

The Student, the School, and the Purposes of Our Teaching: A Historical and Current Look

“School is like a twelve-step brainwash camp...” exclaims Dead Prez in their hard-hitting song entitled “*They*” schools, from the *Let’s get free* album (2000). Then comes the chorus delivered by Keanna Henson’s serious, smooth-sounding female voice, “...theyyy schools ain’t teachin’ us what we need to know to survive.” More than any other hip-hop song critiquing schools—and there are many lyrics expressing discontent with schools and education embedded in hip-hop’s musical history—“*They*” schools represents an unprecedented systemic analysis of the purposes of schooling replete with angered insights, feelings, and daily realities felt by millions of youth, especially “urban” youth of color. If you can handle an extra dose of vulgar expletives, certainly a few phrases are not warranted, but fully expressive of the frustrations felt by an entire population, you’re encouraged to YouTube this song and allow yourself time for multiple replays. It’s simply that intense as it sets forth social, economic, and political perspectives. Anyone interested in gaining insights into disengaged students’ feelings on their education should listen to this song. “*They*” schools serves as a raw grassroots framing for this article. Here’s one last taste:

...I tried to pay attention, but they classes wasn’t interesting,
They seemed to only glorify the Europeans,
Claimin’ Africans was only three-fifths of human beings...

In this article we attempt to succinctly outline key purposes and effects of schooling for millions of children over time throughout the United States as we ask ourselves and the reader: *What were the original purposes of compulsory schooling? Do these continue to play out today? How are people, schools, and communities redefining what it means to be “student” and “teacher” within the walls of educational systems? How have these purposes impacted students (including us)? What can we learn from Freire’s “problem-posing concept” at this place and time where life-threatening problems define much of our reality?*

Although an intensive scholarly look at these questions is beyond the scope of this piece, a well-researched and concise history coupled with a critical current analysis, student testimonials, and a summary of Freire’s problem-posing concept are offered below. While “*They*” schools may present a hyper-frustrated perspective unfamiliar to folks less in-tuned with hip-hop, we’ll attempt to clarify the roots of these popular frustrations in an effort to disrupt and redefine what it means to be “student” and “teacher” today and tomorrow. To do so, however, and to provide greater context for the work of the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce and this toolkit, we’ll need to gain clarity on the original purposes of mass education in the United States.

A Greater Clarity of U.S. Schools’ Original (and Continued?) Purposes is Needed Now

There are *the student, the school, and the purposes of education* in relation to the student, that locality, and society at large. Whatever these purposes are, both stated and unstated, known and hidden, the school administration is supposed to uphold them, the teacher is supposed to deliver them, the parent is supposed to support them, and the student is supposed to follow them - all with “full compliance”. This cycle, in fact, has taken place for more than one hundred years now (1910-15 serves as the accepted timeframe by education historians for when our modern school system was institutionalized). And during this time, there’s been very little attention given in public spheres to the *ultimate questions*:

- *What have been the purposes of mass schooling and education historically?*
- *What are they today?*
- *What should they be tomorrow?*

- *Who decides these purposes and who else should decide?*
- *How will we transform schooling by redefining these purposes to ensure students, teachers, families, communities, and justice are all positioned at the heart of things?*

Without clarifying the purposes of formal education (past, present, and future), and redefining what they should be, how can we act intelligently to improve education for all? How can we devise and implement a meaningful game plan? Without such clarity, we continue to be at the whim of others' purposes and priorities—and it only takes a brief look at these historic and current purposes, driven over the years by elite educational think tanks, individual industrialists, civic clubs, corporations, government agencies, shortsighted administrators, and the more self-serving teachers unions, to be scared straight (Lipman, 2011; 2004). Compounding the situation are socio-economic realities, systems of race, class and gender, and dire future projections for schools, healthcare, employment, and housing in lower-income communities. Even if you're completely new to these realities, we hope you'll open your eyes and your mind to the realization that we need a greater clarity of purpose as teachers in urban centers, and we need it now.

As we gain greater clarity, only then can emancipatory roles and relationships between the student and teacher occur. Otherwise, we're doomed to repeat centuries old patterns of subordinating students even when we think we're embracing more enlightened teaching by employing instructional "best practices" and instituting hot new reforms. We might think we're blazing new trails, but a closer look shows we might be reforming old roads that still lead to the same old places – irrelevant schooling designed to **deculturalize** (Spring, 2012; Delpit, 1995; Kunjufu, 1989), **Americanize** (Westheimer, 2007; Benham & Heck, 1998; Loewen, 1995), **sort/track** (Kohn, 1999, Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), **control/subordinate** (Woodson, 1933; Spring, 1972; Gatto, 2006; Shor, 1986), **label** (Valenzuela, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 1999), and now more than ever before, **commodify** our children within a movement towards privatization of the \$600 billion dollar education industry in the United States alone (Cave and Rowell, 2014; Lipman; 2011).

Gaining Clarity on the Historic Purposes of Schooling and Education Nationally

John Holt, known as a best-selling educational author, inadvertent father of the *Homeschooling movement* and consultant to the Black Panther Party's liberation school in the 1960s, expressed the following observations of school and children in his groundbreaking work from 1964 entitled, *How Children Fail*. He said, "[t]here are very few children who do not feel, during most of the time that they are in school, an amount of fear, anxiety, and tension that most adults would find intolerable (p. 91)." He continues,

It is bad enough to be a teacher and feel that the children in your charge are using the conscious and controlled parts of their brains in ways that which, in the long run and even in the short, are unprofitable, limiting, and self-defeating; to see them dutifully doing the assigned work and to be sure that they are not getting a scrap of intellectual nourishment out of it; to know that what they seemed to have learned today they will have forgotten by the next month, or next week, or even tomorrow.

