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Michael W. Apple
apple@education.wisc.edu

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IF TEACHER ASSESSMENT IS THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

Michael W. Apple

John Bascom Professor of
Curriculum and Instruction
and Educational Policy Studies
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Michael W. Apple is John Bascom Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has written extensively on the relationship between education and power. Among his recent books are *Official Knowledge* (1993), *Education and Power* (1995), *Democratic Schools* (1995), and *Cultural Politics and Education* (1996).

Introduction

Throughout the United States, it is almost impossible not to hear the din of criticism of our educational system. It is supposedly a failure. It does not prepare our children for the rigors of international competition. It is too responsive to "minority" interests and not responsive to "our" common culture. It is inefficient and wasteful. And it has been captured by "producer" (teacher) not "consumer" (parents and the business community) interests.

A number of quite contradictory proposals to "fix" the schools are currently enjoying their place in the limelight. The first is organized around a vision of the weak state. Schools and teachers will become more efficient and effective, we are told, if we turn them over to the market. Voucher and choice plans will solve deep seated educational problems. The second set of proposals is centered around a vision of the strong state. Tighter control will solve our problems. Establishing national curricula and national testing is the answer here.

Most of the impetus for both of these sets of proposals comes from various fractions of the conservative alliance now taking center stage in education and in social policy in general. For the former--neo-liberal--part of this alliance, what is public is necessarily bad and inefficient and what is private is necessarily good and efficient. For the latter--neo-conservative--part of the conservative alliance, public can be good; but, only when there is tight control over curriculum and teaching and only when what is taught and how it is taught is aimed at what "we all know" is proper knowledge and proper teaching skills.

All too often, calls for more rigorous teacher assessment are part of this latter position. Both positions are highly questionable. Whitty and others have demonstrated that marketized and privatized "solutions" can create even more social and economic inequality. 1

The same seems to be true for those supposed solutions that are so committed to tighter control over curricula and pedagogy.2

As someone who has spent decades involved in efforts to make our schools more socially just institutions, I do not want to dismiss criticisms of these institutions. Nor do I assume that all teachers are

somehow naturally outstanding and need no information about what they are now doing and how it might be improved. However, we do need to ask whether the recent calls for more rigorous teacher assessment are ways in which dominant groups export the blame onto teachers and schools for the results of their own selfish and misguided economic and social decisions. We need to ask what such assessment is meant to do. And we need to ask whether such centralized assessment procedures--in the face of the massive budget deficits now being experienced in so many places throughout this country--might actually make things worse rather than better.

In a brief article, I cannot deal with all of the complex issues involved in teacher assessment. What I shall do is raise a number of critical social and educational issues that are too readily ignored and at the same time suggest the kinds of questions that might be useful if we are to have a genuinely progressive and more socially critical way of assessing our educational practices.

Learning From Our History

Many teachers may be wary of bureaucratic modes of teacher assessment for good reasons. The history of the evaluation of teachers' professional competence has not always been pleasant; and it has too often been based on a profound misunderstanding of the complexities of the lives of teachers in classrooms. Take as one example the ways such assessment was sometimes carried on in Boston public schools at the turn of the last century. It was often punitive, extremely rigid, and had more of an interest in control than in suggesting more responsive and responsible practices. The following excerpt from a teacher's diary from 1899 graphically demonstrates this. It tells the story of a young woman teacher who was being evaluated by a principal who came into her classroom to observe whether she was following the "one right way" of teaching. After calling upon a student to read aloud for him, the principal was less than pleased with the performance of either the teacher or her students and made his displeasure known. Here are the teacher's words.

The proper way to read in the public schools of Boston in 1899 was to say "page 35, chapter 4" and holding the book in the right hand, with the toes pointing at an angle of forty-five degrees, the head held straight and high, the eyes looking directly ahead, the pupil would lift up his voice and struggle in a loud, unnatural tone. Now I had attended to the position of the toes, the right arm, and the nose, but had failed to enforce the mentioning of the page and chapter. 3

The teacher was duly fearful. She was at risk of losing her job. The assessment procedure in this instance was part of a system of enforcing a sense of duty, morality, bodily control, and cultural "correctness" for both students and teachers. It bore no relationship to the student's backgrounds, cultures, hopes, fears, and dreams. Just as importantly, it did no more than force the teacher into a form of instruction that was guaranteed to be irrelevant both to her own emerging skills and to her students.

