



Teaching

to Change the World

Second Edition



Jeannie Oakes

Martin Lipton

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Introduction

In 1997 there were 2.6 million public school teachers. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that the nation's schools will hire 2 million new teachers by 2007.

—U.S. Department of Education

In fall 1997 William was five, and he was finishing his first week in kindergarten. First-year teacher Tracy Barnett was also finishing her first week, as William's teacher. When she announced that it was time for the class meeting, William asked, "Why do we have to do that again?" Mrs. Barnett answered obliquely with a question of her own, "Why, William, if we don't hear all the children's voices, how will we change the world?" William rolled his eyes upward, sighed with exasperation worthy of a teenager, and took his place in the circle. One week later, on a Monday morning, William walked into class and straight up to his teacher's desk. "Mrs. Barnett, what are we going to talk about today to change the world?"

In 2002 William was a fifth grader. This year his little sister entered kindergarten, but Tracy Barnett was not her teacher. Barnett had become a special education resource teacher at her school. Instead of spending her days with twenty rambunctious five-year-olds, she now works one-on-one with troubled learners. True to her commitment, she is determined that her students understand that they, too, are amazing learners who can strive to change the world.

By the year 2007 Tracy Barnett and others new to teaching at the turn of the twenty-first century will compose about half of all the public school teachers in the nation. During the course of their careers, these teachers will touch the lives of millions of children and adolescents with their skills, their knowledge, their talents, and their passion. This could be a good time to change the world.

The Book's Perspective

This book provides a comprehensive look at teaching for twenty-first century American schools. It is both practical and foundational. The chapters are

organized around conventional topics—schooling, learning, curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and so on—with two themes that weave these chapters into a coherent story. The first theme is that learning is a social and cultural activity. The second theme is that the United States is a multicultural society. You will note, however, that there is no separate chapter here on multicultural education. Rather, we treat diversity as an integral part of all elements of education—of learning theory, curriculum and instruction, classroom management, assessment and testing, grouping, and the school culture.

The historical, philosophical, and sociological foundations of education are emphasized throughout the book. However, as with multicultural education, we do not include separate chapters on these foundations. While Chapter 1, “Schooling: Wrestling with History and Tradition,” is heavily grounded in the history and ideas that help explain today’s schools, the foundations are most powerful when people can use them to make sense of contemporary practices and concerns. For this reason, each chapter includes the history, philosophical positions, and social theories that help illustrate that chapter’s topic—sometimes presenting entirely new background information and sometimes offering a new view of information presented earlier.

This book has a point of view. It takes the position that a hopeful, democratic future depends on whether all students learn and experience academic rigor and social justice in school. If only a few citizens have such teaching when they are small children, young boys and girls, and teenagers, there is no hope for change—just more of the same. This book aims to help teachers know why they should, and how they can, pursue social justice teaching and have sufficient hope to pursue it relentlessly.

We hope the book will help educators act on a commitment to social justice schooling. We define a *social justice perspective* on education as one that does three things: (1) It considers the values and politics that pervade education, as well as the more technical issues of teaching and organizing schools; (2) it asks critical questions about how conventional thinking and practice came to be, and who in society benefits from them; and (3) it pays particular attention to inequalities associated with race, social class, language, gender, and other social categories, and looks for alternatives to the inequalities. Acting to achieve social justice in schools is a struggle sustained by hope. Lacking hope, many thousands of promising teachers quit the profession within their first few years, unable to see how they can make a difference in students’ lives. This book helps to build a foundation for hope by helping teachers understand and critique “commonsense” views of schools and conventional practices.

If good teaching and rigorous academic achievement do not reach every student in every class, we lock out the possibility of both social justice and excellence, even for a few. A common point of view, not ours, is that excellent teaching and social justice are distinct—that it is sufficient for good teachers to possess appropriate professional skills and impart the culture’s knowledge and values to students. Daily consideration of social justice may or may not characterize such teachers, just as a passion for social justice may or may not characterize a good lawyer or businessperson. Again, this is not our perspective.

