THE MORAL
& SPIRITUAL
CRISIS
IN EDUCATION

A CURRICULUM FOR JUSTICE & COMPASSION IN EDUCATION

DAVID E. PURPEL

INTRODUCTION BY HENRY A. GIROUX & PAULO FREIRE

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CRITICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION SERIES

I wish to dedicate this book to
Mark, Rachel, Nancy, and Gabriel

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Preface

This is in many ways an extraordinarily exciting time for educational theorists and yet in other ways it is a particularly dreary and bleak era. The dreariness and bleakness is not very hard to locate, since they are what emerge from current mainstream educational dialogue, particularly the language of so-called educational reform. This discourse is not only trivial and distracting; it is marked also by a singular lack of imagination and daring. The criticisms made, the solutions offered, may be important insofar as they affect current policies and programs, but they hardly stir us with wonder and awe. Beyond this hum and drone, however, there is the roar of high excitement involving enormous possibilities and dangerous risks.

I speak of two roars—the first has to do with the enormity of our present cultural, political, and economic crisis and with it the incipient possibility of catastrophe. The second general realm of energy and excitement is in the world of ideas which is bursting with ever increasing vitality and brilliance. Virtually every scholarly and professional field is awash with significant controversies, challenges to existing canons, emerging paradigms—some of which have led to whole new areas of inquiry and new research modes. Clearly, some of this excitement is evident in the field of educational theory as we see qualitatively different discourses emerging from the invigorating effects of the newer insights, theories, and critiques. I believe that we in education do in fact need to re-conceptualize mainstream educational discourse. More precisely, we need to quicken the pace of these efforts already begun in the seminal work of such educators as

Paulo Freire, James Macdonald, Henry Giroux, Maxine Greene, William Pinar, and Michael Apple.

It is my hope that this book contributes to the effort to develop a more liberating discourse on the intimate relationships among the society, culture, and education. Furthermore, I want very much to facilitate the process by which we can understand and act on the ways in which our schools might at the very least not increase the probability of social disaster. I continue to have the faith that schools can go even beyond that point and can actually contribute to the creation of a more loving, more just, saner world. My efforts toward this goal focus on the possibilities involved in enriching educational theory with a moral and religious discourse. More particularly, I have tried in this book to make a case for the necessity for educators to affirm moral and educational commitments. I believe that there is an urgency not only to be critical, not only to deconstruct, debunk and unmask, but also simultaneously to affirm, commit, and advocate. I try in this book to confront the problematics of moral affirmation in the context of confronting the problematics of avoiding moral affirmation. I come away from these efforts more convinced than ever that we as educators have special responsibilities in this unique moment to risk positive commitment in addition to risking negative criticism. Indeed, I have come to see that one effort is not complete without the other.

The book is organized into seven chapters; the first two chapters examine on the nature of recent and current mainstream educational discourse particularly in its trivial, vulgar, and technical character. These chapters present a number of explanations for this state of affairs including a discussion of American anti-intellectualism and the fears of education. They conclude with the position that what is most lacking in current educational discourse is the inclusion of the moral and religious dimensions of society and education.

In chapter three I present a moral analysis of the current culture in a series of paradoxes and conflicts that reflect both the dangers and possibilities inherent in our present consciousness. It is an analysis that focuses most directly on middle-class life, in part because I believe that the middle class has both political and economic power and high educational potential, i.e., is in position to inform its power with a moral and religious vision. I address in this chapter the enormous conflicts, contradictions, and divisions within our society, as well as our pride in pluralism and diversity. It is my strong belief that we both need and are capable of creating an overarching belief system (I call it a mythos) that can accommodate both our affirmation and skepticism of them.

In chapter four I spell out such a moral and religious framework

or vision that speaks to meaning, purpose, and ultimacy. It is a framework that borrows from two ancient traditions, the Socratic and the Prophetic and two current theological movements: Liberation Theology and Creation Theology. The major emphasis, however, is on Prophecy, conceptualized as the voice that in Walter Brueggemann's phrase combines "energy and criticism" and a consciousness which, says Abraham Heschel, "has the ability to hold God and man in a single thought." Prophecy holds us to our deepest commitments, chides us when we do not meet them, and provides hope for us when we think we cannot.

The fifth chapter describes how educators might internalize this voice and thereby provide themselves with purpose and direction. The chapter concludes with a credo focusing on the goal of education being that which facilitates love, justice, community, and joy.

The concluding two chapters deal with how a curriculum primarily directed at social justice and compassion might look. The chapter includes a list of specific educational goals and objectives, and the book ends with a discussion of issues of implementation and of overcoming sabotage and cooptation.

