CHAPTER FIVE

IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Reframing the Debate, Reclaiming Public Voice

WE HEAR IT ALL the time: the work of teachers is exclusively the work that happens in classrooms. Let the principals worry about the school; let the parents worry about the community; let the elected officials worry about policies, laws, and the many reforms coming our way. Indeed, the advice often given to a new teacher is to just shut the door and do your own thing, make your classroom the space where you can really have an impact on the lives and learnings of your students. The value of independence, of course, should not be underestimated; the autonomy of teachers is necessary if we are to tailor our teaching to the diverse needs and capacities of our students, as well as to the unique contexts in which we find ourselves. Nonetheless, the work of teachers does and should extend far beyond the walls of our classrooms: we are members of the community, after all—in fact, of many diverse and overlapping communities—and of families and the whole
CHAPTER FIVE

Teaching has long been integral to broader movements to change society. We have a stake in the larger context and a responsibility to a wider public.

Teaching has long been integral to broader movements to change society and to make our world a better place for all. In the 1800s, Catharine Beecher was one of several prominent educators pushing forcefully for expanded educational opportunities for women and girls. In 1933, Carter G. Woodson published *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, in which he not only critiqued existing curricula for its Eurocentrism and the many ways that it taught black students inferiority within the racial hierarchy of the United States, but also called on educators to raise critical consciousness among the nation's youth. Unions of public school employees, including the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, marched shoulder to shoulder with national and local civil rights organizations during the black freedom movement of the mid-1900s. During the civil rights movement, activists and educators created "freedom schools" across the South and then across the nation, aiming to teach the next generation ideas of democracy as well as skills for social change.

Across the country today, a host of organizations call together teachers who are committed to equity and justice in public schools. These engaged activist-educators organize curriculum fairs, campaigns, meetings and forums, conferences and professional development events, and initiatives to change policy and the decision-making process. A group of teachers in one city organized to ban standardized testing in early childhood education as pointless at best, and likely destructive to student learning and development in most cases, and following a spirited campaign and the mobilization of parents, the district discontinued all K–3 standardized tests. Teachers in another city opposed the imposition of a specific basal reading program on all schools and won an initiative to allow teachers at the school level to choose the reading program that they thought best for their classrooms from three distinct alternatives reflecting different philosophies of learning. Teachers in a third district fought for and won the discontinuation of military recruitment in the district's high schools.

If teachers spend their time and energy grumbling instead of organizing, the sure outcome will be the continuation of the status quo, including the existing inequities and injustices. If we work hard, get smart, mobilize and organize in the community, come together to speak up, and make our voices heard, teachers can become a powerful force for authentic and substantive school improvement. To get started and to get going, call together a few interested colleagues and check out one or more of these networks: Education for Liberation; the National Association of Multicultural Educators; the Association of Raza Educators in Los Angeles; Literacy for Social Justice in St. Louis, Missouri; the New York Collective of Radical Educators in New York City; Teachers for Social Justice in San Francisco (Pui Ling Tam, pulingaccessf.org); Teachers for Social Justice in Chicago; and Rethinking Schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The historical role that teachers have played in social movements is important to contrast with the current initiative to minimize the impact teachers can have on public education. Often teachers are not even invited to the decision-making table, especially as more schools and school districts turn to for-profit corporations for their own management, curriculum materials, and assessment. Teachers are less able to organize and collectively negotiate to improve schools and their own working conditions, particularly in a culture that considers teachers and their organizations a "special interest," or where it has become acceptable to publicly demonize unions (as happened a few years ago when then–secretary of education Rod Paige called the National Education Association "terrorist"). Teachers are facing increasing restrictions in what and how to teach: initiatives in several states, for example, curtail curriculum in order to enforce a "teach to the test" regimen; other policies require teachers to act as
little more than mindless clerks following written scripts and dispensing predigested bits of curriculum into passive young people.

Teachers stand with students and parents at the center of school life; effective teachers must be thoughtful, caring people and oppose, then, any policy that encourages carelessness or thoughtlessness. Teachers' voices are absolutely vital to any efforts at positive and lasting school improvement. This is why the work of teachers today urgently involves changing education policy, and now more than ever, public education needs its teachers to mobilize and act.

