

From:

Power, Meaning and Identity

Michael W Apple 2014

## Chapter 2

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# The Politics of Official Knowledge in the United States

### Introduction

No matter what some of our more well-known social control theorists would argue, state funded schooling was not a gift that was given easily by dominant groups in society to control the minds of the people. Instead, such schooling was a *result* of concrete struggles among different groups with different social and cultural visions, and of course different resources and power. The form schooling took, the curriculum that was instituted, the way teaching went on, how and by whom it was controlled, all of this was the contradictory outcome of compromises or accords in which government had to respond to those above and below in the social structure.<sup>1</sup>

This is not simply of historical interest. Currently, in a time of what has been called the conservative restoration, new struggles over teaching and curriculum, in essence over what education is *for*, are having a profound impact on the daily lives of educators and students. In this brief essay, I shall focus on what this means for people who self-consciously see themselves as members of the curriculum field, because what these conflicts mean to the tradition of asking curriculum questions in the United States is of no small interest in the politics of what counts as legitimate knowledge.

### The Politics of the Conservative Restoration<sup>2</sup>

Spencer was not wrong when he reminded educators that one of the most fundamental questions we should ask about the schooling process is "What knowledge is of most worth?" This is a deceptively

simple question, however, because the conflicts over what should be taught have been, and continue to be, sharp and deep. It is not only an educational issue, but one that is inherently ideological and political. Whether we recognize it or not, curriculum and more general educational issues have always been caught up in the history of class, race, gender, and religious relations in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Because of this, a better way of phrasing the question, a way that highlights the profoundly political nature of educational debate, is "Whose knowledge is of most worth?"<sup>4</sup> That this is not simply an abstract academic question is made strikingly clear in the fact that right-wing attacks on the schools, calls for censorship, and controversies over the values that are being taught and not being taught have made the curriculum of many school districts throughout the country into what can best be described as a political football.

The public debate on education, and on all things social, has shifted profoundly to the right. The effects of this shift can be seen in a number of educational policies and proposals that are now gaining momentum throughout the country: 1) proposals for voucher plans and tax credits to make schools more like the thoroughly idealized free market economy; 2) the movement in state legislatures and state departments of education to "raise standards" and mandate teacher and student "competencies," thereby centralizing even more at a state level the control of teaching and curricula; 3) the often effective assault on the school curriculum for its supposedly antifamily and antifree enterprise bias, its "secular humanism," its lack of patriotism, and its failure to teach the content, values, and character dispositions that have made the "Western tradition" what it is; and 4) the consistent pressure to make the needs of business and industry the primary goals of the educational system.<sup>5</sup>

What has been partly accomplished has been a successful translation of an economic doctrine into the language of experience, moral imperative, and common sense. A free market ethic is being combined with a populist politics. This has meant the blending together of a rich mix of themes that have a long history in the United States—nation, family, duty, authority, standards, and traditionalism—with other thematic elements that have struck a resonant chord during a time of crisis. These latter themes include self-interest, competitive individualism, and antigovernment rhetoric.

The rightist and neoconservative movement has entered into education in part because the social democratic goal of expanding equal-

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ity of opportunity has lost much of its political potency and its ability to mobilize people. The panic over falling standards and illiteracy, the fears of violence in schools, the concern with the destruction of family values and religiosity all have had an effect. These fears are used by culturally and economically dominant groups to move the arguments about education into their own arena, an arena of standardization, productivity, a romanticized past when all children sat still with their hands folded and learned a common curriculum, and so on. Because so many parents are justifiably concerned about the economic and social future of their children in an economy that is increasingly shaped by lower wages, the threat of unemployment, and cultural and economic insecurity, the neoconservative and rightist positions connect well with the fears of many people.<sup>6</sup>

