

Teachers

Reclaiming the Middle Ground

in the

of the Adolescent Years of Schooling

Middle

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Introduction

“This place hurts my spirit”

(HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, POPLIN & WEERES, 1992, p. 11)

At the time of writing this book, there is a profound and deepening crisis in secondary education—but at its essence, it is a crisis of a very different kind from the one portrayed by the media, the business community, politicians and policy-makers. While barely a day goes by without some reference in the mainstream media to a crisis in schooling, just what constitutes the crisis is somewhat problematic. What is being constructed for us through a concerted ‘conservative assault’ and a ‘new authoritarianism’ (Giroux, 2005) is one of failure by young people, their schools and teachers. But as with any moral panic, there are undisclosed interests and agenda operating, and they are not those of the people most directly affected, in this case young people. If we are to believe the ideologues of the right, schools—especially middle schools—are failing young people because they lack clear guidelines in terms of curriculum content and standards, overemphasize the social dimensions of learning at the expense of rigorous academic studies, fail to concentrate on the basics of literacy and numeracy, and place too much stress on student-centered learning. The solution to this crisis, as advocated by critics like Yecke (2005) and Donnelly (2004), is to name and shame failing schools, define what and how students must learn through a prescriptive subject-based syllabus, enforce

strict accountability standards through standardized testing regimes, maintain strong discipline approaches and place more emphasis on formal, whole-class learning. In short, the answer to ‘falling standards’ is greater uniformity and compliance.

By most accounts, somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of young people in Western countries are not completing their secondary education and are actively rejecting the version of schooling being served up to them. Furthermore, it has been estimated (Cothran & Ennis, 2000) that as much as two-thirds of the US high school population may be disengaged from schooling and actively contemplating leaving school or else remaining tuned out. Official responses to this alarming situation have been jackbooted, to say the least—bearing down with harsher accountability and testing regimes, and requiring teachers to teach in increasingly meaningless and scripted ways. Failure to comply brings its own swift forms of retribution. ‘Quick fixes’ of this kind are precisely the wrong kind of remedies for alienation, disaffection and disconnectedness, which lie at the heart of students ‘not-learning’ (Kohl, 1994). What is going on here is a major disconnection between the curriculum on offer in contemporary high schools, and the lives and experiences of young people (see Brown & Saltman, 2005). Put simply, schools are boring places for many young people and being made even more so by ill-conceived and damaging policies and reforms. The causes of this ‘crisis’ have much more to do with the failure of schools, governments and societies to challenge inequitable educational policies and practices that contribute to social exclusion and the escalating school ‘dropout’ rates and palpable disaffection being felt by minority groups (Gibson, 2005).

As our opening quote from a high school student indicates, the crisis lies deep in the construction of school systems that are wounding and damaging large numbers of young people. The real crisis is one of paradigmatic paralysis fed by an impoverishment of political will and imagination capable of listening to and embracing the lives, experiences and aspirations of young people, and the teachers and schools who work with them.

We have decided to tackle the issues raised above by framing our research and writing in this book around Charles Silberman’s (1970) provocative image of 30 years ago of high schools, at least in the United States, as being mindless “wasteland[s]” (p. 324). We invoke Silberman as a way of acknowledging what is being *done to* large numbers of young people by current policy directions through testing, benchmarking, standards, competitive league tables, and similar measures that are making high schools more like prisons and boot camps than vibrant and lively places of learning. Framed in this way, the ‘crisis’ is a crisis of equity arising from savage economic inequalities (Kozol, 1992; 2005), an under-funded and constantly vilified public education system, and a ‘manufactured crisis’ in education (Berliner &

Biddle, 1995) used to justify the imposition of discriminatory high stakes testing regimes. As Lounsbury and Vars (2003) argue:

Gains in test scores, when and if achieved, will have no immediate impact on the serious problems that beset our society. The greater need is to guide the overall development of young adolescents in ways that will equip them with the behavioral attributes, attitudes, and values they need to make wise choices in all aspects of their lives. Success in doing so will in no way handicap the school's clear responsibility for the intellectual development of students but will, in fact, fulfill that responsibility more effectively. (p. 8)

Part of the solution to this “crisis” has to lie in rejecting the “yellow-school-bus model of education” (Eisner, 2002, p. 576), and instead embracing diversity in all its forms and creating “conditions that enable students to pursue what is distinctive about themselves” (Eisner, 2002, p. 581) rather than having to endure an alien, imposed and rigid curriculum.

Unashamedly, we identify ourselves with the view that schools should be guided by higher purposes other than the reproduction of the *status quo*; that education should not merely serve the economy by turning out compliant workers but should encourage the acquisition of critical literacies and democratic practices; that all children should be able to participate in a challenging curriculum that will assist them to make sense of their lives and their identities. If there is a ‘crisis’ in education, it is a crisis that has been manufactured by those who seek to undermine the democratic and egalitarian purposes of public schooling. The starting point in any kind of reconstrual has to be with ‘a pedagogy of respect’ (MacKenzie, 1998), and that is what we try to portray in this book.