

# **DILEMMAS OF SCHOOLING**

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Teaching and Social Change

Ann & Harold Berlak

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ANN & HAROLD BERLAK

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Science is to lighten the toil  
of human existence

There is joy in doubting  
I wonder why

Can society stand on doubt  
Rather than Faith?

Brecht, *Galileo*

For our children, Lev, Mariam and Rachel, who enrich our lives, struggle with us, and often remind us how little we understand of children's views of the world.

In memory of Dina and William who showed us the meaning of justice and love.

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This book is our effort to make sense of our experience as teachers, teachers of teachers, schooling researchers, parents of three children, and citizens. We address not only our academic colleagues, educationalists, sociologists, and curriculum researchers, but the entire community of teachers and non-teachers, who as citizens of constitutional democracies have the right and responsibility to see to it that the nation's schools operate in their and their children's best interests.

Our contribution to a more active exercise of this right and responsibility is a 'language of schooling' intended to help surmount the obstructions to communication between and among academic experts, practising educators, and citizens. The terms of the language are sixteen dilemmas that will, hopefully, be useful for guiding teachers' and non-teachers' collaborative, critical inquiries into the schooling process, illuminating the relationship of everyday school events to broader social, economic, and political issues, and the alternative possibilities for action.

In an effort to speak to three audiences we have necessarily slighted many of the significant problems and issues of concern to each. Academic readers may find underdeveloped our treatment of the theoretical underpinnings, and disconcerting our choice to confine largely to a single chapter and to the end notes our discussions of other critical and interpretative social scientists who have been working on similar problems. On the other hand, some general readers might have preferred fewer forays into social and political philosophy and a more systematic clarification of the educational policy issues of the 1980s. Practising educators, particularly teachers, are likely to find thin our discussions of the many practical pedagogical, curriculum and evaluation questions we raise and only briefly address. If our book has merit, it is not its great depth of treatment of any subject but its breadth; its effort to join the theoretical with the practical in one domain of human activity, schooling.

There are many friends and colleagues who have contributed to

the writing of this book, and we can acknowledge only a few of them by name.

First, the teachers and head teachers, particularly those in the three schools we describe and analyse in some detail. They allowed us to intrude upon their and their students' lives, and added immeasurably to our knowledge and understanding of children, teaching and learning. We hope we have not violated their trust.

Naida Tushnet Bagenstos, and Edward R. Mikel, both longtime friends and colleagues. They began with us in 1973 this effort to develop a language of schooling cast as a set of dilemmas. Their contributions to this work were enormous and selfless.

Marilyn Cohn and Vivian Gellman. They worked with Harold during the years we were writing this book, developing an elementary teacher education program at Washington University that bridged the gap between theory and practice. They brought a vision of the practical possibilities, and knowledge of the complexities, of relating knowing and doing.

Rita Roth, Rebecca Glenn, David Dodge, Timothy Tomlinson, friends and colleagues, we have been privileged to work with over the years, whose ideas greatly extended and clarified our own.

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Finally, we thank some old and more recent friends: Judson T. Shaplin, at one time Associate Dean at Harvard Graduate School of Education and later Director of the Graduate Institute of Education at Washington University (retired). He made it possible for us – and many others – to pursue careers as scholar/practitioners. Donald W. Oliver, Professor of Education at Harvard, who years ago sowed the seeds of the idea of a critical analysis of the problematics of social life in terms of a set of dilemmas. Finally, Barry A. and Gail M. Kaufman, colleagues, dear friends and intellectual compatriots who sustained us during the difficult times.

Ann and Harold Berlak  
St Louis, Missouri, USA  
January 1981

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## PART ONE

# CONTROVERSIES AND CONTEXT

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### INTRODUCTION

The eighth decade of the twentieth century opens with the world's first and largest capitalist nations in economic eclipse. The prognosis holds little or no hope for return to the post Second World War years of economic expansion coupled with rapid growth of the welfare state.<sup>1</sup> The economies of Britain and the United States stagnate; unemployment is high, inflation that reduced the buying power of the pound and dollar by more than half over the preceding decade continues. People worry increasingly about their own and their children's fates, and schooling issues are deeply implicated in their concerns.

The idea of the common school, a cornerstone of constitutional democracy and of democratic socialism, is once more under attack in both countries. People ask more insistently whether it is possible for a single system of tax-supported schools to provide all youth – regardless of social class, cultural and racial origin, history of oppression or privilege – with the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the intense competition for employment or entry into favored universities, professional and technical schools.<sup>2</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic skepticism is expressed by more intense public pressure for separation of the exceptionally talented, creative and/or dim, uninterested or troublesome students into different classes, programs or schools. Questions are raised whether laws should compel adolescents who show no aptitude for or interest in school to remain. In Britain the Conservative government's proposal to underwrite private or independent schools by providing direct grants or 'vouchers' to students undercuts the present policy formulated in the 1960s and 1970s to create a single system of comprehensive secondary schools. Articles in newspapers and popular periodicals in

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the UK, the US and Canada question whether young children are being taught what they need to know to survive during the difficult years ahead. The debate over 'progressive' v. 'traditional' methods has virtually disappeared in Britain and North America; lines are now drawn over how far 'back to the basics' to go. And the issue of accountability – often cast as who is to blame for the failures of schools – children, teachers, parents, educationalists, school administrators, government officials – is a nasty undercurrent in all these controversies.

