schlafly’s comments show the differences as well as similarities in the right-left division here. While for many people across the divide, there is a strong distaste for selling our children as commodities, divisions reappear in other areas. For one group, the problem is a “handful of individuals” who lack proper moral values. For the other, the structural forces driving our economy create pressures to buy and sell children as a captive audience. For conservatives, the content of the news on Channel One is too “liberal;” it deals with issues such as drugs, sexuality, and similar topics. Yet, as I have shown in my own analysis of what counts as news in the major media and in Channel One, even though there is some cautious treatment of controversial issues, the content and coding of what counts as news is more than a little conservative and predominantly reinforces dominant interpretations.

These differences should not detract from my basic point. Tactical alliances are still possible, especially where populist impulses and anti-corporate sentiments overlap. These must be approached extremely carefully, however, since the grounding of much of the populism of the right is also in a racist nativism, a very dangerous tendency that has had murderous consequences. A recognition, though, of the anti-corporate tendencies that do exist here is significant, since it also points to cracks in the alliance supporting some aspects of conservative modernization in general and to similar fissures within the ranks of authoritarian populism itself.

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xxvi See Apple, Official Knowledge, pp.89-112.
For example, the fact that Ralph Reed was hired as a consultant to burnish Channel One’s image has also created a number of tensions within the authoritarian populist ranks.\textsuperscript{xxvii}

Another area that is ripe for such coalitions is that of national and state curricula and testing. Neither the populist right nor the populist left believe that such policies leave room for the cultures, histories, or visions of legitimate knowledge that they are so deeply committed to. While the specific content of such knowledge is decidedly dissimilar for each of these groups, the fact that there is agreement both on a generally anti-elitist position and on the fact that the very processes involved are anti-democratic provides room for tactical alliances not only against these processes but as a block against even further incursions of managerialism into schools. In addition, given the ideological segregation that currently exists in this society, working (carefully) with such groups has the advantage of reducing stereotypes that they may hold (and perhaps that we might also hold?). It increases the possibility that the populist right will see that progressives may in fact be able to provide solutions to serious issues that are so distressing in populist movements of multiple orientations. This benefit should not be minimized.

My position here, hence, embodies a dual strategy. We can and must build tactical alliances where this is possible and where there is mutual benefit--and where such an alliance does not jeopardize the core of progressive beliefs and values. At the same time, we need to continue to build on more progressive alliances between our core constituencies around issues such as class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, globalization and economic exploitation, and the environment. That such a dual strategy can be used to organize both within already existing alliances and to work across differences is made clear in the anti-WTO mobilizations in Seattle, in Washington, and in a number of other cities throughout the world.

Once the issue of tactical alliances is raised, however, it is nearly impossible to ignore charter schools. For a number of people on both the left and the right, charter schools have been seen as a compromise that can satisfy some of the demands of each group. Here, though, I

would urge even more caution. Much of the discussion of these schools has been more than a little romantic. It has accepted the rhetoric of “de-bureaucratization,” experimentation, and diversity as the reality. Yet, as Amy Stuart Wells and her colleagues have demonstrated, charter schools can and do often serve less meritorious ends. They can be manipulated to provide public funding for ideologically and educationally problematic programs, with little public accountability. Beneath the statistics of racial equality they supposedly produce, they can exacerbate white flight and can be captured by groups who actually have little interest in the culture an futures of those whom they assume are the “Other.” They are used as the “constitutive outside” in attacks on public schooling for the majority of children in schools throughout the United States, by deflecting attention to what must be done there. Thus, they often can and do act to deflect attention from our lack of commitment to provide sufficient resources and support for schools in urban and rural areas. And in a number of ways they threaten to become an opening wedge for voucher plans.xxviii

Having said this, however, I do not believe that charter schools will go away. Indeed, during the many periods of time when I have lectured and engaged in educational and political

work in countries in, say, Latin America and Asia, it has become ever more clear to me that there is considerable interest in the charter school movement. This is especially the case in those nations that have a history of strong states and strong central control over the curriculum, teaching, and evaluation and where the state has been inflexible, highly bureaucratic, and unresponsive. Given this situation, it is absolutely crucial that the terrain of charter schools not be occupied by the forces within the conservative alliance. If charter schools become, as they threaten to, primarily a site where their function is to deflect attention from schools where the vast majority of students go, if they are allowed to be used as vouchers “in cognito,” if they serve to legitimate concerted attacks on teachers and other educators, then the effects will not be limited to the United States. This will be a world-wide tragedy. For these very reasons, it is crucial that some of our empirical, educational, and political energy goes into guaranteeing that charter schools are a much more progressively inclined set of possibilities than they are today. We need to work so that the elements of good sense in the movement are not lost by it being integrated under the umbrella of conservative modernization. xxix

Making Critical Educational Practices Practical

You will notice that I said “some” of our energy in the previous paragraph. Once again we need to be extremely cautious that by focusing our energies on “alternatives” such as charter schools we are not tacitly enhancing the very real possibility that progressives will spend so much of their attention on them that action in the vast majority of schools will take a back seat. While all of the tactical and strategic foci I have mentioned are important, there is one area that I believe should be at the center of our concerns as educators–providing real answers to real

xxix See the interesting arguments in Jonathan Schorr, “Giving Charter Schools a Chance,” The Nation, June 5, 2000, pp.19-23. I am still not totally convinced that Shorr’s arguments in support of the progressive possibilities of charter schools can overcome the conservative context in which charter schools are actually situated. However, Shorr’s points need to be taken seriously and should not be rejected out of hand.
practical problems in education. By showing successful struggles to build a critical and democratic education in real schools and real communities with real teachers and students today, attention is refocused on action not only in charter schools but on local elementary, middle, and secondary schools in communities much like those in which most of us spend our lives. Thus, publicizing such “stories” makes critical education seem actually “doable,” not merely a utopian vision dreamed up by “critical theorists” in education. For this very reason, political/educational interventions such as the popular and widely translated book Democratic Schools and the increasingly influential journal Rethinking Schools become even more important. This is crucial if we are indeed to interrupt the right. Since the right does have an advantage of speaking in “common-sense” and in “plain-folks Americanism”—and peoples’ common-sense does have elements of good and bad sense within itself—we can also use these progressively inclined elements to show that it is not only the right that has answers to what are real and important issues of educational practice.