THE POWER OF FRAMES

During the 2008 presidential campaign, conservative candidates said repeatedly that we must get the "lazy and incompetent teachers" out of public school classrooms, and who could disagree? Who would possibly stand up and insist that the lazy ones be promoted, or that "my kids deserve the incompetent"? Audiences dutifully and duly nodded on cue. Whichever politician made the point instantly won the point simply by framing the issue in that specific way: the terms were set, the options limited, and the verdict in.

But imagine if one of us had gotten to the podium first: we'd have said, "Every student in any public school classroom deserves an intellectually curious, morally grounded, thoughtful, caring, and compassionate teacher who is both well compensated and well rested." By framing the issue that way, we'd have gotten support, too. Setting the frame turns out to be a particularly powerful piece of work—who names the world, and who frames the issues, matters.

In area after area, issue after issue, we might productively open space for debate as we question and resist the wisdom of the dominant framework for discussion: why is our foreign policy based on military might rather than the principle of living together as a nation among nations? The issue is framed in what has become an orthodox dogma, something that appears to be just plain old common sense and therefore beyond question: national security depends on military power. But what is the actual evidence? What's the proof? Even asking the questions begins to open our eyes.

**TEXTBOX 5.1**

Why does every newspaper have a business section but not a labor section? Why is our notion of public safety based on escalating rates of incarceration? Why are workers who cross borders seeking jobs called "illegal immigrants" while capital that crosses borders seeking profit is never called "illegal money"? And why are the conditions that give rise to the movement of labor—collapsing prices and massive unemployment caused by the unchecked flow of capital and environmental degradation—rarely mentioned? The frame itself is a kind of consistent answer, a force that shapes our imaginative horizons and hence our choices.

Returning to education and schools, why is the so-called achievement gap accepted as an empirical reality decontextualized from the "education debt" (Ladson-Billings 1996) and "savage inequalities" (Kozol 1991), or absent a sustained critique of the testing industry?

The framework in which the discussion about schools and reform is carried forth is particularly narrow today; the dominant discourses and common metaphors are constraining and controlling. The frame includes, as noted earlier, a focus on standards for students, teachers, and schools developed by powerful interest groups but divorced from standards for legislatures, for example to generously fund education; accountability for reaching those standards as measured exclusively on anemic but widely accepted standardized test results and, again, without
input by those directly affected and separated from any accountability whatsoever for lawmakers; and sanctions placed on schools and teachers for failing to meet those standards, combined with rewards for doing so.

These frames have been established over the past several decades, and today this framework constitutes a kind of consensus within the dominant political class. Although the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act during the Clinton administration required states to develop content and performance standards, and created the notion of "adequate yearly progress," it was the early years of the Reagan administration and the release of its report, *A Nation at Risk*, that signaled the beginning of a standards-and-testing movement that has dominated educational policy and politics for the past quarter century. Education reform has been framed by the language of standards and testing from both political parties, the dominant mass media, as well as in individual school districts across the nation. Chicago Public Schools, for example, influenced Clinton's vision of education reform in the mid-1990s by providing what he called a "model for the nation" in terms of standards, high-stakes testing, school accountability, and centralized regulation of teachers and schools. From both Republicans and Democrats, proposals for education reform have been shaped by the same concepts, thus reinforcing the notion that these are just naturally occurring phenomena, the only sensible way things can be; they achieve the lofty status of "common sense."

A consensus within the two dominant political parties does not mean that the standards-and-testing movement has proceeded without dissent. On the contrary, disagreement, protest, struggle, and dissent from teachers, parents, schools, and districts have marked the movement from the start. But the opposition has mainly struggled within the terms provided by the dominant frame—for more funding to get the test scores up, for example, or for different testing instruments—rather than organizing toward a new consensus based on a profoundly different educational vision.

In the contested space of schools and education reform, and in this particular moment, educators, parents, and citizens might find ways to rethink and challenge the dominant framework that has so relentlessly undermined the tenets of education in and for democracy. We might work together to upend the controlling metaphor that posits education as a commodity rather than a democratic and human right. We would reject, then, the notion that schools are just like little factories cranking out products, a failed nineteenth-century image for twenty-first-century schools. We would disrupt the language of production—assembly lines, management and supervision, quality control, productivity, and outputs—and of war—in the trenches, on the front lines. We would oppose the representation of students as raw materials moving dumbly down the assembly line as value is added by the workers/teachers.

