

CRITICAL SOCIAL THOUGHT  
Edited by Michael W. Apple

# Contradictions of Control

School Structure  
and School Knowledge

LINDA M. McNEIL

# **Contradictions of Control**

School Structure  
and School Knowledge  
LINDA M. McNEIL

**Routledge**

New York London

Published in 1988 by

Routledge,  
an imprint of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.  
29 West 35 Street  
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by

Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane  
London EC4P 4EE

First published in 1986 by Routledge & Kegan Paul

Copyright © Linda McNeil 1986

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

McNeil, Linda M.

Contradictions of Control.

(Critical Social Thought)

Bibliography: P.

Includes Index.

- ✓1. High Schools—United States—Administration.
  - ✓2. High Schools—United States—Curricula.
  - ✓3. High Schools—United States—Case Studies.
    - I. Title. II. Series.
- LB2822.2.M36 1986 373.73 86-17750  
ISBN 0-7102-0246-6  
ISBN 0-415-90075-1 (pbk.)

British Library CIP data also available

## **PART ONE**

# **Choice and contradictions**

# Contradictions of Control

## **Critical Social Thought**

Series editor: Michael W. Apple

Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and of Educational Policy  
Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison

*Already published*

*Critical Social Psychology* Philip Wexler

*Reading, Writing and Resistance* Robert B. Everhart

*Arguing for Socialism* Andrew Levine

*Between Two Worlds* Lois Weis

*Culture Wars* Ira Shor

*Power and the Promise of School Reform* William J. Reese

*Becoming Clerical Workers* Linda Valli

*Racial Formation in the United States* Michael Omi and Howard  
Winant

*The Politics of Hope* Bernard P. Dauenhauer

*The Common Good* Marcus G. Raskin

**To Ken**

# Series editor's introduction

During the past two decades we have made a good deal of progress in showing the connections between curricula, pedagogy and evaluation in our elementary and secondary schools and the unequal structures of the larger society. Even with this growth in sophistication, however, an element has been very clearly missing in many of the studies of the cultural, political and economic role of our formal institutions of education. Here I am speaking of the tendency to ignore – or treat as epiphenomenal – the school's internal workings as an organization. This has been unfortunate.

Schools are not simple places. They are complex organizations that can never easily correspond to theories that claim a mechanistic connection between the ideological and economic requirements of powerful groups and the day-to-day life of the institution. Not only are schools complex, but they are riven with contradictory tensions that have a long history, a history that informs the discussion in this book. Whether these tensions are called the contradictions between accumulation and legitimation, as some analysts have labeled them,<sup>1</sup> the need to support economic stratification and democracy at the same time, as others have argued,<sup>2</sup> or the tensions between educating citizens and providing mechanisms of control, as McNeil calls them here, it is clear that no reductive theory that shows a one-to-one correspondence between the needs of dominant groups and education can ever do justice to what goes on in the day-to-day reality of schools.

Our task is to understand what schools do socially and educationally without reducing them to simple reflections of ideological and economic pressures outside of themselves. Political/economic, cultural and organizational analyses need to be combined if this is to be successful. Any individual study may stress one of these three



*Series editor's introduction*

modes of analysis, but it is in demonstrating the connections among the three that real progress is made.

When we consider the question of what counts as legitimate knowledge in the curriculum and how it is organized and taught, this becomes of even greater import. There have been an increasing number of volumes that have argued that the curriculum in schools has very real connections to the class, gender and race dynamics that create social inequalities.<sup>3</sup> And there has been considerable attention paid to the relationship between curriculum and teaching and the bureaucratic and organizational structure of the school.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, these bodies of literature often talk past each other. If these disparate perspectives could be integrated together,<sup>5</sup> then our ability to comprehend how and why schools do what they do would be increased immeasurably. *Contradictions of Control* enables us to take a large step toward such a synthetic view.

McNeil examines four, primarily middle-class, high schools. Each of them attempts to resolve its contradictory requirements in a distinct way. All of the schools are "smooth running." All enjoy reputations (some national) as "good schools." Yet in all but one, it is possible to raise the issue – as the author so clearly does – of whether in the midst of these smoothly operating administrative apparatuses, these schools actually educate in the best sense of that word? Her negative answer may not be one every school reformer, national, state and local school official, and others like; but there is no doubt that it must be taken very seriously if education is to do more than prepare students for an unequal society outside the classroom doors.

