It has become seemingly commonplace in recent years to admit that there is a relationship between social class and curriculum in schools, but to say very little about it. For decades, U.S. education has been resistant to social-class discussions, preferring to focus on race. In recent years, in response to the insights of feminist pedagogy, gender has achieved almost equal status to race in discussions of schooling. But in general, discussion of class appears to be treated as almost “un-American,” as in the tendency of neoconservatives to dismiss social-class discussions, particularly critiques of inequality, as “foreign” ideology. Somewhat ironically, the neo-con revolution of the past twenty-five years began with a forceful claim that liberal-progressive ideas of schooling were class-biased because of the prevalence of ability tracking. That assertion became a key argument for the common core curriculum now being promoted in U.S. schools. As we shall see below, one of the first steps in assessing school curriculum is sorting out the contradictory policies and practices.

The substitution of race for class in U.S. policy discussions complicates matters, because there are certain correlations between class and race in our society. As Michael Harrington reported in The Other America (1962), the book that helped spark the 1960s War on Poverty, higher percentages of people of color live in poverty than the general population. He also reported that, based on population statistics, the largest numbers of citizens living in poverty are white. Sometimes we say “class” when we mean “race,” and sometimes it is the other way around because of the elision of the terms. In what follows, I will undoubtedly also mix race and class in ways that are problematic. But one only need
recall the exclusionary practices of golf and country clubs to recognize that class is not just about socioeconomic status, and that it is confounded with race and ethnicity within all parts of society.

One key reason for the avoidance of social-class debate in American educational thinking centers on the idealized meritocratic assumption that schooling eliminates class distinctions—Horace Mann first articulated the great advantage of education as an “equalizer” in a democratic society in 1840s. And, most popular education discourse in the meantime has uncritically adopted that equalizing function. Education, and the spread of education, is seen as inherently democratic. While the question of social class does appear in the writings of influential scholars writing about education, most of the social-class arguments about schools appear to come from postwar sociology (Aronowitz 1993, Bourdieu 1993, e.g.), or economics (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

The better-known education scholars who focus on social class, Apple (2004), Giroux (2001), and Kincheloe (2005) being examples, tend to write about knowledge and power rather than curriculum, and work under the banner of cultural studies rather than curriculum theory. The critical pedagogy model is a very powerful analytic tool, though, and much of what I will do in this chapter is indebted to its insights. I suppose it would be foolish to try to add anything philosophically significant to what Joe Kincheloe (2005) recently articulated and synthesized in Critical Pedagogy, but I want to take aim at the “practical” elements of curriculum.

The critical pedagogy emphasis on power and political process, with the concept of hegemonic ideology at its heart, appears too deterministic for curriculum-in-action in individual classrooms. Many policy decisions are made out of fear and ignorance (e.g., current government decisions concerning privacy), and most public policy is deeply contradictory and/or confused. School practice, despite the current emphasis on federal and state accountability, is rarely controllable, and much of the oppressive practice in schools has as much to do with parental pressure on administrators and school boards (and the local Fox network affiliate) than oppressive elected officials. Further, studies of “top-down” policies made at the state level usually reveal that those policies are modified to meet local conditions—modified here means subverted (Loveless 1999).

I also perceive that there has been a removal of class and curriculum discussion on the Left because discussions of pedagogy and curriculum are misconstrued as “traditional” discussions of planning and technique. The critical pedagogy movement in the United States has been notorious for avoiding classroom-based curricular discussions, focusing instead on institutional and cultural analysis, cultural capital reproduction and distribution within the culture, and educational policy/law. All the time spent on analyzing cultural context rarely leaves time for looking at school curriculum. On the other hand, Apple’s analysis of the science and social studies curriculum in Ideology and Curriculum, especially the “hidden curriculum” of social values and norms, is a necessary baseline for any attempt to unpack curriculum and practice (2004).

But, here’s the point: the time for analysis is over. We live in times when people want answers, as in the federal government’s push to publish guidelines on “What Works” in teaching and the new Department of Education declarations that we know “what works” based on “scientific” research (see U.S. Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse Web site 2006). On the other side, the critical pedagogy traditions rarely provide “answers” (constructed as oppositional, they are focused on critique rather than construction). As a result, the “practical” minded tend to have inordinate influence on new curriculum. One only need look at the success of E. D. Hirsch Jr. (1987) promoting “cultural literacy” as philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, and product to see the advantage of practicality. In uncertain times, the functionalist agenda will take precedence.

There have been some singular efforts addressing social class in classroom settings, namely Paul Willis’s Learning to Labor (1981, set in England, of course), or, for that matter, Cameron Crowe’s Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1981), but even those are much less interested in actual curriculum and classroom practice than the social construct called “schooling.” Basil Bernstein’s work on social-class dialect in Great Britain in the 1960s is a good example of curriculum specific, social-class critique in its time (Bernstein 1971). But, in an apt illustration of my previous point about race and class, all of the subsequent discussion of sociolinguistic differences in social class dialects in the United States became an obsession with “Black English.”
That discussion continues to this day with the not-so-long-ago cause célèbre surrounding “ebonics” in Oakland, California.

