

# From Silence to Dissent

## *Fostering Critical Voice in Teachers*

*Alan S. Canestrari and Bruce A. Marlowe*

In today's top-down school structures, new teachers need to develop capacities for critical reflection during pre-service training.

**D**espite their sense of expectation, enthusiasm, and energy, new teachers too often become assimilated into school cultures that are characterized by cynicism, resignation, and, ultimately, compliance. As Albert Shanker once famously remarked, it only takes about six weeks for new teachers to look like old ones. The reasons for this sad state of affairs are obviously complex, but we believe that such resignation is, at least in part, due to a lack of pre-service opportunity for potential teachers to think critically about the most salient characteristics of American public education.

Teacher preparation programs seem to cover every conceivable facet of teaching. However, in their breadth and their depoliticized, neutral stand on every question, they perpetuate what Tyack and Cuban (1995) refer to as the "grammar of schooling." That is, there is plenty of expository, rhetorical discourse describing the management of student behavior, methods of instruction, the construction of curricula, and the assessment of students. And, there is narrative too: for example, about what it is like to be a teacher. But there is virtually no critical discourse. As a result, the tone and level of student engagement with such programs rarely moves beyond the prosaic. Worse, when teacher preparation programs take a critical stance about current

practices or provide examples of alternative models of teaching and learning, they do so in a way that invariably marginalizes these approaches as radical, impractical, or, at the very least, controversial. In part, this framing of the critical stance as extreme occurs because teachers no longer set the agenda.

In fact, teachers today have lost almost all control over their work. Few are capable of standing up to state-mandated, top-down curricular and instructional mandates. They are tightly constrained by school districts seeking compliance and higher test scores. We need critically literate teachers capable of challenging the technocratic demands of state-mandated curricula. Preparing such teachers must begin at the *pre-service* level; otherwise new teachers will find themselves looking very much like the old ones, mindlessly going through the motions without question or reflection.

But even when new teachers know that the top-down system is wholly inadequate, they lack clear direction as to how to move purposefully in another direction, to ask questions and challenge assumptions. But what questions should teachers ask? What answers should teachers accept? We hope new teachers will consider asking whether their instruction promotes the status quo. New teachers need models of critical reflection (and even dissent) in order to help them develop their *own* critical questions, their *own* voice, by being given the opportunity to engage in serious conversations about learning and teaching in the context of increasing pressures for accountability and uniformity of instruction.

Serious discussions with our students about teaching and learning inevitably begin with what we have begun to call the “Yes, but . . .” question because this is how the conversation inevitably begins. That is, after introducing commonsense—and-research-based—notions about teaching and learning we frequently hear, for example,

- Yes, but . . . won't I have to teach to the test if the district demands that scores on statewide assessments improve?
- Yes, but . . . what if the principal requires that all second grade classrooms work on math at 9:15, regardless of my kids' needs or interests on a particular day?
- Yes, but . . . what if the school district adopts basal readers and requires that we use them to the exclusion of other approaches and instructional activities?
- Yes, but . . . what if the schoolwide discipline policy requires that kids stay in for recess if they don't finish their homework?

On several occasions we have used these “Yes, but . . .” questions as a point of departure, and after simply asking what our students thought about all of this, we taped the discussion that ensued. The conversations are invariably thoughtful, reflective, and insightful, and the occasional debate between students addresses exactly the kinds of questions new teachers should be contemplating. These include the kinds of teacher decisions that rise to the level of moral imperatives, about how we got where we are, about whether teachers should even make decisions about curriculum, and about the role teachers can, and should, play in the shaping of broader educational policy and decision making.

Imagine how our schools might be different if in-service teachers engaged in regular discussions like the one below about whether the mandates they face are consistent with their view of what is in the best interest of their students.

**Jane:** But, what do we do when we are asked to do something we know isn’t right, or is contrary to what we’ve learned in some of our classes here? I just had a class in literacy where we talked about how research indicates that “Round Robin” reading is not best practice. And yet, the classroom I’m in now as a student teacher, that’s all they do. It’s the whole reading program.

**Maya:** As a new person, as a first year teacher I wouldn’t say anything. I mean you don’t have any credibility. You’re the new kid on the block and you have to go along at first.