At the root of this volume is a seemingly innocent question. How does the administrative context of schools affect the content of the curriculum in the classroom? This innocent query becomes more powerful given the pressures now placed upon school systems, and made so popular by national reports on education such as *A Nation at Risk*, to tighten up controls on students, teaching, curricula, "standards," and so forth.

Part of McNeil's theme is best expressed in words taken from her own preface to this book:

The language of control has become the language of educational reform. . . . The irony of these reform efforts is that they perpetuate a basic reality that has created the problems in

the first place. We assert the purpose of our schools is to increase learning, but we have organized schools in ways that distort that purpose and even contradict it.

As she goes on to say:

When the school's organization becomes centered on managing and controlling, teachers and students take school less seriously. They fall into a ritual of teaching and learning that tends toward minimal standards and minimum effort. This sets off a vicious cycle. As students disengage from enthusiastic involvement in the learning process, administrators often see the disengagement as a control problem. They then increase their attention to managing students and teachers rather than supporting their instructional purpose.

The effects are what McNeil labels the contradictions of control. These contradictions are lived out at the level of what gets taught, how teachers actually do that teaching, and how students respond to these conditions.

I have argued at length elsewhere that the labor of teaching is increasingly being restructured in ways that are very similar to what has happened to other white-, blue and pink-collar employees. The growth of plans for rationalizing and standardizing as many aspects of teaching, curricula and evaluation as possible is creating a situation in which teachers are losing power and, especially, *de-skilled*.<sup>6</sup> McNeil goes into considerable detail about this, refining and building on it, and going beyond it when necessary. What is happening to teaching, though, cannot be understood in isolation. It must be linked to changes in the organization of knowledge in schools as well.

School knowledge is a part of, and a product of, the organization of schools. It is *organized* knowledge. This seems almost too trite to say, but it speaks to something of no small moment. We are apt to talk about the organization of school knowledge in particular ways. Within a traditional curricular perspective we speak of disciplinary knowledge in mathematics, science, history, and so on. In a political manner, school knowledge is described as organized around the cultural principles of elite groups. Both of these are significant, and especially the latter when one is concerned about the place of schooling in the reproduction of class, gender and race

relations. Yet there is a third way to think this through. Knowledge is also organized around the internal bureaucratic workings of the school, an organization that may stand between and mediate both the disciplinary and political senses of curricular knowledge.

The focus on the relationship between internal organizational processes and the curriculum is a key to McNeil's argument. For her, the *internal* ways that schools operate provide a rationale for and create the conditions that may help serve to prevent students from gaining a critical understanding of their society. "Elite controls" are less necessary than some educational critics have claimed. Pressures from the economy, from dominant groups in society, and so forth make less of an immediate difference than the perceived needs for organizational controls by teachers and administrators. In essence, it is in the "relative autonomy" of the schools from these external forces that the connections between schooling and the larger social order lie.

In many ways, *Contradictions of Control* goes a long way toward specifying in detail some of the more interesting claims made by sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein that the organization of culture and people in educational institutions follows its own logic and is *not* directly connected to the economy. By following through on its own logic, the educational system is then still able to reproduce some of the cultural conditions "necessary" for the reproduction of inequality.<sup>7</sup>

McNeil's reason for devoting so much of her attention to these internal characteristics is perhaps best stated in her discussion of how this volume fits into the program of critical research on education that has evolved over the past two decades:

Critical educational scholarship . . . needs to trace out the contradictions inherent in subordinating teaching and learning to institutional controls. The specific linkages and unanticipated outcomes within schools need to be clearly documented. Variations from traditional patterns need to be examined. If we are to understand the impact of further educational reforms based on controls, we must describe in detail the legacy of the controls from past generations as they shape the school's role today. For that reason, [this volume] may appear to be internalistic, only slightly cognizant of external economic and political factors. It is an attempt to fill in the gap in our

theories of knowledge production and transformation in schools. The close-up detail of classroom processes and administrative policies is not meant to ignore these external forces; it is an attempt to bring into the open those practices in schools which are mistaken for failures of educational planning but are in fact the logical outcomes of that planning as it has subordinated education to control. The research ranged across the entire school, but centered mostly on classrooms, because that is where students encounter the contradictions.

Having said this, the author wants to make it clear that this is not just another study of how schools may operate to reproduce inequality. In fact, she expressly argues against such a reproductive theory in a number of ways.