Basil Bernstein places the class divisions squarely within the sociolinguistic demarcations undergirding communication (1971). In Bernstein’s analysis, even the linguistic codes discriminate, an argument picked up later by Lisa Delpit to argue against progressive (in this case, “naturalistic”) language practices used by white teachers in schools populated by low Supplemental Educational Services (SES) African American kids (Delpit 1988). The irony in Delpit’s position, at least to me, is her contention that allowing low SES kids to employ their own language is a form of class discrimination in teaching. Neo-cons call anything that accounts for racial difference the “soft bigotry of low expectations” (Bush 2004). Both Bernstein’s “class, codes, and control” argument and the debate over Black English explicitly argue class-based rationales for a single, common curriculum, though one that eliminates the “lower class” dialect of the low SES students.

I know that some readers are now saying, probably out loud, that I am being foolish here. Surely most American scholars concerned with pedagogy are interested in social-class differences. I would reply that most studies of class, such as Jonathan Kozol’s books, are merely a list of deficits that afflict poor children. There have been some interesting writings on class and curriculum in U.S. schools, but little “practical discussion.” Recent interest appears as an argument over whether the class bias exists, since “class bias” tends to disappear and reemerge as “ability tracking.” Nowadays, the standard neo-con response to assertions of class bias by any thinker is that the “liberals” are trying to promote “class warfare” and that kids really need direct instruction to make up for their cultural deficits. Coupled with the neo-con assertion that tracking is a liberal-progressive legacy, the liberal policy maker finds it as difficult to argue for a class-free curriculum as to label oneself as a “liberal.”

What I would also argue here is that the we and they in the class debate have been confused. Ever since the Heritage Foundation and the other conservative think tanks were founded after the humiliating defeat of Barry Goldwater and right-wing ideals in 1964, the Right has been turning liberal and even radical discourse on its head. The Right has made liberal discourse the enemy, but then uses liberal arguments to accuse liberal progressive teachers of racism, sexism, and elitism. Lisa Delpit, interestingly, was the first to score big in the Orwellian arena when she attacked the liberal notions ascribed to whole language as “racist.” E. D. Hirsch Jr., of course, was the most successful of all the conservative Orwellians with his coining of “cultural literacy.” And, in higher education, who can forget Allan Bloom’s diatribe against liberal thinking, The Closing of the American Mind (1988); even the title is beautifully Orwellian, suggesting that liberal thinking has “closed” the mind.

What I want to look at here is not the neo-con “solutions” to the “elitist” curriculum promoted by liberal progressive thinking over the past century: the exceptionally “practical” curriculum solutions provided by Hirsch (1987), Ravitch with Finn (1988), and Bloom (1988) have been disseminated and discussed. They have also been implemented through NCLB and other initiatives at the state and local levels. Instead, I want to take a look at the “practical” solutions to class-biased curriculum from both the liberal and leftist positions. I want to reference representatives from those two positions to show how the “solutions,” if there are any, to class-based curriculum in schools (and among schools) are just as problematic as the neo-con cultural literacy model. The positions of the Left tend to be deterministic and the positions of the liberals tend toward the essentialist, neither of which addresses the problem of class-biased curriculum in the long run.

Folks on the left/liberal side of the scale as ideologically disparate as Jean Anyon and Theodore Sizer have written, famously, about class differences in schooling and have made specific suggestions for fixing the problem (Anyon 1980; Sizer 1984). The general argument goes like this: Schools are tracked by “ability grouping.” Ability grouping correlates with class (i.e., SES or socioeconomic status, in sociological terms). Ergo, goes the argument, American schools are segregated by class. (You can see where the neo-cons got the argument in the first place.) The alleged meritocracy of ability testing merely recapitulates the class-biased strata of society outside of school (Lemann 1999). Some critics have even argued that the class struggle goes on within even the wealthiest and most elite schools themselves (Mathews 1998). In any case, goes the argument, different social classes (different SES groups) receive different treatment in school programs, classroom conditions, curricular
choices and opportunities, and career counseling. Anyon and Sizer are both grounded and “practical” in their approaches—each has a plan.

Anyon’s and Sizer’s arguments, respectively, are particularly telling, since both have become popular constructions of the class bias argument as it relates to classroom practice and curriculum transformation. Anyon argues that the different academic tracks represent different approaches to student learning and career expectations (see Anyon 1980, for the oft-reprinted article). The upper tracks receive information that the lower tracks do not, and more important, are treated differently. The upper-track—and, therefore, upper-class—kids are asked to engage in critical thinking and encouraged to express their ideas. Lower-track—that is lower-class—kids are taught to repeat information they have been asked to “learn” and are rarely asked about their thoughts on a subject. The origin of this system, and its maintenance, is conscious and unconscious elitism based on differential expectations for these students in society.

