# The American School and Prospects for Critical Thought

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The current "thinking skills" movement proceeds under the assumption that students do not emerge from schools as critical thinkers and offers increased instruction in thinking skills as the solution. While attention is needed on the pedagogical front, and current theorists have contributed to the awareness of the need for critical thought in the curriculum, the nature and context of the school encounter in relation to critical thinking have gone largely unexamined. The author argues that the authoritarian and bureaucratic features of the existing system have a significant influence on the thinking of the young. Not only do these controlling elements of the enterprise restrict the thinking that is possible under such conditions, they also affect the views of knowledge and roles of learners which can be accommodated by the existing structure.

C'est un sentiment assez général aujourd'hui, en éducation, que les écoles ne forment pas des penseurs critiques. Aussi voit-on surgir, de partout, des cours dont l'objet principal est la formation des habiletés de pensée. L'apport des théoriciens et des practiciens dans ce domaine n'est certes pas à sous-estimer. Pourtant, la nature même du contexte scolaire et le type de relation élèves-enseignant qu'on y trouve doivent aussi être examinés, si l'on veut développer la capacité de pensée critique. L'auteur attire l'attention sur les aspects autoritaires et bureaucratiques du système d'éducation, dans le but de montrer l'influence qu'exerce le milieu scolaire lui-même sur la pensée des jeunes. Ces éléments de contrôle non seulement restreignent l'activité de pensée mais touchent à la notion même de connaissance et à la définition du rôle de l'apprenant.

References to Rene Descartes' well known dictum "I think, therefore I am" rarely include the words which precede his famous phrase: "I doubt, hence I think" (Fromm, 1981, p. 8). These five words encapsulate the essence of critical thought in its most basic sense if we take it to mean a questioning, probing, mental stance. Current interest in critical thinking as part of the nation's educational agenda, however, reveals a very different understanding of what critical thought entails.

The definition to which one subscribes indicates how one might respond to the questions "for what purposes should critical thinking be a central task of school curricula" and "what and whose ends should be served by the educational experiences of the young?" If critical thought is viewed as a prerequisite for active participation in the life of a democratic community, it finds its justification as part of citizenship education. If it is seen to be a problem solving capacity as part of career preparation, it has a more vocational and technical meaning.

Renewed attention to critical and higher ordered thought resulting from the 'reform' thrust of the 1980s indicates that technical thinking for economic ends is the dominant meaning attached to most current efforts (Brown, 1987).

Critical thought of the political/social type differs in kind from the vocationalized problem solving valued by industrial personnel managers. It is an ability to interrogate experiences to discern their deeper meanings.

> An interpretive, critical perspective . . . assumes that the social world is in need of interpretation and interpretations are in need of criticism. Criticism is needed to disclose and peel back the layers of value and commitment embedded in interpretations and explanation. (Cherryholmes, 1982, p. 61)

According to Catherine Cornbleth (1985), if critical thinking is perceived as questioning the ideas we encounter, the questions raised and the means needed to pursue them will depend in large measure upon the social context of the encounter.

The purpose of this article is to consider critical thinking in terms of its political and civic functions and the educational conditions that facilitate its development, use, and growth. To date, the primary focus among proponents of critical thinking "models" or approaches for schools is on the definition of the term and accompanying strategies and tactics for teaching it (Romanish, 1986). The basic problem with the prevailing view is that it ignores the powerful impact that oppressive school experiences have on one's ability and willingness to question accepted beliefs and doctrines honestly and openly. Moreover, existing school structures, characterized by hierarchically distributed power arrangements and their concomitant bureaucracy, carry with them an educational ideology that gives little comfort to the conditions necessary for genuine critical thought.

## The Definitional Issue

It is important to consider, briefly, various types of critical thinking as described in the literature because, as Ennis has noted, there is no agreement on definition (Ennis, 1985). One researcher, for instance, compiled a list of thirty-five definitions from education journals alone, and that was before the concept's rebirth in recent years (D'Angelo, 1971).

Richard Paul draws a distinction between a strong and a weak sense of critical thinking. The weak sense relies on a series of discrete skills which are external to the individual and can be tacked on to other learning. The strong sense leans on more intrinsic features of one's character and is not dependent primarily on technical reason. It values 'emancipatory' reason and skills that can assist in the transformation of a person's cognitive and affective processes as well as cultivate the rational, autonomous mind. "In the weak sense, we are content to develop what typically comes down to 'vocational' thinking skills, which by themselves have little influence on a person's intellectual, emotional, or moral autonomy" (Paul, 1984, p. 5). It is critical thinking of the 'strong' sense that is most affected by the social, political and personal conditions of one's educational experience.

