

BUILDING AND DEFENDING CRITICAL DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

MICHAEL W. APPLE

Abstract

Education is never a neutral activity. It is an ethical and political act. In a time when conservative forces throughout the world are seeking to redefine what counts as a "good school," a "good curriculum," and a "good teacher" so that education focuses only on conservative goals, it is crucial to build and defend a critically democratic education. The examples of the Citizen School in Porto Alegre, Brazil, La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee in the USA, and of Mathematics for social justice in Chicago provide us with powerful models of what can be done, even in times of conservative attacks. But we must be careful not to make the mistakes of the past and to understand that it will not be easy to build and defend critically democratic schools. However, even though it will not be easy, it is possible to create institutions that respond to the very best in us.

Biography



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MICHAEL W. APPLE is the John Bascom Professor of Education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is also World Scholar and Professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of London Institute of Education. Among his recent books are *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*, 2nd edition (2006), *The Subaltern Speak: Curriculum, Power, and Educational Struggles* (2006), and *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*, 2nd edition (2007). He has worked with governments, unions, dissident groups, and educators throughout the world to build more critically democratic educational research, policies, and practices.

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Education is political

1. It is involved in sorting and selecting students by class, gender, and race and in struggles against such sorting and selecting.
2. The curriculum is part of the politics of "official knowledge." Some groups' knowledge is seen as legitimate, while other groups' knowledge is defined as "popular," as "not important."
3. There is a hidden curriculum of norms and values that is taught, so that different groups of children get different identities in schools.
4. How teachers are selected, paid, given or not given respect and autonomy is related to status hierarchies in the larger society. In all too many nations, any occupation that is seen as "women's paid work" often get less autonomy, less pay, and less respect.
5. Money and power are crucial determinants of educational policies and of what actually gets done in schools.
6. In public debates over education, we must ask whose voices are heard and not heard.
7. It is organized action and social movements that push education in progressive (and sometimes retrogressive) directions. Unfortunately, right now in all too many nations, the movements are retrogressive.

The current balance of power—*Conservative Modernization*

1. There is a struggle over the very meaning of democracy currently. Dominant groups in our societies are seeking to redefine democracy and democratic education in ways that favor themselves and their own children.
2. There are four groups that have formed a new "hegemonic bloc" that is pushing education away from critically democratic schooling.

- a. Neoliberals—a focus on markets and privatization, such as voucher plans in the USA.
- b. Neoconservatives—the restoration of a false common culture of dominant knowledge.
- c. Authoritarian populists (religious conservatives)—restoring religious emphases in schools.
- d. New middle class managerialism—testing, measurement, and accountability.

Democratic schools are attempts to change all of these politics and to build an education that acts against the politics of conservative modernization.

1. They have a different vision of society and of whether schools can alter daily life. Democracy is seen not simply as a slogan, but as a way of life that must be lived in all of our institutions.
2. They see schools as part of society, as helping to alter dominant relations.
3. They are meant to be critically democratic, not simply student centered.
4. They offer full participation for students, teachers, community members (not simply parents), so that the actual experiences of all of the people involved reflect the kind of society they want and act as alternatives to the educational models of dominant groups.
5. They redefine what counts as a “common culture” and a common curriculum in more critically democratic ways.

Examples of critically democratic schools

1. Porto Alegre, Brazil—Citizen Schools, participatory budgeting.
2. Fratney Street School/La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, USA—a two way bilingual school.
3. Mathematics for social justice—Chicago, USA.

Dangers and cautions—keeping critical democratic education alive

1. Democracy is messy and the results are not guaranteed.
2. In times of economic crisis and the neoliberal exporting of this crisis onto the government and local communities, critically democratic schools and democratic councils may wind up spending all too much of their time deliberating over what educational programs and people to *cut*, rather than focusing on building a “thick” democracy in schools.
3. We must always be aware of the relations between our more democratic reforms and their possible hidden effects on other reforms and power relations. Some democratic reforms can have contradictory results—Cincinnati example of active involvement of elderly community members in schools and how it had both positive and negative effects.
4. We need to fully understand the history of successes and failures.
5. It is crucial to constantly make public the successes of critically democratic schools and policies in a time when the media and the forces of conservatism will constantly criticize them and will tell the public that “there are no alternatives” to their more conservative policies.
6. Hope is a resource. We must keep hope alive. I salute you in the Basque Country for taking all of this so seriously and for becoming the teachers of all of us about what can be done in real schools and real communities.