Anyon’s solution to class-divided schools is a Marxist utopian endgame, articulating the social justice argument that schools will never be equal until society is equal (see Radical Possibilities, 2005). The fatal problem with this argument is ignoring the curriculum as not important, or at least not of interest, until the necessary changes in the system bring about social justice. In the end, even a society that is “just” does not automatically enact a curriculum that is common to all and fair to each one, or even meritocratic for that matter. Michael D. Young’s The Rise of the Meritocracy (1994) provides a very clever, and chilling, illustration of what might happen in a society built around social justice, and how inequality (and privilege) will always be a problem in any utopian scheme. Kurt Vonnegut’s short story “Harrison Bergeron” (1968) also skewers the assumptions of “equality” in a utopian future in which the “Handicapper General” limits the abilities of “gifted” citizens to make them equal with the less able. The deterministic argument assumes a one-way assertion of power over the curriculum rather than a reciprocal relationship between school and society (and certainly not the radical progressive notion of curriculum as culturally transformative).

This “put the curriculum off until we fix society” approach is done at a peril, since it assumes that change in the school curriculum, or maintenance of the class-divided curriculum, does not contribute directly to the societal problem. The first thing the Reaganista neo-con revolution attacked was the school curriculum, arguing that it was a “cafeteria” or a “shopping mall” style hodgepodge of electives, and asking that it be controlled, reduced, authorized, and sanitized for your protection. The culture wars are fought at the school level for most citizens, not in the editorial pages of elite magazines and newspapers. The debate over creationism in science class cannot wait for a just society.

The shopping mall image comes from a “Study of American High Schools,” the most famous volume of which was Theodore Sizer’s Horace’s Compromise (1984). (Another volume, by Arthur Powell and others, from that study was titled The Shopping Mall High School). Sizer’s argument represents the neoliberal argument with a sort of nostalgia for Horace Mann’s academies. Sizer’s practical project is called the “Coalition of Essential Schools” for the type of curriculum the schools meant to offer (Coalition of Essential Schools National Website 2006). The essential school curriculum is the “less is more” model, reducing the school curriculum to its basic academic elements. Schools are stripped of sports and band and all the other accoutrements of the modern suburban high school. But, also, the curriculum is “less” and the study is “more.” Sizer’s vision of the “essential curriculum” as a curriculum for all addresses his complaints about the class divisions in American high schools.

Sizer’s solution is what I would term the “shining city on a hill” (Matt. 5:14–16, a central Reagan metaphor even referenced at his funeral), or “New Jerusalem” (the Puritan version of Utopia) argument, in which all class differences are eroded by returning to a simple Puritan existence. In the Puritan utopia, drawing on Thomas More’s original vision of utopia, the object of life is shunning pride. In Sizer’s school model, the leveling argument is expressed as the essential curriculum. Despite its old-time liberal origins, Sizer’s curricular vision is what the neo-cons have lightened on to produce the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. The George W. Bush administration’s rewrite of Title I into NCLB represents itself as a classless document—it argues for a common, limited, testable curriculum for all classes.

The religious connotations of the essential curriculum, as Puritan culture, do echo throughout the Bush administration’s vision of education,
since much of the discussion appears to be about behavior and character. I remember President Bush talking about rewards and consequences during much of the specifying concerning NCLB (The National Forum 2000). Certainly, “rewards and consequences” is Orwellian Newspeak for “rewards and punishments,” since both are consequences. Indeed, much of the rhetoric around NCLB responses by state and local authorities has been focused on controlling the curriculum as a means of controlling the teachers and the kids. The control of character, based on assumptions of the traditional Protestant work ethic, is part and parcel of the puritan essentialist curriculum. Liberals (and Leftists) who objected to the removal of curricular complexity were tagged, in an Orwellian twist, “elitists,” but you can see how the religious metaphors also question the “character” of those who objected. The basic anti-intellectualism of the neo-con essentialist agenda has its roots in religion as well, especially evangelical Christianity, but more about anti-intellectualism later.

While many liberals and Leftists see NCLB as a plan for the systematic destruction of the public school system, the neo-con rhetoric has been to present NCLB as a democratic and leveling instrument of salvation. NCLB is the logical extension of the Reaganista de-funding of vocational education in high schools in the early 1980s (even before *A Nation at Risk*), on the basis of the argument that the vocational track amounted to class-based discrimination in the curriculum. The vocational track was originally established in 1918 by the Smith-Hughes Act that created the comprehensive high school, which also led to expectations for universal K–12 schooling. Good conservatives have always fought the comprehensive elements (vocational tracks, health, counseling, anything outside the basic academic curriculum) as unnecessary expense. (In the 1994 Texas gubernatorial debates, George W. Bush argued for reducing the curriculum to the four academic subjects based on an economic argument.) The Reaganistas shifted vocational and technical training to postsecondary proprietary institutions; of course, the first results of that policy shift were the student loan scandals of the 1980s. What the neo-cons have done, in applying the common, controlled curriculum to schools, is erase the comprehensive high school and replace six to eight years of basic schooling with twelve years of basic schooling. The high school exit examinations now in place all over the country, required by NCLB, guarantee it.