On the shop floor, in the schools, teachers and school head teachers are, as usual, preoccupied, often in isolation, sometimes with others, about the decline in standards, whether more or less discipline is the best response to hostile or indifferent learners, how to provide for the more able or for those who lag behind, how much to yield to individual or organized public pressure for relatively greater curriculum emphasis and expenditures, on development of basic reading skills, mathematical skills, and vocational training at the expense of the humanities, arts, social studies, music, dramatics and other aspects of the curriculum that have little or no market value. In some states and local school districts in the US the very real fear of loss of voter support for school tax levies and bond issues pushes directly on local school officials and teachers to respond to these widely advertised concerns.

Many of the problems that face parents, academic educationalists, teachers, heads and other school administrators are at their root the same, yet people rarely help one another clarify the practical issues each confronts and explore policy alternatives. Just as with great economic and social issues of the day, people talk by one another, rarely expecting to persuade or be persuaded. Schooling professionals rarely invite citizens or parents to help them formulate the issues. In the US particularly, many parents, community groups and school governing boards have become impatient with, if not distrustful of, professional promises and ask for, sometimes demand, an objective monitoring of children's, teachers', school heads' and, occasionally, other administrators' performance; while in Britain it is no longer so certain that parents are content to leave schooling matters to the professionals. Attitudes of the public and teachers toward the role of educational scientists remain mixed as publicly expressed skepticism increases. Some maintain the hope that the scientists will penetrate our educational confusions and uncertainties. Yet the scientific work that reaches the public, for the most part, is used not to illuminate the issues but to lend authority to the preferred policies of those who

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presently govern the schools, or as missiles in the continuing battle of words between left and right, scientific rationalizations of social and economic interests and values of the protagonists.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to assess the conflicting diagnoses, to formulate alternative solutions, or merely to find words that are mutually accepted and understood. C. Wright Mills's words of twenty years ago are as apt today:

[O]rdinary men, when they are in trouble or when they sense that they are up against issues, cannot get clear targets for thought and for action; they cannot determine what it is that imperils the values they vaguely discern as theirs. . . . In due course (the individual) . . . does not seek a way out; he adapts. . . . This adaptation . . . results not only in the loss of his chance, and, in due course, of his capacity and will to reason; it also affects his chances and his capacity to act as a free man.<sup>4</sup>

We offer in this book a modest contribution to the solution of these problems. We provide a general orientation for examining schooling practices and a set of terms, sixteen 'dilemmas', that relate the daily problems of schooling to the social and political problems of the society at large. This approach and the concept of 'dilemmas' are intended to be useful to citizens, researchers, parents and professionals for clarifying differences over schooling practices, and for engaging in collaborative inquiries into the origins and consequences of present patterns of schooling and the possibilities and desirability of change. To borrow from C. Wright Mills, ours is an effort to formulate 'private troubles as public issues', to illuminate in one form of institutional life, schooling, 'the intricate connections between everyday behavior and the course of history';<sup>5</sup> the relationship of the mundane, the ordinary – and sometimes unusual – events of everyday school life to the significant broader concerns of social and economic justice, and the quality of life.

This relationship of social life in the particular to larger social questions is often cast in the argot of Anglo-American social science as the relation of 'micro' to 'macro'. When stated in such grand terms, it is often seen as a problem for a particular class of experts – social scientists, philosophers and other university academicians – who generally have no continuing first-hand experience in the realities of daily school life. The details of the 'micro', the everyday events in the classroom and school, are ordinarily left to the educationalists – teachers, teachers of teachers, state and local educational authorities and classroom or pedagogical researchers. Our effort is to cast these two concerns as one – to provide a language for

## CONTROVERSIES AND CONTEXT

examining the macro in the micro, the larger issues that are embedded in the particulars of the everyday schooling experience.<sup>6</sup>

In the remainder of Part One we first provide an overview of the contemporary controversies concerning economic and political priorities and policies and their connection to schooling questions; second, attempt to locate ourselves within the current traditions of social research; and finally, give a brief account of the history of our study and an explanation of the organization of the book.

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# I PUBLIC ISSUES AND SCHOOLING CONTROVERSIES

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## SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND SCHOOLING SHIFTS

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We began the work that led to the publication of this book almost a decade ago, in 1972, in the closing years of an era when there was, if not a universal, a widely held conviction among middle-of-the-road and left-leaning political leaders and intellectuals that social injustice and poverty could be overcome; that equal opportunity, material plenty and a high quality of life could and would be extended to all through or with the aid of governmental policies and programs, with schools playing a significant role in the gradual change to a more progressive social order.

