


Affecting Social Change: The Struggle for Educators To Transform Society

By William C. Sewell

Since he first chronicled the plight of schools and the painful struggle to provide quality education for children of all backgrounds and abilities in *Death at an Early Age* (1967), Jonathon Kozol has been a strong and popular advocate for children. In his recent work, *The Shame of the Nation* (2005), Kozol contends that the unrealistic goals set by policies, such as No Child Left Behind, are breaking school districts, schools that have already been overburdened and have few resources to improve their situation. When addressing the problems for today's educators, Kozol points out that current federal efforts are designed "not to benefit children but to humiliate the public enterprise" (as cited in Jehlen, 2006, p. 17). Kozol has joined with teachers' unions like the National Education Association to "stave off an onslaught of misguided federal dictates" in order to "help mobilize teachers to take action politically and launch a new movement for racial integration" (Jehlen, p. 17). Unfortunately for Kozol, history has not been kind to reformers who have attempted to wrestle control of public schools from bureaucracies that impair school quality.


William C. Sewell is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teaching and Leadership of the School of Education at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.

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George S. Counts and Ivan Illich are the most outstanding examples of those reformers who have tried and failed to initiate substantive school policy change. Though Counts and Illich come from very different generations and very different geographical regions, their quest to enhance public education shares very similar paths. As a result, their work warrants attention by those interested in the history of education as well those interested in contemporary school policy. Highlighting their careers and failures, this essay will provide insight to those like Kozol who attempt to modify American public schools.

From the 1920s to the 1960s, George S. Counts was a major figure in progressive education. After two visits to Russian schools in the late twenties, Counts came to prominence for his promotion of a new educational system based upon ideas formulated during his travels. At first glance, Counts' zealous acclaim for the Soviet model of education would suggest that he was a communist, but the fact was that he was heavily drawn to the Soviet Union's passionate, orderly endeavor to remedy its failed state. As Gerald Gutek (1993) notes, Counts was drawn to this model because "Soviet leaders...had correctly recognized the power of organized education as an instrument of cultural transformation" (p. 11). While the U.S. degenerated into a do-nothing Hoover-era depression, the Soviets were attempting to strengthen their nation after decades of disastrous internal and external conflict. Their 1904-1905 war with Japan was a complete fiasco only to be worsened by their devastating involvement in World War I. Because their leadership had utterly failed them at home and abroad, Russians repeatedly plunged into a civil war that installed Lenin and Stalin as their new leaders in 1917.

While revolution transformed the Soviet Union, U.S. leaders seemed unwilling to remedy their own nation's economic and social woes. Like other educators around him, Counts began looking for alternatives to the U.S. model. States Gutek, "While his own country seemed unable to come to grips with the Depression, the Soviet[s] were making great strides forward because of their coordination and centralized planning" (p. 11). In his acclaimed pamphlet, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order* (1932), Counts eloquently makes a case for a radical rethinking of social organizations:

We are moved by no great faiths; we are touched by no great passions. We can view a world order rushing rapidly towards collapse with no more concern than the outcome of a horse race; we can see injustice, crime and misery in their most terrible forms all about us and, if we are not directly affected, register the emotions of a scientist studying white rats in a laboratory. (pp. 19-20)

Fueled by Soviet efforts, Counts promoted a new ideal because "if democracy is to survive in the United States, it must abandon its individualistic affiliations in the sphere of economics" (p. 42). Counts believed that rapidly growing public "schools were potentially the strongest force for nonviolent change in the United States. Education of all the people would lead to prosperity and a decent life for all of the

people” (Kohl, 1980, p. 57). In a 1948 speech, he stated that “In our own country the secondary school enrollment increased from 2,500,000 in 1920 to 6,950,000 in 1940 and the enrollment in higher schools of all kinds from 750,000 to 1,800,000.” Counts realized that this growing audience, which now comprises over 80 million people (Rury, 2001, p. 227), would enable educators to have tremendous power to affect social change.