Given the various correlations between poverty and ethnicity in the United States, it is also interesting to view some of the other assumptions of the democratizing influences embodied in NCLB with its emphasis on standardized testing, especially as it relates to college admissions. First, I might mention a key moment in the “Texas School Miracle” of the 1990s, the main source of the federal NCLB legislation. The Texas courts ruled that affirmative action was not beneficial to the citizens of Texas, so affirmative action by race was replaced by a class-based system. The court ruled that since Texas schools remained de facto segregated fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education, the “fair” thing to do was admit the top 10 percent of students graduating from any high school in Texas to the University of Texas system (Horn and Flores 2003). The confusion of “access” with “opportunity” should be clear to anyone with any reasoning skills, but the fact remains that this is a class-based affirmative action model. Replacing race with class, while simultaneously making class a marker of race (given the de facto segregation of the schools), strikes me as pretzel logic.

I certainly do not want to single out the southern states for intractable racism and elitism. There used to be an old school joke about Long Island, the mostly segregated suburban paradise east of New York City: On Long Island, it is said, SAT scores are correlated with distance from the water. The connection between SES (and housing) and standardized test performance is well documented. Real estate agents may be responsible for most of the class-based problems in the United States, but they are only meeting the expectations of their clients. If one reads the real estate listings in the Long Island newspapers, one sees coding related to school districts. In listings for towns where a majority of the local schools’ population is minority (and that is a small number of towns) there is an indication if the particular house’s neighborhood is zoned for an adjoining (meaning acceptable, i.e., nonminority) school district. I am sure that is the case in many other communities across the United States.

That standardized testing correlates with class is a bit obvious anyway. One could easily argue that if the bias in favor of the higher SES groups did not appear in the scores of the students that the tests would be abandoned. Why would the ruling classes use a test that did not provide a justification for their advantages? Enforcing federally mandated
fair housing laws has been subverted at every turn, why shouldn’t the meritocratic elements in standardized testing also be subverted? The truly elite universities argue that they go well beyond the SAT in admissions decisions. But what is that but another way of discriminating against those who score well on the tests but do not have the leisure or the income to engage in significant charitable or community pursuits or interesting hobbies. I cannot help but point out the decline in the influence of SAT scores in elite college admissions now that Asian students have become a “problem”; in other words, “too many” Asians with high SAT scores are applying to a select number of universities (Mathews 2005). Since a quota system like the one used against Jewish students in the 1930s is now out of the question, the elite schools now argue they need a diverse student body (meaning not too many Asians, apparently). To this day, legacies, the children of alumni, are generally three times as likely to be admitted to Ivy League schools as other applicants. Some have called this affirmative action for the rich.

TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM

Most discussions of the curriculum leave out the teacher’s influence. The curriculum is not just its content. The operationalized curriculum includes the teacher, the ideas and concepts taught by the teacher, and the teacher’s stance relative to the students. The argument about African American and Latino teachers as role models for African American and Latino students is rarely applied to the class divisions between teachers and students in predominantly white schools. Though, interestingly, much of the recent agitation to “improve” teaching has implicitly argued a set of assumptions regarding the class of origin of public school teachers. The common belief is that teachers traditionally exhibit blue-collar origins. In any case, teachers are from the “lower classes” in most discussions of recruiting and educating teachers and in discussing the failings of schools.

Here is another conundrum for us to sort out. The traditional “blue collar” origin of many teaching professionals has been constructed as a “problem” by the Reaganistas, to be solved by replacing them with temporary craftspeople from the middle and upper classes recruited through “alternate route” certification programs. Sympathy for working-class and poor children is certainly more likely to be promoted by liberal progressive thinking implicit in the professional model (and those who have experienced social mobility themselves), than a group of dilettantes from the privileged classes who see the kids in static, class-biased terms and do not see the schools as place for social mobility. It is interesting how those who appear to promote the notion of teachers as nonprofessionals tend toward conservative views of the school’s social and political function (see Chester Finn’s Fordham Foundation as the best example).

If one reads a classic like Pamela Grossman’s The Making of a Teacher (1990) through that lens, one can see that the differences between traditional professional training and the new alternative routes are a conflict between class-based ideologies. Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach for America (based on her undergraduate thesis [!] at Princeton; so much for the value of experience), certainly embodies the Reaganista notion of “trickle down” in her basic argument for “new” people in teaching and a “mission” for the elite college graduates before they go off to professional school (Kopp 2003). She argues that teaching cannot be taught (think about the logical problem in that reasoning), and so one can only assume teaching is a matter of inherent class and character (both essentials of our neo-con world). Elite curriculum, as I will discuss below, is always “different” from what the regular folks get, so it essential to the recruitment of “better class” people into teaching that the certificate route be an “alternate.”

