

The background of the cover features a series of concentric, overlapping circles in shades of purple and grey. Within these circles, there are stylized arrows pointing in a clockwise direction, creating a sense of continuous motion or a cycle. The overall aesthetic is modern and academic.

Current Issues and Trends

I N E D U C A T I O N

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Current Issues and Trends in Education

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PREFACE

Both of us began teaching children over 25 years ago. Currently we work with teachers in classrooms on a weekly basis. One of the comments we hear again and again is that children today are different than they used to be. Teaching is very different today as well. We also present at conferences and attend book exhibits, where we often hear the question asked, “Do you have a source on current issues in education?” The book representative hurries around showing books that skirt current issues but finds none devoted solely to considering current trends facing educators. This book was written to address these issues, to examine how children and teaching are different today, and to explore the path of education in the 21st century.

Organization of the Text

This textbook provides an introduction to current issues in education. It is divided into four sections: Political, Economic, and Historical Issues and Trends; Evolving Notions of Human Development and Learning; Changing Views of Instruction; and Issues in Accommodating Differences.

Political, Economic, and Historical Issues and Trends

Chapter 1, Politics and Education, looks at the conservative backlash in public education and considers policy issues related to education. Chapter 2, Changing Demographics amid Diversity, maps the changing face of the American population and the growth of minorities, considers the demographics of families and teachers, and poses possible ways of working with quickly changing populations. Chapter 3, The Rights of Children, looks at advocacy for children with regard to children at risk—those in poverty, children who are homeless, those who are perpetrators or victims of violence, and children who are suffering from abuse or neglect. The chapter closes with a section written by Susan M. Hill, doctoral student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United States is the only member nation of the United Nations that has not ratified the convention.

Evolving Notions of Human Development and Learning

During the past three decades radical changes in the way we view human learning have occurred. Chapter 4, *Theoretical Shifts in Our Understanding of Children*, reports many of these changes. It begins by considering changing worldviews and moves to more specific theories. A shift in education has taken place from the ideas of dead, white, Western men to more critical, feminist, and postmodern perspectives. All of these changes have influenced curriculum models, which are also presented in chapter 4. Chapter 5, *The Controversy over Brain Research*, was written by Nina King, Instructor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama. She begins by giving an overview of what we have learned about the brain during the past decade and then provides a fascinating account of both promoters and inhibitors of brain development.

Changing Views of Instruction

Chapter 6, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, is concerned with the National Association of Education for Young Children's (NAEYC) and the Association for Childhood Education International's (ACEI) published guidelines for early childhood and the middle grades. Noticeably missing from developmentally appropriate practice literature is an emphasis on secondary education. This chapter considers the research base for developmentally appropriate practice as well as current criticisms. Chapter 7, *Progressive Education in the 21st Century*, was written by Shelly Hurt-Chumley, a fifth-grade teacher with the Jefferson County, Alabama, Public Schools and a doctoral student in early childhood education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Shelly provides three current examples of progressive education and then describes, from a personal perspective, how it is particularly difficult to be a progressive teacher in the 21st century. Chapter 8, *Social Promotion, Retention, and Alternative Possibilities*, is the work of Janice N. Cotton of the Civitan International Research Center of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Janice effectively describes the prevalence of both social promotion and retention. More importantly, she details the effects of both, provides alternatives to both retention and social promotion and offers suggestions for implementing these options.

Issues in Accommodating Differences

Chapter 9, *Teaching in Inclusive Settings*, begins by defining inclusion and considers whether or not we should be moving toward full inclusion. The reader is cautioned in this chapter to consider the complexities of special education and avoid seeking simplistic solutions to this salient issue. Chapter 10, *Multicultural Education and the Cultural Curriculum*, is concerned with *religious*, *cultural*, and

linguistic differences in classrooms and begins by posing real-world scenarios for students to use in problem solving. Fifteen misconceptions concerning multicultural education are described and specific suggestions for working with limited-English-proficient learners are provided. Chapter 11, Gender Equity and Education, was written by L. Kay Emfinger, project coordinator of the Ready to Learn in School Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (funded by a grant from the Mayer Electric Foundation). She focuses on the differences between boys and girls in mathematics and science and considers the impact self-concept and internal variables have in exacerbating the differences between males and females. Chapter 12, Private Schools, examines private schools and looks at other variations of or alternatives to public schools, including charter schools and vouchers.

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Many thanks go to our families. Jerry wishes to dedicate this book in memory of his father, J. Titus Aldridge, and in honor of his mother, Winnie Aldridge, who is still active and traveling throughout the world at 91 years of age. He would also like to thank the following friends and family for their support and encouragement: Susan Durant, Linda Steele, MaryAnn Pearson, Jessica Capp, Gay Trawick, Gwen McCorquodale, Trish Crawford, Anne Watson Bauer, Randall Scott, Pat Snyder, Patricia Kuby, Ricky Aman, Made Wertha, and Hitoshi Someya. Renitta wishes to dedicate this book to Jay.

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CHAPTER

1

Politics and Education

If I were a rich man, I wouldn't give any money to learning. I would amend the Constitution and Congress will do it if you suggest it to 'em. Have 'em pass a Constitutional Amendment, prohibiting anybody from learning anything. And if it works as good as the Prohibition one did, why, in five years we would have the smartest race of people on earth.

