Critical Issues in Education

DIALOGUES and DIALECTICS

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Dialogues and Dialectics

FOURTH EDITION

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Foreword
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Boston Burr Ridge, IL Dubuque, IA Madison, WI New York
San Francisco St. Louis Bangkok Bogotá Caracas Lisbon London
Madrid Mexico City Milan New Delhi Seoul Singapore Sydney
Taipei Toronto

McGraw-Hill Higher Education
A Division of The ***McGraw-Hill*** *Companies*

CRITICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION: DIALOGUES AND DIALECTICS, FOURTH EDITION

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

6 7 8 9 0 QSR/QSR 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN 0–07–228661–X

Editorial director: *Jane E. Vaicunas*
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Compositor: *Precision Graphics*
Typeface: *10/12 Palatino*
Printer: *R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company/Crawfordsville, IN*

Cover designer: *Chris Reese*
Cover image © *Harald Sund/The Image Bank*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nelson, Jack L.
Critical issues in education : dialogues and dialectics / Jack L. Nelson, Stuart B. Palonsky, Kenneth Carlson.— 4th ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–07–228661–X
1. Education—United States. 2. Teaching—United States. 3. Educational evaluation—United States. 4. Critical thinking—United States. I. Carlson, Kenneth. II. Palonsky, Stuart B. III. Title.
LA217.2.N45 2000
370'.973—dc21 99–32995
CIP

www.mhhe.com

Foreword

We all know that reasonable people differ on matters of great importance in education and, more generally, on issues concerning the public good. However, in the crush of demands, teacher educators often bypass critical issues in favor of meeting the pressing need to prepare teachers for their instructional and managerial roles in classrooms. We expect them to help their students learn how to think critically, but we sometimes assume that they already engage in such thinking themselves. *Critical Issues in Education* presents educators-in-training with the opportunity to consider opposing arguments on almost two dozen vital issues.

In this fourth edition of their popular text, Jack Nelson, Stuart Palonsky, and Kenneth Carlson bring these important issues up to date. They offer persuasive arguments, pro and con, on vouchers, affirmative action, whole language, multicultural studies, standardized testing, increased academic freedom for teachers, and many other contemporary issues. In most cases, the arguments, although they are presented dialectically, are not posed at the extremes. Indeed, readers may want to search out and defend even stronger arguments on one side or the other. I found myself reacting to several of the arguments with some emotion, thinking, "Oh, this could be argued more strongly!" or "This should be protested more vigorously!" That reaction says something about both the salience of the issues and the power of the presentations.

Most people interested in education have opinions on the topics in *Critical Issues,* but their opinions are often highly emotional and unsupported by careful argument. Because opinions are so frequently founded on strong feelings, educators have endorsed critical thinking as an essential aim of education in liberal democracies. We want our students to hold their beliefs evidentially, to support their opinions with arguments that others cannot brush aside as mere feeling. To understand our own positions, however, we need to understand the positions of those who oppose us. John Stuart Mill (1859/1993) was eloquent on this:

> The greatest orator, save one, of antiquity, has left it on record that he always studied his adversary's case with as great, if not with still greater, intensity than even his own. What Cicero practised as the means of forensic success, requires

> to be imitated by all who study any subject in order to arrive at the truth. He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. (p. 43)

But Mill would have us encourage our students to go beyond the arguments presented in *Critical Issues*, and this is good advice:

> Nor is it enough, that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. . . . He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. (p. 43)

This is the invitation *Critical Issues* offers. Nelson, Palonsky, and Carlson do not claim to present comprehensive opposing arguments, nor do they suggest that there are only two sides to the crucial issues discussed. The dialectical mode should spark reaction (as it did in me), and lead students to investigate more deeply and, perhaps, to construct alternatives.

One reason for studying the opposing side carefully is, as Mill pointed out, to understand our own position more thoroughly. But another reason, too often neglected, is the possibility that we may achieve a genuine appreciation for the other side. We may be persuaded; thinking reflectively, we may change our minds. But even when we become more deeply committed to our own position, we may arrive at a more genuine respect for our adversary. As a result, we may work actively and honestly toward a compromise that will not do serious damage to our basic commitments.

An example may help here. In the past few years, I have had conversations—some written, some oral—with members of the Christian right. We disagree on many issues. At a symposium of the American Educational Research Association, an evangelical intellectual spoke eloquently about "his" values. They included honesty, courage, compassion, loyalty, and the like. Annoyed, I responded (to heartening applause from the audience) that these were not just "his" values but, rather, values that most of us, including humanists, accept and cherish. My adversary answered in a way I will never forget. He admitted that we might share important values, but he said that the values—important as they are—are secondary. Of primary importance is the worldview in which they arise. In his worldview, God is the source of value; in mine, human beings in interaction with one another construct value. How can we create a program of moral education if we must start with a worldview?