Distraught by inflexible institutions, Counts called upon his fellow teachers to assert their increasing power. In the now famous 1932 speech to the Progressive Education Association, he put his fellow educators to task: “Progressive education wishes to build a new world but refuses to be held accountable for the new kinds of world it builds” (p. 22). The Great Depression demonstrated that the United States had to reconcile its two economic bases, agrarian and industrial. Counts argued that bureaucracies should be reorganized around education so that the nation could pull itself out of the depths of the Depression. Although progressives had noble intentions, Counts was concerned that “the child is becoming increasingly isolated from the serious activities of adults” (p. 15). Thus, it was time for the teacher “to lead the way to a new age” (Lagemann, 1992, p. 156) where the school actively addressed social issues. Counts believed that “the individual who is to live and thrive in this world must possess an agile mind, be bound by no deep loyalties, hold all conclusions and values tentatively, and be ready on a moments notice to make even fundamental shifts in outlook and philosophy” (1932, p. 23).

Although his desire to connect learning to everyday experience sounded similar to other progressives’ efforts, where Counts diverged is his open and radical call to indoctrinate students. He stated that “in opposing and checking the forces of social conservatism and reaction” (1932, p. 21) teachers must impose open their students so “that democratic sentiments should be cultivated” (p. 17). While this notion of indoctrinating students sparked numerous debates, Counts felt that American society had become leaderless, and in order to improve the lives of Americans, teachers should fill the vacuum. According to Herbert Kohl, “Counts challenged American teachers to provide their students with a vision of a future egalitarian American that embodied principals of economic and social democracy” (1980, p. 57).

Despite his zeal, Counts faced a major challenge to his ideas that would frustrate him for most of his career. While *Dare the School Build a New Social Order* captivated an audience of progressive reformers, his efforts stalled because he emphasized organizational change that a strong bureaucracy readily resisted. Counts’ problem lies not in his support of Soviet tactics; he misread the power structures that control society. Furthermore, Counts misgauged teachers’ abilities to significantly affect change. Today over 2.7 million teachers belong to the NEA/AFT, the nation’s largest teachers’ union, but while teachers are concerned with national affairs, the bulk of their political efforts goes towards local politics—issues such as salaries and working conditions. The remainder of their efforts tends to be devoted towards affecting policy change at the state level. Teachers’ politics are

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strictly kept out of the classroom because it is “unprofessional.” Political struggles are kept silent and as a result, many students are completely oblivious to the power struggles over their own education. In Kansas and Pennsylvania, for example, many students are unaware that the entire nation has focused on their states’ fight over the teaching of evolution in the classroom. The history of American public schools demonstrates that education has been a weapon used for political gain. From school segregation to school vouchers, school policy has been embroiled in very bitter ideological battles, but despite Counts’ admonition, students are kept out of the fray.

It has been generally accepted that the progressives had lost much of their drive by 1938, when fascism spawned a Second World War in Europe. For the progressives, the Soviet model could no longer be utilized. In an address to the Harvard School of Education, Dianne Ravitch best explains the demise of the progressive movement:

The whole movement begins to collapse because word filters back...that all of these wonderful progressive educators that they met in the Soviet Union had been sent to labor camps, had been assassinated, or had committed suicide. Not one of them is left. They can’t make contact with them anymore. They’re all gone. (2001, para. 74).

Increasingly, Counts found his ideas losing traction; perhaps the most evident instance was his inability to establish organizational change at his own university. His proposal to create an institute of social research at Columbia Teachers College in 1931 met skepticism. By the start of the Cold War, the innovative ideas of the progressives found little acceptance. In an increasingly repressive anti-communist atmosphere, the way was paved for critics of progressivism to dominate policy for the remainder of the century. John Rury observes that “there were calls for a return to traditional teaching methods, and a renewed emphasis on core subjects such as history, mathematics, English, and the sciences. Above all, however, there was an outcry for more order and control in the daily lives of children” (2001, p. 183). Increasingly, teachers’ ability to engage in political discourse with their students was being curtailed.

As the Cold War heightened, political censorship became even more rigid at the district level. District control of teachers is often the most powerful and subtle form of censorship. School boards can engage in many methods of control beyond their ability to deny tenure to new teachers. Districts have the power to alter teaching assignments, extra-curricular activities, and program funding. To a teacher who does not meet the expectations of the school board, the district has the power to make the workplace very uncomfortable. Central Heights Unified School District located only 30 miles from Counts’ childhood home of Baldwin City, Kansas, provides the best example of the power a district can impose on its teachers. The district was created in 1968, by the unification of four neighboring schools. At the time, board members were concerned about the hiring of any teacher who failed to share their conservative values. Consequently, the board adopted a strict dress code to “weed out the hippies.” Men were required to wear a suit and tie; women were required to

wear a dress. Furthermore, men were prohibited from having beards. In effect for over three decades, the rules were finally terminated when teaching shortages dictated an end to the rigid dress code. Struggling to fill an English position, the high school principal successfully petitioned the board to revise the dress code; all three of his candidates had either a beard or a goatee, and the dress code restricted his ability to find a qualified applicant. Thus, when the new English teacher joined the faculty in the fall of 2000, he was the first bearded teacher in the school's history.

