

CHAPTER 1

TAKING REFORM SERIOUSLY: THE ANGER AND THE TEARS

Armies of education governors roam the land. Legislators forage in the ravines of their mindscapes and offer restrictive mandates and high-stakes testing to make schools better. A self-proclaimed education president and his governor allies offer six stirring goals, but they seem not to understand that hunger, crime, and poverty teach lessons better than any school. Overstuffed panels of the socially elite rain reform reports on a public distracted by sports and television. Teachers, who must till the fields of reform, still being trained rather than educated, are told to march boldly forward with oxen and wooden ploughs. Too many administrators efficiently manage a system strangled by problems and cannot muster the vision and moral courage that leadership requires. This was the spirit of educational reform in the 1980s. Politicians and many in the press corps marched happily in this parade. They sang loudly of their concern and often proclaimed success, confusing paper intentions with concrete results. Many citizens were indifferent, and

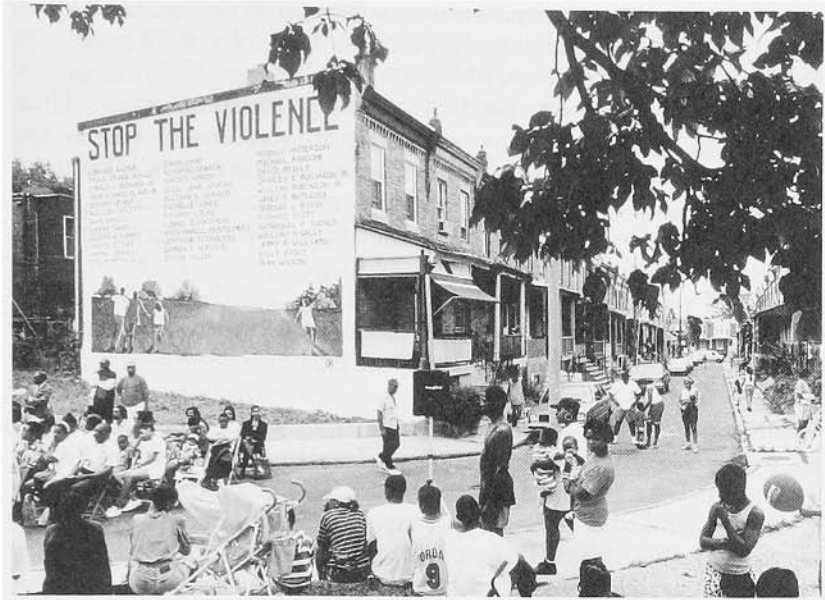
those closest to the children in our schools—teachers and principals—were not applauding and they surely were not singing. They were not doing much reforming either.

Any credible or practical discussion of education reform—or any reform proposal—must take into account the larger social environment in which public school educators live and do their work. This environment is too often overlooked by reformers themselves or by academics who write about reform. Most often the working environment of educators is not only hostile but punishing. Practitioners know that this environment and some of its anti-reform characteristics must be acknowledged if my discussion of reform is to be not only realistic but fair. Few corporations or universities function in a social environment so consistently hostile to their mission as that which surrounds public schools. Little wonder educators are often indifferent to the blandishments of reformers.

THE ANTI-REFORM SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

To be a public school teacher or administrator today is to live in a society that cares too little about what is good for its children. One-third of preschool children are likely to fail in school because of poverty, sickness, and the lack of adult protection and support. Fifteen million children are being reared by single, divorced mothers who earn about \$11,500 a year—close to the poverty line.¹ We probably spend much more money buying and maintaining our cars than it would cost to give every needy child food, a place to live, and medical care. Let us recall, too, other less lethal but mind-sapping influences in our culture that educators do not create but which influence the work they do. School must compete with football, rock videos, cult movies, and a culture exploding with things to buy, from pump sneakers to the calculated commercial style in popular music. Youth learn things today in the soothing visual images of television and advertising caught between a sip of Coke and a telephone conversation with a friend.

The power relations in our society that tolerate poverty and inadequate health care for children cannot be ignored. Neither can the cultural message, implicit in commercial television and other mass media, that “buying things” is a virtue itself (it keeps the economic machinery humming). The cultural apparatus defines knowledge, as John Dewey and other critics have repeatedly said. Michael Apple reminds us how the culturally taken-for-granted educates. “Televi-



*Relatives and community members meet to mourn the death of 37 teenagers slain on the streets of West Philadelphia (July 1, 1993). Two other similar memorials in the city bear the names of 76 youth. The painting depicts children running through a meadow toward an inviting horizon. Photograph by Bonnie Weller, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.*

sion and mass media, . . . billboards, films," Apple writes, make important contributions to how we construct social meaning. When these media influences are coupled to the social meanings embedded in the school's curriculum, the conditions exist for the continuation of an "unequal social order."² Democracy demands that educators know the culturally implicit and "natural" ways schools deny social and economic benefits to the poor while extending social goods to those who are suffering less.