Throughout, we emphasize research and historical analyses that show how excellent teaching requires social justice.

Obviously, there are significant ideological differences in how people view educational practices both past and current. These ideologies are often consistent with political positions that bear the traditional political labels of conservative, moderate, liberal, and radical; and, as in politics, the ideological boundaries in education are often hard to pinpoint. Education uses similar labels and others—such as “progressive,” “back to basics,” and “traditionalist.” If we had to label this book’s perspective, we would call it “social progressive.” Its roots lie in John Dewey’s turn-of-the-twentieth-century learning theories and political sentiments, and its current frames of reference are the sociocultural and democratic theorists who are Dewey’s intellectual descendants at the start of a new century.

Once labeled, however, educational perspectives are easily caricatured. Adversaries use the caricature in the manner of a *straw man* logical fallacy (constructing the opponent’s argument in the worst possible light and then attacking what they, themselves, have constructed). Such has been the case with Dewey’s progressive educational ideas and with current sociocultural theories. Over the years, educators have enacted a good many wrongheaded schooling excesses—many under the banner of progressive or child-centered education. Although the ideas of Dewey and of today’s sociocultural theorists and teachers bear little resemblance to these caricatured practices, critics attempt to discredit—with some success—today’s progressive reforms by portraying them as having a soft, “social agenda” free of rigorous academic content and skills. To these potential charges, we will leave it to the reader to decide whether the evidence we present would lead to “ratcheting up” or “dumbing down” the academic learning opportunities and outcomes for all students.

Unlike some introductory education texts, this book doesn’t simply offer a smorgasbord of theory for readers to browse and then choose whatever suits their appetites. We try to help readers understand what is good in education and dissuade them from simply getting good at what is popular. So, for example, when teachers are troubled by misbehaving students, whether they should (a) struggle to build a caring classroom community or (b) work to perfect “assertive discipline” routines is not a neutral choice in this book. The correct answer to the “quiz” is (a): build a caring classroom community. It is correct because theory and substantial research evidence reveal how caring classroom communities support high-achieving, socially just, intrinsically motivated teaching and learning and reduce unproductive student behavior. Assertive discipline, on the other hand, is a commercially hawked scheme to control behavior, and it promotes an authoritarian, anticomunity, and less intellectually challenging classroom. Furthermore, it has no support in sound educational research and theory. It is neither honest nor objective to describe popular teaching practices in a neutral manner if they do not stand up to the standards of social justice or education research. We do not believe that the world is a neutral place or that teaching is a neutral profession.

Making choices on behalf of children and social justice requires personal qualities of integrity, decency, and the capacity to work very hard. We find these

qualities in abundance in people who choose to be teachers. But making social justice choices also requires teachers to have a professional groundwork of social theory and educational research to make their efforts credible to others and sustainable for themselves. We would be very pleased if this book helps teachers get started in that direction.

Overview of Chapters

Each chapter describes a particular domain of school knowledge and practice. Throughout the chapters, we include the observations of first-year teachers—in their own words. We would expect these teachers to be struggling with lesson plans, discipline, paperwork, time management, school bureaucracy, and so on. And, of course, they are. But please listen carefully to their voices. What is crucial is not that they struggle, but the quality of the problems with which they struggle. For example, Dung Lam, first-year teacher of ninth-grade mathematics, confronts the problem of students who “are restless and would rather do other work or chat with their friends.” She is devastated, not by students who do not behave, but by her own part in the “horror” of lessons that make it “so tempting and easy to cheat.” “Sad and angry because this math year is virtually wasted,” Dung Lam began teaming with a veteran teacher to revise the curriculum. These teachers belie one criticism of a social justice emphasis to a teacher’s career—that these are soft “do-gooders” whose social agenda wipes out their obligation to teach. For readers who might need to ask, yes, these teachers have high expectations for their students; and the teachers are, indeed, very competent. They are among the most sought-after teachers in their communities because they expect their students to learn by thrusting themselves into a better, more humane, more equitable future.

