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**LEAVING CHILDREN BEHIND:
URBAN EDUCATION, CLASS POLITICS, AND THE MACHINES OF
TRANSNATIONAL CAPITALISM**

I have often felt that one of the ironies of urban school reform movements in American education over the past decade or so is that the language or semiotic systems of reform involve a kind of double-speak. So for example, basic skills and "teach 'em and test 'em" reform discourses and models that are popular in many urban school districts, such as *Success for All*, virtually guarantee that most urban youth will not succeed. They establish the discursive terrain within which most urban youth marginalized by social class, race, or ethnicity are constituted as "failures." This is because such reform discourses and models focus on the "functional literacy" skills needed in the growing service sector of the economy, and thus set up urban youth for economic subordination and domination (Carlson, 1992). Whether a student is certified as a "success," that is, as having mastered the requisite basic skills, or certified as a "failure," as having passed the State's basic skills proficiency test, makes little difference in this regard. This indeed may be why so many marginalized urban youth decide to "drop out." Similarly, under the current Bush administration, the juridical discourse of *No Child Left Behind* virtually insures that the opposite will occur, that marginalized urban youth will get left behind and locked out of opportunities for developing their fuller potentials. The *No Child Left Behind* reform agenda includes steep and continuing cuts in financial support to urban schools, both at state and federal levels, and the reorganization of the urban school curriculum around high-stakes testing in ways that are spiking dropout rates among poor African-American, Latino/a, and Appalachian youth. If this is progress, it is a kind of progress that is wreaking havoc with the lives and hopes and dreams of urban youth.

1.2 Even progressive intellectuals in education sometimes participate in a kind of double-speak when they tell "action research" stories about collaborative projects in democratic educational renewal in individual school sites. Such stories are typically based on the presumption that urban schools can be turned around one school at a time by small groups of committed and caring teachers, administrators, and education faculty working collaboratively. These are hopeful stories that represent urban schools as open spaces where it is possible to "do" critical pedagogy, or as sites where "transformative leadership" can be practiced. Certainly, I do not want to suggest the opposite—that it is not possible to make a difference that counts in attempting to transform urban schools or open up space for critical pedagogy. Space exists within the cracks of urban schools for important progressive work, and some models of school reform (such as the *Coalition of Essential Schools*) may open up possibilities for empowering urban youth and their teachers. However, the fact that such space exists should not blind us from facing certain other facts about the continuing role of urban schooling in the reproduction of class, race, gender, and other inequalities. Hope is good, and progressives need to be careful not to abandon all hope in facing this fact

about urban schools. But if we are to recover some hope for changing urban education, and truly empowering urban youth, then we will need a hope without illusions.

1.3 In what follows, I want to explore the basis for telling a different kind of story about urban school reform, one that is less hopeful in a naïve sense, but that nevertheless does not abandon hope altogether. The hope is that an honest appraisal of what I call the machines of urban schooling can lead to a new democratic counter-hegemonic movement in American education and public life that offers a new "commonsense," a new way of "thinking" about the urban school crisis and responding to it. I focus on telling the story of a project in democratic educational renewal in a high school in Cincinnati, Ohio, with which I was involved in the mid-1990s as part of a school-college collaborative. The project, an interdisciplinary school-within-a-school team, was explicitly oriented around progressive themes of student and teacher empowerment, cooperative learning, a project-based curriculum, "authentic" assessment, and so on. The project was supported by the school district as part of a decentralization initiative in which local administrators and teams of teachers were encouraged to "think outside the box" in restructuring their schools for success.

1.4 Although I want to tell the story of the interdisciplinary team, as it was called, I am at least as much interested in the context of that story, and in situating the project within various competing or overlapping economies of discourse involved in organizing power relations in the school, the community, the broader culture, and ultimately the globe. The first of these is a democratic progressive discourse that circulated through the *National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER)* and was articulated, with variations, by several teachers on the interdisciplinary team and by the faculty and graduate students at Miami University who were involved in the project. This was the discursive community that sought to carve out space for democratic educational renewal at the high school. A second discourse, expressed most powerfully in a report by the *Cincinnati Business Committee* (1991), laid out the case for a major overhaul of the city's school system, using the language of corporate reform discourse—of standards, accountability, and leadership from the top, but also of decentralization, local initiative, and site-based management. All of this was linked to raising passage rates on the state's new high school proficiency test, and to a curriculum that was more closely aligned with the skill needs of local industry. Yet a third discourse and movement in Cincinnati in the 1990s had a significant impact on the interdisciplinary team. That was the movement to bring urban youth, particularly Black youth, under a more complete gaze of surveillance and a more effective policing. This was a discourse that circulated within large segments of the White community in Cincinnati and among leaders in the police department, and that resulted in a number of shootings of unarmed, young Black men by police. The discourses of surveillance and policing of young, Black, male bodies impacted the public schools as well, for they were expected to play their part, along with police, in managing the "youth problem" in the city.

1.5 To situate this project in democratic educational renewal in these ways is to tell a different story, and I think a more useful one, than that which is most often told about "action research" projects in urban schools. Action research stories, as the name implies, focus on action in this case the actions of a few committed teachers and administrators in local schools who decide to do things differently, often in collaboration with nearby universities and education faculty. Indeed, the interdisciplinary team project I report on here was originally framed as an action research project. Conference papers and journal articles written about the project framed it as a success story, albeit a limited success. Very little attention was paid to the broader economies of knowledge and power within which the interdisciplinary team was constructed and would have to continue to operate. By focusing on a micro-situational analysis of the change process in the school, largely ignoring the history of reform movements and discourses in the district, to say nothing of the whole history of the "problem" of urban education as it has been constructed and represented in scholarly research and in professional educational discourse, the story kept its gaze on the actions of local teachers and administrators. The effect of this was to overstate the degree to which urban schools serving marginalized youth are open to democratic or progressive restructuring. Now I want to tell a different story, although surely not one that returns to the determinism and fatalism of structural

Marxism, nor one that implies that there is not space within urban schools for a progressive curriculum or a critical pedagogy.