Even if a teacher risked board disapproval in order to express political views, the curriculum lacked the proper forum for intellectual discourse. In English classrooms, for example, the conservative Cold War ideology forced a shift away from critical learning—engaging students to think critically about society—towards functional literacy—being able to comprehend a reading passage in order to excel on a standardized examination. To the progressives, this policy was the antithesis of good educational policy and democracy. John Rury (2001) asserts that for them, “Democracy...embraced a wide range of ideas, such as tolerance, fair play, critical discussion of social issues, and respect for the rights of others. It was nothing less than the highest form of collective intelligence” (p. 145). Although America has moved beyond the Cold War, little has done little to increase political activism. New laws such No Child Left Behind (NCLB), emphasizing high-stakes testing, reasserts the dominance of functional literacy. Furthermore, when Rod Paige called the National Education Association a “terrorist organization” in 2004, it was apparent that the dominant ideology has little tolerance for politically active schools. Because Paige was able to deflect criticism for his comments, it was evident that teachers were powerless to respond. As a result of decades of removing social inquiry from the curriculum, the classroom has lost its identity as a place for political discourse. At present, it would appear that there is no desire for identity change.

The progressives felt that the school could provide “citizens with the skills and knowledge necessary for political participation” (Rury, 2001, p. 144). In the absence of political discourse, however, it is no wonder why young Americans are disengaged by the political process. According to “Facts on Voting Trends in Presidential Elections,” seventy percent of 18 to 24 year-olds complained that “Politicians are out of touch with the concerns of people their age” (2002). The result is that Americans are becoming disengaged from politics. While the voting trend for women indicates a fall from 60 percent in 1964 to 51.3 percent in 1996, rates for men have plummeted. Since 1964, nearly two-thirds of men voted in presidential elections. By 1996, the number had steadily declined to 48.6 percent (2000). As a consequence of declining voter participation, the ability to affect social change has eroded.

While Counts' actual ideological perspective is far from being genuinely radical, he was frustrated by the inability to modify bureaucracies, such as segregated public schools, that openly denied citizens opportunities for leading fulfilling lives. For the next generation of education reformers, the few changes granted by the status quo resulted in a heightened level of economic and political oppression by

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the end of the sixties. In the United States, for example, Malcolm X, who sought violent change to the status quo, was assassinated in 1965. His counterpart, Martin Luther King, Jr., who sought peaceful solutions to social injustice, was assassinated in 1968. When Robert F. Kennedy, another passionate social reformer appeared to have clinched the 1968 Democratic nomination for President, he, too, was assassinated. While these deaths shocked many citizens, the increasingly deteriorating situation in Vietnam shattered most Americans' faith in their nation's ability to end a war that had been waged for unknown reasons. When the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive in early 1968, U.S. public sentiment for the war permanently faded. With the U.S. embroiled in a conflict at home and a conflict abroad, efforts to reform bureaucratic organizations faded as well.

Thus, when Ivan Illich made the argument in his 1971 critique, *Deschooling Society*, that failed bureaucracies should be eliminated, he was presenting a critique tempered by prior attempts to affect social change through education reform. "During the sixties," he writes, "institutions born in different decades since the French Revolution simultaneously reached old age; school systems...all became bureaucratic, self-justifying, and manipulative" (p. 61). Although the American government had grudgingly yielded political rights to its citizens, economic and political rights eroded as leaders tightened their grip in an effort to protect their fragile hegemony. By the late sixties, political reformers around the world were meeting a similar fate as did the Soviet progressives in the late thirties. The Czechoslovakia uprising in 1968 and subsequent Soviet "intervention" serves as the most chilling example, but images of tanks storming public squares would only foreshadow many more crackdowns, such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre in China.