But it is a good deal worse to feel that many children are reacting to school in ways that are not under their control at all. To feel that you are helping make children less intelligent is bad enough, without having to wonder whether you may be helping to make them neurotic as well (p. 91-92).

Why have U.S. schools overwhelmingly generated, according to Holt, responses of "fear", "anxiety", and "tension" as well as making children "less intelligent" or worse, "neurotic"? How could this be happening? Certainly, this was not the intended purpose of mass schooling. Or was it? Only a committed review of the historical record can help us here.

Emerging by the late 1800s was a clarity of purpose and “efficient” pathways towards that purpose with regards to schools and education for the masses. This occurred with the rise of major U.S. industrialists, all of whom were White, powerful, and held prevailing classist, racist and sexist beliefs (Gatto, 2006; Watkins, 2001; Domhoff, 1983). They included Fredrick Taylor, Andrew Mellon, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Ford; men who would emerge to financially and philosophically dominate the construction of our educational system still in place today. These men would join with professional educators led by William Harris, Edward Thorndike, Elwood Cubberly, William Rainey Harper, John Franklin Bobbitt, John Dewey, Willard Wirt and others to implement reforms such as the *Gary Plan* (also called “platoon system”, which launched mass departmentalized schedules, bells, and assembly-line movement throughout the day) in Gary, Indiana; *intelligence testing (I.Q.)* via the U.S. military; “*scientific efficiency*” from Mr. Taylor; “*carrot and stick*” *Behaviorism* from B.F. Skinner; as well as *managerialism*, *vocational training*, and the *Cardinal Principles* from the National Education Association.

As these designers of mass schooling become highly organized, their work centered on key social, economic, political, and cultural purposes which sought to fund, design, and administer schools on a large scale. They sometimes disagreed on styles of education, but mostly agreed that the masses would receive a different, more pragmatic, education than the children born into the upper classes - their children.

By 1917, a group entitled “the Education Trust” controlled the major administrative jobs in American schooling as they worked deliberately to reach key goals. Said John Taylor Gatto in *An Underground History of American Education* (2006), “The first meeting of this trust included representatives of Rockefeller, Carnegie, Harvard, Stanford, the University of Chicago, and the National Education Association” (p. 38). Their primary goal, wrote Benjamin Kidd (1918), a British evolutionist, was to “impose on the young the idea of subordination” (p. 38). This imposition became fully possible with compulsory (forced) schooling becoming the law of the land.

Once compulsory schooling laws were passed in each state (ranging from Massachusetts in 1852 to Mississippi in 1918), parents were compelled to send their children to public schools. Most parents, according to Cubberly, did not look favorably at the idea of sending their children to government schools. Many parents resisted, as they rightfully wondered, what do these schools have in store for my child? This, it seems, was the multi-billion dollar question.

Gatto, in an essay entitled, “The Country School of Tomorrow,” reports a telling response from the first mission statement of Rockefeller’s General Education Board, printed in a document entitled, *Occasional Paper Number One*, first published in 1912. Not only is the response by industrialists an important point to review, but it should be fully known, the power to implement this perspective was firmly intact. This power came from the fact that, between 1896 and 1920, a small group of “industrialists and financiers...spent more money on forced schooling than the government itself did” (p. 45). The General Education Board was led by Rockefeller and Carnegie. Here’s their response to parents’ concerns. It’s framed as “our dreams” for what should happen to the children of the masses:

In our dream...people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands. The present educational conventions fade from our minds, and unhampered by tradition we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive folk. We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or men of science. We have not to raise up from among them authors, educators, poets or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians, not lawyers, doctors, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we have ample supply. The task we set before ourselves is a very simple as well as very beautiful one...we will organize our children...and teach them to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way... (p. 45).

What the children of the masses would do “in a perfect way” differed greatly from what their own children, the heirs to power, as well as children of the middle-upper classes, were being prepared to do. This fact was presented with great clarity through extraordinary research on overall systems of power by G. William Domhoff, in *Who Rules America Now?* (1983). In this classic work, Domhoff, a political psychologist and sociologist from the

University of California, Santa Barbara, presents a detailed picture of schooling for the children of upper class families. He said, in part:

From infancy through young adulthood, members of the upper class receive a distinctive education... This separate educational system is important evidence for the distinctiveness of the mentality and life-style that exists within the upper class, for schools play a large role in transmitting the class structure to their students... The linchpins in the upper-class educational system are the dozens of boarding schools that were developed in the last half of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries, with the rise of a nationwide upper class whose members desired to insulate themselves from an inner city that was becoming populated by lower-class immigrants... From kindergarten through college, then, schooling is very different for members of the upper class from what it is for most Americans, and it teaches them to be distinctive in many ways. In a country where education is highly valued and the overwhelming majority attend public schools, less than one student in a hundred is part of this private system that primarily benefits members of the upper class and provides one of the foundations for the old-boy and old-girl networks that will be with them throughout their lives (pp. 24 - 28).