1.6 This is where my interest in a poststructural Marxism comes in, although some would no doubt view the very idea of a poststructural Marxism as a heresy or an oxymoron. In recent years, the debate among poststructuralists, Marxists, and critical theorists indebted in one way or another to the Frankfurt School and ideological critique has become something of a family feud among progressives. That debate has tended to revolve around the conflict between narratives of totality and difference, a unifying politics and a pluralistic politics, demystification and deconstruction, as well as determinism and indeterminacy. In large part, each side in the debate has constructed its position by negating the other side. Thus, it might be best to view this debate dialectically, in which case an effort must be made at some point to move beyond the current state of the debate, toward a new synthesis. Certainly, the old, discredited base-superstructure model, according to which all consciousness all knowledge can be read off as simply a reflection of the base, needs to be rejected and largely has been. At the same time, economic forces, shifts, and material relations of production must be taken seriously in any analysis of the present situation in public education. Hegemony or cultural leadership is still very much mediated by class in postmodern America, even if that mediation is now more complex and intersects with semi-autonomous struggles of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on. A poststructural Marxism calls for research that maps out the points of connection between economic relations and other sets of power relations involved in producing what goes on in schools, and to what effects.

1.7 My own version of poststructural Marxism is perhaps most indebted to Antonio Gramsci, along with Michel Foucault. Gramsci (1971) is the one Marxist theorist who has survived the "death of Marxism" unscathed, and that is because Gramsci understood culture as a site of ongoing battle, organized along a number of overlapping fronts, between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power blocs and common sense worldviews. Foucault, for his part, was certainly not a Marxist in any orthodox sense, but his work does help us see how hegemony is achieved as an everyday accomplishment in various cultural sites such as schools through the circulation of discourses tied to micro-technologies of control. In this way, Foucault helps move critical theory beyond the micro/macro binary, to reveal how power operates as it attaches itself to real human bodies and subjectivities. He also focuses on the powerful role that discourses of instrumentality and discipline, closely linked to the rise of capitalism, have played in producing truth and constructing power/knowledge relations.

1.8 I also want to explore some of the contributions that the Marxist psychoanalytic theorist of the postmodern, Felix Guattari, has made to a poststructural theory of urban education. Guattari provides a useful, if highly abstract, scaffolding for the analysis of transnational capitalism that is in many ways compatible with both Gramsci and Foucault. Guattari (1996) defines capitalism as the "semiotization of a certain mode of production" (233). Symbolization systems embody the "codes" used to organize everyday life and the syntax through which meaning is made of experience. Semiotic codes such as "effective/ineffective," for example, serve to restructure everyday life in urban schools at the same time that they make meaning of "what is going on here." They mobilize processes and procedures for "writing" educational practice at the local level so that it is integrated within broader structures of domination. Guattari (1996) observes that "capitalism does not seek to exercise despotic power over all the wheels of society. It is even crucial to its survival that it manages to arrange marginal freedoms, relative spaces for creativity" (235). What gives capitalism its special power is that it is able to re-order various heterogeneous activities and domains of cultural production under a single semiotization system similar to Gramsci's notion of a hegemonic commonsense. Semiotization systems are also inseparable from what Guattari calls "machines," those micro-technologies used in the workplace (in this case schools and classrooms) as part of the production process, including structures such as ability grouping, planning and assessing systems, policy-making procedures, curriculum documents, and so on. The metaphor of the machine suggests that schools be understood as "processual" sites where semiotization systems are busily engaged in working and re-working student and teacher bodies and producing learning outcomes. This is

similar to what Foucault (1979) had in mind in the idea that discourse attaches itself to human bodies and subjectivities through "micro-technologies" of power. Also like Foucault, Guattari views machines as more than merely repressive forces. They are productive forces involved in constituting everyday institutional life in diverse spheres. This means that progressives need to counter dominant or hegemonic machines with counter-machines such as dialogue-based instruction, cooperative learning, a multicultural curriculum, qualitative assessment, and critical pedagogy. In all their various forms, machines activate discourses and practices of "pilotage," of steering and maneuvering activities so that they are expressions of either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic common senses.

The Interdisciplinary Team and the Democratic Discourse of School Renewal

2.1 Central High School, as I will call it, is a typically large high school in Cincinnati, with over 100 teachers and an enrollment of approximately 1,200 students in the mid-1990s. At the time of this study, approximately 84 percent of the students were African American and were from impoverished or lower working-class backgrounds. The rest were poor Appalachian youth. 55 percent of the students were from families with incomes below the poverty line. Approximately half of the entering ninth graders could be expected to return to school the next fall, and two-thirds of those could be expected to graduate. Somewhere close to 20 percent of students went on to higher education in some form; although many reported feeling unprepared for college. As the curriculum was reoriented toward learning the skills and knowledge tested on the State's high attendance rates, and retention rates continued to rise and achievement levels were stagnant.

