

Introduction

Teaching for Equity and Justice

Like its predecessor, Volume 2 of *Rethinking Our Classrooms* begins from the premise that schools and classrooms should be laboratories for a more just society than the one we now live in. After more than a decade of high-profile national debate on school reform, we think this proposition is more central than ever to the success, perhaps even the survival, of public education.

Schools have crucial obligations not only to individual students and families, but to our society as a whole. Their success or failure is tied not just to personal well-being, but to the prospects of creating a multi-racial democracy capable of addressing the serious social and ecological problems that cloud our future. We live in a world plagued by economic inequality, endemic violence, and racial injustice. A me-first, dollar-driven culture undermines democratic values, and seems to invent daily new forms of alienation and self-destruction. Over the long term, the production and consumption patterns of industrially overdeveloped and under-planned economies like ours threaten global ecological disaster.

Given such unpleasant but inescapable realities, education reform must be driven by a far broader vision than it has been in recent years. What happens every day in our classrooms both shapes — and is shaped by — the larger social currents that define who we are as a society and where we are headed. Accordingly, to be truly successful, school reform must be guided by democratic social goals and values that provide a deeper context for more traditional academic objectives.

Unfortunately, too many schools foster narrowly self-centered notions of success and “making it.” Too



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many, especially in poor areas, provide a dismal experience based on tests, tracking, and a sanitized curriculum that lacks the credibility or sense of purpose needed to engage

students or to connect with their communities. Too many schools fail to confront the racial, class, gender, and homophobic biases woven into our social fabric.

Years of classroom experience have convinced us that these shortcomings are intimately connected to low student achievement, including poor performance on standardized tests. The problems many schools have in teaching children to read, write, and think are, to a large extent, symptoms of the inequality that permeates our educational system. In fact, we would argue that unless our schools and classrooms are animated by broad visions of equity, democracy, and social justice, they will never be able to realize the widely proclaimed goal of raising educational achievement for all children.

Historically, efforts to expand the reach of public education or to democratize curriculum have been accompanied by extensions of the sorting and labeling mechanisms schools use to preserve pockets of privilege. (See for example the role play activity on the origins of tracking in *Rethinking Our Classrooms Volume 1*, p. 133). Today the standardization and testing movements threaten to play a similar role. They profess to raise the bar for all children, yet without dramatic increases and more equity in resources and without radical improvements in teaching and learning inside classrooms, they are more likely to create a new credentialing maze that continues to channel some students to lives of privilege and others to educational oblivion.

Teachers typically have little individual control over many of the factors that shape the conditions of schooling. But in their classrooms they often have a measure of autonomy to create a space that can profoundly affect the lives of young people. As we wrote in our earlier volume, despite many obstacles, “teachers can create classrooms that are places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic

and critical skills needed to make it a reality.”

This effort to rethink our classrooms must be both visionary and practical: visionary, because we need to go far beyond the prepackaged formulas and narrow agendas now being imposed on our schools and classrooms; and practical, because the work of reshaping educational practice and countering the agendas imposed from above requires daily, school-based efforts at learning, teaching, organizing, and educational activism by those with the most at



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stake — teachers, students, parents, and local communities.

We’ve drawn the articles, stories, poems, and lessons in this second volume of *Rethinking Our Classrooms* from different academic disciplines and grade levels. We hope they will offer insights and useful examples that can be adapted in classrooms of all levels and disciplines and in diverse social settings. Our goal is to provide frameworks and identify resources that can support teachers in their

efforts at classroom transformation.

A common social and pedagogical vision still unites the collection. We continue to believe, as we wrote in our first volume, that curriculum and classroom practice must be:

- **Grounded in the lives of our students.** All good teaching begins with a respect for children, their innate curiosity and their capacity to learn. Curriculum should be rooted in children’s needs and experiences. Whether we’re teaching science, mathematics, English, or social studies, ultimately the class has to be

about our students’ lives as well as about a particular subject. Students should probe the ways their lives connect to the broader society, and are often limited by that society.

- **Critical.** The curriculum should equip students to “talk back” to the world. From an early age, students must learn to pose essential critical questions: Who makes decisions and who is left out? Who benefits and who suffers? Why is a given practice fair or unfair? What are its origins? What alternatives can we imagine? What is required to create change? Through critiques of advertising, cartoons, literature, legislative decisions, foreign policy choices, job structures, newspapers, mov-

ies, consumer culture, agricultural practices, and/or school life itself, students should have opportunities to question social reality. Wherever possible student work should also move outside the classroom walls, so that academic learning is linked to real-world issues and problems.

- **Multicultural, anti-bias, pro-justice.** A social justice curriculum must strive to include the lives of everyone in our society and to examine critically their histories and



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interconnection. With some 40% of the students in public schools from communities of color, while more than 90% of the teachers are white, we need to address directly and constructively the racial, class, and gender dimensions of educational inequity and school failure. We need to move from what anti-racist educator Enid Lee calls the “soft stuff” to the “hard stuff.” This means not only “celebrating our diversity,” but also helping ourselves and our students understand why some differences translate into access to wealth and power, while others become a source of discrimination and injustice. Only when we face honestly the truths about our past and our present will we be able to uncover the common ground that public schools in a multiracial society need in order to thrive.