Illich, thus, launched his attack of the bureaucratic machine at the target most responsible for preserving hegemony, the public school, which teaches what he called a "hidden curriculum." To Illich "this hidden curriculum of schooling adds prejudice and guilt to the discrimination which a society practices against some of its members and compounds the privilege of others with a new title to condescend to the majority. Just as this hidden curriculum serves as a ritual of initiation into a growth-oriented consumer society for rich and poor alike" (1971, p. 33). Illich proposed to "separate learning from social control" (p. 19) by creating new forms of learning experiences, such as learning webs, a means of exchanging skills that are of interest or need to a learner. He felt that by divorcing the institution from the learning experience, "men will shield themselves less behind certificates acquired in school and thus gain in courage to 'talk back' and thereby control and instruct the institutions in which they participate" (p. 23). Illich ultimately sought freedom from a system that engenders dependency.

Ivan Illich's critique can certainly arouse one's attention since most Americans are products of public school systems; hence, his call to completely reject the schools proves quite jarring. Many critics argue that because "his critique was phrased in oversimplified binary form" (Schuller, 2005, p. 1), he was unable to make

any progress reshaping education. However, his success in reforming medical bureaucracy, which he took to task in *Medical Nemesis* (1976), indicates that his rhetorical pattern was not flawed. The fault lies in the differing structure of the two industries. Medicine is founded upon innovation; the industry incorporates new techniques in order to decrease mortality, so systematic change may be affected—even if change occurs incrementally. Education, on the other hand, is based upon tradition; many teachers use the same pedagogical techniques their teachers used. As education is a primary key for maintaining hegemony, the status quo has little interest in fostering innovation. In fact, trends in education often center on the recycling of ideas rather than the creation of new ideas. “Education in America,” according to Diane Ravitch (2004, para. 9), “tends to be like religion, with cycles of stability and change, periodic, crusades, and occasional bouts of zealotry and apostasy.” Thus, “when classroom methods and protocols seem to have grown stale, or when society is experiencing an unusual degree of upheaval, along comes an educational movement to cast out the old and mobilize the true believers.” The progressives’ fall decline during the Cold War epitomizes this trend. The fact is that many of the new proposals tend to be a “revival of some failed idea” (2004, para. 9). Fads such as block scheduling or classrooms without walls come and go over the decades only to come and go once again.

When Illich wrote *Deschooling Society*, he observed a glaring contradiction in school systems: while citizens had an increasing stake in political and economic issues, schools produced students who were incapable of intellectual discourse. Writes Illich:

Dissent veils the contradictions inherent in the very idea of school. The established teachers unions, the technological wizards, and the educational liberation movement reinforce the commitment of the entire society to the fundamental axioms of a schooled world, somewhat in the manner in which many peace and protest movements reinforce the commitments of their members—be they black, female, young, or poor—to seek justice through the growth of the gross national income. (1971, p. 67)

As a consequence of these contradictions, Illich felt that a fundamental change within bureaucracies had to be made. While critics of Illich have argued that his critique is as complicitous as it is critical of the status quo, they miss an essential component of his rhetorical technique, the dialectical principal. In *Deschooling Society* he contends that “fundamental social change must begin with a change of consciousness about institutions” (p. 61). By the end of the sixties, social contradictions became prominent. “The mood of 1971,” states Illich, “is propitious for a major change of direction in search of a hopeful future” (p. 111). Noting that social programs create the opposite of their intentions, he contended that it was time to create systems antithetical to the status quo. Illich’s use of dialectal reasoning provides the opportunity to change consciousness. Citizens conceive the inconceivable and thereby create a world free from social inequity. Illich felt that change is a process of demystification, the eradication of false ideologies imposed by a hegemon, and in order to find those

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boundaries, citizens must create alternatives to the status quo. While Illich correctly addresses the problem within education, his solution—the elimination of bureaucracy—clearly failed to make a lasting impact. Like George Counts, Illich’s ideas were popular at the time, but both men are today ignored, a fact marked by the relatively poor contemporary scholarship on the two men and their ideas.

Despite their lowered status, much may be learned from their efforts and failures to affect social change through education reform. While Counts correctly realized that schools need to produce students who are politically conscious, his failure lay in a belief that a particular political ideology should be imposed. Imposing a system for political education broke down when educators could not reconcile ideological differences, and in the absence of instruction, students became apolitical. Illich’s response to growing decline in political awareness was to advocate the elimination of schools altogether, but his solution is clearly not feasible, either. What may be ascertained from their two failures, therefore, is that students need to be taught how to create their own political ideology that is cognizant of the power structures around them.