The schools-as-factories model is not only a failure on its own terms, but worse, it undermines the basic ideal that in a democracy every life matters. The goal of sorting kindergartners or seventh graders or high school kids into a track for winners and another track for losers is in basic conflict with the precious ideals of democratic living.

A foundational belief in the value of every human is belied by current "reform"—closing schools, privatizing the public space, testing children relentlessly. Michelle Rhee, the young Teach for America alumna and head of the Washington, D.C., schools, was featured in a cover story in *Time* magazine called "How to Fix America's Schools." Rhee is currently the chief executive officer, an honorific and official designation that has swept the nation—the business metaphor ascendant, knocking out the traditional and presumably lowly title of "superintendent of schools." In any case, the article turns on unrestrained praise for Rhee for making more changes in a year and a half on the
job than other school leaders—"even reform-minded ones"—make in five: closing twenty-one schools (15 percent of schools in the district) and firing one hundred central office personnel, 270 teachers, and thirty-six principals. These are policy moves held on faith to stand for improvement, but they only make sense if education is a product like a stove or a box of bolts. Look at the list; this is downsizing and cost-cutting, the kinds of things we read about as General Motors emerges from bankruptcy. There is not one word in the Time piece about kids’ learning or engagement with school, nothing about connecting curriculum to any idea of relevance or rigor; there isn’t a nod to any evidence that might connect these "reform" moves with any measure of student progress. There’s no mention of getting greater resources into this starving and depleted urban school system, an essential part of real reform. There are no ideas for more robust parent involvement, and no actions planned that might attract, reward, and retain terrific teachers for the long haul. So the heart of schooling is missing, the soul of it is absent, the wisdom nonexistent, and yet this, we are assured, is reform, and we’re asked to accept it on faith. That is the power of frames.

This context provides all the more reason for educators to work to improve education policy. Progressive change happens not merely when a strong individual assumes a position of leadership but, much more important, when each one of us assumes the responsibility to lead, to take action, to build motion and a movement. Social justice in education is needed now. And every educator—at every grade level, in every subject area—has a role to play.

THE POWER OF VOICE

Many educators in K–12 schools and in higher education have insightful critiques of current “reforms” and have imagined viable alternative policies and practices for our nation’s public schools. Too often those critiques and alternative visions have remained within the confines of the teachers’ lunchroom or small discussion groups or the ivory towers of higher education; only occasionally have they reached out to and involved a wider audience. To engage broadly in new ways of thinking and talking about public education, we all must do more to extend the public square, reframe the debate, and reclaim the public voice as we build toward a new movement in a committed, coordinated, and sustained way.

We need to speak up and speak out, using every available means to be heard and to have an impact. We can work with students in classrooms around educational issues, encouraging them to conduct their own critical action research projects and then helping them to procure public venues to present their work (see Youth Radio, for example: Jacinda Abcarian, jacinda@youthradio.org; or Lissa Soep, lissa@youthradio.org). Excellent classroom examples can be found at the Arts and Humanities Academy at Berkeley High School, where teachers and kids do quite a number of interesting investigations that are published or displayed. For example, they do an immigration unit that includes interviews and an art project—a portrait of an immigrant (contact Miriam Klein Stahl at cake3@mindspring.com).

We can seek out independent media outlets and shows, and we can produce content or build relationships around educational issues that may prove to be mutually productive (Democracy Now! radio and TV or Guerrilla News Network, for example). We can offer to contribute to more established shows such as This American Life, This I Believe, and The Story, all produced for National Public Radio and each actively soliciting story ideas. We can create our own media—blogs and vlogs and webinars; street theater and performance art (Google the Interventionists, Reverend Billy, or the Yes Men for breathtaking inspiration); poster art, broadsides, and mural displays (see AREA Chicago for one example of a sustained and extraordinary effort)—or we can partner
up and find space within existing blogs and more established networks (Huffington Post and Eduwonkette, for example). We can access and utilize YouTube and Facebook and other social networking groups. We can comment publicly on legislation, and we can create our own online petitions.

The essential thing is to start to speak and write regularly, to exercise your democratic responsibility to make some noise in the public square, and to link up with other teachers and education activists to make a plan to make a difference.