—Will Rogers

Power and knowledge are inseparable (Giroux, 1993). Politics has always played a major role in the relationship between power and knowledge. Since power is always deployed strategically to advance or restrict knowledge, we can look at education as a political endeavor fashioned by those in power (McLaren, 1998). For example, throughout the twentieth century most presidential elections in the United States emphasized education as a major issue, and this was still the case in the 2000 elections. We will explore the many ways in which politics drives education. We will describe the conservative backlash, the democratic-progressive discourse, and recent and future political challenges to postmodern education.

The Conservative Backlash

A conservative reasoning has dominated many political efforts at school reform over the past several decades (Carlson, 1998). This is especially true of urban school reform. This discourse has centered on such issues as the back-to-basics movement, instructional objectives, and minimum competency testing. Overtly, the basics-skills push, centered on standardized testing, has been in response to the changing character of work in postindustrial America.

Before the 1960s, urban school districts had students from predominantly white and working-class backgrounds. General and vocational education prepared

these students for available clerical and trade union jobs. There was also a small college preparatory program for those who aspired to more. The jobs in industry available to high school graduates were often routine and unrewarding but the pay was relatively high and some jobs offered security. Manual skills took a priority over literacy requirements. The high school curriculum socialized the working class by teaching students how to be cooperative workers, with more offerings for technical skills than for college preparation.

By the 1960s, however, business and state leaders began to discuss the mismatch between the literacy skills of high school graduates and the literacy requirements of new jobs in urban areas. While enrollment in vocational education was relatively high, fewer jobs were waiting for these students (Gray, 1991). Developing countries became recipients of manufacturing jobs, and the good trade union jobs became less available. Data processing, janitorial, clerical, and service industry jobs replaced these. New entry-level jobs increasingly required more literacy because workers frequently had to refer to sets of standards in operating equipment and in recording data on forms. Students needed certain minimal reading and writing skills and competencies (generally defined at about ninth grade level of ability) that could be used and adapted to a number of diverse work settings (Livingstone, 1985).

To respond to the new jobs for Americans, conservatives believed the curriculum needed revision to include minimal language decoding, comprehension, and processing skills. These were needed for students to become effective workers in the new service industry, data processing, maintenance, and paraprofessional fields. The curriculum took the form of workbooks, drill sheets, and skills fragmentation. Students would encounter these year after year. Because the curriculum didn't work, many students had to enroll in remedial basic skills classes in order to pass minimum competency tests. Many were also placed in low ability groups or courses that emphasized basic skills over subject-area knowledge.

After several decades of this basic skills reform, schools still have failed to achieve even the most limited objective of certifying that students will be functionally literate by the time they graduate. In fact, many students from lower socioeconomic areas have not stayed in school long enough to graduate. Like the Vietnam War and the War on Poverty, the War on Illiteracy and the War on High School Dropouts in urban schools have become so problematic that little hope is held for solving these battles any time in the near future (Carlson 1998).

Disparities between Curriculum and Student Needs

Why have schools not been more successful in ensuring that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds learn the literacy skills necessary for gainful employment? One reason that stands out is how the curriculum is packaged. The curriculum is so highly rationalized and regimented that it lacks interest for students. How can students in the twenty-first century, who are used to being

entertained, find anything interesting in routine workbooks, drill sheets, computer programs with similar formats, individual seatwork, and rounds and rounds of pre- and post-testing? The curriculum itself fails to hold much relevance for urban students once they leave school. The new working-class jobs pay low wages and leave little room for advancement. They offer little job security and few health benefits. Workers often have to hold several jobs just to maintain their families' level of poverty. While jobs may be out there, fewer "good" jobs exist, given the growing disparities between power and wealth in the United States. A "basics skills" curriculum has become increasingly more difficult to sell to the students who suffer through it (Carlson, 1998).

Who Controls the Schools?

Proponents of the conservative backlash give considerable credence to local control but local control does not seem to be how the school agenda works. Several conditions keep the control of schools basically out of local hands. State-mandated minimum competency testing, the growing financial dependency of urban schools on the state resulting from chronic fiscal crises in urban schools, and the growing threat of direct state takeover of failing urban schools keep local school districts under control. To challenge these curricular and educational power relationships, African American and Hispanic groups will need to fight for involvement in substantive rather than merely technical educational decisions (Carlson, 1998). Many African Americans and Hispanics were drawn to major urban areas in the 1970s and beyond because they were seeking a space to assume control of their own institutions that was away from the control of a repressive white power structure. Local control of school reform, however, still eludes both urban and rural areas (Carlson, 1998).

The conservative basic skills school reform movement has also affected gender power relations in the schools. The reforms have taken for granted the bureaucratic and hierarchical chain of command in urban schools that rigidly subordinates women teachers, particularly elementary teachers, to male administrators. In education, teacher-proofing the curriculum, advanced through basic skills reform, has also been based on masculine presumptions that (female) teachers are not intelligent enough to be seriously involved in important curricular decisions (Freedman, 1988).

The Democratic-Progressive Discourse

Although liberal groups have exerted some influence on policy *thinking*, they have had little influence on policy *making*. Liberal discourse has advanced concerns over equity and excellence and urged a curriculum organized around