2.2 It is within this context that in the spring of 1994, the superintendent sent out a request to all high school principals to submit proposals for pilot projects focused on school restructuring. The superintendent was particularly interested in exploring school-within-a-school projects that countered the large, impersonal, bureaucratic character of most of the city's high schools. The central administration said it wanted to promote initiative and innovation in local schools, and also competition among various schools to develop designs for restructuring. Only the best proposals were to receive funding support from the district. The principal at Central High viewed the central office "request" for proposals as more than that. The superintendent wanted plans for how the school was to be restructured to raise test scores; the threat was that if such plans were not forthcoming, the principal's job would be on the line. At this point, all that was being called for was a proposal for a one-year pilot project in restructuring that could be renewed for a second year. From the principal's standpoint, this also offered an opportunity for getting some teachers "out of my hair," as he put it to me in one of our regular, informal talks. A group of progressive-minded teachers had been pressing him to let them do team teaching and develop a project-based, interdisciplinary curriculum. Consequently, he asked this group of teachers to meet with me and come up with a plan for a school-within-a-school proposal. In his own way, he also felt drawn to progressive approaches to instruction, but he insisted that they prove they can "deliver." This new project could provide a test case.

2.3 Over the course of the next academic year, I met with the group of teachers regularly on Friday afternoons, after school in a local coffee shop, to formulate a proposal and begin planning for what we might do if by chance the proposal were funded. The proposal, we decided, should "give them what they want," using the language they wanted to hear which meant frequent reference to measurable outcomes and raising achievement levels. Our own dialogue, in contrast, was very much about how the teachers could use the project to gain some freedom and control over their own work and teach the way they wanted to teach. The interdisciplinary team began operating in the fall of 1995 with a heterogeneous group of 160 ninth graders, and with special education students included. The teachers included several women and one male the social studies teacher. Only the home economics teacher was African American and the rest were White. The team had a teacher for each of the core subject areas (math, science, English, and social studies), one special education teacher who floated between classes and served as a team leader, and three home economics teachers who provided the elective credits in the program. The interdisciplinary

team was housed in an abandoned wing of the building. Until recently, the wing had housed vocational education programs; but as these programs had been eliminated in a recent budget cut as not cost-effective, the school suddenly had an empty wing. It was a wing defined, however, to separate vocational students from the "regular" students, a wing of the building cut off from the rest of the school by several doors and a stairwell. From the outset, the interdisciplinary team was located at the margins as outside that which was normal and "regular." As such, it would assume the status of the "Other" in the school. At the same time, the fact that the interdisciplinary team occupied a space apart, on the outside of the normal, seemed to suit the team teachers. Indeed, this space on the outside is precisely what they wanted, a space as much untainted by the dominant discourse and practice in the school as possible. Teachers also hoped that this space apart would be good for their students since it would encourage them to forge community bonds apart from the perceived "bad" influences in the rest of the school. This distancing and "othering" was thus part of the identity work of both teachers and students assigned to the interdisciplinary team.

2.4 Several papers on the project were presented at academic conferences over the first two years, and these papers coded the interdisciplinary team work as a project in "doing" democratic educational renewal in urban schools (see Henke, Lokon, Carlson and Kruezman, 1996). I, along with two of the teachers on the team who also happened to be doctoral students at the university, were the primary authors of these papers, and in some ways they were designed, once again, to "tell them what they want to hear," which was a hopeful story. In this case, "them" was the NNER, which was interested in case studies of change in urban partner schools, and also the "action research" community at educational conferences. The project was presented as emerging out of a "conversation" among teachers, administrators, and university faculty, one which adhered as much as possible to the ideals of democratic dialogue in which all voices are heard and differences respected, but in which the conversation leads toward some empowering "common vision" of education. The title of one conference paper was, "Conversation toward Equity." In this case, the conversation was understood to be about overcoming tracking and ability grouping practices in urban schools and adopting a full inclusion approach to special education students. Woven throughout the conference papers was a semiotics of change, the deployment of a language tied to a micro-technology of change. So the project was represented as an unfinished product in process; and teachers were represented as "reflective practitioners" continuously engaged in inquiry designed to make their practice more effective (Schon, 1986; Zeichner, 1994). In some ways, then, progressives and transnational capitalism may be said to share a common valorization of change, a shared sense that the system must be restructured; although both offer distinctively different responses.

2.5 The semiotization of the interdisciplinary team as a project in democratic educational renewal was meant to bring the university and the public schools into closer "collaboration" in responding to the urban school crisis, and to bridge the theory/practice binary in education. Yet, the progressive discourse did not travel very well or very far across the borders between the university world and the "real world" of the public school. Democratic progressive language never really established itself as a viable discourse in the everyday life of the high school, even within the interdisciplinary team. It was, for all intents and purposes, a discourse brought from the university to the public school; and while it had some currency in that latter world, it was always a very limited and circumscribed currency. While the democratic progressive discourse was critical and potentially transformative, it did not adequately account for the forces that stand in the way of "doing" democratic education in this sense in public schools today. It was used to tell a too-hopeful story, and one which largely ignored the most powerful semiotic machine shaping urban school reform in Cincinnati in the 1990s, which had its roots in corporate soil.

