**Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy
in the Foundations of Education** by Peter McLaren,
New York: Longman, 1989.

Reviewed by

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Nearly 30 years ago, Huebner called on educators to develop a greater recognition of the political nature of schooling. Since that time, researchers have analyzed the political economy of classrooms, textbooks, and curricula. They documented what we already suspected—that schools do not distribute learning resources and success equitably across students even when differences in ability and interest are taken into account. There is often a subtle but systematic bias against groups of pupils on the basis of their social status, economic class, gender, ethnocultural background, and geographic location. By the 1980s the relevance of this research moved beyond academic journals as teachers in urban centers increasingly faced the educational effects of inner-city poverty and changing patterns of immigration. During this past year, for example, the cameras of national television came into my daughters' school to highlight the issue of hungry children. Coincidentally, in this same school district, a group of inner-city principals published a report on the harsh reality of poverty and its debilitating results on student learning (*Inner-City Schools: Principals' Position Paper*, 1988), while the newspapers were making front page news of violence, economic inequalities, and cultural diversity within the district's schools. Educators were having to face directly the impact on classrooms of larger social and economic changes.

The literature of critical pedagogy—of which *Life in Schools* is designed to be an introduction—helps us to make sense of these kinds of issues. I read it with more than casual interest because I teach a course in critical pedagogy for experienced teachers. Materials for such courses usually consist of journal articles and parts of books that apply critical theory to public schooling (e.g., Apple, 1986; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Freire, 1985; Wotherspoon, 1987). But there has been a need for entry level textbooks, and McLaren's work is timely and promises to be an important resource. His audience includes prospective and practicing teachers who wish to understand educational issues in relation to the social, political, and economic context of schools, and who

want to foster greater equity for disadvantaged groups of students. Divided into four parts, the book's 258 pages explain and illustrate the purposes and ideas of a critical pedagogy, define the problems it addresses, and provide extensive references for follow-up reading.

In Part One, the author wastes no time setting the stage for critical pedagogy. He briefly outlines the social and economic crises characterizing American culture and argues convincingly that schooling and teacher education help to perpetuate many of the inequalities, injustices, and intolerance manifested in society. Despite their ongoing attempts at school improvement and curricular reform, educators rarely occupy a "critical space" (p. 1) in the society and often do not recognize how their work legitimized the status quo. This short section (21 pages) is written well and points clearly to the need for a critical pedagogy. McLaren concludes Part One by saying that teachers

must begin candidly and critically to face our society's complicity in the roots and structures of inequality and injustice ... we must face our own culpability in the reproduction of inequality in our teaching, and ... we must strive to develop a pedagogy equipped to provide both intellectual and moral resistance to oppression, one that extends the concept of pedagogy beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and skills and the concept of morality beyond interpersonal relations. (p. 21)

Part Two is autobiographical, providing many short vignettes from his teaching experiences with inner-city elementary children. The entries are crisp and easy to read. They vividly document the growing frustration of this young teacher with a school system that did not serve the interests of his low-income, immigrant, and minority language students. The stories chronicle his disillusionment with "equality myths"; his realization that school is another agent of oppression rather than an ally of children trapped in poverty; and his determination to challenge the school's role in social injustice. They also raise larger questions about how well equipped teachers are to deal with immigrant and low-income children in schools that are geared largely to the backgrounds and interests of middle-class youth and teachers. His use of this diary material is not to avoid the didactic style typical of some introductory textbooks, but rather to prepare the reader for the concepts and theory discussed in Parts Three and Four. We are then invited to reread the entries in the light of these concepts and theories. This encourages thoughtful reading and is consistent with the book's critical pedagogy perspective. Although the intention behind this organization is ingenious, I found that it did not work for me.

Because of its length—129 pages—this section is much too long and the ideas too repetitious to be reread.