The fact that this is a woman teacher is important to this history. As I have argued in much greater detail in *Teachers and Texts*, 4 any occupation that is dominated by women is subject to less autonomy and greater outside control, lower pay and respect, and is apt to be blamed for social dislocations, tensions, and inequalities over which it actually has little control. The call by conservative critics for tighter control over teachers, teaching, and curriculum is a continuation of a much longer history in which schools and teachers are attacked during times of economic and social crisis. An understanding of this cannot be complete unless we see the history of gender relations that partly underpin it.

Yet, even with this history, there is evidence that teachers feel that assessment when done well and with full participation by the people being evaluated can provide an opportunity for reflection on their daily practices. However, there is also evidence that in many cases teachers report that assessment had little impact on their teaching. Even more important is the fact that the ways it was accomplished led many teachers to find it insulting, especially when it was done both by using methods and by evaluators who were clearly out of touch with the classroom situation.⁵

Teacher assessment was used to show what was wrong--by people with a less than full understanding of the realities and density of classroom life--and was not organized to provide the kind of feedback that was truly helpful.

For example, while the situation may not be quite as bad as that experienced by that Boston teacher in 1899, recent studies have consistently shown that artificial norms of control are still too often imposed from the outside during evaluations and that there is still insufficient recognition of students' and teachers' lives and of teachers' professional competence than is necessary. Take as examples the words of current teachers who were told by the school administration when and what would be observed in their classrooms during an outside evaluation.

It's stressful. I don't care how long you've been teaching, you're always worried that they will catch you on a down day...Sometimes, let's face it there are times when you are not as good as others. You worry about putting everything on the line [during an] evaluation, when the principal decides what to observe.⁶

...I found the night before you could never get to sleep, and you were just awful in the morning due to lack of sleep and if anything bad was going to happen, it would happen then because you were so uptight.⁷

There is also a widely shared sense among teachers that "professional assessment" of teachers very often not only misses the complexities of their daily lives and is immensely stressful, but that it is decidedly not there to assist teachers. Rather, it is too often used in negative and "inhumane" ways.

What bothers me is that according to our [evaluation] document and according to our superintendent, recommendations can never be positive, it has to go against you. You see, it goes in recommendations, "This is what you should do [in your teaching]. Well, it's not what I should do. It's what I choose to do as a professional. Give me credit, a little shot in the arm, a little encouragement saying, "This teacher has the courage to continue growing." That's the way it should be approached to me. I hate the [evaluation process]. I feel like I'm talking to a machine.⁸

These sentiments are expressed by teachers who do not reject, but embrace, the need for critical reflection on their practice. Rather, they speak to the continuation of an accurate sense--first articulated so compellingly in the diary of the Boston teacher--that something is very wrong with the ends and means of dominant forms of teacher evaluation.

In many instances, even when there is a recognition of the complexity of the kinds of knowledge, skills, and values that teachers possess, because there now is no universal agreement on "what makes a good teacher" in every situation and how it might appropriately be assessed, much of the focus of assessment

is on a limited range of generic "technical skills" or on an atomized list of relatively easy to measure (but uncertain in terms of their real success) "competencies." Yet, we already know that most teachers already possess generic technical skills. Many of the problems of classrooms come not from a lack of skills, but from the lack of resources, alienated students who see no future given the racial and class divisions of labor and the loss of jobs with respect and sufficient pay in urban areas, and similar kinds of things.

However, to deal honestly with these kinds of things would require exceptional amounts of human and financial resources and this society has yet to indicate it is willing to deal with these underlying economic and racial realities with all of the seriousness they deserve.

I do not mean to imply here that there are no good reasons to take on the problem of how we assess teachers at the same time as we as a society take more seriously the structured inequalities in which so many of our students live. Yet, here too we need to learn a bit from the checkered history of recent attempts to put in place more responsive and flexible assessment procedures. Let me give one example taken from the massive growth of state-wide testing systems of student achievement. It is generally recognized that simplistic pencil and paper assessments of student learning (i.e., standardized testing based largely on factual recall with little reasoning) are exactly that--simplistic. They do not get at the depth of understanding that students may actually possess and they do not usually help us in finding better ways of teaching. This recognition has led many states to develop more varied models of "authentic" assessment in which students were asked to demonstrate complex reasoning, to form portfolios of their work, and so on.⁹

In some states considerable effort was spent in developing evaluation instruments such as these portfolio evaluations which were aimed at providing a much wider and more subtle and accurate picture of what students know and could do. Yet, even with all of the work that went into the development of more flexible and responsive models, given the fiscal crisis in these states ultimately money was only allocated for standardized, reductive, paper and pencil instruments. The more educationally wise alternatives were simply too expensive to actually implement and use.

There is an important lesson to be learned here. In state after state, whenever the issue of student assessment is raised, while the original impulse was to broaden the ways in which students could show their abilities the ultimate result has been to install tighter and often very inflexible mechanisms of control. The tail of the test wagged the dog. Given current economic and ideological realities, there is no reason at all to suspect that this situation will be any different in the assessment of teachers. Concerns for cost cutting and "efficiency" will win out over educational substance in most cases.

Beyond Reductive Assessment

From what I have said here, it should be clear that the pedagogic and social reasons for engaging in the assessment of teaching must not be reduced to simply finding out whether our teachers are acting "efficiently" without a concern both for the larger context in which they operate and for the resources they may need to actually make a difference in a society riven with inequalities. Thus, any form of assessment must be deeply concerned as well with social justice inside and outside of the classroom. Our questions about what does and should go on in classrooms then cannot be reduced to simply technical issues without doing damage to the educators who devote their lives to schools and children. Instead, the goals and procedures of assessment should be guided by the following principles.¹⁰

1. They should improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged in our classrooms.
2. They should create a voice for those groups who have been consistently marginalized or silenced in our schools.
3. Rather than highlighting defects in teaching or getting teachers to do more with less--as is so often the case now--they should focus on the contexts in which teaching actually occurs so that teachers get the kind of support that enables them to sustain their work.
4. They should encourage, not discourage, teachers' attempts to "celebrate differences" and diversity in their own teaching and assessment practices, rather than encouraging conformity, compliance, and control.
5. They should help provide spaces in which teachers have the time and resources to construct curricula that connect with the lives and experiences of their students, rather than constantly being subject to pressures to provide anonymous, standardized curricula that are supposedly linked to such rhetorical goals as "enhancing international economic competitiveness."

Once again, this is not to say that we should not be committed to disciplined analysis of what is working in teaching and learning. Rather, it goes further to ask: What is working for whom? Does it treat teachers as thoughtful and critically reflective professionals? Does it contain a socially critical component that assists teachers in actually finding ways to support their democratic intuitions and intentions?

In thinking about how these questions might be taken seriously, John Smyth reminds us that "a socially critical view of teacher evaluation" needs to be grounded in a set of concrete issues that can be raised about teaching, curricula, and the larger set of connections between that classroom and the society in which it operates. Drawing on Smyth,¹¹

we can offer the following list of questions that might be used by teachers and others to ask about the effects of their teaching and the social conditions under which they work. It embodies the idea of the teacher as a social activist, one who is deeply concerned both with what happens in the classroom and with the connections between that classroom and inequalities in the larger society. Among the questions we would need to ask are the following:

- * Who talks in this classroom?
- * Who gets the teacher's time?
- * How is ability identified and attended to here, and what's the rationale?
- * How are the unequal starting points of students dealt with here?
- * How are the instances of disruptive behavior explained and handled?
- * Is there a competitive or a cooperative ethos in the classroom?

- * Who helps who here?
- * Whose ideas are the most important and count most?
- * How do we know that learning is occurring here?
- * Are answers or questions more important in this classroom?
- * How are decisions made here?
- * How does the arrangement of the room help or hinder learning?
- * Who benefits and who is disadvantaged in this classroom?
- * How is conflict resolved?
- * How are rules determined?
- * How are inequalities recognized and dealt with?
- * Where do learning materials come from?
- * By what means are resources distributed?
- * Are these resources truly sufficient to do what the teacher is being asked to do?
- * Who determines standards and how are they arrived at?
- * How is failure defined? Who or what fails?
- * Whose language prevails in the classroom?
- * How does the teacher monitor her or his agenda?
- * How does the teacher work to change what may be unequal structures of the classroom?
- * What is it that is being measured and assessed in this classroom? Why?
- * Are teachers able to choose to work collaboratively, on what, under what circumstances, with sufficient time and resources?

Of course, we could easily add to this list. But, its basic thrust is to ask us to pay attention to issues of social justice in classrooms, to teachers' working conditions and resources, and to the social and economic context in which schools operate. While it does focus on assessing what goes on inside classrooms--and this cannot be ignored by anyone interested in education in the United States--and on some of the things that indeed are under the control of teachers, it asks us to also place at the very center of our assessments the differential resources and power relations inside the school and between

the school and the larger political economy. Without doing both, and without putting in place ways in which teachers can actually help each other to improve their practice, teacher assessment by and large plays one role--that of preventing us from examining both the roots of our problems and what is really necessary to deal with them. This is a point that needs to be recognized by anyone who is concerned with the issue of teacher assessment. As Jonathan Kozol so powerfully shows in his compelling portrait of the effects of differential resources and life chances in *Savage Inequalities*,¹² it would be ludicrous to assume that schools in affluent areas in which \$14,000 per year are spent on each student and schools in very poor areas in which \$4,000 are spent on each student are the same. No amount of rhetorical flourishes about "higher standards" and "more rigorous" student and teacher assessment procedures can compensate for the fact that in all too many of these latter schools the buildings are crumbling, teachers are often teaching in hallways, closets, and even toilets, with insufficient desks, books, and even pencils and paper, and that these schools are increasingly overcrowded and understaffed. And no amount of rhetorical demands about making our educational system and our children "more economically competitive" can compensate for the fact that schools and teachers cannot by themselves overcome the immense poverty, joblessness, horrible housing conditions, lack of health care--and the list is seemingly endless--experienced by an increasingly large proportion of the American population. It is not schools and teachers who moved their factories to other countries and thereby destroyed stable communities. And it is not schools and teachers who have caused the levels of economic despair and the racially segregated division of labor that their students face.¹³

While there is definitely a need to have teachers critically examine their own practices, assuming that higher national standards, more rigorous national testing, and tighter controls through more detailed and frequent assessment of teachers will do any more than shift the blame onto a teaching staff that is already reeling from budget cuts, social upheavals, the effects of child poverty, and so on is simply to live in a world divorced from reality.

Rather than continuing down the path of tighter control and surveillance through more detailed assessment of technical skills, I believe that it would be more realistic and useful to examine those public schools where teachers have asked the questions I listed above and are succeeding even in quite difficult circumstances. These include schools like the Rindge School of Technical Arts in the Boston area, Central Park East School in New York City, and Fratney Street School in Milwaukee. Each of these is guided by certain principles: a closer working relationship between schools and their local communities and among the teachers themselves; more, not less, collegial control and autonomy; a curriculum that is connected to the cultural and economic lives of the students; a commitment to social justice not only in society but inside the school as well; and a democratic ethos that limits the amount of bureaucratic requirements.¹⁴

In such programs, "assessment" goes on continuously. Teachers assist their colleagues. Parents and community members are deeply involved and, thus, mutual feedback is structured into the routines of the school. Schools such as these document the fact that there are ways of critically engaging in asking questions about our educational practices and in ways that actually help, not hinder, our search for better educational policies and teaching practices. However, they are not simplistic responses that wind up only dealing with a small part of a much larger problem that we seem to refuse to face honestly. Granted, these schools and these teachers and administrators don't come with a money-back guarantee of success. But, then they don't have students and teachers worrying about the angles of their toes and the positions of their noses either

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1. For a review of this literature, see Geoff Whitty, "Creating Quasi-Markets in Education," in Michael W. Apple, ed. *Review of Research in Education Volume 22* (Washington: American Educational Research Association, 1997).
 2. See, for example, Michael W. Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996) and Michael W. Apple, *Official knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
 3. James Fraser, "Agents of Democracy: Urban Elementary School Teachers and the Conditions of Teaching" in Donald Warren, ed. *American Teachers* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 128.
 4. Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1986).
 5. Margaret Haughey, Peggy Howard, and Stephen Marshall, "Technical Expertise and Teacher Growth: Results of a Teacher Evaluation Policy Impact Study," *Journal of Education Policy* 11 (march-April 1996), p.163.
 6. *Ibid*, p.162.
 7. *Ibid*.
 8. D. Jean Clandinin, Merle Kennedy, Linda La Rocque, and Marni Pearce, "Living the Tension: A Case Study of Teacher Stories of Teacher Evaluation," *Journal of Education Policy* 11 (March-April 1996), p.174.
 9. Portfolio assessment usually asks for a wider range of evidence of student understanding, capabilities, and accomplishments. They go well beyond standardized tests and may include student produced essays and reports, artistic productions, videos of performance, and similar kinds of things. For a picture of what portfolio assessment might look like in actual practice, see "Central Park East Secondary School: The Hard Part Is Making It Happen," in Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane, eds. *Democratic Schools* (Washington: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995).
 10. John Smyth, "Evaluation of Teacher Performance," *Journal of Education Policy* 11 (March-April 1996), p. 192.
 11. *Ibid*, pp. 192-193.
 12. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Crown, 1991).
 13. For a more complete picture of what this economy actually looks like in terms of class, race, and gender divisions, see Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education*, pp. 68-90.
 14. For descriptions of these and similar schools, see Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane, eds. *Democratic Schools* (Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995) and Greg Smith, ed. *Public Schools That Work* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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