2.6 Among themselves, the interdisciplinary teachers maintained a sense that they were controlling their own destinies, and they genuinely believed that the progressive ideals they espoused mattered. So over the first year of the project, they were relatively happy with what they were doing and felt empowered as teachers. They also began to appreciate just how much teachers need the community of other teachers; and the interdisciplinary team gave them community for the first time in their professional lives. Students, too, identified community as the major feature they like of the interdisciplinary team, along with caring

teachers. But for teachers, all this caring and community came at a cost. Their working weeks had been intensified rather dramatically. Not only were teachers in the team now responsible for many of the routine activities that administrators used to take care of, they were always meeting before school, after school, and during their lunch periods to talk about what was happening that day and week, and to plan and assess various project-based activities assigned to students. These projects included: creating their own country with a constitution and bill of rights, assessing the needs of homeless people in their neighborhoods, and evaluating the nutritional content of food served in the school's cafeteria. Planning, monitoring, and assessing the projects took a good deal of teacher time; although they felt that the extra work was worth it and they experienced the "rush" of being suddenly in charge of creating a curriculum of charting their own destinies. Added to all this, teachers assumed responsibility for calling parents or guardians on a regular basis to tell them something "positive" about how their child was doing and to enlist their support when there were discipline problems. Teachers typically arrived at the school at 7 a.m. each morning, and they rarely left before 5 p.m., at least during the first year. In effect, they agreed to extend their own working hours without additional pay.

2.7 At the end of the first year of the project, largely because of the enthusiasm and hard work of the teachers, and the growing sense of community among students, the team was able to produce quantitative data to prove that its efforts were effective. A little over half of the interdisciplinary team students had passed all of their core subjects (math, English, social studies, and science) compared to 34 percent of other ninth graders in the school. Daily attendance was estimated at 85 percent in the interdisciplinary team, compared to 78 percent in the rest of the school. Approximately 36 percent of interdisciplinary team students received one or more discipline referrals during the year, compared to a school average of 52 percent. Test scores, however, had not risen. But at least they were no worse than the scores of "regular" students. This meant that the interdisciplinary team was a limited success from the district's standpoint and it decided to continue support for the project with the proviso that the team focuses more of its energies on raising proficiency test scores. In the second year of the project, I began to slowly phase out my own involvement, and one of the most progressive teachers in the team quit in order to devote full time to her doctoral studies. Another critical voice, a doctoral student who was doing her dissertation on community-building in the team, also began to phase out her involvement. As pressures intensified to raise test scores, many of the project-based pedagogical technologies began to be replaced by other technologies, including the state-produced proficiency test study guide and sample worksheets. Many of the commitments to community building, and a closer, more personal relationship between teachers and students, continued into the second year. But these were not supported by the individualizing technologies of testing. Finally, the semiotic system of standardized testing was associated with a narrowly-pragmatic syntax, one which encouraged teachers to reflect on their teaching in terms of the immediate situation at hand only, and in terms of a means-ends rationality of teaching to the test.

2.8 To appreciate some of the forces that came to bear on the interdisciplinary team, I now want to return to a discussion of the context of the renewal project, and more specifically the context established by the semiotization system of the corporate CEO leadership in the city, which in turn may be linked to the semiotics of transnational capitalism. In a very real sense, the interdisciplinary team was caught in a web of power relations that extended around the globe, and the machines and micro-technologies they increasingly came to use to produce "data" were plugged into a state-mandated and maintained Management Information System (MIS) on the global information web.

The Corporate and State Discourse of Reform

3.1 Corporate interests and ideologies have played a very powerful role in shaping school reform throughout the past century. But it is only over the last several decades that business interests now tied to transnational capitalism and the restructuring of the global economy and labor force have become hegemonic in the strong sense of that term in public education. We might say that the age of the new corporate State hegemony in public education officially arrived with publication of the report of the

Reagan administration's National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (1983). That report introduced a new language of educational reform, a new set of semiological codes (excellence, accountability, standards, global competition, rewarding merit, and so on) used to manufacture certain "truths" about both what was wrong with public schools and how they should be fixed. All of this was tied to an explicitly economic rationale for school reform. The public schools were to prepare a new, more globally competitive workforce, setting higher standards for both entrée level and college educated workers. The report warned in dire terms that if public schools were not restructured around this "excellence" discourse, the continued military and economic preeminence of the nation would be at risk. Since then, public education has sustained several waves of reform designed to bring the schools into closer alignment with the worldview and interests of transnational capitalism, restructuring them in ways that are both economically functional and ideological compatible. The machines of transnational capitalism, according to Guattari (1996), set in motion the "permanent restructuring" of everything. To coin a phrase from Marshall Berman (1983), "All that is solid melts into air." All established relationships and institutions are continuously revised, reworked, and reorganized, and all that is new becomes obsolete before very long in the constant drive to make the system more productive and to overcome persistent crisis tendencies.

3.2 It may not be exaggerating to say that Cincinnati Public Schools were, in effect, "taken over" in the early 1990s by the city's big business community. Certainly the word "takeover" was frequently used in the press and in the schools at the time. Corporate leaders stepped-in, as they saw it, because the school system was mismanaged. The 1980s had been a time of considerable conflict within the school board and even within the central administration, and school board meetings were often packed with parent and community advocacy groups, and contentious. To corporate elites in the city, this was taken as a sign that no one was in charge, and that decisions were being politicized in a way that was not "productive." Furthermore, the bureaucratic structure of the system, and a powerful teachers union, inhibited the power of the superintendent. Corporate leaders were represented in their drive to reform the schools by the *Cincinnati Business Commission (CBC)*, under the leadership of Clement Buenger, chairman of the board of Fifth Third Bank, one of the new global banks with home offices in Cincinnati. In the late 1980s, the *CBC* pressured the school board to authorize it to undertake a study of the schools. When the *Buenger Commission*, as it was called, released its report in the autumn of 1991, the *CBC* asked the school board to act on its recommendations, and to select a new superintendent to undertake the needed reforms.