In Britain, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the stimulus of the Plowden Report,<sup>1</sup> informal methods associated with infant schools were extended more broadly and upwards to the junior schools, and 'positive discrimination', intended to dissolve the legacy of the class society, became government policy. Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) were established 'to make the schools in deprived areas as good as the best in the country'.<sup>2</sup> Numerous curriculum development and educational research projects were funded by the Department of Education and Science, the Schools' Council, the Nuffield and Ford Foundations, and the Social Science Research Council. And as we indicated perhaps most significant was national policy that supported dissolution of the dual system of secondary modern and grammar schools, and their replacement with a unitary comprehensive system.<sup>3</sup>

In the US at this time Research and Development Centers were established at several major universities, Regional Educational Laboratories and collaborative school/university projects aimed at solving a variety of educational problems. Federal dollars were provided to encourage reform of teacher education and the

## CONTROVERSIES AND CONTEXT

development of innovative training programs for educational professionals, experienced teachers and researchers. Numerous projects were funded by the Federal government and private foundations to develop new curricula, utilize new technologies, and help children from 'culturally deprived' or 'socially different' homes who were seen as victims of prejudice or of social and economic oppression.<sup>4</sup>

Portrayals of the 1960s and early 1970s as times of great progressive advance and public optimism are surely overstated.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable shift in mood as we enter the 1980s. Today it is difficult to find many who express confidence in the ability of our institutions, including schools, to fulfill their promises.<sup>6</sup> Economic, social and schooling policies and priorities in both nations have also changed. Though liberals, conservatives and radicals disagree between and among themselves over whose interests the newer policies serve and over their prospect for success, there is no quarrel over their general outlines. Labeled by proponents and critics as 'neo-conservative',<sup>7</sup> their central tenet is that governments cannot manage economic and social affairs as effectively and efficiently as free markets. What follows from this policy premise is reducing to a minimum government spending and lowering the priority for government programs that extend equality of opportunity, improve the quality of life, raise standards of safety, health and environmental pollution and provide services – medical care, housing, recreation and cultural activities.

However uncertain the commitment to progressive educational policies of both nations during the last two decades may have been, the conservative schooling policies are now often endorsed – or at least tolerated – as the only reasonable alternative, not only by avowed conservatives, but by people at all social levels and of many shades of political opinion. Radicals, liberals and organized groups that presume to speak for the interests of the poor and the oppressed minorities argue not only that schools have failed to bring about equal opportunity but that they have not even delivered the least one should expect – minimal competency in reading, writing and arithmetic.<sup>8</sup> 'Back to basics' is also endorsed by members of the more privileged classes, including many university-educated liberals of the 1960s, who see schools as having sacrificed the minds of the best and finest in the pursuit of what are now taken to be unrealizable egalitarian ideals.<sup>9</sup> Schools are seen also as having failed the children of the 'silent majority' – those in the US and Britain who see themselves as the exploited middle and working classes who bring up their families, pay taxes, keep their homes in good repair, live by the rules,



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yet have had their economic position and prospects eroded in recent years. Many see themselves and their children as victimized by favoritism ('positive discrimination' or 'affirmative action') granted to oppressed groups (immigrants, urban poor, blacks, women) whose exploitation they may or may not grant but for which they feel they have no historic responsibility. Many students demonstrate their doubts about the value of schooling by attending only sporadically, particularly as they approach school-leaving age. In some areas vandalism and violence in the schools are frequent,<sup>10</sup> and many students, particularly in the secondary schools, have abandoned any pretense of learning useful skills let alone pursuing an understanding of themselves and their culture more generally.

These doubts and criticisms of public schooling, coupled with the prevailing economic conditions and political climate, play themselves out in the curtailing of public funds for education generally, and for equalizing policies in particular.<sup>11</sup> Rather than using declining enrollments as an opportunity for broadening opportunities for those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, reducing class size, exploring ways of making schools more effective, or finding alternatives to the present institutionalization of the schooling process, teachers are sacked, art, music and recreational budgets are reduced, school counseling and special service programs are dismantled or curtailed.

### *Shifts in primary schooling policies*

Effects of the shifting political mood and economic priorities on daily life in primary schools are evident in both countries, but in our view are more striking in the US. Where informal education has had strong roots in Britain it appears to continue, though hampered by adjustments in budgets and personnel priorities.<sup>12</sup> In the US, however, during the eight years since we began our work, the 'open education' movement which in large measure drew its inspiration from British informal methods is moribund.<sup>13</sup> Why informal primary schooling remains firmly rooted in Britain can only be understood in terms of differences in the histories and structures of primary schooling of the two nations.