One of the conservative movement's major successes has been to marginalize a number of voices in education and in the government at most levels. The voices of the economically disadvantaged, of many women, of people of color, and so many others are hard to hear over the din of the attacks on the school for its inefficiency, its lack of connection to an economy, and its failure to teach "real knowledge." Another group of people who have lost even more of their already limited voice is curriculum scholars. Individuals such as E.D. Hirsch Jr. (whose own book, *Cultural Literacy*, owes more of its popularity to the propensity of many educators and the middle-class public to play a more intellectual version of Trivial Pursuit than to the power of its arguments and cultural vision) now provide answers to the Spencerian question.<sup>7</sup>

What some people define as a crisis of loss of voice, others of course see as progress. This is especially evident in a quote from former Secretary of Education William Bennett. In his view, rather than a crisis that is deepening, we are emerging out of one in which "we neglected and denied much of the best in American education." In the process, "we simply stopped doing the right things [and] allowed an assault on intellectual and moral standards." This assault, which the conservatives see as being connected with attacks on the family, traditional values, religiosity, patriotism, and our economic well-being, has led schools to fall away from "the principles of our tradition."<sup>8</sup> It has been led by liberal intellectuals, not by "the people."

Yet, for Bennett, the people have now risen up. "The 1980s gave birth to a grass-roots movement for educational reform that has generated a renewed commitment to excellence, character, and funda-

mentals." Because of this, "we have reason for optimism."<sup>9</sup> Why? Because:

The national debate on education is now focused on truly important matters: mastering the basics—math, history, science, and English; insisting on high standards and expectations; ensuring discipline in the classroom; conveying a grasp of our moral and political principles; and nurturing the character of our young.<sup>10</sup>

Part of the solution for Bennett and others is to take authority away from many of those professional educators who supposedly have had it. This speaks to a profound mistrust of teachers, administrators, and curriculum scholars at universities. They are decidedly not part of the solution, but part of the problem. It speaks as well to the suspicion of all things public that shapes much of the conservative vision.

As all this has been happening, most people in curriculum have largely stood by, watching from the sidelines as if this was a fascinating game that had to do with politics, not with education. Others may have bemoaned their fate, but fled into increasingly technical procedural questions, thereby again confirming the artificial separation between "how-to" curriculum questions and those involving the real relations of culture and power in the world.

This is not a new phenomenon by any means. Curriculum workers have witnessed a slowly growing but very significant change in the way their work has been defined over the past decades. This change is only visible over the long haul, yet few things have had such an important impact. I am referring here to the transformation of professional curriculum discourse and debate from the issues surrounding *what* we should teach to those problems associated with *how* the curriculum should be organized, built, and, above all, evaluated. The difficult and—as any examination of the reality of schooling would show—contentious ethical and political questions of content, of whose and what knowledge is of most worth, have been pushed into the background in our attempt to define technically oriented methods that will "solve" all of our problems once and for all. For years, professional curriculum debate has been about procedures, not what counts as legitimate knowledge. As a number of social commentators continually remind us, when it comes to real conflict over cultural visions in education, technique consistently wins out over substance.

Although the process did not start in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was certainly exacerbated during the years that saw a resurgence of

discipline-centered curriculum and technically oriented curriculum to radically shift curriculum in the discipline-based teachers and curriculum abilities to deal with social alliance, if it was to organize it in particular the massive curriculum teacher-proof material that still often line the to these attempts.

There are few better. If curricula are purchased of most of this new government—if all curriculum and already linked to the skills of curriculum increasingly isolated curriculum and housed primarily legitimate knowledge plinary matrix?

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discipline-centered curriculum. Government, industry, and scientifically and technically oriented academics formed an alliance that attempted to radically shift curriculum to "real knowledge," that knowledge housed in the discipline-based departments at major universities. Because most teachers and curriculum workers were perceived to not have the capabilities to deal with such "real knowledge," it became clear that this alliance, if it was to be effective, had to select the knowledge and organize it in particular ways. The National Defense Education Act, the massive curriculum development efforts that produced so much teacher-proof material, and the boxes upon boxes of standardized kits that still often line the walls of schools and classrooms stand witness to these attempts.