One of the significant points made by the volume is in fact that schools do not merely reproduce existing cultural content and form. This has been noted by others as well, of course, who have argued that schools play a major role in the *production* of particular kinds of knowledge – for example, technical/administrative knowledge that is necessary for the expansion of markets and products, for cultural control, and so on.<sup>8</sup> *Contradictions of Control* goes beyond even these theories to demonstrate in a very insightful way how schools *transform* official culture. Schools take official culture and change it into small bits of knowledge and “sequences of assignments that are compatible with the internal bureaucratic processes of the school.” One of McNeil’s most interesting claims is that after official knowledge is “processed through worksheets, list-filled lectures and short answer tests, the cultural content, regardless of whose interests it may have served before, comes to serve only the interests of institutional efficiencies.” Control and credentialling become the rationale for the educational experience; substance is lost. The effects of this process on students are profound.

The very fragmentation of the knowledge that is taught, the omission of crucial elements of content and the “mystification” of much that remains, the presentation of overly simplified “facts,” these were characteristics of the curricula in the classrooms McNeil studied. All of these were generated out of a strategy of what she calls “defensive teaching” that itself grew out of the histories of the schools and the attempts by teachers to maintain their own “authority and efficiencies.” The ultimate effects were the participation of

teachers in their own de-skilling and, just as importantly, the creation of a curriculum that was too impersonal to be appropriated by students but whose effects were still damaging and long lasting.

In these schools, however, teachers and students were not just the passive recipients of administrative designs. They are active agents, altering, reappropriating and mediating a whole array of organizational and curricular structures. It is in their accommodation and sometimes resistance to these structures that the contradictory results of schooling are produced.

*Contradictions of Control* is a case study in the trivialization of education, as control wins out over serious educational purposes. Yet it is much more than that. By also focusing on a school that at least partly resolved its contradictory demands in a somewhat more democratic manner, the book shows the very possibility of difference.

It also demonstrates the fragility of the conditions necessary for good teaching and curricula and for more democratic educational practices. In the face of the legislative and bureaucratic attempts further to rationalize and control classroom discourse, it is this very fragility that should concern us. Many of the current attempts to standardize procedures and develop competency tests for students and teachers may actually create more problems than they solve. McNeil's analysis makes this possibility very clear. Thus, by providing a detailed examination of what actually happens in secondary schools, and why, in the United States, the simplistic remedies suggested by the multitude of reform proposals such as *A Nation At Risk* and others are shown to be exactly that – all too simple.

*Contradictions of Control*, then, is a major contribution to two kinds of debate. It continues the tradition of, and raises questions about, the research on the relationship between the curriculum and teaching practices in our schools and the larger society. Even if this was all it did, it would be well worth reading. The fact that the book also illuminates the organizational conditions inside schools and the day-to-day qualities of teachers' and students' lives, and then relates them to the mass of top-down efforts to "reform" our elementary and secondary schools, makes it an even more interesting book. It is the very combination of critically informed scholarship with an insistence on focusing on questions of the quality and reform of curricular and teaching practice that sets McNeil's study

apart from other volumes. It is an articulate challenge to perspectives commonly accepted both by leftist critics of education and by more conservative educators who want to make schools more "efficient" and business-like. As such, it is a welcome addition that deserves our serious attention.

Michael W. Apple  
The University of Wisconsin-Madison

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Apple, Michael W. (1982), *Education and Power*, Boston and London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- 2 Carnoy, Martin, and Levin, Henry (1985), *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- 3 Among them are Apple, Michael W. (1979), *Ideology and Curriculum*, Boston and London, Routledge & Kegan Paul; Apple (1982), *Education and Power* (see note 1 above); Apple, Michael W. (in press), *Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education*, Boston and London, Routledge & Kegan Paul; and Giroux, Henry (1983), *Theory and Resistance in Education*, South Hadley, Bergin & Garvey.
- 4 See Fullan, Michael (1982), *The Meaning of Educational Change*, New York, Teachers College Press.
- 5 This point is similar to Erik Olin Wright's argument that a synthesis of Marxist and Weberian analyses is essential for understanding complex institutions. See Wright, Erik Olin (1978), *Class, Crisis and the State*, London, New Left Books, pp. 181-225.
- 6 This is discussed in greater detail in Apple (1982), *Education and Power* (see note 1 above) and Apple (in press), *Teachers and Texts* (see note 3 above).
- 7 Bourdieu, Pierre and Passeron, Jean-Claude (1977), *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Beverly Hills, Sage; and Bernstein, Basil (1977), *Class, Codes and Control Volume 3*, London and Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- 8 Apple (1982), *Education and Power* (see note 1 above), especially Chapter 2.