First, in the US, in contrast to Britain, 'open' or informal education was a top-down movement, originating with middle-of-the-road liberal school reformers and intellectuals, and its influence never penetrated very deeply into classroom practice. Second, the administrative structure of schools buffered and nurtured informal

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approaches in Britain while in the US it hastened their demise. British school head teachers and other administrators are not as easily affected by local economic fortunes or by shifts in political winds as their American counterparts. Though they may be on occasion called to account by school governing boards, in Britain school head-teachers' positions are secure. American principals, on the other hand, are easily fired or demoted, and hence are vulnerable to the pressures that are brought directly to bear on American superintendents. Organized, public-spirited (and not so public-spirited) interest groups can influence a superintendent or LEA governing boards, and these pressures are quickly passed through to principals and on to teachers.<sup>14</sup> Finally, 'objective' testing has long played a far stronger role in American education, including elementary schools. For many years standardized tests have been administered to every student yearly, sometimes bi-yearly, and the scores are prominently displayed in children's permanent records which follow them throughout their careers. Since such tests rarely reveal consistent advantages for informal methods, their use contributed to the easy abandonment of whatever inroads the open education movement made in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Informal methods have not, of course, escaped public criticism in Britain. The Black Papers, published from 1969, condemned progressive methods and policies, but it was not until the middle of the 1970s that such arguments gathered political force. The national furore that was precipitated over the internal policies of William Tyndale Junior School in London added fuel to the developing national debate over primary-school methods.<sup>15</sup> What, in a different political climate, might have remained a local dispute among staff, school managers and parents, escalated into a national media event with charges and counter-charges over excesses of progressive educational ideology and methods. The dispute and the subsequent official inquiry made news repeatedly over a three-year period and contributed to the initiation in 1976 of the 'Great Debate' by the Prime Minister, James Callaghan. Though perhaps more a public relations campaign than a debate it did raise to the status of a national issue the future of progressive educational policies at all levels.

Social and educational problems remain and divisions over policies will likely become more rancorous if economic conditions do not improve markedly. In both nations there is a contradiction in the theories and programs propounded by neo-conservative intellectuals

## PUBLIC ISSUES AND SCHOOLING CONTROVERSIES

and political leaders, and the realities of the economic and social policies they pursue. Though their argument is that governments should avoid using public funds and institutions to further social and political ends, there appears to be little reticence to pursue or advocate governmental policies and programs that serve the national interest as they define it. The most striking examples are the governmental policies in both countries of providing tax incentives for large corporate and individual investors and, in the US, of underwriting loans for failing national industries. In the arena of schooling policy conservatives press for 'back to basics' as they define it, for policies, often including costly testing programs, that hold schools and teachers accountable, and for various forms of public subsidy of 'private' or 'independent' schools.<sup>16</sup> The policies they promote are designed to confront a limited range of problems that in their view can and should be solved through the schools. The issue once again is not whether there shall be national and local priorities in schooling policy, but whose interests they will serve.

It is our hope that the dilemma language will be useful in clarifying for professionals and the public some of the debates over schooling practices and their relationship to the major political and economic questions of the day, and for helping to identify alternative possibilities for making schooling a richer, more engaging and challenging intellectual, cultural and social experience for all students.

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## II THEORETICAL CONTEXT

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### VENERATION OF SCIENCE

We live in a scientific age. Final arbiter of our fates is not priest, prophet or prince, but the penetrating eye of the scientist who transcends personal preferences, parochial interests and prevailing social and cultural norms to reveal the world as it is. The ideals of liberal constitutional democracy are freedom and equality – with science providing minister and citizen with the means of establishing what has been and what is, in order to make the best estimate of what is possible.<sup>1</sup> The penchant to look to science and scientific technology to undergird and justify social policy can be seen in the recurring controversies over schooling policies and priorities over the last fifty years. Not only has social science served to justify and legitimate structural changes in schools, and to set policy; it has also shaped the way educational professionals and laypersons think about human learning and the educative process.

Until the 1970s, virtually all the sociological studies that received public notice were used to support the need for progressive education policies.<sup>2</sup> In the UK the writing of R.H. Tawney (1926), and the empirical sociological studies of Jean Floud, A.H. Halsey, F.M. Martin (1956) and others, both galvanized political opinion and legitimated efforts to terminate the ‘hereditary curse upon English education’<sup>3</sup> by eliminating the dual, class-based structure of secondary schooling. Similar arguments by psychologist Kenneth Clark (1953), sociologist James Coleman (1966), and others hastened the demise of legalized racial segregation in schools in the US.<sup>4</sup>

Less than a decade later, another Coleman study was used, along with the writings of socialists Christopher Jencks, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, and genetic élitists Arthur Jensen and Richard Herrnstein to buttress the case *against* efforts to equalize oppor-

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tunities for historically oppressed peoples and races by changing the structures of schools.<sup>5</sup> These studies added the weight of social science to the common wisdom that the governmental programs of the 1960s and early 1970s with this aim had no detectable effects, were therefore an inefficient use of tax money and human effort. Government efforts to equalize opportunities were unjustifiable not only on moral grounds, as conservatives had long argued, but also on practical grounds. Using the same forms of logic and methods of social research, they turned the earlier argument of sociologists – that equalizing opportunity through schooling was both just and efficient – on its head.<sup>6</sup>