Teaching has been constructed as lower class (or low SES, as in “You can’t make any money in teaching.”) when it applies to professionals certified by state authorities and professional standards. If the job is constructed as a temporary position that needs little preparation other than a basic liberal arts degree, then it is considered something worthy of doing for the elite classes. In fact, the current rhetoric seems to suggest that noblesse oblige, or a missionary model to mix in with our religious metaphor, is a major factor in saving our society from the excesses of the hippie liberals who have destroyed our schools by promoting freedom and choice (consult any neo-con report or pop culture document on schooling in the past twenty-five years for the reference here). The missionary model is a neocolonialist view of low SES kids, a colonialist view more obvious when accounting for the number of
new immigrants in those poor schools. Harvard Professor and Clash of Civilizations author Samuel Huntington’s recent book, Who We Are: The Challenges to America's National Identity (2004) makes the argument directly: Americans need to colonize the new immigrants within our borders or risk losing “American” values which explicitly includes “Protestant” Christianity.

SCHOOLS AND CURRICULUM

Reform in schooling has traditionally only affected the working class and poor. Curriculum has not really changed for the upper classes—it is just remains different from what the other kids get. Mostly, elite curriculum reinforces a familiarity with European culture of the past. Here in New York City, we have been undergoing our own special form of school reform in response to NCLB (tagged something ironic like “Children First”) and wrestling with the new political leadership model that brings in lawyers and other nonprofessionals to run the school system. In keeping with the mandates of NCLB, Chancellor Klein (under the mayor’s “leadership”) has instituted a common curriculum for all schools in New York City. He simultaneously released the top-performing 200 schools from the curriculum mandates. They could do whatever they wanted, since they were “successful.” The majority of the schools on the list (a very carefully selected list, politically) were traditionally “elite” schools in the system, either by testing (the famous all-borough high schools like Bronx High School of Science) or, de facto, by politically powerful neighborhoods.

One could certainly argue class bias in this scheme. Students in all but the most elite settings are subjected to a reduced and common curriculum, to be reinforced by tests that would punish as well as promote. But what is most puzzling is the set of assumptions that would ignore the top-performing schools as curriculum models for the rest of the system. The only reason for that assumption would be a class-biased assumption that the high-performing schools were not just “better” than the rest but “different.” Illogically as well, at least based on the common culture argument of the neo-cons, was the idea that not everyone got the same curriculum, even though they all took the same tests. Wasn’t the new argument, that tests should test specific information taught by teachers in lock-step sequence, the rationale for using a common curriculum in the first place? And here we have school officials saying that the top-performing schools can teach anything they like as long as the kids score well on the tests. Maybe there are several twists in that logic beyond my comprehension, but it all looks like privilege to me.

But here we have the class issue exposed for all of its pernicious effect. What one actually finds in the elite schools is not just a special curriculum (though it doesn’t matter which, since its only distinguishing factor is that it is “different”), but extensive “extracurricular” activities denied the poorer schools (conflating all meanings of “poor”). If that is not enough, in the Reaganista fee-based society, many of those extras need to be paid for by the parents who wish their children to participate. Even the desire for extracurricular activity is undermined by the fiscal reality for poor children and poor schools. The attitudes that rationalize this situation are truly shocking to me, a beneficiary of baby boom school-funding policies. Most shocking was the public pronouncement of a colleague of mine at my public university that has traditionally served the poor: “If these kids want counseling, guidance, and advising, they should go to a private university and pay for it.” I think he was a war baby, and not a boomer. I believe most U.S. politicians think in similar terms, at least judging by all recent federal and state reductions in funding for public education.

And so here’s the point, the essential curriculum is class-biased curriculum because it provides limited curricular and extracurricular choices to those who cannot afford in both time and money to seek them outside of schools. The kids whose parents cannot afford to provide them with an enriched curriculum outside of school (or in some districts get together with the other parents to buy time and circumstance) are stuck with the basic curriculum. For the Leftists who think the curriculum does not matter until the revolution happens, we are currently teaching a basic curriculum to a new generation of students who will not be able to grasp the “emancipatory moment” when it arrives, because they will not have the political imagination to envision a different world of possibility and equality. Further, while the content of the curriculum may now be controlled through testing, the form still isn’t. Scripted lessons, the latest educational “innovation,” are the next
step in that process. The glimmer of hope here is that scripts are always meant to “played,” not merely followed, but that will depend on the teacher assessment schema and its “consequences.”

As I write this, the federal government has proposed a new student-aid plan that rewards low-income students who have completed “a rigorous secondary school program of study,” with the definition of “rigorous” left up to the Secretary of Education, herself famously a non-professional (Dillon 2006). “Larger amounts” will also be available to “college juniors and seniors majoring in math, science, and other critical fields.” My guess is that “rigorous” curriculum for low-income students is not the same as the curriculum needed for the math and science students. The low-income students will also be less likely to attend schools that provide the science and math courses needed to qualify for this student aid. “Rigor” has a moral and disciplinary quality to it, and suggests a de facto reduction in aid for low-income students unless they shape up and behave themselves. Many of the low-income students never get to be juniors and seniors in college anyway. Will the low-income students have access to a full college preparatory curriculum in their underfunded schools that will allow them to take advantage of the science and math awards? Class-biased school planning would suggest it is a waste of time to spend the money.