One important and underutilized way to amplify the voices of social justice educators and advocates is to speak up in national and local newspapers throughout the country. Although the media has historically privileged the voices of the political and societal elite, local TV and radio stations often have a designated space for guest commentary, and newspaper editors almost always reserve a section of the newspaper—typically the “op-ed” page—for divergent opinions, including opinions that challenge conventional wisdom. These editors are eager for intelligent, well-argued contributions. According to the Progressive Media Project (www.progressive.org/mp/about), the op-ed section was created for the open exchange of “new ideas and divergent opinions... It is where the general public mulls over the arguments about the way the world should be. It is also the place where policy-makers measure the mood of the public and gain new perspectives on social issues.” Perhaps not surprisingly, the editorial section of newspapers remains one of the most commonly read sections following the main and sports sections, with almost half of the general readership looking at the editorials that are published in their daily newspapers, according to the Newspaper Association of America (www.naa.org).

Editorials generally consist of four types of articles: (1) “editorials” written by newspaper staff; (2) “columns” written by regular contributors; (3) pieces written by members of the community, variously called “commen-

tary,” “opinion,” or “op-ed” articles; and (4) “letters to the editor,” written by members of the public. The latter two are important avenues for educators and advocates to reframe the debate on public education.

“Commentary” articles are generally five hundred words in length (longer in the major newspapers). They can take days or even weeks to be reviewed and accepted for publication. “Letters to the Editor” are generally much shorter, but are accepted by more newspapers, including online newspapers, and in greater numbers than commentary articles. Newspapers often prefer to publish articles and letters by members of the community in which the newspaper is published.

Every newspaper is different, so when getting started it’s important to carefully read the instructions for submissions (regarding length, format, and review processes) as well as previous articles and letters (regarding recent topics, tone). Sample op-ed articles can be found on the website of the Progressive Media Project (www.progressive.org/mp/about).

CONCLUSION

We often meet brilliant young activists who choose not to go into teaching because they can’t see how, in today’s public schools, it would be possible to be an activist-educator. Among colleagues and friends and relatives who are veteran teachers, we see people leaving the profession for much the same reason. The challenges are daunting: the pressure to teach to the test, the narrowing and even scripting of curriculum, the increasing professional demands and public criticism, the heightened monitoring and censoring of anything or anyone deemed too “political” (that is, too willing to question the status quo or the powers that be), and the muting of teacher voices in school governance and education reform. Now more than ever, we need to redefine what it means to be a teacher, and activism must become a central part of that identity.
TEXTBOX 5.2

Although there are many ways to structure a compelling commentary, the following outline highlights elements that are common in published op-ed articles:

- The topic is timely; in other words, the article has a “news peg,” a connection to something happening today.
- The first two sentences concisely state the subject and attitude of the essay—something like “Congress is poised to reauthorize many aspects of NCLB. This is bad news for America’s children, because NCLB does not address three major problems with public schooling.”
- The body of the commentary defends your position with two to four arguments—too many arguments makes the article complicated to follow—and for each argument provides compelling support, such as data or personal stories.
- The discussion rebuts the obvious counterarguments—it anticipates and responds to what a typical reader might ask.
- The conclusion is strong and does not introduce any new arguments.

Notice the following use of language in published commentaries and letters to the editor:

- Short paragraphs, short sentences, small words (the article needs to be easy to skim)
- Active tense (“the committee proposed a solution,” rather than “a solution was proposed by the committee”)
- No use of categoricals (“best,” “always”) or overheated language (“outrageous,” “ridiculous”) or of jargon (the article needs to be accessible, so avoid language like inflated academic terms that only a small group would understand)

When brainstorming an outline for your essay, consider the following six guiding questions:

- WHEN are you writing? What is your news peg? (Right before the beginning of the school year? Impending state budget cuts? Election of a new U.S. president?)
- WHO/WHERE is your audience? (Are you writing for a national newspaper? Local newspaper? Ethnic newspaper? School newsletter? This helps to tailor the message and to imagine the obvious counterargument.)
- WHAT is your message? (Do you have a concise thesis statement?)
- HOW will you flesh out your message? (What are the two to four main arguments, and how is each argument being supported?)
- WHAT is the obvious counterargument, and have you rebutted it?
- WHY are you writing/what is your goal? (For example, what action do you hope will result? Do you want readers to speak to their legislators? Attend an upcoming rally? Vote against a referendum?)