Counts’s and Illich’s failures demonstrate that in order to achieve genuine education reform, change begins by transforming people; once the masses demand reform, then the hegemon must adapt. This is a value that educators like Kozol reaffirms today. By chronicling the neglect of public school systems, Kozol has been a vocal advocate for systemic change. Change, however, cannot end with one man’s crusade. Teacher education programs must produce teachers who break the shackles of a tradition, teaching the next generation of students to not be as apolitical as the current generation. At all levels, teachers unions must support and nurture their teachers to foster political inquiry. Teachers must develop their own political voices and then develop their students’ voices. Increasingly, both parties have a vested interest in social and economic issues. Teachers must reject a hidden curriculum that preserves hegemony and dependence. Without active participation, those who are in power will not serve their needs. The progressives taught the value of integrating learning with society, and the teaching profession needs to return to this long-forgotten value.

Furthermore, with NCLB under increasing scrutiny and with many states opting out of the federal program, the time is right for educators at all levels to lobby state and federal leaders to implement a new curriculum that increases political and historical study. For example, current language arts standards are deficient in requiring the study of American literature and American literary history in over half the states (Stotsky & Finn, 2005). Federal mandates have forced an emphasis in functional literacy over critical literacy, and as a result, students do not see the connection between their reading material and society. Standardized tests dominate schools’ efforts to meet Adequate Yearly Progress, but the opportunity to explore more appropriate evaluative measures increases when states shift away from NCLB. To paraphrase Marx, Counts, and Illich would contend that “teachers of the world should unite” to eradicate a bureaucracy that discourages freethinking.

New educational trends can also provide a safe forum for teachers who seek to instill

political values in their students. For example, many districts are keen to promote character education programs and programs that are designed to teach poor students. Such programs are excellent opportunities to explore current events and civics because they are aligned to the program goals. Because schools are fixated on reading and math scores, other curricular issues have become neglected; by taking advantage of these new trends, teachers have the ability to connect students to the world around them.

Ultimately, a curriculum must teach students to look beyond consumption towards personal fulfillment. Illich was especially critical of the increasing emphasis in public schools on consumerism; therefore, new educational models should emphasize intrinsic values rather than extrinsic values. In the 1800s, the mantra, “Art for Art’s Sake,” was extremely popular; a new mantra needs to be chanted in schools today: “Learning for Learning’s Sake.” If educators truly wish to be triumphant in affecting social change, they must, as Counts argued long ago, “deliberately reach for their power and then make the most of their conquest” (1932, p. 26). The history of education in America for the past eighty years demonstrates that teachers have been unwilling or unable to utilize their power, but now opportunities exist. Counts and Illich sought “to separate learning from social control” (1971, p. 19); they believed that learning has the power to eliminate social injustice. Since schools have this noble ability to make a more perfect society, it is even more important for teachers to take command of their institutions.

It is unclear if Jonathon Kozol is aware of his predecessors’ failures in education reform efforts. If he is aware, however, he remains undaunted:

I’m going to encourage teachers who are the best witnesses because they’re in the classroom, to speak out politically, to rise up and protest, not only against this testing madness—which is sociopathic in its consequences—but also about the perpetual separation of our children so they don’t know each other any longer in America, and to protest the bitter unfairness of investing twice as much money in a White suburban child as we do in a low-income inner-city child in America. Things have to change. (as cited in Jehlen, 2006, p. 17)

Change, however, will not be easy for Kozol and contemporary reformers. The sad fact is that the hegemon has painfully flexed its power over school policy. As Michael L. Shaw notes (2006): “In all my years in education I have never felt such a high level of tension as exists today because of No Child Left Behind” (as cited in Harris, p. 1). According to NEA President Reg Weaver (2006) matters are getting worse: “nothing has gotten my attention more than recent actions undertaken by the U.S. Congress and the White House” (p. 7). While the federal government mandates increased performance standards, their financial responsibilities have been decreasing. NCLB has been “under-funded by \$40 billion over the past four years” (p. 7). Weaver also points out that President Bush trimmed \$2.1 billion from the education budget effectively ending 42 programs that Bush “considers unnecessary—art and technology, parent resource centers, and drug-free schools programs” (p. 7).

Perhaps the status quo will incite and unify tense, overworked teachers to

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retaliate. Perhaps the NEA will be able to lead its teachers to successful reform. Perhaps scholars will be able to utilize the efforts of prior reformers. However, George S. Counts and Ivan Illich have demonstrated that the path to successful school reform is arduous and perilous for today's educators. After 11 books and a yet a system which still continues to decline, Kozol's effectiveness as an educational reformer could certainly be questioned.

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