TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY OF LIBERATION

An Interview With Henry Giroux

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Illustration By: Michael Merrill

The appearance of the Croyev Commission in Ontario leaves burning questions about the state of education in the province. The report calls for an end to the "two-tiered" system of education, and for a more equitable distribution of resources. The government's response has been to establish a "new" education policy, which includes the introduction of a "two-tiered" system. This policy has been met with widespread criticism, and there is a growing demand for a more democratic and participatory approach to education.

Henry Giroux

Giroux is the author of over 70 articles and seven books. Two of his books, Ideology, Culture and the Process of Schooling, and Theory and Resistance in Education were nominated by the American Educational Studies Association for the "Best Book of the Year" award. His work has been influential in the development of a new critical pedagogy, and he has been a leading voice in the critical theory movement.
Of course, this should not suggest that schools are merely agencies of domination. They are not. They are a terrain in which struggles occur, contradictions manifest themselves, and spaces occur where people do learn to think and act in a critical fashion. What this suggests is that at the current moment progressive forces will have to fight harder to reclaim schools as democratic spheres.

What is your opinion, are the major obstacles presently working-class students from succeeding in school? I'm wondering, too, what 'school success' should mean! I'm referring here to the concept of equality and schooling.

I think the best way to answer this question is to start from the perspective of how we might view the notion of successful schooling for working-class students. I believe that working-class students need to be exposed to the knowledge and skills that will help them to assume the moral and intellectual leadership basis to their class and social formation. This means learning about the strengths and weaknesses of their own cultures and histories. It means learning how to appropriately critically the knowledge and skills from the dominant culture that promote self and social empowerment; it means learning how to understand and apply these forms of knowledge as part of a constant struggle both for themselves and to fight for political, economic, and social democracy.

Any viable theory of working-class pedagogy needs to take seriously the historical and social particularities of everyday life, it needs to confirm and make meaningful the experiences that make up the lives of those students who have been disconfirmed and excluded from the discourse of dominant schooling. But such a pedagogy needs to be characterized by a critical rather than a merely useful relationship to working-class culture and ideology. This suggests that working-class students need a type of schooling that provides them with the discourse of conflict as it develops a type of educational discourse that produces political awareness and political awareness and political action.

But working-class students also need a discourse of possibility. They need to be given the skills and knowledge to imagine a different world, one that gives them an active voice in controlling their own experiences, one that legitimates and richly extends their dreams and hopes, put simply, they need a form of schooling in which knowledge and power are

I am trying to find ways of encouraging students to become more sensitive to the concerns expressed in the radical educational tradition. I am wondering how those of us committed to developing a critical or radical pedagogy might find ways of helping student teachers and classroom teachers become more interested in issues within schooling that deal with concepts such as ideology, culture, power, liberation, and oppression.

I think this question can be raised by arguing that we need to make the pedagogical more political for prospective and actual teachers and administrators. In other words, we need to help educators understand that the process of schooling can never be removed from the dynamics of power, politics, and culture. That is, schooling must be viewed as reifying a specific ordering of knowledge, as an expression of human values constructed through a set of emphases and exclusions over what is to be legitimated and devalued in human life. By making the pedagogical more political, we can help teachers, student teachers and others understand the implications of their own behaviour and what ideas and economic conditions might be necessary for them to work as transformers of social relations. Educators provided with an alternative and critical educational discourse are in a better position to decide
whether they want to be transformative intellectuals and fight for schools that allow them to act in that capacity, or whether they want to function as to serve the status quo and maintain a safe position within the dominant traditions of schools.

The point is that progressive educators can offer alternative discourses and social practices in our universities and public schools so as to provide the opportunity for students to rethink the nature of their own values and how they might operate through the conditions of their work.

I'd like to ask what is it that progressive educators need to do that critical and radical educators face in the future.

I think that critical and radical intellectuals need to develop a more dialectical notion of power and schooling. They must go beyond analyzing school systems as agencies of domination. This suggests advancing beyond the discourse of critique to the discourse of possibility. One consequence would be that the notion of power would not longer be defined as an exclusive instance of domination, in relation to which teachers, students, and parents so as to develop philosophical and programmatic changes in educational structures.

The language of the public sphere where alternative changes in school organization, curriculum, and teaching were seriously considered and proposed.

I want to stress that the language of critical and radical educators is a difficult one to embrace, especially for us who need to link theory and action in the service of making, as Philip Coniglang has argued, deep understanding and hope more practical. This may seem like a utopian task, but it is a necessary precondition for any viable educational reform.