REVISED EDITION

a Different View of Urban Schools

Civil Rights, Critical Race Theory, & Unexplored Realities

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THEMES AND THEORIES, PERSONAL AND ACADEMIC

It is not that hard to make young people educated and happy. It happens every year in a thousand affluent private schools in the United States, in the public schools of some European and Latin American countries, in a few courageous and transformative U.S. public schools, and in other places I know little about. Why does how to do it seem such a big mystery in the majority of urban schools of the United States?

I attempt to provide the systemic, economic, historical, and political answers to that question in this book. I do not think the common answers are the right ones. Neither private schools, nor Danish schools, nor Cuban schools use merit pay; they do not fail children in first or second grade; they do not eliminate music in favor of test prep; and they do not evaluate their teachers by putting their names in the newspaper (a recent occurrence in Los Angeles). It is assumed in Denmark that teachers can have both unions and a love of children. It is expected in Finland that children can learn several languages, grasp mathematics, and be happy at the same time. I have helped to create schools in the United States where students and teachers were both happy and stimulated, and I begin the book with a bit about myself.

I never really decided to teach. I was propelled into it by the barely moving clock hanging above my desk at the collection agency where I addressed threatening notices to tardy customers. I was completing college and had not considered occupations very much. I took credential classes to escape the deadening routine of the office, and in the process I found teaching to be a job so thrilling that I would have done it even if no one were paying me. Everything about teaching was exciting—the ideas, the sociability, the opportunity to plan events for 30 young human beings. And eventually teaching led me back to confronting the sort of large and small civil rights issues that had filled my student years.

I have participated in schools in a dozen different roles and have looked at them from as many angles. I have been a substitute teacher at every grade level and have taught high school in Oakland, California, community college in Hayward, and undergraduates at UC Berkeley. I have taught teachers, masters candidates, and doctoral students. And I have been an active parent. I have investigated schools from the front of the classroom, as a teacher, and from the back of the classroom as a parent. I have investigated schools from a scholar's vantage point in libraries and archives and from a participant and researcher's position in community gatherings, union meetings, and boardrooms. I have visited and been involved in dialogues with educators and students in Jordan, Nicaragua, South Africa, China, Denmark, and several other countries. Most recently, I spent four years as the education director for the mayor of a major American city. In the process, I have concluded that schools in this period are a preeminent place of social struggle in the United States. Even though many Americans have abandoned the hope of fairness in the marketplace, the bureaucracy, and the health care system, they still expect schools to be fair and to provide opportunity, justice, skills, and enlightenment. When schools are not fair and nurturing, people are willing to struggle about the ideas and issues that undergird this failure.

By living the events in one school district and studying the events in others, I have concluded that the actual operation of urban schools is obscured by a number of myths and false debates. The story line of the most important myth goes like this: Urban schools brought enlightenment and basic education to masses of Americans from the early part of the 20th century to the 1960s. Then these schools became chaotic, violent, corrupt, dysfunctional, and filled with incompetent teachers. As a result, responsible people, including those in state and federal governments, academics, and businesses, have been forced to intervene to save the children attending these schools. The federal education act,

commonly called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was based on this premise. The state takeover of school districts and the shutdown of individual schools that have occurred in Detroit, Philadelphia, Compton, Oakland, and many other districts are based on the same reasoning.

Many liberals rejected the federal education policies introduced with NCLB on the basis that its accountability measures were flawed, that its mandates were unfunded, and that it would lead to the privatization of public education. However, these critics did not generally reject the underlying faulty historical logic, and so their reasoning was hard to sustain: If the schools are screwed up, the teachers ineffective, the results unacceptable and the people currently in charge of the schools are responsible for the mess, why shouldn't somebody else take over or establish new rules? The inclination of the Obama administration to accept many of the NCLB assumptions indicates the extent to which mainstream Democrats have accepted the same logic.