Educators and school board members did not create a society that seems indifferent to poverty and the relative neglect of its youth. We need fresh thinking—among both liberals and conservatives—on ways to make a more just and caring community that supports family life. One statistic suggests the radical and chilling changes that have taken place in American families since the 1950s. Four decades ago, 81 percent of white children lived with both parents until the age of 17; of white children born in the early 1980s,

only 30 percent will live with both parents until the age of 17. "The corresponding rate for black children has fallen from 52 percent in the 1950s to only 6 percent today," writes William Galston in a review of the literature on the family titled "Home Alone."³ These numbers reflect changes of earthquake proportions in family life. Children are coming to school from unstable families. Children get too little nurturing at home. Miss Jones who teaches fourth grade is part of a better America, but many education critics forget that Miss Jones is not all of America.

While educators try to stay afloat in a culture in which students are increasingly disengaged from their family, community, and learning, and while educators work in a culture that has not recently recognized the gashes that poverty inflicts on the young, some reform goes on in other parts of the society. It is salutary to look at the reforms proposed in American business corporations—institutions which, like the schools, are believed to have a "quality problem,"—and to contrast the temper of these reforms with those proposed by the establishment for schools. The fortuitous appearance of two articles on reform, one on education and the other on business, in the same issue of *USA Today* makes an ironic and unintended juxtaposition of power and conflicting values.

The education story is headlined "Student skills 'not good enough.'" This story reports the latest test results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal project that periodically tests a national sample of students. The public is told yet one more time that fewer than 20 percent of our fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students are proficient in mathematics. But there might be better news, too. Students did as well in mathematics, science, and reading as their parents did twenty years ago. The U.S. Secretary of Education and some governors say that this is not good enough (and it is not). "For the first time we are saying how good is good enough," said Colorado governor Roy Romer. The learning gap between whites and students of color narrowed. And last, as if to hint at the complexity of this reform business, the test data show a direct link between the parents' education and a child's mathematics knowledge. A teachers' union president denounces the finding as technically indefensible and misleading.⁴

The animating ideas behind this article are that proficiency in learning can be objectively measured, that federal initiatives can develop an assessment process through which student learning can be compared within a group of states, and that testing students and publicizing the results are good ways to reform education.

I turn to the business section of *USA Today*. The topic is achieving quality in American business. The month of October is being given over to a national series of symposia and conferences on ways to improve quality. Public television will show an IBM-funded documentary on ways to improve the quality of American products. The events planned for this month include a half-day forum sponsored by the American Society for Quality Control, sparked by the chief executive of IBM. The forum will examine quality issues in Germany, Japan, and the United States, and will be seen via satellite by one hundred thousand people in seventeen countries.

The lead story is about an executive who was called in five years ago to rescue Buick's LeSabre plant from decline. The LeSabre ranked close to the bottom in every quality survey. Reduced literally to tears of desperation, the executive studied other plants that seemed to have surmounted the quality-of-product problem. The same words kept coming up in these visits—"teamwork, communication, worker empowerment." The LeSabre man realized, the story reports, that the secret to improving quality is not issuing orders or in installing gee-whiz technology. Quality hinges on giving the people closest to the making of the car encouragement to share their ideas and to act on them. Buick is now run by two hundred teams of fifteen to twenty workers who use Toyota's six-step plan to eliminate defects. The results have been good. For the last four years, Buick has been the number one domestic car in customer-satisfaction surveys.⁵

The story recounts some of the things that American companies have learned in their by-no-means-always-successful efforts in reformation. I learned, for example, that in 1980 the average American car had 250 percent more defects than a Japanese car. By 1990 that quality gap had shrunk to 50 percent. Although the majority of American consumers regard American-made products as high in quality, fewer than 25 percent of Germans and Japanese hold the same opinion (might Americans be culturally constituted—the frontier, the lack of a guild tradition, egalitarianism and all of that—to be just a bit sloppy when it comes to the refinements that quality demands?). Many companies, perhaps in imitation of their education brethren, look for the quick fix and are "mouthing the right words but are continuing to do everything cosmetically." Three ideas from this article stand out. Direct conversations must be held among those designing, making, and selling the product as well as straight talk between upper management and those on the front lines. Second, quality cannot be defined too narrowly. People's atti-

tudes must change, based on Buick's experience. Quality cannot be defined statistically to find only where the defects are. A totally new approach might be better than trying to perfect an "old and bureaucratic process." And third, the intangible "look and feel" of the car is important as a driver sees it. A former executive at Ford tried to broaden the definition of quality by describing how a customer should feel: in "perfect harmony with the vehicle, its features, and its overall design."⁶