The history is clear. The children of each “class” received a different type of education to prepare them for different positions in life. Through a synthesized review of the historical record, including writings by U.S. schoolings’ “founding fathers”, educational historians, political sociologists, and treatments on the purposes of schooling since the 1960s by critical pedagogues, the popular notions of mass schooling as being a tool to *equalize society* and to *educate the citizenry for full democratic participation* become myth. Rather, these five overarching purposes emerge at the heart of mass schooling. They are:

- **Deculturalization:** The ideologies of school architects were driven by White supremacy, “scientific racism,” nativism, and the eugenics movement. Designers of mass schooling deeply believed in stripping immigrants and people of color (really anyone not of Anglo descent) of their ‘savage’ or ‘less advanced’ cultures, languages, traditions, styles, dress, cuisine, and histories through powerful and dehumanizing processes of assimilation, brainwashing, and self-hatred. Deculturalizing techniques were developed and mastered in three forms before mass public schooling emerged in the late 1800s: **1)** the violent and mentally insidious “seasoning” of Africans in preparation for enslavement over a two hundred year period (Bennett Jr., 2003; Hine, Hine and Harrold, 2000); **2)** the use of American Indian boarding schools by the United States government to completely strip any and all signs of indigeneity from American Indian children (Spring, 2012; 2000); and **3)** forcing German immigrants to adopt *English-only* policies and practices in their schools established in the 1700s instead of maintaining German bilingualism and biculturalism (ibid).

Methods of deculturalization, it is important to note, were resisted by all groups, yet these overwhelmingly racist forces still severed millions of people from their cultural roots, languages and lands – with cultural, economic, political, and social-emotional effects felt over the centuries. Deculturalization survives today in ways that are both clearly and lesser understood. These include the proliferation of deficit-based models, the misdiagnosis and overidentification of African-American and Latino/a children into special education, English only policies and practices, the removal of ethnic and multicultural studies curricula, Eurocentricity embedded in all subject areas, the banning of politically “controversial” books from schools, and when teachers simply don’t know or understand who their children are—racially, culturally and linguistically. See works by Valenzuela, Tyack, Spring, Woodson, Kunjufu, Delpit, Carruthers, Benham and Heck, Watkins in the References.

- **Americanization:** School designers intentionally sought to replace peoples’ cultural constructs and sever national ties by proliferating dominant constructs of U.S. patriotism, allegiance and military might. For instance, Noah Webster’s spelling book was *the book* of the 1800’s with 75 million copies sold by 1875. It was patterned in part after the *New England Primer* and became the model for numerous spin-off textbooks glorifying “American” culture, English language, U.S. government, racist categorizing, Protestant teachings, and popular “American” idioms. Webster also published the famed *Webster’s*

Dictionary and an American interpretation of the Bible. His work was driven by a patriotic commitment to turn every reader into a “good American” and to establish public schools for this purpose. His first spelling book was printed in 1783, as the nation was just conceived. In his own words from a 1790 essay, *On the Education of Youth in America*, “It is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principle of virtue and of liberty and inspire them...with an inviolable attachment to their country.”

Patriotization was systematized with the rise of Frances Kellor, an “official presiding genius of the Americanization movement” (Gatto, 2002, p. 233), and the first woman ever to head a state agency. Americanization processes are seen today in the English-only, anti-bilingual movements intended to “Americanize” immigrant children from Latin America, Eurasia, and Africa. Americanization also occurs through ROTC programs, rising military academies, recitation of the *Pledge of Allegiance*, memorizing the presidents, glorifying the myth of the “American Dream,” honoring the flag, reading from standard history textbooks, viewing patriotic imagery, singing the *Star Spangled Banner*, and within “hidden curricula” and biased teachings. See *Loewen, Benham and Heck, as well as the authors listed above in References.*

- **Economic Sorting and the Docilization of Students (future worker-consumers):** School designers intentionally prepared children of the masses for docilized manual labor and consumerism. Just before the turn of the 20th century, with the booming industrial revolution, came the realization that children of the “rubbish”, they felt, must learn to accept authority, follow rules, and be more easily molded, trained and controlled in preparation for hard labor and service industries, especially since these comprised the vast majority of jobs available. Economic growth, and its by-product of stagnation that festered during the late 1800s, led to tremendous shifts in economic policy in the United States, and with it, a shift in the purpose of public schooling. These shifts were in development by the early 1800s when the young United States learned from the Prussian (German) industrial model of public schooling (Kliebard, 1995; Gatto, 2006; Spring, 2000). Below, Gatto, author and former *Teacher of the Year* for New York State, explains how “practices of dumbed-down schooling [were] common to England, Germany, and France, the three major coal-powers (other than the United States), each of which had already converted its common population into an industrial proletariat (p. 39).”

Since the early 1900s, schools for lower-, working-, and middle-income communities were architecturally patterned after factories, inside and out. John Bobbitt, the quintessential educational advocate for *scientific efficiency* and factory-based *managerialism* of schools, even referred to schools as “plants” and superintendents as “educational engineers” (Kliebard, p. 84). Compliant behavior was instilled in these “plants” through daily regimens, strict direction-giving, harsh verbal treatment, corporal punishment, and threats of “suspension” or “expulsion”. Students were trained to follow the bells, stay in line, be quiet for hours at a time, and complete mind-numbing work with full compliance. Manual training courses and “tracking” students by IQ and skill level were used to sort students into lower-level curriculum tracks that led to low-wage jobs. By the 1920s, the following plan, as presented in these comments by President Woodrow Wilson, was in firmly in place: “We want one class to have a liberal education. We want another class, a very much larger class of necessity, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks” (Gatto, 2001, p. 38).

Alfie Kohn—who illuminated and challenged *behaviorism, behavior control, and behavior modification techniques* in *Punished By Rewards* (1999)—explains that the docilization of students transitioned from being hyper punitive-based to positive reinforcement-based during the twentieth century. Skinner’s theories led the way, which in turn produced an insidious “carrot and stick” system “to induce students to learn” with “stickers, stars, certificates, awards, trophies, membership in elite societies, and above all, grades” (p. 11). Kohn presents an overwhelming body of research, pulling from numerous studies, in proving that “students who are motivated by grades or other rewards typically don’t learn as well, think as

deeply, care as much about what they're doing, or choose to challenge themselves to the same extent as students who are not grade oriented' (p. 204). Most damaging, explains Kohn,

Grades dilute the pleasure that a student experiences on successfully completing a task [Harter, 1978]. They encourage cheating [Milton, et al., 1986, p. 149] and strain the relationship between teacher and student [Smith, 1986, p. 198]. They reduce a student's sense of control over his own fate and can induce a blind conformity to others' wishes – sometimes to the point that students are alienated from their own preferences and don't even know who they are [Milton, et al., 1986, p. 140; Kirschenbaum, et al., 1971, pp. 87 – 88]... [I]t is not only those punished by F's but also those rewarded by A's who bear the cost of grades (p.204).