There are few better examples of the deskilling of a field than this. If curricula are *purchased*—and remember that 80 percent of the cost of most of this new curriculum material was repaid by the federal government—if all curricula come ready made, largely teacher proofed, and already linked to pretests and posttests, why would teachers need the skills of curriculum deliberation?<sup>21</sup> Of what use were those increasingly isolated curriculum scholars, unattached to "real" disciplines and housed primarily in schools of education, when what counts as legitimate knowledge was already largely predetermined by its disciplinary matrix?

The hidden gender relations here need to be mentioned. We need to remember a simple but very telling fact. Most teachers, especially at the elementary school level, are *women*. By, in essence, disempowering them, by centralizing curriculum deliberation, debate, and control in the hands of academics in the disciplines and through government intervention, we undercut the skills of curriculum design and teaching for which women teachers had struggled for years to gain respect.<sup>12</sup> I shall return to the issue of the relative power of teachers in a moment, since it bears directly on the question of who has really made decisions about curriculum in the past.

Yet it was not only teachers who lost power here. A good deal of the scholarly literature in curriculum at this time was filled with questions about the declining power of curriculum "experts" to determine what should be taught.<sup>13</sup> Power was seen to have shifted from those people who were closely attached to a long tradition of curriculum debate to those—like, say, Bruner and his coterie of disciplinary-based experts—who may have had interesting things to say about what should be taught in schools, but whose primary affiliations were to their disci-

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plines rather than to schools and teachers. And although many curriculum scholars raised serious objections to what they believed was an unwise turn toward an overly subject-based and perhaps elitist curriculum, they were by and large ignored outside of the limited professional audiences for whom they wrote. The parallels between then and now are more than a little interesting. Once again, powerful groups and alliances in the larger society, in government, and in the academy had more to do with shaping curricular debate than those individuals whose special purchase on educational reality was supposed to be exactly about that.

This situation was heightened by the curriculum field's own propensities as well, by the increasing dominance of procedural models of curriculum deliberation and design. The model that became, in essence, the paradigm of the field—that articulated by Ralph Tyler in *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*<sup>14</sup>—even taking into account its avowed purpose of synthesizing nearly all that had gone on before, was by and large a behaviorally oriented procedural model. It provided almost no assistance whatsoever about the difficult issues of *whose* knowledge should be taught and *who* should decide, preferring to focus on the methodological steps one should go through in selecting, organizing, and especially evaluating the curriculum.<sup>15</sup> Although it may not have been intended, one of its ultimate effects was to evacuate political and cultural conflict from the very center of curriculum debate. So successful has that been that the curriculum field now confronts resurgent conservative movements that have thoroughly politicized the curriculum and the entire schooling experience only to be faced with the loss of any substantive ways of justifying *why* x should be taught rather than y.<sup>16</sup> Teachers are not the only ones who have been deskilled here.

Although it may be too harsh of an assessment, curriculum experts, then, increasingly became irrelevant in many ways. Curriculum specialists were often transformed into “experts for hire,” people with more limited expertise in the procedures for writing documents based on what other people have decided is important to know, in quantitative or qualitative evaluation, in methods of goal setting and assessment and in techniques of writing behavioral objectives. What they are decidedly not experts in is the immensely difficult and contentious issue of what we should specifically teach. And because of the ahistorical nature of the field and the increasingly technical and specialized quality of graduate education, the knowledge of the traditions of dealing

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with those issues withers. Many people simply do not have the resources, ones so dependent on a knowledge of past conceptual, educational, and political curricular debate over what is worth knowing, to deal both with the dilemma of what a society's collective memory should be<sup>17</sup> and with the politics of cultural criticism that might enable them to answer these questions.