**Marlowe:** Will it be the same as a tenth year teacher? How long do you wait to do what you see as the right thing?

**Ted:** One thing we can count on is that what’s wrong today will be right tomorrow. School reforms come in waves.

**Canestrari:** So will you allow yourself to be swept in and out with the tide?

**Kate:** Yeah, but I agree with Maya. You want the job, right? You’re not going to say, “See ya later,” because, I mean, good luck finding another job. There aren’t that many out there so you do have to swim with the tide.

**Alex:** Should you risk losing your job by raising questions? Don’t you have a larger responsibility to your family?

I mean what do we really know about teaching anyway? We're new. I agree with Maya too. We have to go along at first. After a while, maybe then you can say something. But, definitely not at first.

**Marlowe:** Is there a point at which you stop saying to yourself, "I'm just going to hold my tongue, and I'm not going to say a thing?" Okay, Jane mentioned round-robin reading. The stakes seem relatively low here. But, what about practices that you view as actually harmful? Is there a point at which you will respond to a principal's directive with "No, I won't do that"?

**Ronald:** I would. I would absolutely refuse if I thought morally or educationally something I was asked to do was wrong.

**Kate:** You need to be respectful though. Whether you agree or not, you are the rookie. So you can disagree I guess, but be tactful. Something like, "I know the test scores are down, and I realize that you want more seat time to help my students prepare for the tests, but I'm thinking about doing it a little differently. I've looked into the research . . ." Something like that, where you go into the discussion with the principal with a knowledge base, with some preparation. Then, maybe he will give a little bit too.

**Sally:** Isn't there a happy medium here where you can do something of yours and also what the curriculum might dictate? Just so that it's not completely one way or the other. You get to do some of what you want, what you know is right, what will work with kids, and you do some of what they want too.

**Ronald:** So, it's ok to do the harmful stuff, as long as you do the good stuff too?

**Sally:** Yeah, well, I mean . . . to some extent, maybe. No, I guess I wouldn't do the bad stuff. That doesn't make sense. I'm thinking there is stuff that needs to be taught that addresses the standards, but I guess actually, no, I won't do it if it's wrong.

We liken this evolving conversation to "spinning plates." As students formulate their positions and develop their own insights they are forced

to consider the ideas of others through this dialectical exchange, thereby positioning another “plate” to be spun, another thought that must be considered. It is this emerging complexity that allows insights to move towards solutions. Notice how the following excerpt concerning teaching-to-the-test evolves with increasing clarity.

**Jane:** As a student teacher, I’m going to be in a predicament next semester. I’m going into a fourth grade class and I’ve already been told that we will be making a final push to prepare students for statewide assessments in the spring. Here, in our program, we’re all told that we’re not supposed to teach to the test, but I mean, my cooperating teacher couldn’t have made it any clearer to me.

**Canestrari:** Testing has become a yearly event. The results are published in the paper and the schools are ranked from low to high performing. Do you have to pay attention to these results, or should you simply teach the way you know is best for your students?

**Ryan:** Well, again, as a beginning teacher, if I’m told that it’s imperative that we do better on the tests, I would highly recommend that you teach more to the test. But, obviously, I mean you could maintain your teaching and still address the test issue.

**Jane:** Do I drop social studies? Science? My cooperating teacher didn’t say specifically, “We’re going to drop science,” but there’s no doubt in my mind that’s what she meant when she said, “We need to prepare the students for the test.”

**Ronald:** If we teach the right way won’t students be prepared for the test anyway?

**Kate:** No. If there’s a state-wide assessment in 5th grade in mathematics, and your job is to prepare students to do well on this test, what do you have to give up to do that? I agree that you can do lots of things the right way that will help them in math, but even if you do everything well to teach them math, but drop the rest of the curriculum to prepare for the math test, are you serving your students well?

Although not always sure of why these conversations are important, all of the students, as you will see in the exchange below, are certain that such conversations are a critical part of teacher education, and perhaps more importantly, should be part and parcel of the on-going professional development of in-service teachers as well. In fact, students are so certain of the importance of these conversations that once given the opportunity it is like the opening of the flood gates.

**Megan:** Isn't this what it's really about, carefully listening to and analyzing each other's views? I mean do real teachers do this? Do they ever really get to reflect on their practice, or do they just go through the motions?

**Ted:** I know I'm only beginning my student teaching, but I don't see this happening in my school. Is this what faculty meetings are like?