See Kohn, Aronowitz & Giroux, Anyon, Bowles & Gintis, Reich in the References.

- **Socio-Political Controls:** School designers intentionally divided and socialized the population in order to both establish and cyclically preserve *four overall socio-political population controls* in a fast-changing, politically “unstable,” increasingly heterogeneous, and quickly urbanizing landscape. These four *socio-political controls*, when looked at separately, are daunting in and of themselves, with each generating its share of pains and sufferings. When combined together, these controls begin to resemble socio-political cement. They are *race-based schooling*, *class-based schooling*, *gender-based schooling*, and *schooling as juvenile control*. The historical record is clear on how these played out - and so should we be clear in recognizing the effects of these on our children and society as a whole. Each is briefly described here.

Race-based schooling: The goal was clearly stated in laws and actions across the country: segregate the “races” and provide White children with greater opportunities. Before, during and after the Civil War Black folks were demanding greater access to equal education under the law, especially during Reconstruction (1865 to 1877). It became clear to school designers by the late 1800s that Black children could not be constitutionally barred from schools. Concurrently, the racist and inhumane theory of *eugenics*, also called “scientific” racism, began to flourish. William Watkins, late professor of public policy analysis and education history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, explained how “scientific” racism undeniably shaped the creation of separate and unequal schools for all people of color in the United States. Watkins (2001) says:

The connection of “scientific” racism to Black education and the new social sciences is far from coincidental... “Scientific” racism was indeed the centerpiece of the new social science, which presented human difference as the rationale for inequality...“Scientific” racism was a fundamental precept in the architecture of Black education. It was felt that the naturally inferior Black must always occupy a socially subservient position. “Scientific” racism provided a lasting framework around which to rationalize all forms of social privilege in the twentieth century (p. 40).

Class-based schooling: The economic and political leaders of the time decided that schools must serve their role in supporting this economic boom by becoming completely tied to economic, as well as race- and gender-based defining and “sorting” of the population. Engineered in large part by the work of coal industrialists such as Taylor, as well as Rockefeller and Carnegie, the tying of schools to mass sorting by class led to oppressive manual labor for the many, managerial positions for some, and leadership positions for the few. The German model of industrial efficiency and India's Hindu caste-system schooling model were both implemented first on working-class immigrant children, then spread to children of color as greater numbers of Blacks, Latino/as, and Asians migrated to urban centers for jobs and better lives (Gatto, Giroux, Spring, Watkins). As Domhoff explains, upper class children attended exclusive schools (e.g., private schools, boarding schools, private tutoring, corporate apprenticeships); middle income children attended schools in their neighborhoods (quality public or catholic schools); and lower-income children attended the lowest quality schools. This stratification is still intact today.

Gender-based and gender-less schooling: Gender-based schooling, marked by sexist and heteronormative attitudes, biases, stereotypes, hierarchies, norms, victories, preferences, and

misunderstandings have all played themselves out with a complexity all its own. Heteropatriarchy has been embedded in most schools' curricula, textbooks, and programs since the beginning of mass schooling. For example, woodshop and trades existed for boys and home economics for girls. Girls had cheerleading and prom committees (with few other options), while boys enjoyed access to athletics, arts, leadership and other recreational opportunities year-round. Gender-based economic sorting "tracks" included manual labor training, armed forces recruitment, trades funneling, and some college and professional tracks for male students, while females were mostly prepared for one of four areas: home life, secretarial work, nursing, and teaching (see Kliebard, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1990). Girls were discouraged from studying mathematics, sciences, and technology-based courses, while boys were shunned for expressing any interest in cooking, sewing, and other "home-making" activities meant for girls. Says Tyack and Hansot in *Learning Together, A History of Coeducation in American Schools*, "Unconsciously or deliberately, schools played a part in the subordination of women" (p. 246). The authors continue, "Male perspectives permeate the whole curriculum, which is not gender neutral, but based on a male epistemology".

Simultaneously, male and gender nonconforming students were harmed by these hyper-masculinizing processes and norms as they were pressured to live up to expectations of being a "jock", "getting the girl", being the "class clown", and following traditional pathways into manual labor and the trades. Students did not learn about the roles, contributions, and struggles of women and LGBTQ-identified individuals in history. Schools became gender-blind institutions, biased in favor of gender-conforming male students and masculinity in a male-dominant society. They reinforced and continue to reinforce heteronormativity and the gender binary. Feminists, the LGBTQ community, and their allies, have called for educational approaches that "promote the full range of human values and intellectual perspectives for all students" (p. 283).

Schooling for juvenile control: With the mass migration of millions of people from other countries and rural areas to urban centers, the industrialists, urban planners, and other leaders created the rationale to provide a sort of *adjustment daycare service* for society. Working-class parents were needed to serve the industrial engine, and it was not desirable to the leaders of our new cities for poor children to get involved in loitering, organizing, rebelling, or "criminal behavior". At the same time, laws were being passed prohibiting children from working until certain ages (often 14 years old). These passed under differing situations by state, with child labor laws going into effect over a one hundred year period from the 1830s to 1949. By 1949, an amendment was added to the Fair Labor Standards Act, which fully prohibited child labor nationwide for the first time. These laws fully appeased the designers of mass schooling, even though they still looked down upon the "incorrigible" children entering the public schools. Cubberly, a pioneer of administrative designs for schools, wrote *Public Education in the United States* (1919, revised in 1934) and other works. In a section entitled, "The New Lengthening of the Period for Dependence" he expresses motives to advance "well adjusted" citizens. He says...