3.3 The *Buenger Commission* report began by asserting that many of the things wrong with the city's schools, including problems of underachievement and lack of public support, were attributable to conflicts that were politicizing decision-making. The most visible sign of mismanagement and inefficiency, according to the report, was conflict among the teachers union, administrators, and the board of education. As a result, the report concluded that "no one is truly in charge of Cincinnati's public schools," and that conflicts and disagreements "delay decision-making." Furthermore, principals and teachers in the schools receive "conflicting messages about overall direction and specific priorities." The report represented internal conflicts among school leaders as "erupting" into public disputes, which supposedly further undermined public trust. To rectify these problems, the report called for consolidation of power in a strong, CEO-type superintendent, whose authority is no longer undermined by a labor contract that limits "operating flexibility." The CEO model of superintendency was defended as appropriate "since the job carries responsibilities comparable to managing a large business." In turn, the report called for the superintendent to be supported by "talented, qualified people with solid business experience," people who keep the focus on the "product" of the system. Incentive pay systems were proposed to make sure principal and teacher performance could be "evaluated fairly and linked to overall organizational goals." Finally, to streamline the chain of command, the report called for eliminating a whole stratum of assistant superintendents and supervisors in various subject areas, along with curriculum development staff.

3.4 The *Buenger Commission* report said little explicitly about curriculum, although it did argue that the system's extensive vocational education program be scaled back and deemphasized since it was engaged

in preparing young people for "skills that are increasingly obsolete in today's technology-driven market." But what the report did not say about the curriculum was perhaps more important. It did not say anything about preparing more Cincinnati youth for college. Instead, it held out hope that Cincinnati youth might meet the high standards associated with passage of the State high school proficiency test, which (the report also failed to mention) was linked to a ninth-grade achievement level and the "skill needs" of the entrée-level, service sector labor force. With the *Buenger Commission* report, the city all but abandoned its honors and advancement placement programs, and the few college preparatory students in the district were primarily enrolled in magnet schools. By focusing on a basic skills curriculum, with more technological training, the report in essence tied the city's schools to the expanding service sector of the economy.

3.5 The report also tied the curriculum to what Roland Barthes (1957) has called the "quantification of quality" (153). For Barthes, one of the ways that bourgeois semiotic systems work is by reducing all discussions of quality to a quantifiable indicator. As a result, inherently politic questions get reduced to technical, managerial questions, questions to be answered through reference to numbers. Thus, for the *Buenger Commission*, "success" (for students, teachers, and administrators) was to be much more closely linked to "individual accountability for academic progress" defined in terms of quantifiable outcomes. Goals for improving "educational productivity" were to be established through "management by objective" systems, in which there is a "clear focus on agreed-upon organizational goals." Once this "bottom line" is firmly established, according to the report, local administrators and teachers could be "given the incentives and the responsibility to produce superior educational performance." They could be "empowered to make decisions affecting their schools' operations." They could be "freed up" to think creatively and come up with different approaches to meeting system goals. The report's support for decentralization in local schools, and its encouragement of different paths to reorganization, was reinforced by borrowing a few lines from John Milton having to do with the "marketplace of ideas":

Where there is much desire to learn there of necessity will be much arguing much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good people is but knowledge in the making.

Supposedly, then, ideas for school reform were to be tested out in the marketplace to see which ones survive and are thus by definition "best." Those schools that succeeded that developed effective and efficient means of raising student achievement levels were to be rewarded by the district, and those that failed were to be eliminated. As I noted earlier, the contradiction in this semiotization of urban school reform is that by specifying the quantitative "bottom line," the only real choice local principals and teachers had was between various models of reorganization designed to raise test scores.

3.6 Finally, the *Buenger Commission* report called for the creation of a state-of-the-art "management information system" for the school district that would integrate school-based software programs with central office processing units. Each school would also need, it said, "a mechanized student information system data base" linked to other schools and the state's new MIS files. Data and computer technologies were to provide the kind of "quality control" needed to make important management decisions. Throughout the 1990s, as this management information system was put in place, local schools increasingly became data processing centers, and machines and micro-technologies of collecting, processing, and assessing data on student achievement became ever more important in the everyday life of the interdisciplinary team at Central High. At the same time, the State Department of Education (DOE) was establishing its own MIS. The state's system was represented to the public as a means of making the schools accountable to parents. For example, an essay on the MIS that appeared on the DOE website recently, titled "Improving Education with Business Intelligence," noted that a parent could have one-click access to: how much each school district spends per pupil each year, student attendance rates, enrollment figures, graduation rates, and proficiency test results. Another click gives the parent access to individual school data. As educational consumers, parents can then presumably make wise choices about where they want to educate their children. Of course, most inner-city parents in urban districts do not have the choice

presumed here, even if middle-class parents may. More importantly, the MIS is represented in the essay as a "tool" that administrators can use to make important decisions and answer important questions, such as: "Why do students read better at this school? Why do they keep dropping out at that school?" Quick and easy access to MIS information promises to let us "get to the bottom" of such troubling questions. The quantification of quality is here represented as the answer to all educational questions, and as a guide in telling us how to proceed.