I am still struggling with this problem, and I believe that secular educators must find a way to accommodate religious worldviews in public school curricula. It is likely that no suggestion we can make will entirely satisfy fundamentalists, because they believe honestly that only one view is right, and they will condemn our attempts to include their view along with others as "relativism." Here, my own view seems clearly better: After all, I am willing to include

theirs, whereas they stubbornly label mine wrong. But if I swallow my feeling of liberal superiority, I can see that my willingness to include all views is, in a sense, an insistence on my own. That, at bottom, *is* my worldview—that there are many reasonable, interesting competing views we should hear and allow to live side by side. In a way, if I can get agreement on this, I've won.

My adversary has a much tougher problem, and working together is incredibly difficult. Still, I think we must try. Many of the fundamentalist's points are well taken. Schools pay far too little attention to the great existential questions, and they are afraid even to consider discussing religious answers to these questions. If a compromise can be achieved, we may all gain from it.

A third reason for attending to current conflicts is to acquire educational literacy. Even if we are personally uninterested in some of these problems, we should recognize that others find them intensely interesting. As professionals, we need to know what arouses such interest and how it is likely to play out politically.

One more reason for studying opposing views is to get a better understanding of what it means to be reasonable. We sometimes consider a heartfelt sentiment expressed by someone we like as reasonable without examination. And sometimes we allow the possibility that an outrageous opinion is reasonable because we want to show our own tolerance or sophistication. However, unreasonable positions do exist, and students must learn how to assess them and how to deal with the people who express them. They have to learn how to evaluate their own arguments for reasonability, too. At a certain stage, well-educated people are prone to say of unreasonable people, "You can't talk to those people." They even consider it morally questionable to talk to "those people." Thus, the world, in the hands of "reasonable" people, deteriorates into physical and psychological violence. When others are unreasonable, perhaps the best strategy is to change the subject so that a relationship of care and trust can be established or maintained. When it is clear that both sides find it unthinkable to do real harm to one another, they can return to the questions that separate them. It is ultimately reasonable to offer and to elicit caring responses without denying reality and truth.

The educational contribution of *Critical Issues* goes well beyond helping students achieve literacy on current issues. It should help them to understand their own positions more fully, to gain an appreciation for the motives and predicaments of others, and to increase their understanding of what it means to be reasonable. This is no mean contribution.

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Reference

Mill, J. S. (1859/1993). *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*. New York: Bantam Books.

Preface

Welcome to the great debates about schools in society.

Schools , at the beginning of the twenty-first century, are still among the most important and most controversial social institutions. For over three hundred years, people on this continent have agreed on the importance of education, but have disagreed over how it should be controlled, financed, organized, conducted, and evaluated. Two centuries ago, a very young United States was debating the establishment of free and compulsory education, arguing over who should be educated, who should pay, and what should be taught. We have mass education now, but some of these same arguments continue about schools in society. Of course, controversies about important issues are inevitable and, we argue, healthy in a democratic society.

A century ago John Dewey published "My Pedagogic Creed," 1897, calling the school the "fundamental" means for progress and reform of society. His book, *School and Society*, which he published in 1900, laid out some basic social premises for progressive education. Those progressive premises remain under attack in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Social reformer Jane Addams, speaking at the National Education Association meeting of 1897, noted the social purposes of education and the need for schools to provide improved education to "foreign-born children," a precursor to current battles over multicultural education. Susan B. Anthony, cofounder of the National Womans Suffrage Association, argued, also in 1897, that schools then closed to women should open their doors to equality. Race, class, and gender discrimination remain educational issues a century later. Many other school controversies have arisen over the course of time, but pervasive issues survive, often different in patterns and details.

Persistent school issues reflect basic human disagreements. Ideological differences in politics, economics, and social values undergird the battles over schools. The issues and competing ideologies deserve critical examination. It is informative to study schooling by reading newspaper or magazine reports of test scores, finance, and school activities. But the media often ignore or gloss over basic social or ideological conflicts, and they can sterilize issues by presenting only one view; few media provide alternative views of an issue. The

implication that there is one correct view obscures the historical, political, and social contexts that surround school controversies.

Our effort, in this book, is to explore a collection of pervasive and critical school issues by providing divergent views on each. The issues presented are dynamic; by presenting them in the form of opposing essays, we intend to show how provocative and complex they are. That does not mean they are unsolvable problems; it does suggest that good solutions rely upon engaged and informed debate. We see the terrain of education as rugged and rocky, with few clear paths and many conflicting road signs.