I would also like to leave a footnote on the relationship between immigration and class, recognizing that most immigrants suffer various forms of class-biased curriculum and schooling in the United States. For example, foreign language knowledge is deemed a “good” among the upper classes. But, when the multilanguage marker is applied to lower-status—and lower-class—immigrants, multiple languages are considered a barrier to learning and, more important, a threat to society. The difference: the political ideology of the ruling classes and the conservative influence of those classes. The foreign language scholar Terry Osborn has asked the important question regarding foreign language in a period of significant immigration: what exactly is “foreign” in foreign language study in the United States today (2000)? The answer, of course, rests in who you are and what you have to gain or lose in the definition. Poor immigrants are “handicapped” by their bilingualism, say the authorities, and they are treated for their deficits. Conversely, even in these patriotic times, an elite student who has not studied a foreign language is considered poorly educated.

CULTURAL CHANGE AND CURRICULUM CHANGE

The problem with most theories of class and curriculum is that they are static rather than dynamic. Here is the reason we do not want to buy into the essentialist curriculum argument or the deterministic political argument: both are based on assumptions about the nature of culture and cultural change that are too simplistic. For example, the Left determinist view holds that there is a neocorporate dominant culture that can be replaced with a culture dominated by social justice—the notion is that there are two cultural positions at war with one another (the Hegel-Marx dialectic). One criticism of deterministic theory is the demonstrated tendency for the power structure of elitism to reassert itself after a revolution, so a “just” society like the Communist revolution-inspired Soviet Russia will always re-create an elite class and attendant educational structure. The liberal essentialist view holds that most of popular culture—that is, everyday experience—is irrelevant or merely distracting from true knowledge—the notion being that there is a real culture hidden underneath all the distractions and false knowledge. You can see how the conflict metaphor basic to one and the religious metaphor basic to the other as they play out in those positions.

But, at any given point in time there is no single culture but a multitude of cultures. Schools, especially in the curriculum, normally represent only the official culture. Major parts of culture are not represented in school curriculum, the best current example being all forms of popular new media. One assumes that the official curriculum ignores popular culture as a means of legitimizing it. Yet, all efforts to standardize, homogenize, and eliminate popular culture have failed.

Raymond Williams has speculated on cultural development and argued that at any given time a culture includes a dominant culture, but also an emergent culture, reflecting new movements and developments, for example, avant-garde art or new technologies, and a residual culture reflecting deliberately maintained traditions of obsolete culture, for example, opera or horseback riding (Williams 1975, 2003). Residual culture tends to be identified with upper-class conservatism, but also
would include religious culture that rejects modern culture, the Mennonites being one extreme. Using this residual-dominant-emergent heuristic for framing curriculum development, one could say that the dominant culture is the official curriculum and is the basis for common school curriculum. The residual culture forms the additional curriculum for the elite classes, especially connected to European sources. Emergent culture is rarely reflected in the official school curriculum—even in progressive college curricula emergent cultural studies tend to be interdisciplinary, or outside the traditional disciplines.

I might add here, referencing my point about common culture curriculum under the Reaganistas, that the current dominant culture is anti-intellectual. The neo-con public relations vision of the ideal American is based on a portrayal of commonsense and action dictated by “confident” leadership. (Confident is President Bush’s favorite word when asked to provide a rationale for a policy or decision: he says he is confident or he has confidence in the decision. One dictionary definition of “confidence” is “the state of feeling certain about the truth of something.”) The president’s stance, identical to Ronald Reagan’s, is to pose as a cowboy, an outdoorsman of few words and decisive action, the objective correlative and central metaphor of which appears to be brush cutting. One could certainly argue that U.S. culture has never been an intellectual culture (see Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, 1966), but it appears that we are now doing our best to ignore the important changes in the culture and/or resist them (the stem cell debate, censorship of public airwaves, Darwin and “intelligent design,” and many other examples reported daily).

Some of the anti-intellectualism is a reaction against the creative and revolutionary elements of the 1960s. The initial attacks on the school curriculum in the neo-con revolution were the attacks on the elective system—the smorgasbord curriculum—that had cropped up in high schools mimicking the elective system in the colleges. Sizer’s “less is more” approach fits right into the anti-intellectual model, though he would not agree with the fundamental anti-intellectualism. In the official Guide to NYC Small High Schools available to parents, we find this bold heading: “You will learn fewer subjects well” (New York Post 2004). The short text following says that students will be “expected to meet state graduation requirements” and that the small schools “will not have hundreds of different classes to choose from.” (How is that for policy by negation?). One of the assumptions of this sort of controlled curriculum is that school authorities know what is best for students. It is especially interesting to note that 100 years after the invention of film and fifty after television transformed our culture—not to mention the computer—there is still no form of media study in the official curriculum. Raymond Williams might provide some insight into why this is, in his historical study of British schools, that in a time of tremendous cultural change the curriculum would be restricted:

It is interesting that at the beginning of the industrial revolution in Britain, when education had to be reorganized, the ruling class decided to teach working people to read but not to write. If they could read, they could understand new kinds of instructions and, moreover, they could read the Bible for their moral improvement. They did not need writing, however, since they would have no orders or instructions or lessons to communicate. . . . The full range of writing came later, with further development of the society and the economy (Williams 1974, 131).