...It has come to be desirable that children should not engage in productive labor. On the contrary, all recent thinking...[is] opposed to their doing so. Both the interests of organized labor and the interests of the nation have set against child labor... Since 1900, and due more to the activity of persons concerned with social legislation and those interested in improving the moral welfare of children than to educators themselves, there has been a general revision of the compulsory education laws of our States and the enactment of much new child-welfare...and anti-child-labor legislation... The laws have brought into the schools not only the truant and the incorrigible, who under former conditions either left early or were expelled, but also many children...who have no aptitude for book learning and many children of inferior mental qualities who do not profit by ordinary classroom procedures... Our schools have come to contain many children who...become a nuisance in the school and tend to demoralize school procedure.

- **Dumbed Down Basic Skills:** School designers felt the masses should functionally read, write, and do basic math, but only to a point. Upper class children were given access to a resources-laden "liberal

education” filled with creativity, critical thinking, the arts, philosophical foundations, leadership training, and well-rounded skills and talent development. Children of the working classes, however, received a dumbed-down curriculum, with limits on critical thinking and creativity and promoting rote memorization, an emphasis on standardized testing, and lower expectations for children of color and from lower income families. Countless initiatives and methods such as *sight word-based reading, drill-based instruction, fact memorization, call and response, standardized-testing, vocationalism, ability grouping, and deficit-based teaching* have led the way in both dumbing-down curriculum and making learning irrelevant. As Kohn encapsulates, “Right now, a good deal of what students are required to do in school is, to be blunt, not worth doing. The tasks they are assigned involve very little creative thought and very much rote learning. These tasks have no apparent connection between any two sentences on a worksheet, between any two tasks, between any two courses...In a word, learning is decontextualized...For generations, students have been drilled until their minds went to sleep” (pp. 216-17). See Kohn, Holt, Sleeter, Delpit, Shor, Finn, Gatto, Ladson-Billings, Kliebard in References.

No one went unaffected by these purposes and methods. Slight fluidity in upward mobility and extremely minimal racial integration existed, often through intensive group struggles and/or by personal triumph over tremendous odds. Yet, for the most part, deculturalization, Americanization, sorting, tracking, gender-limiting, racial inequities, and dumbed-down learning have all become the norm. It would be hard for anyone to deny that they haven’t been impacted by at least some, if not all, of these constructs. How did these play out in the public schools of Chicago?

The Purposes and Uses of Mass Schooling in Chicago

In Chicago, the political and economic leadership continually sought greater controls over schools. To understand what lay at the core of their intentions towards the schools, which opened in 1834, it should be noted that their children attended local private and parochial schools, boarding schools, received private tutoring, or learned how to take over the family business through apprenticeships (*Encyclopedia of Chicago online*). Public schools, on the other hand, were for the children of lower-income families - people many regarded as not much more than *immigrant laborers, paupers, beggars, criminals, or indigents*. In regards to the general attitude towards public schools early on, an 1838 report of the “special committee formed by school inspectors and Chicago’s political and economic leaders” reads,

It is well known that from the period of the first settlement of this place, the cause of education has received very little attention. This important interest which lies at the foundation of our social and political institutions has hitherto been left like an exotic, to struggle for a precarious existence under the blighting chill of apathy and neglect (Herrick, p. 30).

With this backdrop in mind, and with all five major purposes of schooling (outlined above) firmly entrenched, the city’s leaders moved to prioritize three practical uses for Chicago’s public schools. They **1)** used school lands for profit-making and corporate perks; **2)** used schools for profit-making through financial contracts; and **3)** used teachers for political patronage workers. Mary Herrick’s well-documented book, *The Chicago Schools (1971)*, which includes a review of over 350 records, reports, books, periodicals and speeches on Chicago’s public schools, covers each of these goals in detail. What does the historical record reveal?

School Lands for Profit-Making and Corporate Perks: Douglas Bukowski (1998) writes, “From the start, Chicago schools had rivaled Chicago politics for notoriety. The first school fund was created by selling section 16 land allotted by the Land Ordinance of 1785. Proceeds of just **\$38,600** came from the sale of what became downtown Chicago; the episode established a precedent for shortsighted financial planning. What property the Board of Education kept, it rented at terms agreeable to the lessee. The *Daily News* and the *Tribune* each held favorable long-term leases on prime downtown sites” (p. 18).

Schools as Generators of Financial Contracts: City leaders made school contracts a central focus as many began to ignore working-class children's educational needs and sense of dignity. Herrick explains, "The city government steadily extended its control over the schools. In 1839, the legislature amended the city charter not only to give the city council, instead of the county [Cook], full control of school lands and funds, but also the right to appoint the local district trustees as well as the seven inspectors. The council furthermore had the right to choose textbooks and prescribe the course of study. This right they did not use, and in 1841 turned all such matters over to the inspectors. But the right to control all school contracts, now becoming big enough to be politically useful, the council kept tight hold of" (p. 25).