This has its democratic side, to be sure. By not centralizing curriculum determination in the hands of a few curriculum experts, we are trying to ensure that more power will reside at a local level. This is largely a meritorious goal. Yet, as we know, this is also often a fiction, because, whether we like it or not, we do basically have a national curriculum in the United States. Instead of it now being organized around national curriculum policies specified by academics and the government, however, it is determined by the market in *textbooks* and this market in turn is determined by what is seen as important in the primarily southern and western states of the Sun Belt that have state textbook adoption policies and where conservatives have considerable power to influence what is taught. Curriculum scholars have very limited influence at this level. Here, too, curriculum scholars argue in a vacuum, turning away from the actual processes that determine the most important elements of the curriculum—what I have called “the culture and commerce of the textbook”<sup>18</sup>—and in the process have little to say about the political, economic, and ideological conditions that make the curriculum look the way it does.

Instead of focusing on the social and political realities that stand behind the curriculum and on the way that the curriculum has once again become an arena where different groups fight out their distinct social agendas, we look nostalgically backward to a time when teachers, administrators, parents, business leaders, federal and state government officials, and others all sat up and paid attention to our words of wisdom. In many ways, this is just as mythic a past as that found in the conservatives' romanticization of the perfect school, family, and community where we all shared the same values, and pastoral settings reigned supreme.

I want to focus on this mythic past a bit more since I believe it is very much part of the problem we face. We need to be very cautious about assuming that there was some golden age in which members of the curriculum field had an immense amount of independent power over the content of the curriculum. As I have stressed here and commented at great length elsewhere, controversies over the content and

form of the curriculum, over what and whose knowledge should be granted high status, are most often informed by larger conflicts between and within groups who are now in, or want to have, power.<sup>19</sup>

If we were to be true to the historical record, we would acknowledge that the school curriculum has always been the result of past conflicts and compromises that are themselves the product of wider social movements and pressures that extend well beyond the school. More often than not, curriculum people have been carried along by these movements. Rather than leaders, they have quite often been followers. Indeed, as the example of the discipline-based curriculum movement shows, it is difficult to find more than a very few instances in the last thirty years in which scholars *specifically within the curriculum field* had any appreciable impact on debates over the content of the curriculum.

If it was not the community of curriculum scholars who had so much power, what then are some of the major forces that have shaped the curriculum? As I have argued in considerable detail in *Teachers and Texts*, among the least talked about but most significant have been the gendered nature of teaching and the dominance of the standardized textbook. It is not simply an historical accident that the curriculum of, say, the elementary school has been tightly controlled, text- and test-based, and subject to continued rationalization. Women's paid work in a number of fields has historically been dealt with this way. Yet the fact that elementary teaching has been largely women's paid work also points to women teachers as activists as well. Indeed, the growth of the standardized textbook was not only due to rationalizing influences imposed from above, or to textbook publishers who recognized a lucrative market when they saw one, but was due as well to elementary school teachers collectively pressuring from below for help in changing the awful conditions in which many of them worked. Planning for multiage groups, for many subject areas in which they were not given either sufficient time or preparation to teach, in overly crowded classrooms—all this and more caused teachers to argue for texts to help them.<sup>20</sup> The result was a curriculum that was increasingly dominated by standardized and finally grade-level-specific texts, and in which textbook authors and publishers, compromising with local and state regulators, administrators, and teachers, had a significant amount of power to determine the form and content of the curriculum.

Thus, the *major* organizing element of the curriculum—the textbook—was never the result of curriculum scholars, but was the com-

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plicated result of social policies and dynamics surrounding gender, the politics of rationalization and bureaucratization in schools and teachers' responses to it, and the economics of profit and loss in the field of publishing. To look for the determining impact of a few specialized curriculum scholars in this is to live in a world divorced from reality.