**Ryan:** I've been a long-term substitute for a whole semester and I've never been in a faculty meeting where there was a conversation like this. And I don't get it. Shouldn't teachers be engaged in this kind of discussion? Isn't this what should happen in a faculty meeting?

This exchange, and many more like it, underscores the perceived importance—even urgency—of addressing the “Yes, but . . .” question. The taped transcripts reveal not only deep student reflection about weighty educational issues, but also important insights. Further, there is clearly an evolution in thinking unfolding here that underscores the value of engaging teachers in the kind of dialectical process advocated in the past by notable educators like Dewey (1938) and today by a whole host of critical theorists (e.g., Giroux, 1985; Zeichner, 1983).

Our students also came to some important conclusions about how deliberate attempts at creating a chorus of teachers' voices may be the profession's greatest hope for continuous renewal—a discussion that echoes an interview we conducted with Deborah Meier earlier last year. When asked, “Can teachers be effective in changing their conditions?” Meier responded:

Of course, once they learn to survive. The second strategy is to organize—join with others. It starts with being a good colleague in one's own schools. Not easy work. Another way is through teacher and staff organizations. The power of solidarity among working people is still, or once again, obviously vital . . . Teacher unions also

provide us with links to other organized working people. But, it's important to remember that it's not just joining with the teachers. For example, you may also be a parent. Don't hesitate to speak out in that role also . . . Then, there's using your professional voice. I don't just mean your teacherly voice, but your broader professional voice. (Canestrari & Marlowe, 2004, 214–215)

And, here is what our students had to say after a similar question.

- Canestrari:** How do good teachers get heard when they have a different vision than the administration about what a classroom should look like?
- Mike:** You are teaching a science kit lesson and you decide that it is going really well and so you ask the principal to sit in. Everybody is interactive, it's going great, learning is taking place or maybe someone else in the school is interested in a demonstration, and so you invite them into the room.
- Ronald:** Or you teach together. Let's try something here and approach this unit all from the same standpoint, teaching across content areas.
- Ryan:** Teaming through integration is powerful . . . building consensus, doing things even across grade levels by showing what really works.
- Carissa:** I think change requires one person first, and then you talk with someone else, and you have a partner and then it grows. Soon, collectively, you can make a push. At some point when districts will realize that it's come to the point where you have pockets of teachers yelling so loudly that you can't cover your ears up any more and even legislators, people dictating policy, administrators . . . they're going to have to start listening to what we know about good teaching.

As we probed further about how the "Yes, but . . ." conversation should be initiated, students expanded the focus of the discussion to larger questions about who should participate in such discussions and where they should occur. It was during this part of the conversation that many students realized for the first time that those above them face pressures too. We probed further, "Don't educational leaders have the most

and best opportunities to engage in critical discourse?" Together, we came to some important conclusions. Like teachers, educational leaders can also cave in to internal and external pressures. These collapses are often exacerbated by hierarchical school cultures that have evolved into sorts of feudalistic protectorates where each layer of authority protects the layer below it; superintendents protect principals, principals protect teachers, in return for loyalty, compliance, and silence.

It also didn't take long for our students to see the very real ways in which the mandates they will soon face as teachers mirror those that we face as professors. This became abundantly clear as we pushed our students to reflect more deeply about exactly why they thought the discussion was so fruitful. Students were quick to point out that even at the post-secondary level mandatory assessment and grading policies often interfere with learning. As Schap has argued (in Kohn, 1994) grading policies interfere with learning when teachers use them as a way to assess the extent to which students have complied with their demands as opposed to using grades as supportive feedback to help guide student learning, to inform instruction, and to help teachers understand whether or not their pedagogy is effective. Discussing this demand versus support model of grading was eye-opening for many students; while they expressed discomfort with many of their grading experiences, they had never before really reflected on how, and for what purposes, grades might be employed. Some expressed surprise, and relief, that our discussion was ungraded. Because after reflection, the number of instructional activities students identified in their program that were explicitly evaluated struck many as inconsistent with what professors were telling them about good teaching and learning for its own sake. The fact that this activity was not graded was unique, even liberating. But, like our students who will soon be teachers, we too often have little say about whether to give grades. Similarly, as university professors in a teacher education program, we must worry about how our students will fare on standardized tests, as the state will make judgments about our program based on our students' performance. But assessment information based on standardized tests is often misleading and can be used to make dubious claims about how much students are actually learning or about the success of academic programs. It is for these reasons that we too perpetually face the "Yes, but . . ." question, a revelation for many students.