Chapter 1, “Schooling: Wrestling with History and Tradition,” explains how and why Americans are so conflicted as they both pursue and avoid the “common school.” We probe four deeply held modern beliefs—based on the myths of merit, efficiency, competition, and progress—that insulate schools from the most promising research and practices that support all children learning well. First, *merit* is the belief that people deserve what they have, and if they have little, that is all they deserve. Second, *factory efficiency* is the belief that rational, scientifically run organizations geared to produce the greatest returns, outcomes, or “bottom line” benefit everyone working within that system. Third, *market-place competition* claims that social benefits are fairly and justly distributed through unfettered competition. And, fourth, *progress* suggests that current practices result from a progression of improvements, which require only further improvement and “fine-tuning.” The chapter concludes with arguments that each of these cultural beliefs has been tested in schools and is collapsing under global postmodern demands for a skilled, flexible, and diverse citizenry. Meeting these twenty-first-century demands in the democratic spirit of the common school requires the preeminence of a fifth cultural belief that comes to Americans from our shared heritage of slavery, *struggle*. *Struggle* is the directing of one’s unflinching commitment, endurance, and hope in order to achieve social

justice. In a world that does not promise moral victories, struggle promises a moral journey.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore theories of learning in their historical, philosophical, and social contexts. These contexts matter since humans quickly shape “scientific” findings to conform to prevailing social beliefs. Ours is a cultural and scientific heritage that too often clings to unproductive—frequently racist—psychological theory, often leaving little room for the hopeful and accurate theories that would allow schools to teach well and equitably. The challenge here is twofold. First, teachers need a critique of traditional psychology to help them examine school practices and to scour their common sense for naïve or destructive theories that govern learning—particularly conceptions of intelligence. This is primarily the intent of Chapter 2, “Traditional Learning Theories: Transmission, Training, and IQ.” Reaching back to the European Enlightenment, we examine the hallmarks of belief that set the philosophical stage for the next three hundred years of Western thought. We then turn to the nineteenth century for the earliest attempts to study human behavior scientifically, and we continue with the twentieth-century emphasis on the social and scientific consequences of laboratory experimentation and scientific testing and measurement.

Chapter 3, “Contemporary Learning Theories: Problem Solving, Understanding, and Participation,” asks readers to consider emerging theories that permit and direct us to equitable teaching. The most educationally relevant of these theories weave together knowledge from social science theory and research including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and education. Recent advances in these fields present learning as something that each learner must actively construct. We rely on empirically grounded work emphasizing that “intelligence” is constructed in developmental and social contexts. Within these contexts the overlapping notions of *learning*, *intelligence*, and *knowledge*, are given shape and power by the experiences, histories, languages and cultures of diverse groups of students.

Chapters 4 and 5 tackle the most enduring question of schooling: What should the curriculum be? Chapter 4, “Curriculum: Philosophy, History, and Politics: What Should Students Learn?,” looks beneath the superficial consensus that all children need reading and writing, mathematics, science, and whatever else it takes to be responsible citizens. Like everything else about schools, the American curriculum is deeply rooted in history and politics, as well as in the intrinsic human eagerness to learn. Debates about what content best serves students and society and how teachers should organize and present that content reflect starkly different views of the nature of knowledge, the nature of humans, and the nature of a good society. Today, fierce political battles overwhelm professional curriculum debates. Political conservatives argue that schools must continue to transmit traditional knowledge, while political progressives assert that schools must reflect the multiple American cultural and linguistic traditions. Chapter 4 reviews these issues and sets the stage for the current controversies over local and national “standards” in the school subjects.