In this book, I present an alternate argument to that accepted by both liberals and conservatives. The elements of my argument are as follows:

1. Public schools, especially urban schools, were not so good before the 1960s, at least not for the Latino, African American, and Asian students who attended them.
2. Intense but little known civil rights battles took place in many Northern cities.
3. The post-1960s school boards that resulted from these struggles did not "screw up" the schools but, within existing constraints, made progress on equity issues.
4. These equity policies have produced some advances in civil rights and cultural sensitivity.
5. Urban school districts were increasingly constrained by state and federal policies and then direct intervention.
6. The logic, structures, and practices of American racism flow throughout both history and the current period.
7. Becoming educated involves engagement of the mind and heart, an engagement that becomes less likely when the school atmosphere is either chaotic or punitive and rigid.

In addition to the "schools were OK in the good old days" myth, a second and related myth concerns the relationship between "learning" and all other aspects of school. Both liberals and conservatives focus their rhetoric on the classroom aspect: Is there morality? Is the reading method effective? Both

liberals and conservatives argue that we should "forget adult agendas" and "focus on classroom achievement," as though the recent urban school boards have been unusually and unethically worried about economics and power. The school events in which I participated led me to conclude that while well-meaning people are "ignoring the politics" and "focusing on the classroom," they are losing the political and economic battles related to the classroom, so that neither educational nor economic and political justice is possible.

Who Needs a Theory?

Without a theoretical framework, those concerned with schools toss around an endless set of piecemeal arguments. We engage in debates about phonics versus whole language instruction. Public schools versus charters. Vouchers versus no vouchers. Graduation exams or no exams. Segregation or integration. And a thousand other debates that come and go with the latest think tank or newspaper report.

Important as these individual debates may be, there are six basic, unchanging, and generally unmentioned realities about U.S. education, realities which impact every other debate:

1. The United States is a capitalist country. Money speaks, and disguised battles over who gets the money often have far more influence than pedagogical concerns in educational decisions.
2. The entire U.S. education system sits on a structure of tests and sorting invented by members of the eugenics movement, who believed Northern-European whites to be smarter than everyone else. Thus, every aspect of U.S. education, from the selection of teachers to the assessment of students, has race as an essential, if unacknowledged, component.
3. Democracy is limited. The more white and affluent the parents of a particular group of children, the more likely they are to have real influence over expenditures, curriculum, nurturance, school structure, and personnel selection. When districts with less affluent citizens make different decisions about these issues, their power to make the decisions is increasingly circumscribed.
4. There is no single public. When politicians discuss what "we" should do about American schools, they are advancing a "harmful

fiction" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). There are actually four different American systems: the somewhat responsive suburban and middle-class public system; the urban systems, many of which have been taken over by outside state, federal, or private interests; the system of private and parochial schools for working-class and urban children that are not well funded but are still somewhat responsive to their local communities; and the system of elite private schools to which the wealthy send their own children, which are not required to follow any of the rules and procedures that have been established to control the schools attended by the poor.

5. There is now a historic 20 to 1 gap between the median assets of white and the median assets of black families. The gap between white and Latino families is 18 to 1. Note that this is wealth, not income and it is the median, not the mean. More on these distinctions later.
6. Nevertheless, American students, parents, labor unions, civil rights groups, and community groups have on many occasions successfully challenged the structures and policies that result from the first five realities.

Theoretical Components

The theoretical and conceptual framework of this book draws on the following theoretical foundations: (a) critical race theory, which emphasizes the elements of racism deeply embedded within every institution and event in American society; (b) the Marxist method, not as a set of conclusions, but as a process of investigation that is historical, dialectical, and materialist and that looks at each individual phenomenon from within the totality of all phenomena; (c) a set of provocative ideas emerging from a variety of grassroots and international sources, including the popular education thinking of Paulo Freire of Brazil, who talked about schools as sites of struggle and the popular educators who have followed him, the youth engagement and hip hop activists of the United States, who see hip hop as a global education and political movement, and the unnamed young people, inspired by Tunisia and Egypt, who are working to hook up democratic communication networks of youth across the globe, and (d) a recognition of the racial wealth gap, an undisputed