

Teaching About Hegemony

EXPLORATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE

Volume 17

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In today's dominant modes of pedagogy, questions about issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism, religion, and other social dynamics are rarely asked. Questions about the social spaces where pedagogy takes place – in schools, media, and corporate think tanks – are not raised. And they need to be.

The *Explorations of Educational Purpose* book series can help establish a renewed interest in such questions and their centrality in the larger study of education and the preparation of teachers and other educational professionals. The editors of this series feel that education matters and that the world is in need of a rethinking of education and educational purpose.

Coming from a critical pedagogical orientation, *Explorations of Educational Purpose* aims to have the study of education transcend the trivialization that often degrades it. Rather than be content with the frivolous, scholarly lax forms of teacher education and weak teaching prevailing in the world today, we should work towards education that truly takes the unattained potential of human beings as its starting point. The series will present studies of all dimensions of education and offer alternatives. The ultimate aim of the series is to create new possibilities for people around the world who suffer under the current design of socio-political and educational institutions.

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Paul Orłowski

Teaching About Hegemony

Race, Class and Democracy
in the 21st Century

 Springer

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Preface

Anyone interested in contemporary educational issues must come to the realization that only certain aspects of schooling seem to preoccupy the minds of journalists employed by the corporate media. School rankings, boys being academically disadvantaged, voucher schools, charter schools, using tax dollars to support private schools, ending multicultural education, increasing teacher accountability, and implementing merit pay for teachers are only some of the myriad topics commonly found in media outlets today. Teacher unions in particular are regularly portrayed as the villain in matters pertaining to public education. As soon as the frontline public servants employed to teach children openly discuss school issues such as class size, special education assistants, state-wide testing, or school funding, the corporate media are very often quick to produce editorials and columns that denigrate the representative bodies of professional educators. Of course, it is not too difficult to see the political bias emanating from those who support tax cuts. Anyone with a political acumen understands that the corporate media have corporate interests.

A well-funded public education system is a very expensive undertaking for *any* society. Yet, research demonstrates that when schooling is properly funded, the benefits to the students, and to society as a whole, are great. Historians of education know that the struggle for a strong public education system is one of the great victories for common Americans and Canadians, those people who would have difficulty paying for their children to go to private schools. With excellent public schools, middle- and working-class families could expect to see their children get ahead from a very good academic grounding, as well as find meaning in their lives that comes from a decent liberal arts education.

So what happened? Since the 1980s in the United States and the 1990s in Canada, a massive transformation in collective thinking about public schools has occurred. The emphasis on critical thinking and liberal arts has been replaced by the human capital paradigm in which the focus is on filling the requirements of capital. Of course, developing properly trained workers for job openings has long been a consideration for governments and the captains of industry. Indeed, working class representatives have often touted similar philosophies for public schools. Of course, finding gainful employment is important, but something is profoundly different this time round. The constant media focus on academic “excellence” and international

test score comparisons is new for the public to digest. We hear over and over how students in Finland are doing better than North American students in literacy and numeracy testing, but we never hear about how they fund their public school system. One wonders if the answer to this question might decrease the momentum the corporate media here have successfully generated for the current tax cut craze.

The biggest change that has occurred since the progressive schooling ideas of the 1960s and 1970s is that the economic doctrine known as neoliberalism appeared with such a force that to challenge it seems like pouring a bucket of water on a raging forest fire. Proponents of deregulation, union busting, and privatization of the commons are not interested in the egalitarianism of progressive politics. Indeed, the social welfare state is anathema to these people because of the financial commitment from the public purse. A concept like civil society does not even enter into any of their discourses.

One must ask, "How did this all come about?" After all, most people benefit from a well-funded public education system and a strong social welfare state. The economic elites touting their tax cut mantra are much fewer in number than everyone else. Because we do live in a democracy, the potential is always there to block these neoliberal forces and once again work to strengthen civil society, and stop the dismantling of it. Before this can happen, however, progressive educators must develop critical pedagogy with one collective goal, namely, to deconstruct the *false political consciousness* that has colonized the minds of many citizens from the middle and working classes. The recent rise of the American-based populist movement known as the Tea Party appeared shortly after the U.S. government gave over 1.4 trillion tax dollars to the very same financial institutions that caused a major economic crisis. This seemed hopeful until their refrain for more tax cuts made it clear that these concerned citizens had been successfully duped by hegemonic discourses deployed by the elites and their minions in the corporate media.

Teaching About Hegemony was written in response to neoliberalism and the false political consciousness of too many common citizens. In fact, the book is specifically written to have teachers understand political ideology, discourse, and hegemony so that they, in turn, can develop pedagogy specifically designed to educate their students about these important topics. The content of every one of the chapters in this book come from my almost 30 years of experience as an educator in high schools and university teacher education programs.

The conservative backlash has gone far enough. The gap between the rich and everyone else has grown to grotesque proportions. Racism has not been vanquished, so why has Arizona banned all forms of multicultural education? There is no more time to tolerate this widespread false political consciousness among the general public. When working-class people clamor for more tax cuts, they are saying that they have very little understanding of how and why a social welfare state exists and what it can do for them. Progressive educators have a responsibility to reverse this trend because a civil society is an ideal worth striving for. The alternatives offered by the corporate agenda point in the other direction, and these images are bleak indeed.

I say let us take neoliberalism on because we can win any rational debate about these issues. An informed and active citizen is required so that society can benefit from taking on racism through critical multicultural education, from supporting

progressive tax reform in which the wealthy pay their fair share, and from an understanding of why an enlightened society should help rather than denigrate its less fortunate members. The constant discourse now heard almost everywhere of blaming the victims of corporate capitalism for their misfortune is wrongheaded and mean-spirited. The time has arrived to put the blame for the current economic crises where it belongs – on those who want to sell off the commons so that a few can financially profit. After all, *everyone* benefits from living in a civil society.

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This book was written in the hope that we can reverse the current neoliberal and neoconservative trends in our society. Every citizen deserves to have an accurate political consciousness rather than a false one. Developing a politically conscious teaching force engaged in critical pedagogy is the best way to educate for an informed and active citizenry. Our children and our children's children will appreciate these efforts.

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About the Author

Paul Orłowski received his PhD at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. His research interests are in Teacher Education, Social Studies Education, Sociology of Education, Aboriginal Education, Media Literacy, and Teaching for Social Justice. He has written several book chapters and journal articles, some of which have been published in the *Canadian Journal of Education*, the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, *Democracy & Education*, *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, and *Our Schools Our Selves*. Paul has 19 years of teaching experience in various high school settings in British Columbia, Canada. He has also taught for six years in UBC's Teacher Education Program, and for four years he was the department head of the Teacher Education Program at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. Paul is currently on faculty in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada. The main goal of his teaching in all of these settings has been to develop a political consciousness in his students, so that they may become informed and active citizens focused on maintaining and even strengthening civil society.