The form of social science technology used in these studies, the psychometric and sociometric methods, served not only as scientific tools used in the equal opportunity–social selection studies cited above, but have been used more directly in the conduct of schooling – for sorting students according to levels of ability, intelligence, creativity, aptitude and achievement; for identifying emotional, perceptual–motor and other learning problems/deficiencies of young persons.<sup>7</sup> Tests were and continue to be used to demonstrate the natural inferiority of the non-white races,<sup>8</sup> and in the US, the test technology made possible the rapid proliferation of state ‘minimal competency’ and ‘accountability’ programs.

Test technology is not only integral to the decision-making apparatus at all levels, but influences much of our thinking (or consciousness) about educational matters. For example, teachers, parents, even those who are skeptical of tests, often take as self-evident, or as a scientific fact, the assumption that human capacities – intellectual and/or creative abilities, etc. – are normally distributed by nature in the form of a bell-shaped curve. The assumption, that it is not culture, society or man, but nature that distributes human talents with a few at the very top and very bottom and most in the middle, is taken as given in virtually all ‘objective’ psychological and educational tests, and underlies most of the statistical operations used to draw comparisons among persons and groups. Though assumed as scientific fact, the notion that human talents and achievements are so distributed is at best problematical.

This same scientific logic and the same techniques also underlie the great volume of classroom, pedagogical (or ‘micro’) research that has filled educational research journals and kept educational researchers gainfully employed over the decades. While most commentators on educational practice might agree that such research has never commanded the respect of teachers and school administrators,

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it has continued to define the terms in which many curriculum and pedagogical issues are raised and argued.

### GROWING SKEPTICISM OF PREVAILING FORMS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH – THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

Paradoxically, over the preceding decade, there was increasing use and vigorous defense of psychometric and sociometric technology at the same time as their claims to scientific status and objectivity, and their promise of value-free social science as arbiter of conflicting claims, were becoming vigorously disputed in the academy and in the popular press.<sup>9</sup> Criticism of ‘objective’ tests and methods was not unknown a decade ago. (Indeed, cogent criticisms were made of such methods, including tests, in the 1920s.) What is new is that profound doubts about these technologies and the social science assumptions that undergird them are expressed not only in the fringes, left and right, but in the most respectable places.<sup>10</sup> For example, Fred Hechinger, an education writer for the *New York Times*, wrote at the end of 1979 in an editorial titled ‘Frail sociology’:

The Surgeon General should consider labeling all sociological studies: Keep out of reach of politicians and judges. Indiscriminate use of these suggestive works can be dangerous to the nation’s health.<sup>11</sup>

After reflecting upon studies by James Coleman (1966 and 1975) and Christopher Jencks (1972 and 1979), Mr Hechinger notes how the shifting winds of sociological interpretation have corresponded so nicely with the changing political climate over the decade, and he concludes:

However unintentional, this convergence of the views of the sociological left and the intentions of an ungenerous right obstructs school reform. And it demoralizes people who believe, often for overpoweringly good reasons, that great efforts in the classroom *can* help children succeed. In the matter of social policy, doing the right thing – integrating schools, aiding poor pupils – should come from a clear sense that special help can bring special rewards. There is no need to wait for the next interesting, but frail, study.

Gabriel Chanan of the National Foundation for Educational Research, writing in *The Times Educational Supplement* (London) in 1976 of Neville Bennett’s book, *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress*, put it more directly: ‘Social research must be understood as primarily an ideological rather than a scientific phenomena.’<sup>12</sup>

It is hardly a ringing endorsement of the usefulness of social

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science for practical policy when doing the right thing is exalted over the scientific rules of logic and evidence. Indeed, Mr Hechinger and Mr Chanan are not only dismissing the claims to objectivity by the prevailing forms of social science, but seem to be rejecting the premise of social science altogether. More guarded and subtle, but essentially similar, criticisms have been made in the professional scholarly literature over the preceding decade. The dramatic disclosures of the deceit of Cyril Burt, upon whose work much of the confidence in IQ testing rested, was a significant contribution to the developing skepticism.<sup>13</sup>

The growth of criticism of prevailing forms of social research among sociologists and psychologists has at its root a debate over 'positivism', the set of assumptions about persons and society that underlies the psychometric and sociometric technology, and has been the dominant perspective of social research in the twentieth century. In the US what was, a decade ago, a debate in the rarified reaches of academic epistemology and among social theorists has penetrated into virtually all of the sub-specialties of the social and psychological sciences and into university departments and schools devoted to training persons for the social service professions (social work, education, public administration). In Britain the intellectual debate, peaking earlier, has subsided, but the political questions it raised in and outside the academy remain unresolved.