I certainly hope lots of people read this book, and if they do I certainly expect that there will be criticisms and disagreements. I hope and expect that there will be questions and eyebrows raised. I expect that flaws will be found in my reasoning; that some will point to contrary findings; and that some will find my analysis insufficient and unpersuasive. Such criticism is legitimate and required, just as vital if not more so that the work itself, and can only serve to advance our understanding. What I ask of critical readers, however, is that they not only point out faulty analysis or misreading—this surely must be done—but that they also address the issue of affirmation in general and the particular affirmations I make. This is because my strongest hope for this book is that it will stimulate others to reflect on and engage in the struggle involved in clarifying our convictions. My challenge to critics is to confront the question of what it is that we are working hard to make happen. If the convictions are unclear as stated, how and in what ways ought they be clarified? If they are insufficient, which should be added, which should be deleted? If credal statements are more problematic that liberating, what should we say about developing evaluative criteria for judging cultural and educational policy? I look forward to this dialogue and to continued excitement and vitality in educational theory for I continue to have faith that education can indeed help us to overcome the demons.

Introduction

by

Henry A. Giroux and Paulo Freire

We must abandon completely the naive faith, that school automatically liberates the mind and serves the cause of human progress; in fact, we know that it may serve any cause. [It] may serve tyranny as well as freedom, ignorance as well as enlightenment, falsehood as well as truth, war as well as peace, death as well as life. It may lead men and women to think they are free even as it rivets them in chains of bondage. Education is indeed a force of great power, particularly when the word is made to embrace all the agencies and organized processes for molding the mind, but whether it is good or evil depends, not on the laws of learning, but on the conception of life and civilization that gives it substance and direction. In the course of history, education has served every purpose and doctrine contrived by man [sic]. If it is to serve the cause of human freedom, it must be explicitly designed for that purpose.

George S. Counts[1]

You must know who is the object and who is the subject of a sentence in order to know if you are the object or subject of history. If you can't control a sentence you don't know how to put yourself into history, to trace your own origin in the country, to vocalize, to use voice.

Nelida Piñon[2]

There is a volatile debate in social theory taking place over what constitutes the relationship among knowledge, power, desire, and subjectivity. Within the humanities, social sciences, and educational

theory there is an ongoing criticism being waged over the ideological nature and social function of the canons, the status of grand theories, the boundaries that define disciplines, the meaning of history, and the role of intellectuals. In the reaches of higher education, the major thrust for reform has come from the various discourses of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Declaring war on the categories of transcendence, certainty, and foundationalism, exponents of contemporary social theory have reconstituted the meaning and method of critical inquiry and radically challenged the dominant modes of authority and social practice. In fact, many of the new critical voices have forcefully proclaimed that there exists no "objective reference point, separate from culture and politics, available to distinguish truth from ideology, fact from opinion, or representation from interpretation."[3]

What is particularly valuable about this new mode of critical inquiry is its insistence that interpretation cannot be situated outside of ideology, that is, outside of the considerations of power, historical struggle, and human interests. The importance of this work, especially for educators, is reflected in its powerful dismantling of the resurgent discourse of the New Right,[4] whose claim to objectivity and scientism in defense of its policies has been revealed as inextricably enmeshed in the language of ideology, politics, and power. While acknowledging the important contributions of postmodern social theory, it is also crucial to recognize its serious limitations. For instance, it has not sufficiently addressed the central issue of how identities and subjectivities are constructed within different moral experiences and relations, nor has it pursued with enough analytical rigor how power produces, accommodates, and challenges not simply the discourses but also the material relations of dominant political life. In other words, it has failed to develop a substantive ethical discourse and public morality that is necessary for overcoming existing forms of exploitation and subjugation. In addition, its methods of analysis and critique have not been posed as pedagogical issues. Thus, as a mode of critique, much of what constitutes postmodern social theory has not fully appreciated the critical value of engaging its methods of analysis and inquiry as forms of pedagogical practice that bring into critical relief the relationships that obtain among teaching, knowledge/texts, and learning. One result has been that this work has had only a minor influence among critical educational theorists or within the educational reform movement presently being debated in the United States and elsewhere.

Now, as before, the debate over the reform of public schooling in the United States is being principally set by the right wing. The emphasis on character education and moral fundamentalism currently

trumpeted by New Right critics such as William Bennett and Chester Finn, Jr., have served primarily to legitimate forms of authority and social discipline that undermine the very principles of democratic community and social responsibility. Similarly, this ideological thrust has been instrumental in framing the public questions related to how one should conceive of ethics, power, and history in present-day social reality and what role these should play as part of the language of educational reform. For example, public schooling and higher education are analyzed by New Right critics within what could be called a crisis of authority approach, one which abstracts equity from excellence and social responsibility from achievement. Central to this view is the claim that what constitutes the crisis in schooling is the breakdown of traditional forms of authority and moral regulation. Concerns such as those expressed above by George Counts have been largely subverted by the New Right in the current debates over schooling.[5] Under the guise of attempting to revitalize the language of morality, right-wing educators and politicians have, in reality, launched a dangerous attack on some of the most fundamental aspects of democratic public life and the obligations of socially responsible, critical citizenship. What has been valorized in this ideological discourse is not the issue of reclaiming public schools as agencies of social justice and critical democracy, but an elitist view of schooling based on a celebration of cultural uniformity, a rigid view of authority, an uncritical support for remaking school curricula in the interest of labor-market imperatives, and a return to the old transmission and acculturation model of teaching.[6]