3.7 For the interdisciplinary team, the pressure to produce more data, and to spend more time processing and analyzing data, had the effect of intensifying teachers' work and making their work less meaningful and rewarding. If time spent producing and processing data was not time taken away from teaching, it had to be time added on to the teaching day. The production of data was also a goal displacement to the extent that it diverted teachers' attention away from a more meaningful dialogue about curriculum and pedagogy, and it resulted in increased use of skill-based and individualized curriculum technologies that were alienating to students. Consequently, while the corporate and State discourses on urban school reform did succeed in restructuring the system, the crisis of achievement in the city's schools that the *Buenger Commission* pointed out persisted. The crisis had actually gotten worse over the decade, as the local economy continued to be restructured, as poverty rates rose, and as simmering racial conflicts in the city boiled over. I now want to situate the interdisciplinary team within this racial and class context, and explore how it was affected by a new hegemonic discourse on the "youth problem" in the city.

The "Youth Problem" and Micro-Technologies of Surveillance and Policing

4.1 In Cincinnati, as in most other urban school districts serving a high proportion of youth marginalized by class, race, and/or ethnicity, discourses on the "youth problem" historically have played a pivotal role in shaping educational policy and practice. What was new in the 1990s was the development of much closer working relationships between the police, the juvenile court system, and the public schools as elements of what Foucault (1979) called "disciplinary power." The roots of this disciplinary power could be traced back to the corporate boardrooms of the city, but also to White, middle-class fears of the dark, urban core of the city as "danger zone" a fear that looped back and forth between the news media and the White community (see McCarthy, 1998). This fear played a significant role in the general decline of the downtown business community throughout the 1990s. The problem was compounded, from the standpoint of business leaders, by youth loitering downtown and supposedly scaring away customers. When vandalism and fights did occur, the press was quick to talk about "wildings." Tensions between police and inner-city Black youth increased, and this charged environment was reinforced by a number of high-profile shootings of unarmed Black youth by police. The result was heightened police visibility on inner-city streets, a nighttime curfew for youth under eighteen, and the selective enforcement of a loitering law designed to prevent youth from "hanging out" downtown.

4.2 If there is one catalytic event associated with the articulation of a new discourse on the "youth problem" in the city in the 1990s, it was the 1995 videotaped arrest and beating by police of an eighteen-year old, African-American, young man for loitering and resisting arrest downtown. Na young man who just happened to be a student at Central High School (although not a student on the interdisciplinary team). The young man, along with about 50 other students, was waiting for a school bus transfer downtown. Generally while they waited they hung out on nearby street corners. An office worker complained to the police that the youth were blocking the entrance to the building in which she was working. But just what "blocking" meant was never clear. At any rate, when the police arrived and asked the students to return to the bus stop and wait there, one young man refused to leave, and he was arrested. This is when the scuffle broke out that was captured on videotape by a local television reporter who happened to be in the area. In the weeks following his beating and arrest, the videotape would be shown again and again on local television news shows and analyzed frame by frame. Two distinct "viewings" of the beating and arrest were produced in the community (see Henke, 2003). In the Black press, the videotape was compared to the Rodney King videotaped beating in Los Angeles, and it was represented as

part of a long legacy of police brutality against Blacks in the city. But in the White community, and in the city's news media, the dominant scripting or viewing of the tape was quite different. In a series of "in-depth" reports on the videotaped beating, the major news outlets in the city told a predictable story, one that emphasized the importance of closer supervision of youth at all times by responsible adults, including a closer working relationship between the schools and the police to make sure that youth are not left unsupervised. To leave urban youth unsupervised, according to this script, is to invite trouble.

4.3 Yet, by arresting the Central High student, the police and the public schools also invited trouble. At Central High, students reacted to the arrest of one of their classmates by staging a protest rally. The ad-hoc student group that organized the rally called on the administration to cancel afternoon classes so that students could gather in the school courtyard in support of their classmate. When the administration denied this request, the group called on students to stage a walk out of classes, and most did. Suddenly the rally was a protest against both school administrators and police who together represented the "enemy." The image of a school/police axis of power was reinforced when police showed up to keep everything under surveillance and make sure there were no disturbances; although the effect might actually have been to precipitate a disturbance. When several students were arrested for vandalism and disorderly conduct, it only seemed to confirm the belief among many students that the school and the police were working together. It also confirmed to the administration in the school and the central office that tougher tactics were needed to maintain order. When I visited the school during this period, I almost always saw one or more police cars parked outside. The intensification of a disciplinary discourse also was visible in the increased number of "code red" hall sweeps each week. A blaring alarm would go off throughout the school, disrupting all conversations and instruction. This was a signal for teachers to close their classroom doors while security guards swept through the halls all of this to round up students who were skipping classes and hanging out in stairwells and halls. The number of suspensions and other disciplinary procedures in the school also increased in the wake of rising tensions in the school.

4.4 While administrators and teachers at Central High School generally supported the discipline and efforts at reestablishing order and control in the classrooms and corridors, most also viewed this as a short-term rather than long-term solution to problems in the school. Some even recognized that law and order tactics could backfire and create a vicious cycle of control which is precisely what seemed to be happening. The principal once confided to me: "I don't like playing the policeman. That's not why I came into this profession. There has to be another way." In this atmosphere, the interdisciplinary team seemed to offer hope for another way, and the principal and the central administration began thinking in earnest of reorganizing the school by breaking it up into a series of semi-autonomous interdisciplinary teams. By the spring of the second year of the interdisciplinary team project, the principal had decided: "I think we've got to move in that direction as fast as possible." By this, he meant in the direction of a more personalized form of discipline, one that situated students within a community that countered the impersonality of the sprawling high school campus. This can be taken as an indication that progressive forms of reorganization can have an impact on the system, even one organized by high-stakes testing and the disciplining of student bodies. But if this is to be taken as a hopeful sign, it must be a qualified hope. For even within the interdisciplinary team, student conflict and resistance was often viewed as a problem to be managed. Teachers just believed that this conflict could be resolved more effectively through "peer mediation" and other forms of more personalized conflict resolution.