Chapter 5, “Curriculum: The Subject Matters,” spells out how the professional and political curriculum debates surface in four major academic content

areas, shaping what and how students learn in each. The standards movement, along with the emphasis on testing-based “accountability” has brought under the glare of the political spotlight discussions to determine exactly what math, language arts, science, and social studies students should learn. One side—political liberals, social progressives, and most experts on teaching the subjects—argues that a socially just curriculum provides every child access to the most important ideas of the core disciplines. This happens, they contend, when teachers emphasize meaning-making and understanding, and recognize that facts and skills can best be learned in the context of these important core ideas. The other side—political conservatives, traditionalists, and some scholars in the subject areas—focuses first on the mastery of basic facts and skills. They insist that basic facts and skills are prerequisite to complex ideas. These disputes have been intense and often referred to as history, science, math, and phonics “wars” as they are fought by local school boards and state and national policymaking bodies.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore classroom practice. Chapter 6, “Instruction and Assessment: Classrooms as Learning Communities,” begins with pictures of past classrooms that, as archaic as they sound, have disturbingly familiar features. As in many of today’s classrooms, the teachers’ job was to transmit knowledge to students in an orderly sequence of steps. However, the narrow, unidimensional design of such lessons leads most students to conclude that they’re just not very smart. In contrast, cognitive and sociocultural research presses teachers to focus less on transmitting knowledge than on developing learning relationships with students. These relationships allow students to engage knowledge in ways that transform their thinking, promote their development, and over time help them realize their potential to be fully participating members of the culture. Teachers who want to change the world strive to make their classrooms places where both they and their students can be confident about everyone’s ability to learn. They structure active and interactive learning activities and assessment tasks that make learning accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students.

Chapter 7, “Classroom Management: Caring and Democratic Communities,” surveys the legacy of management, discipline, and control that many contemporary teachers still rely on to organize classroom life. It also reviews a second tradition—caring and democratic classrooms—that, while less common, also has deep American roots. This second tradition is generally consistent with cognitive and sociocultural learning theories. The chapter concludes by calling attention to the important contributions of critical theorists who address classroom issues of power and domination and how teachers may respond to these issues as they attempt to make their classrooms socially just. This work argues that classrooms must allow children to experience democracy as well as learn about it, if they are to learn to be members of a culturally democratic community.

Chapter 8, “Grouping and Categorical Programs: Can Schools Teach *All* Children Well?,” deals with the often-controversial ways that schools respond to differences in students’ abilities, achievements, and behaviors. Schools commonly categorize and separate children into groups that appear to be similar—or homogeneous—in order to address their needs. Many times, these practices

limit rather than expand students' learning opportunities, and children of color and those from low-income families disproportionately feel these negative effects. The chapter overviews the history and social theory that link race, class, and culture to these seemingly objective and technical practices of schooling. It also explores how educators attempt to give students the attention and resources they need without isolating and alienating them from the mainstream.

Chapter 9, "The School Culture: Where Good Teaching Makes Sense," identifies theory and research-based characteristics of schools that support excellent and democratic learning and teaching. These characteristics include opportunities to learn, an environment that makes learning seem inevitable, structures that allow teachers to know their students and their community well, and conditions that allow teachers to care and work hard. These cultural elements are necessary conditions for teachers to challenge all their students to do rigorous, intellectually demanding work. The chapter describes several current, progressive reform projects based around *inquiry*—a mode of conversation that elicits from all members of the school community their understanding of the school's environment for rigorous and socially just learning. These inquiry-based school reforms help individuals clarify others' and their own perceptions and help translate shared beliefs and values into democratic action.