The insights and experiences of teachers can play a central role in challenging the dominant voices in education debates. We encourage all teachers—those just entering the profession as well as those nearing the end of their careers—to join colleagues from throughout the nation in engaging public dialogue and reframing public consciousness. There are many ways to think about the problems and the possibilities of public education, and we need to hear perspectives that challenge what has come to be “common sense.”

THREE SAMPLE OP-ED ARTICLES

In mid-December 2008, as preparations were under way for the start of the new administration, President-elect Barack Obama selected Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago
Public Schools, to be the next U.S. secretary of education. In the days following, a number of media outlets lavished praise on this selection. One of us felt that we needed to offer a counterperspective, particularly given the significance of that historical moment. The spring of 2009 would be when the new president begins his term and sets the tone and priorities for his administration—what historians often look to as the “first hundred days.” The spring of 2009 would also bring renewed efforts within Congress to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and in the process, create opportunities to significantly change the problematic policies of No Child Left Behind. A shorter version of the following op-ed article was first published in the December 23, 2008, issue of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. It was later published in its entirety in the January 12, 2009, online edition of Education Week.

Wrong Choice for America’s Schools

Hailed by some as a pioneer in education reform, Arne Duncan was recently selected by President-elect Obama to be our next Secretary of Education. However, his track record as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools for the past seven years shows that Duncan is the wrong choice for America’s schools.

Behind the rhetoric of “reform” is the reality of Duncan’s accomplishments, particularly the problems behind his signature initiative, Renaissance 2010. Launched in 2004, Renaissance 2010 aims to open 100 new smaller schools (and close about sixty “failing” schools) by the year 2010. To date, seventy-five new schools have opened.

However, many of them are charter schools that serve fewer low-income, limited-English-proficient and disabled students than regular public schools. More than a third of them are in communities that are not high-needs areas. During Duncan’s tenure, district-wide high school test scores have not risen, and most of the lowest performing high schools saw scores drop. Renaissance 2010 is not doing enough to support those students who struggle the most.

This should not be surprising. The blueprint of Renaissance 2010 lies in a report titled “Left Behind,” produced a year earlier by the Commercial Club of Chicago, which mapped out a strategy for schools to more closely align with the goals of the business elite. Central to that strategy was the creation of 100 new charter schools, managed by for-profit businesses, and freed of Local School Councils and teacher unions—groups that historically have put the welfare of poor and minority students before that of the business sector.

Business leaders have long had influence over America’s schools. In the early 1900s, the business sector influenced how large school districts were consolidated and managed. In the late 1900s and into the era of No Child Left Behind, the Business Roundtable (the top 300 business CEOs in America) influenced how policy makers narrowly defined “standards” and “accountability.” Today, public debates are framed by business principles, and certain assumptions go unquestioned and are seen to be “common sense.” This includes the assumption that improvement comes when schools are put into competition with one another, like businesses in a so-called free market.

Duncan’s reforms are steeped in a free-market model of school reform, particularly the notion that school choice and 100 new charter and specialty schools will motivate educators to work harder to do better (as will penalties for not meeting standards). But research does not support such initiatives. There is evidence that opening new schools and encouraging choice and competition will not raise district-wide achievement, and charter schools in particular are not outperforming regular schools. There is evidence that choice programs actually exacerbate racial segregation. And there is evidence that high-stakes testing actually increases the dropout rate.

Duncan’s track record is clear. Less court intervention to desegregate schools. Less parental and community involvement in school governance. Less support for teacher
unions. Less breadth and depth in what and how students learn as schools place more emphasis on narrow high-stakes testing. More opportunities to certify teachers without adequate preparation and training. More penalties for schools but without adequate resources for those in high-poverty areas. And more profit for businesses as school systems become increasingly privatized. Students do not benefit from these changes. Duncan's accomplishments for Chicago Public Schools are not a model for the nation.

America's schools are in dire need of reform, and in 2009, we have the opportunity to overhaul the failed policies of No Child Left Behind. The research is compelling: students need to learn more, not less. Parents need to be involved more, not less. Teachers need to be trained more. Schools need to be resourced more. We need new ways to fund schools, to integrate schools, to evaluate learning, and to envision what we want schools to accomplish.