Paul's perspective is compatible with the view that critical thinking is related to democratic purposes and requires individuals, at a minimum, to interrogate their social surroundings and institutions. Here the questioning features of one's mind are crucial, and dispositions become as important as particular skills. It is this element of critical thought which is most vulnerable to the environmental impact of detrimental institutional features.

Rather than confront these fundamental questions, some states and school districts have proceeded to implement critical thinking programs which focus primarily on skills acquisition. These efforts are more compatible with the approach offered by Barry Beyer (1984). While not a barrier to critical thought, these programs sometimes fall prey to reducing critical thinking to lists of discreet skills which can be taught directly in the fashion similar to instruction of various other kinds of skills. Moreover, they tend to rely on standardized tests as means of determining students' critical thinking, and while these efforts alert teachers to the importance of higher-ordered thought, they typically have not been supported by extensive in-service and other institutional changes that seem to be required (R. Paul, personal communication, September 21, 1988).

As I have noted in the distinctions above, critical thought in its emancipatory form requires more than skill acquisition and technical reasoning. Purposeful dialogue between and among teachers and learners for instance, is seen as basic to the development of critical thought by virtually all modern theorists. Yet ample evidence exists to indicate that such encounters are truly the exception in the school experiences of most youngsters in the United States (Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984; Shaver et al, 1979).[1]

*The School Experience*

Models and formulas for teaching thinking often overlook the effects of the setting in which the youngster's school experience occurs. From the students' standpoint, there is much about the school encounter which indicates that they are not to be in charge of their own thoughts. The system's emphasis on the correct answer shapes student thinking and creates what Arthur Wirth (1983) terms a generation of "nervous right answer givers." Literally every classroom decision which affects a student's life is made by the teacher. Students must adapt to school life which requires living under the constant condition of having their words and deeds evaluated by teachers (Jackson, 1968).

In common parlance, schools are seen as institutions of socialization. That is, they prepare the young for entry into the larger social order. It is at once a process that produces and reproduces the larger social order. If we view the internal qualities of schools and knowledge they use to be inextricably connected to relations of domination (Apple, 1982), it is immediately problematic to expect schools to be the vanguard for the development of critical thought. Rather they are expected to recreate the conditions necessary for ideological hegemony to continue (Apple, 1982, p. 17).

The point is illustrated by the dissenters in the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier. Writing for the minority, Justice William J. Brennan spoke of the danger of schools becoming "enclaves of totalitarianism" that "strangle the free mind at its source." He warned against the prospect of schools acting as "thought police" and transforming students into "closed-circuit recipients of only that which the State chooses to communicate," and averred that even "in its capacity as educator the state may not assume an Orwellian guardianship of the public mind" (Text of the Ruling, January 20, 1988, p. 21.) Freedom of thought is a necessary corollary of critical thought. In the absence of intellectual openness, critical thinking cannot occur in any meaningful form.

Freedom is a political, not educational, concept. To the extent that educators address the need for freedom for the young, it is a political consideration which affects one's education. Relationships in schools are very much political in the sense that they reflect the power arrangements within the institution. From the students' perspective it is the teachers who exercise the greatest power.

> Choices and decisions are made by people who intend to act in some way. If people are not free to act, but instead are arbitrarily restrained, then choices and decisions become equally constrained. The longer action is restrained in this way, the less likely it is that people will even *think* about choices or decisions. From this point it is but a short stop to the cessation of thinking altogether. People who cannot act freely may busy themselves doing efficiently the tasks they have been assigned, and they may also engage in fantasies over the entertainments they have been given. In this way entire societies can acquire the mentality of slaves — and at the same time enjoy the world's highest standard of living! (Arnstine, 1971, p. 5)

It is this function of schools which enabled Hitler to remark that it is the good fortune of those in power that people do not think (Miller, 1983, p.xix). The authoritarian elements of the school environment create habits of obedience to authority and a receptivity to imposed beliefs and opinions. Both are hostile to the development of independent thought and one's critical capacities (Eliot, 1982). Herein lies the subtle schooling achievement which prepares the young for life in the vocational world as it creates a political consciousness that is sufficiently padded.