Schools as the Largest Source of Public Sector Patronage Workers: Herrick documents the systematized political exploitation of teachers and other staff (e.g., janitors) in Chicago as the largest pool of civil service workers in Chicago during the mid 1800s. Essentially, says Herrick, teachers were bound to political patronage work, especially during election time, for local aldermen. How? It so happens that to become a teacher in Chicago, one had to obtain a letter of recommendation from the local alderman. These letters did not come without a price. Exploiting schools grew as time passed. By the 1920, "the use of school funds and school payrolls to build a strong local political organization was, of course, no new thing in Chicago, or in other large cities the country over. But its sudden startling expansion and intrusion of known criminal elements into the gigantic apparatus was definitely contrary to the trend in other cities" (p. 175).

Economic and Political Misuses of Chicago Public Schools Produces Neglect and Exploitation

The early uses of public schools nationally and locally set the stage for what transpired in CPS for many years to come. Speaking on the state of Chicago's public education in 1854, Herrick says,

Many of the settlers were quite indifferent to education, and quite willing to make a fat profit from speculation in school lands as were some of their sons and grandsons a generation later from child labor...The schools had always been an afterthought for most Chicagoans in the midst of the moneymaking hustle. But even the schools had new plans after twenty years. In 1853, the city council had authorized the employment of a superintendent of schools who would serve as a kind of secretary to the school inspectors and "bring order and unity" into the school districts. In 1854 the inspectors agreed to an appointment and Chicago's first superintendent of schools began a monumental task...The anarchy [Superintendent Dore] found in the Chicago schools was even worse than he anticipated when he accepted the position...He was disturbed at the low regard in which the public schools were held, [yet] actual control of the schools remained completely in the hands of the inspectors and of the city council (p. 33).

By 1894, as a result of sixty years of official neglect, graft, and corruption, Chicago's schools were in horrendous condition, even worse than most large cities in the United States, says Herrick. At the same time, Chicago became a global industrial leader with a combination of more factories, steel mills, grain elevators, skyscrapers, shipping traffic, railroads, livestock, lumber yards, and taverns than anywhere on earth (Cronon, 1991; Miller, 1996; Miglietta et. al., 2012). It seems financial capital took precedence over lower-income children's intellectual development and welfare. Here are some glaring problems that resulted:

- **Racial Discrimination:** Children of color, especially Black children, were not included in the vision for public schooling in Illinois. There was only funding provided to educate White children until the late 1870s. Some Whites (mostly Irish who felt threatened by Black labor) pushed for a law to segregate all Black children. As a result, the **Black School Law** was passed in 1863, the same year as the *Emancipation Proclamation*. When this happened, most parents of Black children ignored the law and continued to send their children to the somewhat integrated public schools. In reaction, the school board attempted to split the Black community by allowing "mulattoes" to attend integrated schools, but not darker-skinned children. Blood tests were mandated by law (McCaul, 1987). Due to vigorous campaigning against these laws by Black activists, the Illinois General Assembly repealed the *Black School Law* in 1865. This,

however, was the dawn, not the sunset, of discrimination in our public schools. Students of color would go on to experience, and resist both quietly and loudly, de facto segregation, extreme overcrowding, underfunded budgets, less qualified teachers, rundown schools, irrelevant curriculum, and mob violence against those who tried to attend all-White schools. Early on, Chicago did welcome more Black children to public schools than the rest of the state. As more people of color migrated here, the situation became more complex (ibid).

- **Exploitation of Women Teachers:** Unequal teacher salaries and discriminatory treatment of female teachers (who outnumbered men 25 to 1) was rampant. In the 1860s men made \$1000 a year and women only made \$250. More than any other city, the Chicago Board of Education (founded in 1872) continued the pattern of hiring women as teachers since they could be paid so cheaply. By minimizing salaries, public school monies flowed elsewhere (Herrick).
- **Overcrowded Classrooms:** During the 1800s, small schoolhouses packed in over 100 students to 1 teacher, on average, and reached over 200 pupils at times. The class-size was lowered in the 1890s to an average of approximately 50 students when huge suburban land tracts (with smaller school districts) were annexed by Chicago. Black children still endured a 60 to 1 ratio at the end of the century (Herrick).
- **Lack of Teacher Training:** Patronage training by aldermen seemed more important than teacher training. Chicago became the last big city to establish a teacher training center (the normal school) in 1897 - over sixty years after CPS opened.
- **Learning and Curricular Injustices:** “Military-style discipline,” “obedience,” biblical verses, and “rote memorization” were emphasized over creativity, critical thinking, life skills, and leadership development. Superintendent George Howland (1880–91), in fact, thought too much time was being spent worrying about student whispering, tardiness, simple fact memorization and “not enough in making classes interesting to children” (Herrick, p. 56).

In addition to a factory-style curriculum and the drilling of simple facts into students’ minds, *deculturalization* and *Americanization* of immigrant children and children of color took their toll in Chicago schools.

As Chicago's immigrant population expanded, the schools were called upon to aid in its assimilation into American life. In 1886, the year of the [Haymarket](#) Riot, the [Chicago Tribune](#) editorialized that “it ought to be the first function of the public schools to teach loyalty, love of country, and devotion to American principles and institutions.” The study of American history and “civics” had long been an integral part of the curriculum but received more attention as the numbers of foreign-born students grew. In 1897 school board president Daniel Cameron declared that the schools should impart “permanent admiration and loyalty” for the United States. Jane Addams, on the other hand, believed instruction should be less doctrinaire (Encyclopedia of Chicago, see *Schools and Education*).

These are some of the historic roots leading to many of the inequalities found in Chicago public schools by the 1900s. At the same time, schools continued to provide many working people with hopes, dreams, and opportunities for a better tomorrow. Throughout the system’s early years (1830s – 1890s), as well as the following one hundred twenty, numerous individuals and groups stepped up to establish better conditions in their schools as they pushed for changes in the formal curriculum, in teachers’ rights, and in better services for students.