Public education should aim for more than high test scores, and more than a stronger business sector. Education should strive to prepare every child to flourish in life. We need a different leader, one with a rich knowledge of research, with a commitment to educating our diverse children, and with a vision to make that happen.

At the same time, another one of us published a different perspective on the new secretary of education, and what this selection means for us as advocates of public education. The following op-ed appeared on the Huffington Post on January 2, 2009.

**Obama and Education Reform**

Of course I would have loved to have seen Linda Darling-Hammond become Secretary of Education in an Obama administration. She's smart, honest, compassionate and courageous, and perhaps most striking, she actually knows schools and classrooms, curriculum and teaching, kids and child development. These have never counted for much as qualifications for the post, of course, and yet they offer a neat contrast with the four failed urban school superintendents—Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, Paul Vallas, and Arne Duncan—who were for weeks rumored to be her chief competition.

These four, like George W. Bush's Secretary of Education, Rod Paige of the fraudulent Texas-miracle, have little to show in terms of school improvement beyond a deeply dishonest public relations narrative. Teacher accountability, relentless standardized testing, school closings, and privatization—this is what the dogmatists and true-believers of the right call "reform." Michelle Rhee of Washington, D.C., the most ideologically driven of the bunch, warranted a cover story in *Time* in early December called "How to Fix America's Schools," in which she was praised for making more changes in a year and a half on the job than other school leaders, "even reform-minded ones," make in five: closing 21 schools (15 percent of the total), firing 100 central office personnel, 270 teachers, and 36 principals. These are all policy moves that are held on faith to stand for improvement; not a word on kids' learning or engagement with schools, not even a nod at evidence that might connect these moves with student progress. But of course evidence is always the enemy of dogma, and this is faith-based, fact-free school policy at its purest.

So I would have picked Darling-Hammond, but then again I would have picked Noam Chomsky for state, Naomi Klein for defense, Bernardine Dohrn for Attorney General, Bill Fletcher for commerce, James Thindwa for labor, Barbara Ransby for human services, Paul Krugman for treasury, and Amy Goodman for press secretary. So what do I know?

Darling-Hammond would not have been a smart pick for Obama. She was steadily demonized in a concerted campaign to undermine her effectiveness, and she would
surely have had great difficulty getting any traction whatsoever for progressive policy change in this environment. Arne Duncan was the smart choice, the unity choice—the least driven by ideology, the most open to working with teachers and unions, the smartest by a mile—and let’s wish him well.

But there’s a deeper point: since the Obama victory, many people seem to be suffering a kind of post-partum depression: unable to find any polls to obsess over, we read the tea-leaves and try to penetrate the president-elect’s mind. What do his moves portend? What magic or disaster awaits us? With due respect, this is a matter of looking entirely in the wrong direction.

Obama is not a monarch—Arne Duncan is not education czar—and we are not his subjects. If we want a foreign policy based on justice, for example, we ought to get busy organizing a robust anti-imperialist peace movement; if we want to end the death penalty we better get smart about changing the dominant narrative concerning crime and punishment. We are not allowed to sit quietly in a democracy awaiting salvation from above. We are all equal, and we all need to speak up and speak out right now.

During Arne Duncan’s tenure in Chicago, a group of hunger-striking mothers organized city-wide support and won the construction of a new high school in a community that had been underserved and denied for years. Another group of parents, teachers, and students mobilized to push military recruiters out of their high school; Duncan didn’t support them and he certainly didn’t lead the charge, but they won anyway. If they’d waited for Duncan to act, they’d likely be waiting still. Teachers at another school refused to give one of the endless standardized tests, arguing that this was one test too many, and they organized deep support for their protest; Duncan didn’t support them either, but they won anyway. If they’d waited for Duncan, they’d be waiting still. Why would anyone sit around waiting for Arne now? Stop whining; get busy. In the realm of education, there is nothing preventing any of us from pressing to change the dominant discourse that has controlled the discussion for many years. It’s reasonable to assume that education in a democracy is distinct from education under a dictatorship or a monarchy, but how? Surely school leaders in fascist Germany or communist Albania or medieval Saudi Arabia all agreed, for example, that students should behave well, stay away from drugs and crime, do their homework, study hard, and master the subject matters, so those things don’t differentiate a democratic education from any other.