The problem with the journal entries is that they were selected to give “some insights into school life as it is lived by students and teachers ... from the perspective of a novice teacher” *unfamiliar* with critical pedagogy (p. 26). The insights are limited. Because of my own teaching experience with economically disadvantaged students, I found believable the engaging or pathetic characters, the moments of hope and despair, the bizarre or humorous antics, and the violent incidents associated with both teachers and pupils that McLaren chose to highlight. His stories are a part of school experience. But everyday life in classrooms is more than a series of brutal events. There is also the living together for five or six hours each day, day after day, month after month. However, I was left with little sense of what teaching meant for children in this classroom, or what this teacher’s program was and the rationale for it. Rarely did these episodes give insight into pedagogic relationships with ordinary children, nor the teacher’s *place* in the classroom as he thought through the subject matter and the organization of space and time in relation to the needs of his students. I had to search for the images of *teacher* and *student* that undergird the incidents McLaren chose to tell. While reading the stories I increasingly felt that they were written from the perspective of a journalist rather than a teacher, and that they made for better press than a textbook on teaching. The incidents become repetitious because new facets of classroom life were not developed, nor was greater insight into schooling provided as I moved through more than 100 pages of diary. As such, the importance given to these entries in terms of the book’s length is not justified. The number of stories could be cut by two thirds through a careful selection of excerpts that anticipate and illustrate more clearly the ideas of critical pedagogy that follow, and that introduce us to a range of students and the meanings they gave to the classroom, as well as something about the teacher’s notion of pedagogy. This section does conclude, however, with a strong summary of the failings of the doctrine of education equality and of the need for teachers to be committed to school change based on social justice (pp. 150-154).

The nature of the book changes with Part Three. Concepts and principles are now discussed, and the writings of critical educators—Jonathan Kozol, Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Michael Apple, and Henry Giroux—are introduced and recommended. Here the ideas of critical pedagogy are succinctly made accessible to the uninitiated reader. (Rather than summarizing what McLaren defines as the basic ideas of critical pedagogy, I en-

courage you to read the book!) When using the text with teachers, though, I found that they needed more background on some of the concepts. But when supported by discussion that grounded the text's concepts in their own experience, these readers did collectively formulate ways to make their schools more just.

Part four explains why economically disadvantaged and minority group students often fail in school. Teachers represent the dominant middle-class culture and do not always understand students' own "cultural, class, race, and gendered frames of reference" (p. 213). This clash of two "cultural fields" results in "painful contradictions" for many students (p. 214). They resist those practices that devalue or ignore their own cultural meanings and attempt to protect their street-corner identities from the dominating school culture. When the price of conforming is too high, they drop out of school, or "more realistically," McLaren argues, "they are pushed out" (p. 215). He does not advocate that we merely be more sensitive to minority student backgrounds or affirm aspects of their street-corner culture without also helping them to judge the practices, values, and assumptions of both minority and dominant cultures. The critical knife cuts both ways.

I am supportive of what McLaren has accomplished here and recommend the book. Yet I want to raise three observations about how well it fulfills the stated purpose of being an *introductory textbook*. My first is with the lack of clarity of some of the basic categories for an audience who is "virtually unacquainted" with critical pedagogy. McLaren says that his

central task is to develop a language through which educators and others can unravel and comprehend the relationship among schooling, the wider social relations which inform it, and the historically constructed needs and competencies that students bring to schools. (p. vii)

We would expect an introductory text to carefully develop the *language* that gives readers access to this form of theorizing. It is in providing this language that the book is uneven. The discussion sometimes assumes too much of the reader. As a case in point, the teachers with whom I worked found the central notions of *knowledge* and *ideology* to be ambiguous and their relationship rather confusing. The book argues briefly and clearly that knowledge is historically and socially rooted—that knowledge is an ongoing construction by groups of people who live in particular times and places—and that some forms of knowledge have more legitimacy and status than others. These claims are communicated well to anyone who does not have a

background in the sociology of knowledge. What can be confusing to teachers, though, is that the boundaries of knowledge are not clarified. There is little distinction made among knowledge, beliefs, customs, everyday “constructions of reality,” common-sense understandings, and even consciousness itself. The general forms of knowledge posited by Habermas (1972) are discussed in slightly more than half a page and are applied to classrooms in such a truncated manner as to be meaningless for the novice and a misrepresentation of Habermas. Ideology seems to be inclusive of all thought, consciousness, and the knowledge claims made within the physical and social sciences because these all involve value, interest, and judgment. Note, for example, that the following statements about knowledge and ideology are so broad in application that they require considerable unpacking to be intelligible:

Every description is ideologically loaded, codified, and intextually related to larger interpretive contexts. (p. ix; emphasis added; *All* descriptions are ideological?)

Knowledge in school—or *anywhere*, for that matter—is *never* neutral or objective but is ordered and structured in particular ways; its emphases and exclusions partake of a silent logic. (p. 169; emphasis added; There is *never* a knowledge claim that can be objective?)