The "taken-for-grantedness" of our worldview and the reality which results from the socialization process impose limitations on human freedom. This cultural unconsciousness stands in the way of having one examine, in a critical way, one's reality. To become aware of one's own culture and its shaping influence upon consciousness can result from critical thinking. But it is a process that runs counter to the primary currents of socialization and therefore is, in its initial phases, something that will have an almost unnatural feel to it (Bowers, 1984). For this reason, critical thinking can be described in part as an act of undoing. It is necessary to think critically about our reality precisely because of what has been done through the process of socialization. Ideally it would be preferable to have people think critically about ideas and beliefs *before* they claim them as their own. That, however, would run counter to culture's very nature.

Therefore the ability and willingness to engage in an interrogation of one's culture are inhibited by socialization. The school's mission as a socializing agency, especially one steeped in a technocratic/control ideology, makes it more foe than friend of critical thought.

## Authority and the Teacher

Teachers derive their authority from the power vested in their role by the institution. Schools define the teaching role and role expectations and it is the teacher's responsibility to demonstrate the ability to satisfy those expectations. Such an arrangement reveals little appreciation for the concept of teacher autonomy but in addition it places teachers in a posture which enables the institution to move in its desired directions. If the view is that teachers are paid to teach, not to think, then those who determine what constitutes effective teaching gain dominance over the enterprise as they attain control over teachers.

Since the structure of the teacher's workplace is characterized by bureaucratic features, those elements heavily influence what teachers do more so than personal abilities or professional preparation (Frymier, 1987). There are ever present expectations for teachers to conform with conventional practices. State and school district mandated curricula impose certain restrictions on classroom practices which are further constrained by state-wide standardized testing. Emerging policies that closely monitor instructional behavior by seeking adherence to prescribed and specific teaching acts round out the conditions which provide very little authentic instructional autonomy.

As teachers become socialized into their role, they adopt a more custodial pupil control ideology (Hoy, 1969). Students in turn must yield to the authority of the teacher whose power is used to give shape to all classroom events (Jackson, 1983). If power resides so heavily on the side of the teacher, to what extent can students be expected to both identify and share their truest thoughts, let alone think critically about the knowledge imposed by the source of classroom power?

Noting the form of the activities which occupy the lion's share of a youngster's educational experience, Apple points out that students are to interact only with the teacher, not with each other (Apple, 1982). It is not surprising, then, that teachers are now termed "classroom managers" in the educational vernacular. Even in discussion, for instance, students respond primarily to the teachers who "direct" the experience in all aspects. Thus opportunities for dialogue, the major vehicle for the cultivation of critical thought, are conducted in such a way that the group is kept "on task" and prevented from getting off "the subject."

This "hidden pedagogy" underlines the socializing effects of classrooms. The hidden pedagogy complements the hidden curriculum by causing teachers to approach their jobs in such a way that generations of pupils learn to acquiesce to official authority, tolerate boredom, and accept the right of influential others to be the final arbiters of knowledge and truth (Denscombe, 1982).

Yet teachers too are victims of the structural identification with authoritarianism. Larry Cuban's research reveals a "freezing" of the core pedagogy which is

teacher centered and relies on "direct instruction." This is a consequence of the structure of the institution which severely restricts the possibilities of instructional alternatives. Cuban predicts that "teacher-centered instruction will become even more firmly fixed in the minds of state and local policy makers as the one best way of delivering content, skills, and morality to the nation's young" (Cuban, 1986, p. 9).

The result is a programmed, lock-step curriculum which seeks to control teachers and assumes they are incapable of making educational decisions. It comes about by having authorities external to the classroom determine what teachers and learners must do next, even though the outsider knows neither the teacher nor the students (Smith, 1986). It makes education an exercise in manipulation rather than a meaningful growth experience because presenting one item to be learned at a time followed by the attempt to memorize ever more isolated items, is the systematic deprivation of experience (Smith, 1986). Dewey's series of questions from *Experience and Education* point to the net impact of such education when he cogently asked:

> How many students . . . were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? *How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited?* [emphasis added] How many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom? How many found what they did learn so foreign to the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter? (Dewey, 1938, p. 26-27)

It is the context and conditions of the school experience, then, which need to be at the vortex of any serious discussion aimed at improving the critical capacities of the young.