The current crisis in educational reform is more than a crisis of authority to be resolved primarily through the language of means and technique—developing better ways to promote the same old content and social relations—it is, in fact, a crisis of morality and political nerve. This is evident both in the New Right's attempt to subordinate questions of ethics and power to the discourse of authority and rigid social discipline and in its attempt to reconstruct history as part of a wider political project. In this case, history is fashioned within a particular interpretation referred to by Christopher Lasch as arising "from a need to forget."[7] Lost from this perspective are the voices and struggles of oppressed groups fighting to transform the ideological and material conditions which support forms of subjugation and exploitation. It is a history without a language of moral responsibility, a history characterized by an impoverished civic discourse that celebrates freedom as a form of possessive individualism and treats the concept of democracy as if it were at odds with the notion of community and the call for collective social possibilities that enhance rather than demean civic and public culture. In its right-wing version,

history is offered up as narrative cleansed of social conflict and strug-
gle, reconstructed around the tenets of a mythical past dominated by
republican virtues such as those expressed in the McGuffey Eclectic
Readers and in an insular reading of the traditions of Western civili-
zation.[8] Of course, there is more at work here than the abuse of history;
there is an ideology and politics that denies the importance of forms
of pedagogy that allow people to speak out of their own histories,
cultures, experiences, and traditions.

In *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*, David Purpel takes
up the challenge presented by poststructuralism and postmodernism
and the threat to democracy and schooling currently posed by the
New Right. He begins with the assumptions that educational reform
cannot be debated or understood outside of the space of politics and
social power and that central to the language of reform is the need
to rethink and remake our social meanings and social relations as
part of our effort as public intellectuals. From this stance, Purpel not
only criticizes the New Right's attempt to undermine the democratic
and moral dimensions of schooling, he also brilliantly argues for the
rebirth of a moral culture from which to reconstruct and reconnect
the spheres of politics, ethics, and education.

For Purpel, the reform period of the last decade exemplifies in its
language and philosophy not simply the narrow political and eco-
nomic interests of the Age of Reagan; more lamentably, it points to
the emergence of a public philosophy which in its refusal to confront
the basic moral paradoxes and contradictions that shape the ongoing
relations between public schooling and the wider society constitutes
a crisis of democracy and moral courage. In Purpel's terms, educa-
tional discourse has been trivialized through its neglect of larger social
and political issues along with its willingness to define the task of
reform as a technical rather than ethical, social, and cultural enter-
prise. If Purpel were to stop here his message would be important
but far from new. What is both unique and inventive about his analysis
is that he not only convincingly argues for the importance of recog-
nizing the crisis in education as a crisis in meaning, but he defines
what he thinks should be done about it both in terms of reconstructing
a new public philosophy of education and in developing a set of
pedagogical practices consistent with such a vision. Similarly, Purpel
steps outside of the existing Left and progressive analyses of schooling
by aiming both his criticism and programs for reform at a much wider
audience than that usually addressed by current radical school critics.
In this case, Purpel speaks both to and against the attitudes and beliefs
frequently held by the middle class in this country. Rather than lim-
iting his message to the marginal and excluded, Purpel has chosen
to speak to the issues, attitudes, and values that are familiar to main-

stream Americans. He does this in order to widen the possibility for change and to clarify how the challenge of empowerment is not restricted to the disenfranchised and disadvantaged.