What makes education in a democracy distinct is a commitment to a particularly precious and fragile ideal, and that is a belief that the fullest development of all is the necessary condition for the full development of each; conversely, the fullest development of each is necessary for the full development of all.

Democracy, after all, is geared toward participation and engagement, and it’s based on a common faith: every human being is of infinite and incalculable value, each a unique intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, and creative force. Every human being is born free and equal in dignity and rights; each is endowed with reason and conscience, and deserves, then, a sense of solidarity, brotherhood and sisterhood, recognition and respect.

We want our students to be able to think for themselves, to make judgments based on evidence and argument, to develop minds of their own. We want them to ask fundamental questions—who in the world am I? How did I get here and where am I going? What in the world are my choices? How in the world shall I proceed?—and to pursue answers wherever they might take them. Democratic educators focus their efforts, not on the production of things so much as on the production of fully developed human beings who are capable of controlling and transforming their own lives, citizens who can participate fully in civic life.
Democratic teaching encourages students to develop initiative and imagination, the capacity to name the world, to identify the obstacles to their full humanity, and the courage to act upon whatever the known demands. Education in a democracy should be characteristically eye-popping and mind-blowing—always about opening doors and opening minds as students forge their own pathways into a wider world.

How do our schools here and now measure up to the democratic ideal?

Much of what we call schooling forecloses or shuts down or walls off meaningful choice-making. Much of it is based on obedience and conformity, the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime. Much of it banishes the unpopular, squirms in the presence of the unorthodox, hides the unpleasant. There’s no space for skepticism, irreverence, or even doubt. While many of us long for teaching as something transcendent and powerful, we find ourselves too often locked in situations that reduce teaching to a kind of glorified clerking, passing along a curriculum of received wisdom and predigested and often false bits of information. This is a recipe for disaster in the long run.

Educators, students, and citizens must press now for an education worthy of a democracy, including an end to sorting people into winners and losers through expensive standardized tests which act as pseudo-scientific forms of surveillance; an end to starving schools of needed resources and then blaming teachers and their unions for dismal outcomes; and an end to the rapidly accumulating “educational debt,” the resources due to communities historically segregated, under-funded and under-served. All children and youth in a democracy, regardless of economic circumstance, deserve full access to richly resourced classrooms led by caring, qualified and generously compensated teachers. So let’s push for that, and let’s make it happen before Arne Duncan or anyone else grants us permission.

The following month, two of us published an op-ed in one of the local Chicago newspapers about the intersection of militarizing public schools and discriminating against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. The following article was published in the Windy City Times on February 25, 2009.

**Queer Eyes on What Prize? Ending Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell**

So, we’ve heard that Barack Obama is going to repeal the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy that prohibits gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military. As two queer teachers that have been working hard to arrest the militarism of education in Chicago—a public high school for every branch of the military, and two for the army (and not one of these with a Gay Straight Alliance for students), and over 10,000 youth from 6th to 12th grade participating in some form of military program in their public schools—we are not leaping with joy at this rumor. Our reluctance has our allies scratching their heads:

“Isn’t this what you want?”

“Equal right to fight!”

“What a success for the gay rights movement!”

“I guess this solves the discrimination problem in military public schools, then.”

“Gay kids can join up!”

Sure, we think uniforms are hot, but this—permitting out lesbians and gay men to enlist—was never the purpose of gay liberation, a movement aiming as tenaciously at peace as equal rights.

And for us, it’s clear that overturning Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT) won’t begin to address the public policy catastrophe of turning over our public schools, and some of our nation’s poorest youth, to the military.

We argue that the system of public education should remain a civilian system. This statement rests on three
proposals. First, adults may choose to enlist; youth cannot. Next, schools should educate students for the broadest possibilities and choices; the military narrowly aims to prepare recruits. And last, schools should protect young people and nurture peace; but the military is contagiously violent. From the ugly revelations of Abu Ghraib, and the rash of sexual assaults on military women by men in service, to many veterans’ post-service violence turned both inward and outward—its legacy of brutality is so vast that the Department of Defense might more aptly be called the Department of Destruction.

This proposed repeal, far from any big win, offers queers an important opportunity to think about our strategies and goals. Let’s not unfurl our victory banner too quickly; instead, we should keep our queer eyes, and organizing, focused on the real prize: social justice.