The term positivism, itself an intellectual booby trap, has received a number of first-rate dissections over the preceding decade.<sup>14</sup> We will not recapitulate the arguments here. In most general terms, positivism denotes an orientation to doing social science wherein the differences between scientific work in the social and physical worlds are assumed not to be fundamental. The approaches of positivist social science have in common a press toward precise specification of 'independent' and 'dependent variables'. This most often takes the form of focusing on external observable factors that are capable of being converted into a set of numbers. The intention is to bypass the complexities, difficulties and bias that are considered unavoidable in interpretative inquiries into the relationship of social context to human consciousness.

The debates surrounding the Jencks, Coleman and Bennett studies, which prompted Messrs Hechinger's and Chanan's despair over the role of social research, are not only disagreements over the use and interpretations of a few numbers, but represent profound differences between positivists and their increasingly respectable detractors. Part of the disagreement is rooted in the centuries-old debate over

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free will and determinism – in its contemporary dress, whether it is possible to do social research and/or build a corpus of scientific knowledge and theory based on an assumption that persons are hapless objects, buffeted and shaped by culture and society (and, for social biologists, by nature itself). Critics of positivism – including several varieties of interpretive and critical sociologists – take as a starting place a view of persons as beings with the capacity to create culture and transform the conditions of their own living, and a *reflexive* conception of human consciousness and social context (i.e., human consciousness and behavior shape and are shaped by culture and history).

Criticism of the failure of research in the positivist tradition to study *everyday socializing and educative processes* as they occur in schools, including teachers' and students' awareness of their experience and their continuous reflexive adaptation to one another, has been made by many critics.<sup>15</sup> Schooling research that claims to evaluate the relative merits of method A v. method B, or to discover the relationship of schooling processes to social change, by examining inputs and outputs – but not the process itself – is sometimes called derisively 'black box' research. The general criticism of such research is that any study of persons or society is partial if it attempts to draw conclusions about the consequences of social life upon persons and collectives without inquiring into the complex, dynamic connections between inside and outside forces – how consciousness and action shape society and culture. From this perspective it is impossible to know the effects of schooling, individual, social or economic, without direct study of how human thought and behavior both affect and are affected by social process and structures. It is the argument of some critical and interpretive social scientists that only by studying how schooling experience affects and is affected by the lives and consciousness of the participants in the process, can one draw any conclusions about what schooling contributes to social stability and change.

About a decade ago a number of British researchers, drawing on a variety of social theoretical traditions – North American and European – and doing 'close in' studies of schooling processes, found common commitment not only in the need for direct observation and analysis of the schooling process, but also in a conception of persons and society that denied positivist assumptions.<sup>16</sup> They stressed the more active, creative aspect of persons, their capacity to give and share meaning and to exercise control. (This emphasis should be distinguished from the resurgence of so-called 'participant observa-



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tion' or 'qualitative' research in schools in the US in the early years of the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> Much of this latter work rejected 'positivist' methods, argued for direct study of classrooms, but did not question the positivist conception of scientific laws and explanations.)

This diverse group of British researchers, sometimes classed (uneasily) together as the 'New Sociologists', though they did not deny the significance of political and social forces outside the classroom, often did not directly confront in their analyses the connection of the daily events of classroom life to culture and to the social and political life of the society.<sup>18</sup> Many succeeded, nevertheless, in explicitly confronting the positivistic value-free claims by looking critically at the implicit definitions of knowledge teachers transmitted in classrooms. Instead of accepting as given the school's notion of what it means to be 'educated' and studying how it is that students differentially achieved that designation (the preoccupation of many sociologists of prior decades), they took as problematic the school's definition of the educated person.<sup>19</sup> Some identified themselves with the developing field of the sociology of knowledge,<sup>20</sup> thus setting the stage for studies that could link classroom teaching and learning experiences to broader social and political questions. As Brian Davies remarks (commenting upon these issues), every sociological approach must 'strike a more or less complex balance between the priority of the individual or society'.<sup>21</sup> One major criticism of some of the 'New Sociologists' is that in their attempts to study classrooms in ways that do not portray persons as entirely controlled by outside forces, they have overestimated the capacity of persons to act freely and have often ignored the powerful constraints that bear upon them. A related criticism is that they rely so heavily on the 'insider's' or actor's perspective and become so immersed in the minutiae of daily life, that they rarely attend to how societal forces and power relationships affect classroom structures and processes, and persons' perceptions and behavior.<sup>22</sup>

Over the decade there has also been a resurgence of interest in schooling research in various Marxist traditions. Two individuals, the British researcher Basil Bernstein and the Frenchman Pierre Bourdieu, who share some assumptions with the 'New Sociologists' and with Critical Marxists, must be mentioned to complete this brief review of the context of contemporary schooling research. Both attempt to clarify how the social inequalities of British and French societies respectively are recreated by the structures and processes of schooling. Central to Bourdieu's analysis is *cultural capital*; a concept that refers to high status knowledge, dispositions and skills,

which are acquired and/or reinforced within the institutions of society, particularly schools. At the level of the individual, cultural capital refers to the inherited or acquired linguistic and cultural competence that facilitates achievement in school<sup>23</sup> and provides access to prestigious and economically rewarding positions in society. Bourdieu's analyses of the role educational institutions play in recreating existing social inequalities in French society are provocative, and have stimulated the thinking of a number of Anglo-American researchers including Basil Bernstein.