Chapter 10, "Connections with Families and Communities," is new to this edition. In this chapter we consider two dominant (and contradictory) complaints about parents: (1) They neglect their responsibilities to participate and support their children's schools; and (2) they are disruptive and overly involved in schools. We also examine four types of constructive engagement: (1) parents supporting the work of schools; (2) schools serving families' and communities' need for health and social services; (3) bridging the cultures of home and school through curriculum; and (4) engaging parents directly in schools through community empowerment. The chapter argues that however teachers engage with families, their efforts will be most constructive if they enable them—poor, middle class, and rich—to exercise their rightful power over schooling as *citizens* who are responsible for the education of all children, not simply as parents looking out for their own children's interests. This means that parents who educators consider to be *too* involved, as well as those who seem not involved enough, must develop a very different concept of involvement. They must also come together with parents of different racial groups and socioeconomic positions and act together as citizens on behalf of all children.

Chapter 11, "Teaching to Change the World: A Profession and a Hopeful Struggle," draws parallels between teachers' work in American schools, John Dewey's progressivism, Paulo Freire's pedagogy of hope, the nation's social movements for civil and human rights, and Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism. The chapter grounds this struggle for high-quality and socially just schooling in current thinking about the future of democratic institutions in our postmodern world, and in the experiences of first-year teachers engaged in that struggle. It also describes the pressures that plague the teaching profession and details ways that committed new teachers do maintain their hope, their struggle, and their commitment to change the world.

Digging Deeper: Going Beyond the Text

Each chapter ends with a section called “Digging Deeper.” Here we identify scholars who are studying or working on practical applications of the issues we raise, and we list a few of their books and articles that you might find interesting and useful. In some chapters, we also list professional organizations and activist groups working to make education policy or school practices more consistent with and supportive of socially just teaching. Wherever possible, we provide Internet sites that are good starting points for pursuing additional resources.

Perspectives of Those Engaged in Hopeful Struggle

The words of the first-year teachers whom we cite throughout the book come from the comprehensive portfolios they presented for their Master’s Degree in Education at UCLA. We recommend that all potential teachers write about their experiences, thoughts, and observations. Whether a personal journal, or a portfolio that presents a full record of a teacher-candidate’s intellectual and professional growth, a written record inevitably provides wonderful opportunities for reflection.

The Reader’s Perspective

You will find that this book does not offer chapter-end questions and does not wrap up chapters with lists of “main points” to tell readers what the chapters say or mean. Instead, readers must furnish what the book itself cannot provide—lots of discussion and elaboration. Readers need to become engaged in the *social learning* the book describes in Chapters 3 and 6 and elsewhere. The discussions in those chapters apply to mature readers as well as to elementary and secondary school students.

Readers will find that reading and discussion groups or “book clubs” are excellent structures for forming and revealing their own perceptions as they pursue this book’s issues in depth. A “jigsaw” approach with several people responsible for different supplemental articles or bodies of research and practice can enable readers to support or scaffold their own and others’ sense-making. Readers who are fortunate to have access to other readers with diverse backgrounds, experiences, cultures, and lifestyles will have especially enriched learning opportunities.

Of course, there are some questions that, if not specific to a particular chapter, have good generic potential for sparking the reader’s thinking. For example, What memories of your own schooling or other experiences does the book stir up? What connections can you make to your other knowledge? What makes you angry? What sounds reasonable, but you can’t believe it is true? What have you always known, but you didn’t know you knew it? What do you imagine your acquaintances would think about the material? And, of course, what are your questions?

Teaching

Finally, we suggest that a teacher's most important skill is finding the intelligence and understanding the knowledge that each student possesses. This is no easy matter when teachers are culturally very similar to their students; and, when the teacher is culturally different, it is a real challenge. To perfect this skill is a legitimate and fulfilling life's work. Mary Ann Pacheco, one of the first-year teachers you will meet in this book, put it this way:



I began the year afraid, and gradually developed a more solid sense of who I was, what my profession meant to me, and what I wanted for my students whose lives I would touch forever. Perhaps my views and practices will change in the future, perhaps they will not. What is important is that I developed a new identity through teaching, and this will sustain me. I expect that from a career in which I deal with real and diverse lives every day.

—Mary Ann Pacheco
First-year teacher, grades 1 and 2

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