The Book's Organization

The introductory chapter presents a background for examining reform efforts and debates in education.

The three following sections are each devoted to a major question about schooling and are introduced with background material to provide a context:

Part One—What interests should schools serve?

Part Two—What should be taught?

Part Three—How should schools be organized and operated?

Each part contains chapters on specific critical issues, and each chapter contains two essays expressing divergent positions on that issue. Obviously, these do not exhaust all the possible positions; they do provide at least two views on the issue, and references are provided in each chapter to encourage further exploration. At the end of each chapter are a few questions to consider and a brief sample of related data.

On the one hand, the public views American education as being in deep trouble and getting worse; on the other hand, they view their local schools as remarkably good, with excellent teachers and high-quality programs. If we had a third hand, we could add another view. New views emerge as debates over education stimulate us to rethink our positions.

The authors took initial responsibility for different parts of this volume. For Nelson this included: Introduction to Part II and chapters 1, 7, 11, 12, 15, 17, and 19; for Carlson: Introduction to Part I and chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10; and for Palonsky: Introduction Part III and chapters 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, and 18.

Acknowledgments

We received valuable suggestions from a variety of faculty members and students who have used this book in the three previous editions. For this edition, we revised and updated all chapters and replaced some topics that appeared in older editions with new chapters on current educational issues-debates over approaches to: reading instruction, gender, and the inclusion and mainstreaming of exceptional children in schools.

We owe great intellectual debts to people who examine the relation of education to society, and who express divergent ideas in the extensive literature available. That group includes a variety of both widely known and relatively obscure theorists and critics, as well as a corps of practitioners. We are also indebted to students, colleagues, and others who provided specific criticism and assistance as we worked through the various topics. In particular, we express appreciation to Beth Kaufman, our encouraging editor at McGraw-Hill, to Vicki Krug, our project manager, and to Gwen, Karen, and Nancy for support, enthusiasm, and criticism when needed.

We especially appreciate the contributions of many colleagues who reviewed the manuscript, criticized the work in progress, or provided provocative ideas to challenge us. Among these are: David Blacker, The University of Delaware; Pat Benne, Wittenberg University; David Cauble, Western Nebraska Community College; James Daly, Seton Hall University; Emily de la Cruz, Portland State University; Russell Dennis, Bucknell University; Annette Digby, The University of Arkansas; Gloria Earl, Indiana Wesleyan University; Herbert Edwards, attorney, Harbor Springs, Michigan; Paul Edwards, attorney, Colorado Springs, Colorado; Dean Kenneth Eltis, University of Sydney, Australia; William Fernekes, Hunterdon, New Jersey, Central High School; Karen Graves, Denison University; Kevin Laws, University of Sydney, Australia; Dean Steven Lilley, California State University, San Marcos; Joseph McCarthy, Suffolk University; Wally Moroz, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia; Nel Noddings, Stanford University; Valerie Pang, San Diego State University; Bonnie Rose, Riverside City Schools, California; Dean William Stanley, University of Colorado; Rocco Tomazic, Doctoral Student at Rutgers; Doris Terr, City Schools of New York; David Tyack, Stanford University; Jackie Thousand, California State University, San Marcos; Atilano Valencia, California State University, Fresno; Dorothy Watson, University of Missouri; and Burt Weltman, William Paterson College.

We further dedicate this effort to Megan, Jordan, Jonathan, Kirsten, Tom, Melanie, Chris, Mike, Barbara, Mark, Steven, Tory, and others of the generation of students and teachers who will be at the core of education in the twenty-first century.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Critical Issues and Critical Thinking

A number of questions face schools for the twenty-first century:

On Purposes and Expectations

Why isn't everyone happy with our schools?

What is a good school, a good teacher, a good curriculum, a good society?

Who should be going to school, for how long, at whose cost, and what should be taught to them?

Why don't we know, by now, what works best in education?

Whose interests should schools serve?

On Preparing

How should schools change to meet changing social conditions and expectations? How should they change to meet the challenges of increasing technology? expanding knowledge? climbing school expenses?

Where will we get the financial and human resources we need to provide high-quality schooling?

How should we prepare our teachers, and what should they expect in terms of salary, class size, academic freedom, and professional respect?

On Deciding

What evidence supports one view or another of school quality and school reform? Who can we trust to provide answers to schooling issues?

Why are arguments about schools so extended and deep-seated?

Why do we seem clueless about the best education? Aren't these the same questions we might have asked in the first decade of the twentieth century?