Literacy for the masses cannot be the same as literacy for the gentleman classes, says the school authority, because the lower classes cannot be trusted to use their new knowledge for the betterment of society. On the other hand, this is a Pandora’s box situation, as Williams points out, because, “There was no way to teach a man to read the Bible which did not also enable him to read the radical press. A controlled intention became an uncontrolled effect.” Some thinkers such as Williams see the increasing democratization of literacy as an unstoppable force in overall democratization. The recent attempts to reduce the curriculum could be seen as an attempt to stop the democratization of knowledge, or at least control it into meaninglessness.

Now, of course, one might argue that I am overblowing the situation here—I sound like one of those conspiracy theorists. Have the “powers that be” really been trying to keep the children of working-class parents illiterate? Didn’t I just say that Raymond Williams showed a historical progression toward more available literacy? I didn’t say that Williams said it was an easy process, nor a guaranteed one. Like any good neo-Marxist scholar, he sees the increase in freedom and the growth of literacy as reciprocal. On the other hand, there are all sorts of precedents
to show the attempts to keep literacy from the people. In medieval Germany, rulers went so far as to invent a sign system for their illiterate peasants, rather than teach them “real” German. One also needs to be reminded that every first translator of the Bible into the vernacular language, one that could be read by those who were literate but not in Latin, was burned at the stake by the authorities. Even the vernacularly literate were to be kept illiterate when it came to the language of the law and the church, since that remained in Latin for centuries. Upper-class education in Great Britain was conducted in Latin and Greek until the twentieth century, as were the professional discourses. Though the case is not as extreme in the United States, Latin was not dropped as a requirement for college admission until 1912, about the same time British universities moved toward English studies as the dominant discourse.

In the end, the current U.S. policy demanding “rigorous” curriculum probably means teaching simple textual literacy in a world where literacy is complex and multimedia. The Reaganista movement toward standardizing the curriculum is an attempt to stop cultural movement, or return the culture to pre-1932. Neo-cons are not elitists in the old sense, like liberals, but ideologues (some would say fascists) who want to stop time, and then turn back the clock to a time before the liberal transformation of society represented first by Roosevelt’s New Deal and enhanced by Johnson’s Great Society. This form of elitism is anti-intellectual in nature. It pretends to care about education while providing nothing more than basic knowledge that is then legitimated as real knowledge by a standardized test. Everyone is officially stupid under the neo-con educational model, almost as if Orwell’s 1984 had been the blueprint.

But students need diversity and complexity in the curricular options. Much of the rhetoric of the small school movement has been built around educational options, even though the curriculum is standardized and reduced. One of the fears of social thinkers is that the new small schools will become new bastions of elitism. Indeed, along with the small school movement one finds a push for the development of honors colleges within large public universities. This development is also part of the new stratification. The “smart” kids are funneled into special, and small, classes with full-time professors while the “regular” kids continue to attend huge lectures and be taught by adjunct instructors or graduate students. The “smart” kids also tend to get free tuition and other perks such as free laptop computers, while the “regular” students are on their own—sink or swim. One could see the relationship of the new small schools to the rest of the kids in the traditional schools as a similar structural arrangement.

CURRICULUM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I would like to suggest several starting points as necessary for redefining curriculum in our time to reduce the overall bias against all citizens outside the ruling classes. First, the obvious anti-intellectualism needs to be accounted for, along with the limitations of subject matter. Reduce tracking, yes, but that doesn’t seem too likely, given parental demands. Instead, why not rethink the source of the curriculum and put some faith back in the teaching professionals, if there are any left after the current frenzy for alternatively certified teachers.

First, teachers who want to make a difference should focus on the emergent culture, in relation to the dominant, for the poor and working class. The poor and working-class students rarely receive any exposure to residual culture, except to point out they lack any knowledge of it. Deemphasizing residual culture does not mean removing history—we just need to stop living in the past. Anyway, cultural literacy as defined by Hirsch and others (a mix of dominant and residual) is not dedicated to the transformation of the culture in any case. Develop the emergent culture curriculum, essentially popular culture, around student experience and interest (a variation on Dewey). Certainly the new emphasis on testing is designed to stop us from doing this, but the core of the testable dominant curriculum is so small in the current anti-intellectual less-is-more format that there is plenty of time for study of emerging cultural movements. Schema theory would suggest that connections between a student’s mental schema and the school curriculum are essential to meaningful learning in any case. In other words, the students’ experience must jibe in some fashion with what you are trying to teach them for any meaningful learning to take place.