Professor Bernstein's work is distinguished by his long-standing effort to link the processes and structures of curriculum (the how and what of knowledge transmissions in school) to the inequalities of the British social class structure.<sup>24</sup> He analyzes schools as agencies of cultural transmission by constructing 'a typology of "educational codes" . . . whose abstract and formal rules . . . generate the form and content of valid knowledge as well as the structure of relations between teacher and pupil. . . . [These codes] govern the production, transmission, and reproduction of systems of messages and underlie curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation.'<sup>25</sup> To connect the highly abstract notions of 'codes' to curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation, Bernstein postulates what are his most widely known concepts for analyzing classroom processes: *classification* and *framing* which are intended to hold together 'structural and inter-actional [that is, macro and micro] levels'.<sup>26</sup> Bernstein's ultimate intention is to develop a theory that integrates linguistic codes,<sup>27</sup> educational transmission and social class<sup>28</sup> in a way that would allow for 'responsiveness to and change in structures but would also indicate that there was at any one time a limit to negotiation'.<sup>29</sup> Though, as he acknowledges, his work has not always succeeded in drawing these links – it is constantly undergoing revision and development – in recent years he is unquestionably the most significant figure among Anglo-American social scientists engaged in the quest for understanding the role of educational processes in social transmission and change.

Both Bernstein and Bourdieu have been criticized for excluding from analysis significant aspects of the cultural, political and social contexts of schooling.<sup>30</sup> They have also been criticized for paying insufficient attention to the schooling process as it is lived by teachers and students – the everyday realities to which their theorizing refers<sup>31</sup> – and for formulating concepts at a level of abstraction well removed from the language and experience of schooling.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence, their work has been described as difficult to understand.<sup>33</sup> Both, but

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Bourdieu in particular, have also been criticized as being overdetermined, that is, not allowing for the possibilities of human control of the processes they describe,<sup>34</sup> and therefore, in their present forms, able to make only limited contributions to the clarification of action alternatives open to teachers in classrooms.

We think that much of the criticism of the New Sociologists and of Bernstein's and Bourdieu's work is misdirected.<sup>35</sup> However, it is clear that at present the works of Bernstein and Bourdieu do not represent the lived experience of schooling; thus, their efforts to theorize about connections of micro to macro, though suggestive, are inadequate. The New Sociologists, on the other hand, though they more often attend to the nuances of the schooling experience and the meanings taken by its participants, have not yet succeeded in relating their empirical work to social-political theory and educational practice. It is within the context of the struggles of these several traditions of schooling research to illuminate the relationship between everyday schooling activity and economic, social and cultural change that we place our own efforts.<sup>36</sup>

### *Schooling research and educational policy*

Research on schooling at the present is in ferment in Britain and, as of late, in North America as well. The underlying politics of positivist methodology is far more widely acknowledged than a decade ago. But in spite of the growing legitimacy of newer approaches to the study of the relationship of schooling to society, it is still positivist social science that draws headlines and most heavily influences public political debates. Although these newer forms of sociological research have made major inroads in the academic world of the UK and North America over the decade, their political influence on practical policy appears minimal. In Britain, for example, at the height of the 'Great Debate' over 'progressive methods', despite the strong tradition of 'interpretive' research, it was Neville Bennett's *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress* that made the headlines.<sup>37</sup> That the study made a number of the more familiar grievous errors committed by classroom researchers over the years was overlooked (for example, reducing 'teaching style' to three types along a single dimension, progressive, traditional and mixed, a version of a long discredited democratic authoritarian dichotomy of an earlier era). In the political battles the focus was on attacking and defending the allegedly statistically significant superior achievements of children taught by 'traditional' methods as measured by objective tests. Simi-

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larly, although IQ as a measure of genetic endowment or ability has increasingly been shown by a number of critics as problematical<sup>38</sup> if not untenable, its use in schools as an approximation of a child's 'ability' or potential has not greatly diminished, and standardized tests, despite their generally acknowledged limitations, increasingly dominate public attention as measures of educational productivity.