Yes, gays, lesbians, and transgendered folks are discriminated against and excluded from full participation in our society and its institutions, including schools (read any report about rates of violence against gay students or employment discrimination for out queer or non-gender conforming school staff), military (DADT—enough said!), families (remember the 57 percent majority that passed the 2008 gay adoption ban in Arkansas), and religion (many religious colleges and universities ban homosexual students, staff, and faculty—legally!).

Add to this list the ease with which otherwise smart people, including President Obama, reserve marriage and all its attendant privileges for “one man and one woman” while also claiming they are “ferocious” defenders of gay rights—that’s a fairly self-serving stance, isn’t it? Yes, gays and lesbians still have a long way to go toward achieving... let’s just call it “fully human status” in the United States.

The push to repeal DADT is, on the one hand, a no-brainer—all people should have all rights, right?

But this proposal can also be understood, and it is by us, as an attempt to remap what our social justice goals, as queers, should be—not the right to privacy and the right to public life, and certainly not the right to live lives free from our nation’s ever-present militarism and never-ending war. Instead, lesbians, gays, transgendered, and bisexuals are encouraged to forget our historical places at the helm of social justice thinking and labor (to mention just a few, Jane Addams, Bayard Rustin, Barbara Jordan, and of course, Harvey Milk), constrict our vision and dreams, and just be happy for an opportunity to participate in a military that depends on poverty and permanent war to keep enlistment high.

Let’s forget repealing DADT and cut right to the chase: Repeal the Department of Defense. What about establishing a Department of Peace, as Dennis Kucinich has already proposed? Let’s pair that with bear brigades tossing pink batons (and, of course, an annual teddy bear picnic). Or, we can take up the mermaid parade as an organizing celebration, with its dress-up and float creation. Either of these fanciful, and very queer, forms would allow us all to play and create together, and each seems a better activity for a school to take up than pretend soldiering.

Then let’s organize for some real social justice goals.

For starters, let’s demand universal healthcare, affordable housing, and meaningful living wage employment that supports flourishing, not merely subsisting, lives, for all.

We know we don’t need 6th or 12th graders wearing military uniforms, marching with wooden guns on public school grounds. We don’t need twelve-year-olds parading military ranks or plotting battles. However, we could use more teens painting murals, stitching gowns, and writing code and lyrics. In short, we don’t need child soldiers, but we could use more young artists.

A public school system that teaches peace and art, with fiercely equal opportunities for all students. We can see it now: painting classes, soccer clubs, computer gaming classes, drum kits, comprehensive sexuality education,
and musical theater in every school. That’s so excellently queer, and so very just.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some ways that the media and popular culture have represented what it means to be a teacher? What are some images that come to mind? How do these compare with your own experiences in school?

2. If you had the opportunity to meet with the U.S. secretary of education, or the superintendent of your local school district, what are the top five problems in education that you would want to discuss, and why?

3. What is an issue in education that you believe needs to be re-framed? Using the “six guiding questions,” draft an outline for an op-ed article in which you present a new way of seeing the issue. Consider submitting your article to a local newspaper!

FURTHER READING


An eye-opening description of the power of frames in political campaigns and elections.


An analysis of frames in current federal legislation.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Hijacking Catastrophe, a documentary film by the Media Education Foundation about the strategic ways that war and safety have been framed in the United States; and Sicko, a documentary film by Michael Moore about the strategic ways that health care has been framed in the United States.

THE CHICAGO POET Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a praise song to the dazzling freedom fighter and Renaissance man Paul Robeson, a man who loved music and the arts, a man who knew the elegance of mathematics and espoused the scientific method, a black man in America who fiercely embraced all of humanity and tried to make that embrace have a concrete and vital meaning in the muck and the mud of the real world as he found it: Brooks describes a clear and powerful voice “cutting across the hot grit of the day.” A major voice, she asserts, the mature adult voice, deep and resonant, “Warning, in music words / devout and large, / that we are each other’s harvest: / we are each other’s / business: /we are each other’s / magnitude and bond.”

As teachers we engage in a front-end effort for a more human world—“we are each other’s business,” “we are each other’s magnitude and bond”—a world based on the as-yet-unrealized ideal that every person’s life is of infinite value. We resist, then, all the constructed hierarchies of human worth and worthlessness as base and ugly—wrong in the sense of inaccurate, and wrong in the sense of immoral.