Today, due in large part to these struggles, there are some bright spots in Chicago’s public schools. These include numerous partnerships with community-based organizations, active local school councils, a stronger community-focused teacher’s union, a handful of ethnic studies programs, rising academic expectations, and sustained student organizing through the Chicago Student Union and other youth-led groups. But how about curriculum and learning in today’s landscape of high stakes testing? What are students, both current and recent, saying about their academics?

What Chicago Public School Students Are Saying About Their Curriculum and Schooling Today

Below are recent student comments from thirty-five participants, grades seven through twelve, from four different Chicago public schools. Students were asked to describe the learning and curriculum they receive, as well as their own visions for the purposes of learning and education. Their comments were recorded verbatim (listed below) during a workshop at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) on March 8, 2014, at the *Grassroots Education Forum*. The forum was convened by the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce and NEIU.

Of the thirty-five participating students at the aforementioned forum, twelve were enrolled in an Ethnic Studies course at Jones College Preparatory Academy, where they were studying critical issues in education and learning. Some of the comments below may reflect a recently developed analysis, and accompanying vocabulary, stemming from their studies. Throughout the workshop, there was no mistaking students' obvious frustrations with the general curriculum and learning they'd experienced.

When asked, "What words/phrases best describe your curriculum and learning in school?" students replied:

- It's boring [repeated many times]; it's dry
- We need more voice in our learning and issues we will face in life
- We need more activities that we're interested in
- We need more comprehensive and caring teachers
- Feel stressed, anxious; nervous by testing; its overwhelming
- We need parents to be more involved in our learning - not just telling us to 'get good grades'
- Doesn't leave room for individual ideas
- I want to be invited more to learn, teach and be involved
- Need more interactive activities
- There's passive aggressive verbal abuse
- Memorization; call and response; regurgitating
- Students just a product of teachers job – its like an assembly line
- Eurocentric, not diverse, same authors
- Structured core subjects
- ISAT prep
- Mediocre
- We lose motivation
- Repetitive and basic
- No real prep for career or real world, won't use in life
- Inefficient
- One size fits all, standardized (not accounting for difference)
- Pointless
- Same schedule and subjects (nothing new)
- Some of us are prepped for college, most are not
- It's like a game of levels
- One learning method

When asked, "What is your vision of "great curriculum and learning?" students replied:

- Let students choose more - electives, issues, topics, courses
- Informs students of the actual history of schools and education
- Takes on serious issues, relevant topics
- Cultural histories from non-Eurocentric materials, diverse texts, about my identity and history
- Gives us skills of contextualization, big picture analysis
- Teaches me how to study better
- Makes me excited and interested

Connect our classrooms to the real world
More communication skills
Empowering, advocating
Collaborative, lots of small group projects

When asked, "What should the purpose of schooling and education be?" students replied:

Future resource for community
Provide equitable resources
Feel accepted
Be more of a community than institution-feeling
Prep for self-reliance
Community knowledge
Standardized tests should not = intelligence
Relevant to social issues
Acknowledge everyone's stories
Should be a right to have an equal education
Learn skills we actually need to support families and apply them
Teach us how to learn

What current pre-service teachers (over 1100 from the Chicago-area) are saying about their recent schooling *and* observations of curriculum and learning today:

Now compare the above comments with overwhelmingly consistent responses from 1100+ college students during CGCT-facilitated workshops in educational courses at NEIU, Illinois State University, University of Illinois at Chicago, the University of Chicago (Urban Teacher Education Program), and Indiana University Northwest (Urban Teacher Education Program) during a four-year period from 2011 to 2014. The most recent comments were recorded on September 3rd, 2014 at NEIU and September 12th, 2014 at ISU's Chicago Teacher Pipeline location.

When asked to give words/phrases that describe their own curriculum/learning, as well as what they understand curriculum/learning to be like in urban schools, pre-service teachers overwhelmingly repeated the following terms:

test-driven
standardized
traditional
lacking creativity
lacking relevance
anxiety-inducing
White-washed, Eurocentric, Patriotic
boring
rote memorization
tracking, sorting
one size fits all
overly low or overly high expectations
patriotic, assimilating
punitive, authoritative
old books and materials
individualistic, competitive

In the four years of recording pre-service teacher comments to the above question at workshops, the collaborating professors (Pulido, Aviles de Bradley, Wilson, Skinner, Horn, and others) have estimated that at least 95% of all

comments were critical or negative in nature. In fact, most often there are about 30 words or phrases brainstormed with no positive comments mentioned at all. At best, four positive comments were mentioned out of twenty eight total comments during the September 12 session with pre-service teachers from Illinois State University. Upon inquiry, it was confirmed that none of the three participants mentioning these comments (“differentiated”, “cooperative”, “college preparatory”, and “technologically advanced”) attended schools in a large urban setting or with majority students of color.

Based on the historical record (presented earlier), critical literature (presented throughout this Toolkit), the above responses from over 1100 current and recent students, our own experiences in U.S. schools, and what our own children are learning/not learning right now, we at CGCT believe curriculum/learning is in absolute crisis mode! We think nothing less than a complete redefining of our purposes as teachers as well as a complete overhauling of curriculum is necessary in many, if not most classrooms. This, we posit, is needed right now before another generation of children becomes disengaged, then “pushed out” of school. Or worse, they stay engaged yet become deculturalized, patriotized, docilized, sorted, labeled, competitively pitted against each other, dumbed down, and neurotic in the process.

Redefining Our Purpose as Teachers: “We are the educational servants of students and communities”

Now that we’ve gained a deeper understanding of the original purposes of public schools nationally *and* here in Chicago coupled with what it means to be a reflective grassroots educator (*Element One*) as well as grounding our teaching in community and systemic analysis (*Element Two*), we’ll look at building a critical learning environment for, by, and with students.