4.5 Among the interdisciplinary team teachers, special education and home economics teachers most often framed issues consistent with a therapeutic orientation. These teachers' voices had been submerged somewhat during the initial phase of the project by democratic progressive voices on the team. However, as these democratic progressive voices began to withdraw from the team in the second year, special education voices came to the fore. Team meetings were now often about planning behavioral intervention strategies for individual students strategies than linked underachievement to problems in social adjustment and to problems in the family. This meant more phone calls to parents and guardians during teachers' lunch breaks. Teachers also occasionally asked parents and guardians to attend team meetings, and the

home environment was always a topic of discussion at these meetings. While the therapeutic discourse was most in line with the beliefs and orientations of the special education teachers on the team, its influence was clearly broader. It was related to the idea expressed at one time or another by most all teachers on the team: professional educators, social workers, psychologists, and so on, must fill the void left by the presumed lack of a stable family and community life for urban youth. One teacher remarked: "We're trying to teach what they don't get at home." Another teacher claimed: "The reality is that these kids have issues that need to be addressed before they can be learning what it is they have to learn."

4.6 The therapeutic discourse did not promise academic excellence and high academic standards so much as a less hostile, more relaxed learning environment; one in which discipline and punishment were replaced by situating the student in a network of "caring" relationships. I put "caring" in quotes not because I doubt the commitment of caring professionals, but because caring too often turns out to be about normalization more than liberation or empowerment. As therapeutic technologies of care gained power and influence in the interdisciplinary team, teachers talked less and less about setting high academic expectations for students. They did expect them to pass the high school proficiency test, but that was a minimum competency test. According to one teacher, students would learn to feel a sense of accomplishment when "they come to class knowing that they are expected to do something each day." All of this took for granted a hegemonic deficit model of poor, urban youth that depoliticized and individualized the "youth problem" in the city and the "discipline problem" in the school. Because the interdisciplinary team approach seemed to be a success, on these terms, the central administration decided to begin reorganizing Central High School around school-within-a-school teams, and that is the restructuring model that prevails at the time of this writing.

Conclusion

5.1 Schools exist within semiotic economies, and to study them in isolation of these economies of power and knowledge is like studying a fish out of water. So I have sought to "see" and analyze some of that water in this narration of a project in urban school renewal, and acknowledge its force and power in shaping the urban school landscape. Ironically, the current hegemonic discourse in urban school renewal, which is part of that water, is involved in not seeing it, in riveting our attention upon individual schools as the causal agents in explaining student achievement levels. It thus serves to shift attention away from broader discourses, structures, and technologies of domination and inequality that are involved in the social production of underachievement among urban youth. "Action research" projects which focus on a decontextualized, ahistorical treatment of the change process in one school also serve to blind us. They make us think schools are more open and less determined than they actually are. They make us think that all we need to do is restructure the system one school at a time. The hope that the shift to a more decentralized site-based form of labor might open up significant space within individual urban schools for democratic work has thus not been fulfilled.

5.2 There is, to be sure, some room in urban schools serving socioeconomically marginalized youth for what Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2001) call "possibilities of interruption," practices that call into question the taken for granted reform discourse and at least partially interrupt the reproductive role of urban schooling. But the gap between these "possibilities of interruption" and a fundamental democratic renewal of public education is great. Wherever there is power, there is resistance. However, for that resistance to become transformative in a democratic sense, it needs to be linked to social movements and discourses "outside" the school, and to histories of progressive struggle in American public life. Ultimately, progressives will need to articulate a powerful new "common sense" as part of a process of forging a new power bloc for the renewal of democratic education and public life. In the process, they will need to take on the machines and micro-technologies of transnational capitalism, along with those associated with the policing and surveillance of urban youth.

5.3 Progressives will also need to learn how to tell new kinds of stories about what goes on in urban schools. This does not mean that their stories are deliberate distortions and falsifications of events, nor fictions that take creative liberty with reality. But educational researchers are storytellers to the extent that they are actively engaged in producing certain truths about what goes on in schools and other educational sites, framing events according to particular discourses or interpretive lenses (Richardson, 2000). In the academy, different scholarly discourses and traditions allow us to tell different kinds of stories. Of course, discourses are also open and ever-changing as new storytellers revise and rescript older narratives. Occasionally, something like a new story might even emerge out of this process. As storytellers, educational researchers and scholars also cannot avoid questions having to do with the moral of their story; and this leads to questions about the purpose of the story. Why did this story get written? What use does it serve in advancing a particular set of interests or agendas in education? How does the story enter into battles being waged over the course and direction of public education and public life? In my view, it is important to tell stories that are honest in the sense that they confront us with the real and significant forces that currently stand in the way of a meaningful democratization of urban schools serving poor, Black, Latino/Latina, and White youth.

5.4 Such stories may help individuals and groups deconstruct the beliefs and practices that keep them oppressed or disempowered, and face the reality of their situation. Currently that reality is that transnational capitalism plays an ever-increasing role in establishing the semiotic systems for the articulation of educational policy and practice, and public schools (particularly urban public schools) are being called upon to assume a heightened role in the surveillance, policing, and regulation of "problem youth." If there can be no illusions about the challenge progressives face in reconstructing public education along more democratic and liberatory lines, progressive stories can be useful in formulating counter-narratives and counter-movements that are potentially liberatory. In this regard they can help recover hope and possibility rooted in recognition that culture is contested and thus open rather than determined. Progressive stories can open up possibilities for critical reflection and strategic action at various sites, and they can help develop linkages between various movements, alliances, and axes of struggle to bring progressives together around at least a strategic united front politics (Apple, 2001; Carlson, 2002; Dimitriadis and Carlson, 2003; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1995; Watkins, 2001; Weis and Fine, 2001).