Among the other external forces were the rise of what has been called a "technocratic" belief system in education and in the larger society, in which the assumption seemed to be that if it moved it should be measured. Of great importance as well was the steady growth of federal and state intervention in the shaping of curriculum policy,<sup>21</sup> a growth that was itself stimulated by Cold War ideologies and the pressures of international economic competition. This later set of pressures has had a very long history; but as the conservative restoration gains increasing power, this process of intervention has become even more visible in the aforementioned pressure both to make economic needs the primary goals of education and to return to an idealized and educationally problematic version of the corpus of "Western culture" as the core knowledge we should teach.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, much more could and needs to be said about the influence of state intervention, of crises in the economy on the national reports, about who has the power to speak and to be listened to on matters educational, and about where money goes in—or away from—education. A similar story needs to be told about how a conservative government has used the media in such a masterful way to control the public debate on education. On a more positive note, the intense pressure from below by social activists in the African American, women's, Latino/a, and other communities have led to major shifts in curricular content and authority and this story too needs to be recovered and brought center stage.

Many other areas could be focused upon. Yet, my point is really a simple one. Almost none of this can be traced to the efforts, no matter how well intentioned, of the curriculum field. The nostalgic gaze into the golden age of the past is largely a misreading of the historical record. It is actually a flight from recognition of where power may often lie and an even more dangerous flight from seeing the real depth of the problem.

Oddly, however, perhaps the feeling that curriculum scholars have lost their voice is the first step in the right direction. Perhaps some members of the curriculum field feel that they have lost their collective voice because they do recognize the objective conditions that surround

not only their lives but the lives of so many talented and committed educators. That is, as we are witnessing all around us, curriculum determination at the level of the classroom, in teacher education, and elsewhere is being increasingly politicized, and is being more and more subject to legislative mandates, mandates from state departments of education, and so on. Test-driven curricula, overly rationalized and bureaucratized school experiences and planning models, atomized and reductive curricula—all of this is happening. This *has* often resulted in the deskilling of teachers and curriculum workers, a separation of conception from execution as planning is done away from the local level, and has as well led to a severe intensification of educators' work as more and more has to be done with less and less time available to do it.<sup>23</sup> Power over curricula is being centralized, taken out of the hands of the educators who must put it into practice. This is occurring at a much faster rate than are the experiments of local, school-based models.

Yet, why should all this surprise us? Tendencies toward the deskilling and depowering of jobs, toward the removal of reflection and thoughtfulness from one's work, and toward technically oriented and amoral centralized management are unfortunately part and parcel of the kind of society in which we live. So many millions of people in the United States have already experienced the loss of power and control in their own daily lives.<sup>24</sup> Why should we assume that this won't happen to people involved in curriculum and education in general? The real issue is not what is happening, but why it took us so long to realize that we, like most other educators, do not stand above the centralizing and disempowering logics and the political and economic forces that affect so many other individuals in this society. Perhaps the very way people in curriculum are themselves educated, in which education is too often treated as unconnected to economic, political, and ideological conflicts and in which we can supposedly solve our problems easily by looking only internally at the school, bears some of the responsibility for this dilemma.

Do not misunderstand my argument. My argument has not been that members of the curriculum field have been totally powerless, have only been puppets whose strings are pulled by large-scale social forces beyond their control. I am asking that we be realistic, however. If social, political, and economic forces and movements have played such a large role in determining the shape of the curriculum and have provided much of the impetus behind whose knowledge is taught, then

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individual action by curriculum scholars is not enough. We can and must join together with other groups who need the knowledge of curricular debates and traditions and who wish to make schools more progressive in intent and outcome.

There are collective voices we can join with, that we can contribute something of value to, and, perhaps just as importantly, that we can learn from. There are numerous groups throughout the country who are fighting in very uncertain conditions to build both an education worthy of its name and a curriculum that responds to the knowledge of all of us, not only to those who, because of their power, have sought to shape the curriculum in their own limited political and cultural image. These include the teachers in the Rethinking Schools group in Milwaukee and those involved in Substance in Chicago and Chalkdust in New York. It includes the community-based advocacy groups such as, among others, the Southern Coalition for Educational Equity, Chicago Schoolwatch, Parents United for Full Public School Funding in Washington, D.C., Citizens Education Center in Seattle, and People United for Better Schools in Newark who have been engaged in defending and building upon many of the gains made in the democratization of curriculum and teaching over the past two decades and in making them more responsive.<sup>25</sup> Only by forming coalitions with these groups in the hard and time-consuming political and educational work to restore a democratic vision and practice to education, can we also restore the voice of the curriculum tradition to the public debates over whose knowledge should be taught. If we continue to stand above the fray, perhaps we don't deserve to have our voice restored.