Drawing upon a wide variety of theoretical resources and traditions, Purpel combines the languages of critique, hope, risk, and vision in offering new possibilities for the direction of public schooling and for the examination of political and moral responsibilities that both shape and result from our various interventions as administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Purpel's voice is not that of the technician, ideologue, or prophet. It is the voice of the engaged intellectual reflecting on his or her own historical presence and that of the institutions and social practices that position and engage one's work as a committed and caring educator and parent. Purpel seeks to recover the notion of the public good and make it a central aspect of teaching and education. But he is not content merely to deepen our understanding of the importance of ethical and social responsibility; he also succeeds in linking the enterprise of critical understanding to forms of teaching and social relations that ground our ideologies and visions in emotional attachments and spiritual concerns. In other words, Purpel provides theoretical dimensions to his public philosophy of education that are often missing from some of the most radical and critical approaches to education. He accomplishes this by situating the ideological meanings, ideals, and language of public responsibility and virtue in a politics of compassion and hope that makes all of us more attentive to the experiences and emotions of pain, joy, suffering, and human connectedness. If Horkheimer wants us to stare into the face of history in order to recognize both the suffering and possibilities it offers us, Purpel argues that we do this and more. He wants to create social practices and pedagogical relations that allow us once again to realize ourselves as historically connected subjects. Teachers, in Purpel's vision, do more than transmit meanings; they enact the role of social and moral agents of change; they uncover, reproduce, and produce forms of learning and social relations based on those often repressed memories, stories, and dreams that allow us to analyze and embrace schooling as part of a wider politics of solidarity, caring, and joy.[9]

In Purpel's work we see fleeting images of the compassion and pedagogies of Gandhi, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Rosa Luxembourg, and others who lived out their beliefs—and in some cases died defending them—as part of a political and pedagogical struggle that refused to separate learning and justice from compassion and hope. We know of few books that make explicit in such compelling and engaging terms both the foundation of a critical and emancipatory vision of schooling and the pedagoical practices that give it shape and

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The Current Crisis in Education: Professional Incompetence or Cultural Failure?

The prophet is engaged in a battle for language, in an effort to create a different epistemology out of which another community might emerge. The prophet is not addressing behavioral problems. He is not even pressing for repentence. He has only the hope that the ache of God could penetrate the numbness of history. He engages not in scare or threat but only in a yearning that grows with and out of pain.

Walter Brueggemann The Prophetic Imagination

BACKGROUND: EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Historians are fond of reminding us that the notion of a cultural crisis, as reflected in serious criticism of current educational practice, is hardly new. Indeed, they are able to furnish quotations dating back hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years that provide an astonishing resonance with contemporary displeasure, anxiety, and even horror over the present and future prospects of our educational system. That there have been crises before ours does not by itself demonstrate that our current sense of alarm is either overly harsh or needlessly worrisome. We are, I believe, very much in a cultural, political, and moral crisis and hence, ipso facto, in an educational crisis. Indeed, it is imperative that we confront the nature of this crisis or, more accurately, that we attend to how a number of critical, cultural, and educational issues and problems are perceived and interpreted. I prefer the word "crisis" to "problem" or "issue" or "concern" because I very much share the view that we as a culture, nation, people, even as a species, confront enormous and awesome threats to our most cherished notions of life, including life itself. The dangers of nuclear war, starvation, totalitarianism, and ecological disaster are as real as

they are menacing, and not to view them as problems of immense magnitude and consequence is to contribute to their seriousness.

I consider this book as an educator's response to this crisis. Obviously, an educator is more than an educator and this seemingly trivial point can serve as a metaphor for the inevitable and intimate relationship between education and culture. In point of fact, many educators have presented their professional work in a detached, technical manner as if the educator were *not* more than an educator. A major theme of this book, then, is the critical importance of educators' broad responsibility for the state of the culture as it relates to their specific responsibility for the quality of the "educational program."

The current crisis among other things has served to enhance the highly suspect conception of the educator as a technical expert. It is amazing that in the face of a truism that borders on cliche—that education and culture are significantly interrelated—a great deal of the actual work done by professional educators is being done with minimal or superficial social/cultural analysis. It is not that educators are not to some degree aware of the significance of social and cultural context or of the importance of social goals and aims to the educational process. The difficulty is that when most professional educators examine the social setting they tend to use the very narrow and limited perspectives of the accessible present and of vocational preparation and economic need. The current situation is but the latest instance of the phenomenon of the trivialization of educational issues. Hence, in the mid-1980s we face the possibility of major political and economic revolutions in the Third World, nuclear war, mass hunger, nuclear proliferation, a stagnant or at best uncertain economy, and a very uncertain job market. We are also in the midst of a great many exciting and fundamental intellectual debates on so-called new paradigms and breakthroughs in various academic and professional areas. Yet, in the context of both enormous problems and incredible intellectual ferment, what constitutes the focus of mainstream educational concern? Apparently, such issues as closer evaluation of teachers and students (e.g., merit pay, competence tests, periodic testing) prayer in the classroom, "middle schools," "creationism" *vs.* evolution, and public aid to private schools. This extraordinary chasm between profound challenge and trivial response helps to frame two major questions for this chapter: How can we explain the continuing phenomena of the trivialization of educational discourse? What would constitute an appropriate and meaningful point of departure for a more serious educational conversation?

THE TRIVIALIZATION OF EDUCATION IN AMERICA

When I speak of trivialization I refer to two major phenomena of educational discourse—the evasion or neglect of larger, more critical