# Author's preface

Reforming the mediocre ritualization of American high schools has become a national political crusade. A spate of reform reports emerging during the past few years has documented the growing sense that high schools are in trouble. The content of the curriculum has become watered down, students have become increasingly disengaged from the learning process and the quality of learning has suffered.

Amid the diverse prescriptions for school improvements, the reforms most likely to be implemented have been those which call for more centralized management controls over factors shaping the curriculum: testing, teacher training, course content. The language of control has become the language of education reform.

The irony of these reform efforts is that they perpetuate a basic reality that has created the problems in the first place. We assert the purpose of our schools is to increase learning, but have organized schools in ways that distort that purpose and even contradict it. We are so accustomed to thinking of school organization as separate from instruction that we rarely confront the tension between the two. After all, administrators are trained to "manage"; teachers are trained to "teach." Yet the current pressures to reform schools by strengthening management controls, even to the point of standardization, are bringing these two traditionally distinct domains into crisis by threatening the professional role of teachers as educators.

This book explores the contradictions of management controls in undermining the goal they supposedly seek to achieve – quality of learning. It focuses on the area where the tensions between school management and teaching play themselves out – the classroom. The theme of the analysis is deceptively simple, yet rich

### *Author's preface*

in variations. *When the school's organization becomes centered on managing and controlling, teachers and students take school less seriously.* They fall into a ritual of teaching and learning that tends toward minimal standards and minimum effort. This sets off a vicious cycle. As students disengage from enthusiastic involvement in the learning process, administrators often see the disengagement as a control problem. They then increase their attention to managing students and teachers rather than supporting their instructional purpose.

The management efficiencies implied by centralized controls are tempting for public officials looking for short-term accountability models. Such "improvements," however, ignore years of complex organization research which tells us that top-down controls seldom produce in workers the intended results and in fact often produce unintended consequences. They ignore the common wisdom that measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning. They also ignore the fallacy of equating uniformity with quality, especially the failure of uniform minimum standards to address issues of excellence. Most interestingly, the control-based reforms fail to take into account the calls in the reform reports themselves to increase teacher professionalism, to upgrade their educational level, to attract competent people into the teaching profession. Reforms which tighten administrative controls take a much less optimistic view of the potential of teachers to really teach.

A key reason that many recent reforms have missed the significance of the contradictions of control is that little empirical research has been focused on how the administrative context of schools affects the content of the curriculum in the classroom. Historically, advocates of testing have ignored such dynamics by simply introducing certain curricula, then testing to determine the degree of student "learnings" of that content. Within that model of curriculum analysis, the inputs and outputs are more important than the processes in between the two or the effects not predefined as outputs. Until very recently, critical theorists, who have much less tendency to accept the structure of the school as unproblematic, have nevertheless focused on how schools operate as social control agencies for economic and political elites. This focus has had a tendency to obscure what is happening to the student; often there is the assumption that socialization is occurring because the processes of socialization and social control are so entrenched. In



addition, this perspective has tended to emphasize the role of schools in shaping what students do after they leave school (labor force stratification, especially) rather than the educational effects within the controlling institution.

There has been a dearth of empirical work on the actual dynamics of classroom learning and how they are affected by the broader organization of schools. Indeed, this author stumbled inadvertently onto the significance of the organizational structure for teaching and learning while engaged in a classroom study of social studies curriculum. That study (McNeil, 1977), begun as an analysis of the nature and sources of economics content in required social studies classes, discovered on the surface a pattern of classroom interaction much like that described by Goodlad (1983) as flattened content, limited teaching techniques and bored students. The treatment of economics topics differed little from the treatment of other social studies content (social and political history, for example) in its simplistic forms of presentation, devoid of complex explanation or controversy; its short-answer-test evaluations; its air of unreality which made "school economics" somehow very different from the economy in which students and their parents live.

The perception of unreality was not that of the observer alone. The students, docile in class, spoke in interviews of feeling very skeptical about the credibility of what they learned at school. The teachers, too, had knowledge of their subject far beyond what they admitted into class discussion. The two met in a boring but polite ritual of "social studies."

According to the logic of the recent reform efforts, one would conclude that these were ill-prepared teachers, or at least not very smart ones, and that their school's administration was weak. The students' achievements would be expected to be low. In fact, the school had a strong administration, well-educated teachers who kept up in their field, and a solid base of community support for education. The school was known for being a "good school," whose students generally performed well above average in their school work and in their admissions to higher education.

The key to the low level of effort in these classes, to the skepticism felt by the students toward the course content, lay in the tension between the teachers' professional roles within the school and the administrative context within which they worked. They felt the administration to be interested only in processing students