Speaking of modern learning theories, situated cognition is also necessary to moving beyond the calcified strata of class-based school
curriculum (see Lave and Wenger 1991). The neo-con cultural literacy idea is based on a faulty translation, or misappropriation, of schema theory in which the brain is compared to a computer hard drive with stored data to be accessed at will (Hirsch 1987). Situated cognition returns the temporal and the situational to the engagement and exhibition of knowledge, and returns the prior knowledge teaching strategy to its problem-solving origin as a condition for thinking, rather than a test of trivia and mark of “quality” and “rigor.” Situated cognitive experience (versus a recall of information model) changes the class structure of schooling by eliminating the “deficit” rationalization from school tracking assignments. Situated cognition also deflates instructional strategies that assume kids cannot learn because they lack prior knowledge that some teacher in an earlier grade should have taught them. What is prior knowledge for the twenty-first century, anyway, that isn’t more about the now of dominant and emergent culture than the then of residual culture? On the other side of that argument, we have a U.S. president appointing Supreme Court judges who believe in strict constructionism, an approach that says we must look to the original intentions, through literal textual interpretation, of the eighteenth-century authors of that document for the rule of law in the centuries following. How much more important could focusing education on the future be in that scenario?

Having said all of this, I would also argue that the culture is too rich for a school system to remain oppressive or limited for long. School becomes completely irrelevant when it is too controlled. The small schools movement, contradictory to its less-is-more arguments, will develop communities of learners who will begin to define their knowledge differently from state expectations. The college honors students will be the first to rebel against the standard curriculum of the college once they begin to interact with the “regular” students. Differentiated curriculum promotes diversity after all, and diversity introduces complexity back into the argument. We need to promote difference that is not a status difference—though status is a slippery thing to pin down in the world increasingly defined by raw capitalist power and Re-Gilded Age celebrities such as Donald Trump. The small schools movement promotes communities of learners who will assume their own status markers. Recent studies of student use of information technology out-

side of the official curriculum seem to suggest they are also redefining cultural categories and crossing racial and class lines—the current dominance of hip hop culture should be sufficient evidence for anyone. I do not doubt that inequality of some sort is likely to continue, but it is impossible to define what the status cultural capital will be in the near future. Who would have thought Übernerds such as Bill Gates would have so much power and cultural influence when we were in school during the 1960s? It is always difficult to predict relevance. After failing to make the transition to the Renaissance way of thinking, medieval monasteries were simply shut down by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century. A school system that tries to maintain its connection with the past is doomed to the same fate. That could be what the Reaganistas are up to, returning us to a time in the past when America was for Americans and everyone knew their place in the scheme of things. Others would argue that the Reaganistas are transforming the schools for the brave new world of service workers who need little complex knowledge and very little special training (see Aronowitz 2004). In either case, the result is the same, and the diagnosis, as well as the practical “solution,” remains either essentialist or deterministic.

Finally, there is a confusion of the mandated curriculum with the teacher-generated curriculum in most of the arguments about curriculum. The mandated curriculum is always a political wish list and not an operationalized curriculum. When one considers the teacher’s role in curriculum development and implementation, one begins to see how the deterministic approach either allows teachers to pass the buck (“I am required to teach only the state-mandated curriculum.”) or excuse oneself from participation in the kids’ education (“What can one teacher do?”). The essentialist position becomes an excuse for not engaging the world fully; essentialism allows the teacher to aim low and close the door to the classroom. In the worst-case scenarios, the determinist view of school becomes meaningless; the essentialist view reduces the curriculum to “preparatory” study.

The school curriculum needs to be changed primarily to make the lives of children and adolescents better. Right here. Right now. As Dewey said, “Education is not preparation for life. It is life.” The curriculum is a major part of that process, and the individual teacher has the key role to play in the classroom experience. The great social forces
of popular dissent or a revolution in the street are not necessary to make that change. The teaching professional is necessary though, if nothing else, to allow the kids to explore their world outside the limiting official curriculum. But teachers need to do more that just get out of the way of student learning, and that requires some understanding of how kids learn. It also requires a connection to popular culture, children’s and adolescent versions as well as adult versions. Central to that connection with the world outside of school is a movement toward multimedia knowing and representing.

What also appear to be needed are some complexity and a tiny bit of chaos. The new school leadership models, based on hiring nonprofessionals with leadership qualities, are part of the same neo-con movement, an attempt to limit and control intellectual freedom in American education. It is up to the teacher, the individual teacher working with colleagues, including enlightened teaching professionals serving as administrators, who have the same respect for children and education, to subvert the limitations of the official curriculum. This process is not too different from the old question-authority model of teaching, but it allows for a new construction of authority. Barring a fascist roundup of the teachers (I know, it has happened before), the current limited, anti-intellectual system may fail in any case under the weigh of its own absurdity. As Mark Twain opined, “Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.” If it doesn’t, then the armed revolution may be necessary. But we might in the meantime simply engage the world and resist the attempts of others to limit and control our thinking. And then the revolution will come.

REFERENCES