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### III A BRIEF HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

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We went to England at the height of the open education movement in North America; a time when many professional educators, intellectuals, and political leaders of diverse persuasion appeared to be united in a belief that schools could promote humane values and social justice – and be places where children learn to read, write, do mathematics to a high standard without sacrificing other areas of intellectual, social, moral and aesthetic growth, nor the joys of childhood. Books by John Holt, Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, George Dennison, Herbert Kohl and others,<sup>1</sup> portraying the absurdities and horrors of American public schooling, were widely read and generally warmly received by middle-of-the-road liberal and left-leaning journals of opinion.<sup>2</sup> Educational reform was a hot item. ‘Alternative schools’ were being created in store fronts and within the existing systems. In many locations ‘teachers’ centers’ based on the English experience were struggling to become established with the assistance of foundation and federal grants. Teacher-education programs normally populated by compliant young women were drawing politically active admirers of Herbert Marcuse and/or Charles Reich’s *Consciousness III*.<sup>3</sup> ‘Open’ and ‘humanistic’ education sessions and workshops were everywhere, even at the national conventions of the staid professional education associations.

Many of those who argued for school reforms at the time used the English informal primary schools as a model of what was possible, basing their judgment on what they had seen, read about or heard of these schools. In retrospect, what was interesting about those more active days of the American open education movement was the number of persons of differing political persuasions who viewed reform as desirable *and possible*. The dormant progressive education movement at its height in the 1930s probably could never claim such

widespread interest in the reform of schools. A good deal of John Dewey's influence on American schools was confined to those shepherded by enthusiastic and committed social visionaries. We were led to believe from much of what we read that humane and liberating schools were flowering in England, the oldest and first developed of capitalist countries, not only in quiet villages but in slums and suburbs of the cities. Charles Silberman, whose influential study was funded by the Carnegie Foundation and whose book, *Crisis in the Classroom*,<sup>4</sup> published in the US in 1970, was widely read, posed the question in a form that apparently resonated in the minds and hearts of practically minded reformers. 'What is, is possible.' The implication was that if it could happen in Britain, then why not in capitalist America. Indeed, why not?

We spent six months working and observing full time in English primary schools, four to six weeks in each of three schools and one, two or three days in sixteen others. After a short period of observation in several schools we realized that, though the schools we were seeing were different in many respects from the ones we had known, they were not strange, but familiar. With notable exceptions, most of the British and American literature on 'open' or 'informal' education had created an image of informal English primary schooling that was different from what we were experiencing.<sup>5</sup> We asked several helpful and widely respected local advisors, many teachers, and several head teachers whom we knew, whether we had selected the wrong schools. We took time from the schools we were studying intensively, and visited several they suggested, including six that had the distinction of having been mentioned or featured in one or another North American or British publication. After we found that these schools looked to be variations of the ones we were studying, we pursued for a time not well-known schools, but well-known head teachers, who had written or had been written about in the open education literature. We finally were persuaded that we had, indeed, seen 'it' — the schools we had chosen to study in depth, if not typical, were certainly not atypical of informal primary schools, at least in this area of England.

We realized that despite the sobering words and cautions of Joseph Featherstone and Lillian Weber, and despite our skepticism, we, too, had been misled by the images of freedom and self-motivation in the 'open' and 'informal' education literature. We did find that many of the schooling events portrayed were indeed common in the schools we visited. But behind these images we observed various forms of direct and strong intervention by teachers, and

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became increasingly aware of the broader context of these events, and the complexity of the dynamics underlying the behavior patterns. Eventually, we were able to identify variations in overall patterns of classroom organization and teacher control reasonably quickly in each new situation we visited. By the time we had completed our stay, we felt we had a deeper understanding of the richness, variety and complexity of life in these schools than we had of the several we had taught in or had experienced first-hand over the years – probably because in the English schools we had for the first time the opportunity to be outsiders, observing and analyzing, as well as participants in the situation. It also became clear that many of the efforts of its proponents on both sides of the Atlantic to account for open or informal education in terms of a static set of principles, beliefs or commitments – most notably the Plowden Report, and in the US Roland Barth, Charles Rathbone, Anne M. Bussis, Edward A. Chittenden and Marianne Amarel – were inadequate.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the thinking and personal commitments that underlay the informal educational practices we observed, there was a far greater complexity in the schooling process and in the way that teachers and heads talked and thought about the process than was revealed in most of the popular and professional literature that attempted to portray and/or persuade others of its merits.

After our return we found it extremely difficult to characterize the beliefs and behaviors of teachers in the schools we had observed, and we became far more tolerant of others' attempts to say something about them. When pressed by university and public-school colleagues to say how the things we had seen and experienced in the English schools compared to the American counterparts, we could say with conviction that sixteen of the nineteen (these sixteen include the three we studied in depth) were, according to our own values and beliefs, superior in most respects to schools we knew in the United States, and among the sixteen were several of the best schools we had ever seen, and one school was among the worst. We would add that the schools were by no means utopias; many of the junior schools, particularly at the upper ends, were quite ordinary. In addition, in none of the schools could we say there was a direct challenge to the political values and attitudes of British society; thus, those who see American society as unjust and/or corrupt and see the American school system as witting or unwitting accomplices in perpetuating injustices, would undoubtedly find fault with these schools on the same grounds. However, given important similarities in the social, political and economic systems of Britain and the US, and given that