5.5 To tell these kinds of useful stories of hope without illusion, progressives will need to deconstruct yet another one of those binaries that has limited them as storytellers that which separates "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. Outsider stories most often have been told by those who identify with the foundations of education with its links to sociology, history, and philosophy. As social or psychological scientists, albeit not of the positivist sort, critical scholars seek to bring the everyday life-world or "lebenswelt" under the gaze of a detached, phenomenological rationality, a rationality of "bracketing" the commonsense beliefs of the life-world and stepping outside of that world to view it from a critical distance. The role of the intellectual in general, and the researcher more particularly, is to cultivate the craft of becoming an outsider, an enlightened outsider, who presumably sees things more clearly and rationally than insiders. As outsiders to the everyday world of the school, critical researchers generally have interpreted that world through a macro-theory of schooling. In the 1970s and 1980s, more often than not, that macro-theory of schooling was one variation or another of a structural Marxist theory of cultural and economic reproduction (Althusser, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). This macro-theory of schooling served as a useful template for interpreting what went on in particular school and classroom sites, for revealing how the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum reproduced dominant ideologies and worldviews, and for showing how the process of schooling socialized young people into the work norms of advanced capitalism. Resistance was acknowledged in these stories about what goes on in schools and classroom sites, but it was a resistance that was represented as largely contained and self-defeating, as individualized and depoliticized (McRobbie, 2000; Willis, 1977). I want to be very careful not to dismiss these critical research stories as useless or "untrue." On the contrary, they have played an important role in helping progressives think beyond the limits of liberalism and to confront the real barriers that stand in the

way of a democratic reconstruction of public education. They did so by making it clear that public schools are not autonomous sites of action and strong pressures exist to make the schools serve basically reproductive roles. At the same time, outsider stories, framed by a structural, macro-theory of school, almost inevitably represented the micro-reality of the school as more determined and less open than it really is. As a result, outsider stories often reinforce a cynicism about the possibilities for working for democratic change in public schools.

5.6 The other kind of story the insider/outside binary makes possible is an insider's story, in this case of university education faculty collaborating with teachers and administrators in various progressive projects in public school sites. Often these stories are told by curriculum or administration faculty, and by those working in teacher education. Over the course of the past decade or so this type of story, associated with the discourses of action research and collaborative inquiry, has become more popular in education (Bray, 2000; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of insider stories is that they rekindle hope that through small, localized, collaborative work with committed teachers and administrators, through small victories, a bigger battle is being won. The popularity of action and collaborative research discourses also may be related to the growing interest in narrative inquiry in qualitative methodology, which in turn is a sign of just how much the "old" research paradigm of the researcher as outsider is being deconstructed and, in some cases at least, left behind.

5.7 At their best, insider stories are written in the Deweyan pragmatic tradition of reconstructive experimentalism. They approach teachers and other educators as "reflective practitioners," professionals engaged in inquiry of some sort, as reflecting on their own practice, and as engaging in reconstructing their practice in the light of their inquiry and reflection (Schon, 1986; Zeichner, 1994). Insider stories make us realize that there is always room for real democratic work in public schools, and that education faculty in the academy can play an important role in support of democratic change through their work in local schools, and with networks of supportive teachers and administrators. Unfortunately, action and collaborative research stories do not disrupt the reigning binaries in qualitative research so much as privilege the insider's perspective. One result is that they represent local schools as relatively autonomous sites of cultural production, sites in which it is possible to "do" democratic educational renewal, albeit against considerable resistance. Insider stories take for granted the presumption that nothing fundamentally stands in the way of making public schools serve public interests and public interests are often understood in a rather unified, simplistic sense. They are stories in which professional educators at various levels, from the university to the classroom, typically get cast as the heroes. Fundamental democratic change, in turn, gets associated with teacher empowerment, team teaching, interdisciplinary teaching, multiculturalism, and so on. Because insider stories can be expected to represent (wittingly or unwittingly) the desires of those involved to put a good face on their efforts, they end up offering progressives too much hope, a hope that is naïve and unrealistic. They serve to reinforce the presumption that all it will take to reconstruct public education is for professionals of good will to work together in individual schools across America, that public education can be reconstructed one school and even one classroom at a time. Such stories may make us feel good, particularly if we are involved in collaborative projects for change in public schools. But as Patti Lather (1991) reminds us, we should be suspicious of "feel good" stories, for they hold out false promises.

5.8 How can progressives tell stories that avoid the pitfalls of both outsider and insider stories? How can we tell stories that neither overdetermine nor underdetermine what goes on in local educational sites? What is the role of the progressive educational researcher and intellectual in traversing the borders that separate the insider from the outsider? To begin to address these questions progressives will need to learn how to tell stories of praxis, stories that offer a hope rooted in what Paulo Freire (1970) has called the "incompletion" of social reality and self, a hope based on the recognition that the current hegemonic discourse and practice has been constructed out of an ongoing battle and can be challenged and superceded. The creation of a democratic public life, Freire writes, may be "thwarted by injustice,

exploitation, and oppression; [but] it is affirmed by people's yearning for freedom and justice" (28).

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