In doing so, consider the following questions: Who are your students? What are their capabilities? Interests? Realities? Challenges? How do we foster meaningful relationships, support peer cooperation, motivate leadership, tap their endless potential, and ensure skillful learning and creative transference in the face of so many real and perceived obstacles? As teacher, are you emotionally, intellectually, skillfully, and culturally prepared for everything and everyone that you will encounter?

These questions aren’t meant to dissuade or disrespect you. On the contrary, they are serious concerns we should all share before entering, and while being in, our students’ spaces - especially when considering what it really takes to successfully educate every young person so they’re prepared for a society that simply doesn’t value the humanity of most children of color and lower income families (Alexander, 2012).

It’s imperative we acknowledge the challenging realities students and families face in urban and impoverished suburban centers like the Chicago region, New York City, Los Angeles vicinity, Atlanta, Detroit, St. Louis area (i.e, Ferguson), Houston, Milwaukee, the Bay Area, as well as rural areas like Appalachia, Native American reservations, and migrant farming towns across the country (Miglietta, et al., 2012; Alexander, 2012; Lipman, 2011; Derber, 2002; Gonzalez, 2000; Longworth, 1998; Reich, 1991; also see *Justice-Centered Tips, Element One*). While it is possible to view such distressed areas with a sense of despair, deficiency, or hopelessness, that would be a mistake. To do so leads to lowered expectations, allows students to “pass” without much challenge, tries to motivate students with White, middle-class cultural constructs or extrinsic “American Dream” visions, and, in the end, writes off the futures of some of these youth. For some, thinking about youth and families dealing with injustice generates sympathetic feelings leading to a patronizing, less-challenging, savior-based approach to teaching and learning.

It’s most important to see youth and families from these areas as culture-rich, highly intelligent, intuitive, quick thinking, mature, creative, resourceful, and multi-skilled at survival.

Entering these spaces without intensive self-reflection (as covered in *Elements One and Two*) and practical preparation (as covered in *Elements Three through Six*) by just believing one can readily “make a difference” or “change lives” or “give back” actually borders on a patronizing superhero mentality and may likely lead to a shortened teaching career and harmed learners. While this may sound harsh, good intentions are simply not enough to truly tap into the enormous real world intelligences, creative forces, and academic potential lying within every single student.

And without tapping these in meaningful ways for greater purposes of active intelligence, empowering skills, justice pathways, and human dignity, urban students from oppressive situations are likely to “push back” by disrupting and disengaging from irrelevant curriculum, resisting authority, and making your life much harder. This may be happening in your classroom right now, or you might be worried on occasion about this happening to you. Don’t worry, it probably will. Teachers, at this point, take different routes. Paths include getting tough, using humor, making threats, appealing, pleading, arguing, easing up, coping, or quickly gaining fluency and traction with many of the methods, pedagogies, epistemologies, and educational heuristics presented in this toolkit.

To combat age-old “dominating” canons (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002) and help students unlearn the traditionally authoritative teacher-student relationship, I would frequently mention to students during my ten years of classroom teaching that teachers are the “educational servants” to our students and their communities. I’d tell them teachers are paid decent money (not great by any means) to serve their educational needs, support their inquiries, and assist them in solving problems in their communities. Additionally, we are there to support each student as best we can when real-life challenges arise. And arise they do, especially in major urban centers where life’s challenges grow greater by the year. Yet, with every problem comes a powerful opportunity, says Freire, for critical learning, systemic analysis, and active solution-making - all of which stand at the heart of justice-centered classrooms.

Learning from Freire’s problem-posing concept “as an instrument for liberation”

A summary of Freire on “problem-posing education” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 79-86) helps us understand the “banking model” of education. This refers to the teacher pouring/depositing knowledge into students, teacher-directed learning, teacher-focused instruction, all of which reinforce oppression and domination over students and dehumanizes them in the process, says Freire. It is robotic and authoritative in nature – not cognitive and inquisitive.

On the contrary, liberatory education, posits Freire, is steeped in problem-posing education, a humanizing approach that transforms students into actors with a purpose, not students who must learn something before the teacher says so, because the standards mandate it, or because society demands it.

In essence, *problem-posing education*:

- Rejects vertical teacher/student relations and replaces them through dialogical interactions that enable the teacher to learn from the student and vice versa

- Turns students into critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher

- Frames the role of the teacher as learning from and creating knowledge and action with the students

- Challenges students to solve real problems, which in turn obliges students to think about their real world conditions, real solutions, and personal relations to these problems which helps them become “committed”

Helps students to “perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in progress, in transformation”

Takes people’s reality and historical past as the starting point – and does not force upon them the reality, interests, and perceived lessons of importance of the teacher

“Affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” human by seeing that we are unfinished, uncompleted beings who can learn together and act on our realities

Says reality is posed not as a fatalistic and static condition that cannot be changed – but rather as a fluid and living problem that we can analyze, reflect upon, and solve together

Turns the student into a shaper of the future and not just a robotic droid moving through the system year after year, grade after grade, and report card after report card

Emphasizes “problem posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, [which] posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation.”

According to Freire (as well as every writer and numerous authors cited in *Toolkit 4.0*), we are either contributing to the oppression and domination of our students or we are participating with our students in truly transformative education. Even those of us who think we’re engaging in emancipatory education often miss the mark, and for that reason, we must constantly self-examine our teaching practices. Personally, and especially in today’s world laced with problems, I think problem-posing education is a “best practice” to not only implement in our classroom, but to live by!

By Anton Miglietta

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