There is already a backlash against the unfinished efforts of recent years to revise traditional versions of history, literature, and other subjects, and to include the experience and voices of people of color, women,

gays and lesbians, and working people. Nevertheless, we need to push this effort further and deeper. We must resist attempts by state tests and standards to push multicultural curriculum reform to the margins.

- **Participatory, experiential.** Traditional classrooms often leave little room for student involvement and initiative. They encourage a passivity that is reinforced by fragmented, test-driven curriculum, and which discourages students from taking more responsibility for their own education. In a “rethought” classroom, concepts need to be experienced first-hand, not just read about or heard about. Through projects, role plays, simulations, mock trials, or experiments, students need to be mentally, and often physically, active. They need to be involved as much as possible in explicit discussions about the purposes and processes of their own education. Our classrooms also must provoke students to develop their democratic capacities: to question, to challenge, to make real decisions, to solve problems collectively.

- **Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary.** The ways we organize classroom life should seek to make children feel significant and cared about — by the teacher and by each other. Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won’t share real thoughts and feelings; discussions will be artificial and dishonest. We need to design activities that help students learn to trust and care for each other. Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, pre-figure the kind of democratic and just society we envision, and thus contribute to building that society.

- **Activist.** We want students to come to see themselves as truth-tellers and change-makers. If we ask children to critique the world but then fail to encourage them to act, our classrooms can degenerate into factories for cynicism. Part of a teacher’s role is to suggest that ideas have real consequences and should be acted upon, and to offer students opportunities to do just that. Children can also draw inspiration from historical and contemporary

efforts of people who struggled for justice. A critical curriculum should be a rainbow of resistance, reflecting the diversity of people from all cultures who acted to make a difference, many of whom did so at great sacrifice. Students should be allowed to learn about, and feel connected to, this legacy of defiance.

- **Academically rigorous.** A social justice classroom equips children not only to change the world, but also to navigate in the world that exists. Far from devaluing the vital academic skills young people need, a critical and activist curriculum speaks directly to the deeply rooted alienation that currently discourages millions of students from acquiring those skills. By addressing directly the social context and social relationships that help create school failure, critical classrooms seek to break the cycle of remedial tedium and replace it with more self-conscious, purposeful student activity.

A social justice classroom offers more *to* students than do traditional classrooms, and expects more *from* students. Critical teaching aims to inspire levels of academic performance significantly greater than those motivated or measured by grades and test scores. When children write for real audiences, read books and articles about issues that really matter, and discuss big ideas with compassion and intensity, “academics” starts to breathe. Yes, we must help students “pass the tests,” even as we help them critique the harmful impact of test-driven education. But only by systematically reconstructing how and what we teach do we have any hope of cracking the cynicism that lies so close to the heart of massive school failure, and of raising academic expectations and performance for all children.

- **Culturally sensitive.** Critical teaching requires that we admit we don’t know it all. Each class presents new challenges to learn from our students, and demands that we be good researchers and good listeners. These days the demographic reality of schooling makes it likely

that white teachers will enter classrooms filled with children of color. As African-American educator Lisa Delpit has written: “When teachers are teaching children who are different from themselves, they must call upon parents in a collaborative fashion if they are to learn who their students really are.” They must also call upon the cultural diversity of their colleagues and on community resources for insights into the communities they seek to serve. What

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can be said about racial and cultural differences between teachers and students also holds true for class differences.

We know from our own experience that creating successful critical classrooms is not easy. It is difficult, demanding work that requires vision, support, and resources. Finding groups and networks of support is crucial for the long haul, as is the need to build alliances for equity beyond the classroom among parents, professional associations, teachers’ unions, and community groups. The success of our classroom efforts is ultimately tied to efforts at the district, state, and national levels to improve public education and to

sustain the collective social obligations that a democratic system of public schooling implies.

We know too that there will be opposition from those who think critical teaching for social justice is “too political,” as if traditional teaching for the status quo were not equally “political” in its authoritarian practice, its unequal outcomes, and its endorsement of the established order.

Some colleagues will resist calls to take on greater responsibility for school failure. Others will succumb to corrosive cynicism or force of habit. At times, infuriatingly wrong-headed or counterproductive mandates will be imposed upon us from above by bureaucrats or politicians. At other times the small steps we manage to take may seem painfully short of our grand visions, even isolated and utopian in the face of the broader social changes needed.

But the alternative to critical teaching for social justice is to surrender to a system that, left to its own logic, will never serve the common good. Critical classroom practice is an indispensable, and much-neglected, missing piece in the puzzle of school improvement. Without social justice teaching inside classrooms, even much-needed reforms in funding equity or school governance will have limited impact.

For all its flaws, public education exists because generations of people have fought to improve the future for themselves and their children. Whether public education continues to exist, and whether it rises to the challenges before it, remains an open question. How we as teachers respond will help determine the answer.

A classroom veteran once told younger colleagues that teachers had two choices: “We can teach for the society we live in, or we can teach for the one we want to see.” *Rethinking Our Classrooms* is for those with the vision to reach for their dreams. ■

— The Editors