**Canestrari:** What's different about the conversation we're having now compared to discussions in other classes? What accounts for this very high level of engagement?

- Steve:** Look at the situation. Is this high risk or low risk? Are we getting graded? *No*, we're just having a conversation with no stakes attached and we're really learning the most in this kind of setting. Everyone wants to get involved. Remember what we read about the affective filter? [Laughter in class] To get back to the original question, yeah there is a place for this. We need this at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Look how everyone gets involved.
- Ronald:** In this university setting where everything is graded, everything is assessed, how can you maintain this level of engagement given a threatening environment? I mean we're still in a classroom where every experience, every paper, every assignment is graded and analyzed and evaluated and then we have pre-evals, in-process evals, post-evals . . . I just realized something!!! This is why kids hate school. Because the energy, the enthusiasm for learning gets sucked right out of them with all the obsessive focus on assessment.
- Carissa:** So you're really in the same position as we will soon be in as teachers. You have people above you telling you that you must give grades, as just one example. You don't really have a choice either.

The students that we engaged in conversation were junior and senior undergraduates and graduate masters degree students that were very close to their final field placements. Ironically, it is at the end of the program when they are closest to classrooms of their own, that our students become less secure as they reflect on the incongruity between what they are learning at the university and what they are seeing in public school classrooms. At a time when our students should be feeling more confident, more certain about the skills they have acquired, the dispositions they have adopted, they are instead feeling increasingly adrift; dissonance abounds. The "Yes, but . . ." question dominates their thinking and causes them to second guess their education and their good instincts.

Have we prepared our future teachers for the challenges that await them? Do our teacher education programs have enough emphasis on scholarship and tolerance for differing viewpoints? Have we engaged students in a way that allows them to think critically? Have we given them substantial preparation in articulating what's right in a way that

either facilitates or causes others to rethink their classrooms? Have we prepared them in the art of resistance and dissent? Our suspicion is that we have not and our conviction is that these questions must frame teacher education.

But, perhaps, there is hope for those teachers who are prepared differently. Hope for those who have internalized Freire's (1970) desire for liberation in the form of "problem-posing education" or Giroux's (1985) insistence that teachers think of themselves as "transformative intellectuals" or even Postman and Weingartner's (1969) urging that teachers be vigilant "crap" detectors. Ohanian (2004) warns us that teachers must be educated rather than trained, that offering recipes leads only to the deskilling of teachers, that teaching practice be informed by philosophy and art and music rather than simply by experts "who promise the keys to classroom control and creative bulletin boards, along with 100 steps to reading success."

It was through the back and forth of our conversation, the student-to-student exchange, the horizontal communication between faculty and students where all participants were peers, that reminded us all of the importance and power of these kinds of discussions to inform teaching and learning.

## REFERENCES

- Canestrari, A., & Marlowe, B. A. (2004). *Educational foundations: An anthology of critical readings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Giroux, H. (1985). Teachers as transformative intellectuals. *Social Education*, 49(5), 376–379.
- Kohn, A. (1994). Grading: The issue is not how, but why. *Educational Leadership* 52(2), 38–41.
- Marlowe, B. A., & Page, M. L. (1998). *Creating and sustaining the constructivist classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Ohanian, S. (2004). On stir and serve recipes for teaching. In *Educational foundations: An anthology of critical readings*, Canestrari, A., & Marlowe, B. A. (Eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. New York: Delacort.
- Spinner, H., & Fraser, B. J. (2002). *Evaluation of an innovative mathematics program in terms of classroom environment, student attitudes, and conceptual development*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service Number ED464829)

- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward Utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Zeichner, K. M. (1983, May-June). Alternative paradigms of teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education* 34(3), 4.

### FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Canestrari, A. S. (2005). Social studies and geography: Beyond rote memorization. In *Integrating Inquiry Across the Curriculum* (R. H. Audet & L. K. Jordan (Eds.)), Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Donnell, K., Yang, L., Winfield, A., Canestrari, A. S., Marlowe, B. A. & Kamii, M. (2008). Conversations about social justice. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 21(4).
- Marlowe, B. A., & Canestrari, A. S. (2006). *Educational psychology in context: Readings for future teachers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Thombs, M. M., Gillis, M. M., & Canestrari, A. S. (2008). *Using WebQuests in the social studies classroom: A culturally responsive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