## Conclusions

To examine the issue of critical thought in the context of contemporary schools requires a recognition that the institution in its most basic features is authoritarian. Authoritarian in this case means the antithesis of democratic. That is not to state that any form of authority erodes or pre-empts critical thought. A natural, i.e. earned, authority which emerges out of one's superior knowledge or experience and to which others seek to subscribe can fit appropriately in a teaching/learning setting. But that does not characterize the typical modern school.

Its decision-making apparatus is centralized and hierarchical with most important issues addressed by authorities in district offices or state legislatures which create bureaucratic agencies to carry out their wishes. The result is a teaching force that essentially is expected to implement the educational decisions of others. If teachers and students are not in control of the paths for meaningful discourse, a most elemental condition for developing critical thought is lost.

The American public, which has its own penchant for conformity and acquiescence to authority, can be said to learn its lessons well in school (Zais, 1976). While structural and administrative features of schools raise questions about their proclaimed

primary purposes, the schools' underlying ethic and other assumptions mitigate their prospects for success. Critical thinking, in part, requires us to undo what has been done to our thinking by the culture as a whole through its various institutions. Many, such as church and family, affect our beliefs and, subsequently, the way we think. But schools are constituted to engage young minds and the way learning is encountered affects the establishment of important thought patterns. The school's impact is not only on the "what" of our thinking but also on the "how." Despite lofty rhetoric promising to have young minds grow in flexible and open ways, the reality in school reveals a basic hypocrisy. As Goodlad observed,

> From the beginning, students experience school and classroom environments that condition them in precisely opposite behaviors — seeking "right" answers, conforming, and reproducing the known. Those behaviors are reinforced daily by the physical restraints of the group and the classroom, by the kinds of questions teachers ask, by the nature of the seatwork exercises assigned, and by the format of tests and quizzes. (Goodlad, 1983, p. 17)

All this results in a system which is often apt to characterize many good thinking students as poor achievers, mainly because they are slow to believe and prefer evidence for their beliefs over textbook, teacher, or other authoritarian pronouncements. It is this kind of learning, for instance, which enables large numbers of students to learn, and accept, claims that Columbus discovered America, that the sun rises in the east, and that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation.

Knowledge is viewed as something inert which is not used as a means to develop critical capacities. Instead students learn to rely on authority in this regard. Such an outlook is consistent with the widely accepted assumptions ascribed to the knowledge level of Bloom's Taxonomy: "To a large extent, knowledge as taught in American schools depends upon some external authority; some expert or group of experts is the arbiter of knowledge" (Bloom, 1956, p. 31). Yet this view of knowledge predominates despite Bloom's own words which characterize all knowledge as relative in a certain sense (Bloom, 1956, p. 32).

The way knowledge is ordered, arranged, and posited before the young masks the conflicts and struggles (intellectual, political, social, etc.) that have been part of the human experience in which the knowledge was created or discovered. It offers a false presentation of the past which serves to create the appearance that there is order and structure to everything we seem to know.

Such an orientation serves positivistic outlooks and nullifies and diminishes the subjective. Yet it is in the subjective where critical thought resides, where one attempts to see the problematic in what a culture has provided. The theory of knowledge followed in schools posits certain ideological preferences which in turn shape intellectual practices that subvert critical thought. Good citizenship, as an example, is framed in terms of its nonpolitical elements such as politeness and hard work. Loyalty and compliance are seen as paramount political virtues

and political participation translates into passive forms such as keeping informed in order to make a wise choice on election day (Washburn, 1986). The danger for the system, of course, is that a critical examination may unmask the ideological homogeneity behind so much that is presented through the school experience.

The purpose of this article is not to analyze the theory of knowledge that prevails in the schools as they are currently constituted. It is essential, however, to draw attention to it in order to see how and why genuine critical thought is on the margins of the experiences most students have. Seen as a package, the system's view of knowledge fits very neatly with the rest of the authoritarian traits of the American school. In tandem they bode ill for prospects of providing the next generation with an education that is critically empowering.

## Notes

1. All these studies find that instruction is predominantly teacher centered with students in passive roles. Most questioning is teacher directed and in the lowest cognitive form. The text and pre-designed materials constitute the mainstay of the curriculum.

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