Simply put, ideology refers to the production of sense and meaning. (p. 176; Is *all* sense and meaning ideological?)

There is *no* “deep structure,” totalizing logic, or grand theory pristine in form and innocent in effects which is *altogether uncontaminated* by interest, value, or judgment—in short, by ideology. There is *no* privileged sanctuary separate from culture and politics where we can be free to distinguish truth from opinion, fact from value, or image from interpretation. There is no “objective” environment that is not stamped with social presence. (p. 178; emphasis added)

That knowledge is *always* an ideological construction linked to particular interests and social relations generally receives little consideration in education programs. (p. 180; emphasis added)

Truth *cannot* be spoken in the absence of power relations, and each relation necessarily speaks its own truth. (p. 181; emphasis added)

Critical educators argue that knowledge should be analyzed on the basis of whether it is oppressive and exploitive, and *not* on the basis of whether it is “true.” (p. 182; emphasis added)

Claims such as these are so encompassing and general that readers could benefit considerably from more definition and careful analysis than is given in the book. Glossed over is much of the legitimate debate about knowledge, ideology, and objectivity. If all descriptions, meaning, ideas, and knowledge are *ideological*—and this would have to include McLaren's book—then the category is empty, ceases to be useful in analysis, and leaves the reader mystified. There would be little sense in engaging in any serious critique if power is the major criterion for determining the truth and worth of ideas. Surely as educators we have to be concerned with both the truth and moral import of beliefs. To claim that ideas are formed in a social context and involve interests and values does not commit us to conclude that we are only left with ideology. If we cannot in principle agree on standards for judging ideas, then we are hopelessly trapped by our own group interests, and communication with different groups is severely limited. Knowledge and ideology are important concepts in critical analysis, and educational ideas do need to be critiqued from the point of view of vested interests, rationalizations, and power. However, in this introductory text the level of generality with which these and other concepts are defined implies that readers have a sophisticated background with the issues raised and the debates they assume.

My second observation is focused on a question: Would discourse in the field of critical pedagogy be possible without the use of in-house jargon? I suspect that it would make this theorizing more assessible and intelligible to teachers. Again and again I see them resonate with the issues that critical pedagogy raises but become frustrated with what seems to be specialized language and the way in which buzzwords are taken for granted (e.g., empowering, reproduction, dialectical, domination, liberation, hegemony, construction of knowledge, transforming, resistance, oppression, ideology). Any community of researchers justifiably develops a shorthand for communicating with each other, but this may also hinder communication with *outsiders* and mystify the code for novices. In contrast to some of the literature of critical pedagogy, much of McLaren's book is written clearly and the argument presented in a straightforward manner, as one would expect within an introductory textbook. On the whole, his choice of language usually clarifies and does not confuse the intended audience, although the discussion in Parts Three and Four is sometimes clouded by rhetoric and general claims. Part of the reason for this unevenness, I believe, is that there is a commitment and urgency that turns his writing into theorizing that matters. After all, at stake are democratic values, social justice, and the future of children who

are members of disadvantaged groups. To write about such matters without conviction would be contradictory. However, with commitment comes the danger at times of relying on rhetoric rather than providing evidence and good reasons to make one's point. One ends up then preaching only to the converted.

The third observation comes from teachers who attempt to read the literature of critical pedagogy. They initially feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the question concerning how schools are shaped by and so thoroughly embody the inequalities of the larger society, and they are frustrated by the seeming hopelessness of their being able to effect any meaningful change. There often is considerable pessimism as they come to see that the problems and issues that critical pedagogy illuminates are rooted outside the microworld of each unique classroom. McLaren does provide a *language of critique* for understanding how schools perpetuate social and economic inequalities. Less developed, however, is a *language of possibility* that actually helps educators to define the *conditions for student empowerment* within their classroom relationships and curricula. Although he does indicate many defensible directions for change, his primary emphasis is on the conceptual tools for making teaching problematic rather than telling us what *strategies* should be followed in our classrooms. His task is to explain why critical analysis is so necessary, and he quite rightly does not (and cannot) prescribe what should be done *Monday morning*. Teachers who take critical pedagogy seriously must then work with colleagues to formulate their collective solutions. The applications will be context specific. It is through their ongoing discussion guided by books such as *Life in Schools* that educators can recover their sense of efficacy to counter the educational effects of poverty in children's lives.

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