For example, the specific vocational and academic programs in which curricula and teaching are linked to paid work and to the economy in socially progressive ways in the Rindge School of Technical Arts in the Boston area powerfully demonstrate that those students and parents who are (justifiably) deeply concerned about their economic futures do not have to turn to neo-liberal policies to find practical answers to their questions. I can think of little that is

xxx Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane, eds, Democratic Schools (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995) and Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane, eds. Democratic Schools: Lessons From the Chalk Face (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998). The book has been translated into multiple languages including Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese and has served as a focal point for more democratic practices in many nations.

xxxii See Larry Rosenstock and Adria Steinberg, “Beyond the Shop: Reinventing Vocational Education,” in Apple and Beane, Democratic Schools, pp.41-57.
more important than this. The forces of conservative modernization have colonized the space of practice and of providing answers to the question of “What do I do on Monday?” in part not because the right has all the answers, but in part due to the fact that the left has too often evacuated that space.

Here again, we have much to learn from the right. While we do not need progressive imitators of, say, E. D. Hirsch, we do need to be much more active in actually attempting to provide answers to teachers, community members, and an increasingly skeptical public that questions such as what will I teach, how will I teach it, how will I evaluate its success—in essence, all those practical questions that people have a right to ask and to which they are entitled to get sensible answers—are taken very seriously. In the absence of this, we are left standing on the sidelines while the right reconstructs not only common-sense but the schools that help produce it.

This is where the work engaged in by a number of critically inclined practicing educators has proven to be so important. Debbie Meier and her colleagues at Central Park East School in New York and at Mission Hill School in Boston, Bob Peterson, Rita Tenorio, and their colleagues at Fratney Street School in Milwaukee, the staff at Rindge School, and many other educators in similar schools throughout the country provide critical models of answering the day-to-day questions that I noted above. They also directly respond to the arguments that are made by neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, and authoritarian populists. They do this not only by defending the very idea of a truly public school (although they are very good at marshaling such a defense), but also by demonstrating workable alternatives that are based both on high

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expectations for their diverse students and on a deep-seated respect for the cultures, histories, and experiences of these students and their parents and local communities. Only in this way can the neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and managerial factions of the new alliance be undercut at the level of the school.

Hope as a Resource

Much more could be said about interrupting the right and about building workable alternatives. I have written this paper and the book on which it is based—Educating the “Right” Way—to contribute to an ongoing set of crucial debates about the means and ends of our educational institutions and about their connections to larger institutions and power relations. Keeping such debates alive and vibrant is one of the best ways of challenging “the curriculum of the dead.” Building and defending a truly democratic and critical education is a collective project. We have much to learn from each other.

Let me end with something that I always want to keep in the forefront of my own consciousness when times are difficult. Sustained political and cultural transformations are impossible “without the hope of a better society that we can, in principle and in outline, imagine.” One of my hopes is that this conference will contribute to the larger movement that is struggling to loosen the grip of the narrow concepts of “reality” and “democracy” that have been circulated by neo-liberals and neo-conservatives in education and so much else over


For an account of these practices, see Apple and Beane, Democratic Schools and Gloria Ladson-Billings, The Dreamkeepers (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994). See also Meier, et al. Will Standards Save American Education?

the past decades. There historically have been alternatives to the limited and increasingly hypocritical conception of democracy which unfortunately even social democratic parties (under the label of the “third way”) in many nations have come to accept. In the words of Panitch and Leys, we need “to insist on a far fuller and richer democracy than anything now available. It is time to reject the prevailing disparagement of anything collective as ‘unrealistic’ and to insist on the moral and practical rightness, as well as the necessity, of egalitarian social and economic arrangements.” As they go on to say, this requires “the development of popular democratic capacities and the structures that nurture rather than stifle or trivialize them.”xxxv The movements surrounding conservative modernization may be “wrong,” not “right.” They may in fact “stifle or trivialize” a vision of democracy that is based on the common good. But they certainly don’t have trivial effects on millions of people all over the world. Our children, our teachers, and our communities deserve something better.

xxxv Ibid, p.viii.
CHAPTER SEVEN NOTES
a little doubt I have: I suppose "wrong" and "right" aren't really used that much comparatively, something is taken to be either right or wrong (talk about black-and-white thinking). But if you would, would you say "more wrong" or "wronger" resp. "more right" or "righter". And of course, the rightest and the wrongest (well, I guess righter and rightest exist anyway, referring to the opposite side of left). And would using these really be so unimaginable? I mean, people say things like "you can't get it more wrong than Righting Wrongs (also known as Above the Law, and known in the Philippines as Fight to Win II) is a 1986 Hong Kong action film produced and directed by Corey Yuen, and also produced by and starring Yuen Biao, both of whom also serve as the film's action directors. The film also co-stars Cynthia Rothrock, Melvin Wong, Wu Ma, Roy Chiao and director Yuen himself. Righting Wrongs is the one of Yuen Biao's better known films that he made without film industry compatriots Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan.