

## **Michael Apple**

### **Whose Markets, Whose Traditions? How Current Educational Reforms Increase Inequalities**

Although couched in the discourse of “increasing democracy”, current educational reforms in many nations are creating even more inequalities. These reforms are the result of the fact that a “new” set of compromises, a new alliance and new power bloc, has been formed that has increasing influence in education and all things social. This power bloc combines multiple fractions of capital who are committed to neo-liberal marketized solutions to educational problems, neo-conservative intellectuals who want a “return” to higher standards and a “common culture”, authoritarian populist religious conservatives who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular fractions of the professionally oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and “management.” While there are clear tensions and conflicts within this alliance, in general its overall aims are in providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the “ideal” home, family, and school.

In essence, the new alliance has integrated education into a wider set of ideological commitments. The objectives in education are the same as those which guide its economic and social welfare goals. They include the dramatic expansion of that eloquent fiction, the free market; the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs; the reinforcement of intensely competitive structures of mobility both inside and outside the school; the lowering of people’s expectations for economic security; the “disciplining” of culture and the body; and the popularisation of what is clearly a form of Social Darwinist thinking. Behind a good deal of this is an unacknowledged “racial contract” and a fear of the culture and body of “the Other”. The raced and classed effects of this are increasingly visible.

The seemingly contradictory discourse of competition, markets, and choice on the one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing, and national curriculum have created such a din that it is hard to hear anything else. As I have shown in a number of recent volumes, these tendencies actually oddly reinforce each other and help cement conservative educational positions into our daily lives.

The results of these policies are the production of a “thin” rather than “thick” democracy and in the reproduction of both dominant pedagogical and curricular forms and ideologies and the social privileges that accompany them. The growth of that odd combination of marketization and regulatory state, the move towards pedagogic similarity and “traditional” academic curricula and teaching, the ability of dominant groups to exert leadership in the struggle over this, and the accompanying shifts in common-sense—all this cannot be wished away. In response to this, we have much to learn from the more educationally and socially critical policies and practices that are being built in places such as Porto Alegre, Brazil and elsewhere.

**Michael Apple** is the John Bascom Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Madison, Wisconsin. He is highly regarded as an important voice in “contemporary progressive education.” This highly regarded critical theorist has written extensively, deconstructing and analysing our educational system. He has also taught at both elementary and secondary levels and provided guidance for teachers and administrators as they strive to improve educational outcomes for all children. He teaches courses in curriculum theory and research and in the sociology of curriculum. His major interests lie in the relationship between culture and power in education. His current research centres on the limits and possibilities of critical educational policy and practice in a time of conservative restoration.