The right has done a good job of showing that decisions about the curriculum, about whose knowledge is to be made "official knowledge," are *inherently* involved in political and cultural conflicts and power. And unless we learn to live in that world and join with others to find the *collective* voice that speaks for the long progressive educational tradition that lives in so many of us, the knowledge our children will be taught will reflect that unequal power. Sidelines may be comfortable places to sit. But they have little to do with the lives of the real children and teachers who are losing today.

## Notes

- 1 Michael W. Apple "Social Crisis and Curriculum Accords," *Educational Theory* 38 (Spring 1988): 191-201.
- 2 Much of what follows is based on a longer treatment of these issues in Michael W. Apple, "Is There a Curriculum Voice to Reclaim?," *Phi Delta Kappan* (in press).
- 3 See, for example, William Reese, *Power and the Promise of School Reform* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).
- 4 For further discussion of this, see Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 5 Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and Texts* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).
- 6 This is treated in considerably more detail in Michael W. Apple, "Redefining Equality," *Teachers College Record* 90 (Winter 1988): 167-84.
- 7 For interesting criticisms of Hirsch's proposals for "cultural literacy," see Herbert M. Kliebard "Cultural Literacy or the Curate's Egg," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 21, no. 1 (January/February 1989): 61-70 and Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, "Schooling, Culture, and Literacy in an age of Broken Dreams," *Harvard Educational Review* 58 (May 1988): 172-94.
- 8 William J. Bennett, *Our Children and Our Country* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988): 9-10.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 10
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 See Michael W. Apple, *Education and Power* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), especially chapter 5, for further discussion of the deskilling of teachers.
- 12 Apple, *Teachers and Texts*.
- 13 See, for example, some of the reflections on the previous decade of curriculum work in Elliot Eisner, ed. *Confronting Curriculum Reform* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971). See also A. Harry Passow, ed., *Curriculum Crossroads* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1962) and Glenys Unruh and Robert Leeper, eds. *Influence in Curriculum Change* (Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1968).
- 14 Ralph Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

- 15 Herbert M. Kliebard (1970): 259-72.
- 16 Michael W. Apple, "ties," *Phi Delta Ka*
- 17 For further elabora  
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- 18 Apple, *Teachers an*  
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(June 1989): 107-2
- 19 See Apple, *Ideology*  
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- 20 Apple, *Teachers an*
- 21 Aronowitz and Giro
- 22 Kliebard, "Cultural  
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- 23 Apple, *Teachers an*
- 24 Marcus Raskin, *The*  
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- 25 Ann Bastian, Norr  
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- 15 Herbert M. Kliebard, "The Tyler Rationale," *School Review* 78 (February 1970): 259-72.
- 16 Michael W. Apple, "Curriculum in the Year 2,000: Tensions and Possibilities," *Phi Delta Kappan* 64 (January 1983): 321-26.
- 17 For further elaboration of these traditions, see Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) and Kenneth Teitelbaum "Contestation and Curriculum: The Efforts of American Socialists, 1900-1920," in *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics, and Possibilities*, ed. Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988): 32-55.
- 18 Apple, *Teachers and Texts*. See also Michael W. Apple "Regulating the Text: The Socio/Historical Roots of State Control," *Educational Policy* 3, no. 2, (June 1989): 107-23.
- 19 See Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple, *Teachers and Texts*, and Apple, *Education and Power*.
- 20 Apple, *Teachers and Texts*.
- 21 Aronowitz and Giroux, "Schooling, Future, and Literacy."
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- 23 Apple, *Teachers and Texts*.
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