The only common element in how America's important institutions—its schools and its businesses—approach reform is the tears of frustration shed by the Buick executive. His tears match those shed by many teachers and, I am sure, some exhausted principals and superintendents who, having tried for the good in the face of strong opposition, say, The hell with it. I feel the anger rising in myself as I compare the *quality* of the responses to reform in the two stories. I shall offer only a short comparison. Business reform wisdom says that there must be direct conversations up and down the management line and between those designing, making, and selling the product. Education reform wisdom says that the governors and an education president know best. Teachers, principals, and others who are "close to the student" are defined out of the conversation. Business reform wisdom says that peoples' attitudes must change if reform is to be firmly grasped and that quality control cannot be based on statistical analysis alone. Education reform wisdom says that the use of tests and statistics will not only reform public education, but in the scary words of one governor, tests and the statistical analysis of test scores can tell how "good is good enough"⁷—a task that in times past would have been seen as a problem that should stand before wisdom rather than before a machine analysis of mere numbers. Business reform wisdom says that such intangible and elusive factors as whether or not the driver "feels in harmony with the car and its overall design" are critically important. Education reform wisdom says that to be concerned with teachers' and students' feelings about being in harmony with the overall design of what they learn and how they learn it in school is to sink into the swamp of "soft pedagogy," which sucks the necessary rigor out of learning and teaching. Besides, say the governors and the legislators and not a few others, "to be in harmony with something" surely cannot be measured and put on a wall chart for state comparisons; since this is their definition of reality, "to be in harmony with learning" does not exist. An implicit axiom arises: there is life only where there is number.

I do not begrudge business its humanistic pillars of reform. I am encouraged to see human considerations emerging as part of good business.⁸ It is shameful, however, when the leaders of business reform and their political allies do not give the same humane consideration to America's children and her teachers.

The contrast between the values and the implicit theories that shape at least some business reforms and the values and implicit theories that have directed much of the state-initiated reforms through the eighties and into the early nineties adds yet another dimension to the practicing educator's working environment.⁹ Humanistic theories are invoked to build better cars, while technological and depersonalized theories are invoked in hopes of better educating children. Surely this is life imitating the most satiric art.

THE ANTI-REFORM EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

But if society is often hostile to reforms based on intellectual and democratic values (discussed in chapter 2), the more immediate educational environment, which educators *themselves* create, is little better in some important respects. This environment, too, is part of the soil in which fundamental reform must grow. One of the themes about reform that I shall develop in this book is that the ideas and values educators carry in their minds and feelings is a critical factor in mounting and sustaining educationally worthy reforms.

Since truth sometimes comes in the small bursts of ordinary experience, I shall relate two anecdotes about the education of teachers and administrators. The teacher anecdote will be related first because it is consistent with the findings of a major research study on teacher education.

An activist senior high school principal who leads a school of ninety teachers and eighteen hundred students related this story to me. "Most of our interviews with teacher candidates put you to sleep," he says in a voice that reveals disbelief and frustration. "It's like someone is standing outside the door with a cookie cutter. Almost all of them are boringly similar." This principal and the teachers on the interview committee are looking for signs that the candidates know something, that they care about some things, that they "have professional verve," in the words of the principal. An unbelievable response came from a teacher who was interviewing for

an art position. When he was asked what kind of projects he would like to see his students doing, there was a long pause and he replied, "That's a very good question. I'll have to think about it." A more amazing response came from all thirty-five candidates. When they were asked if they had read any of the reports on the high school, such as the books by John Goodlad, TheodoreSizer, or Ernest Boyer, not one teacher-to-be had read them! The principal later wrote a letter to the head of secondary teacher education in a regional university, many of whose recent graduates were interviewed, in which he related their responses. The university person dismissed the inquiry by writing that "we mentioned Goodlad's book in one course last semester."

The principal says he and his staff want to know if there "is any intelligence there, some spark." Often there is not. The teacher candidates were most interested in the textbooks used in the subjects they teach. The principal asked questions of this kind: "If we visited your class two months into the term, what might we see?" Thirty of the candidates had a hard time coming up with anything other than routine responses.

On the other hand, my students tell me that they have to be careful not to appear to be too thoughtful in job interviews for administrative positions with most school systems. To introduce ideas in their responses that may be interpreted to question standard practice, however humbly expressed, is to be kissed by failure. Rarely, the students say, are questions asked that probe issues of learning and teaching. Rarely is a hint given in these interviews that the school system is trying to do better beyond the adoption of packaged programs in inservice training or in curriculum (some of which I shall describe and critique in chapter 4). The message in these interviews is clear. We have things under control. Our way works. How will you fit in with what we are doing? Reform is not on the day-to-day agenda of board members, teachers, or administrators in the vast majority of our schools. Reform may ride the air waves and soak tons of paper with ink, but the "trickle down" theory of educational reform does not work any better than its cousin in economics works in giving more money to the bottom quartile of our citizens.

What are the chances for reform being initiated *within* the profession with candidates—and interviewers—who reflect the intellectual and professional attitudes of those in my anecdotes? I believe candidates with sleepy minds are more common than uncommon, but I will not try to make a case for this belief.

The anecdote about the teacher interviews could serve as a summary of the chapter titled "Becoming a Teacher" in John Goodlad's book, *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools*.¹⁰ Goodlad and his colleagues studied twenty-nine representative colleges and universities that educate teachers. With very few exceptions Goodlad's story is a dreary one. Teacher education programs are incoherent, starkly anti-intellectual, and technique-bound. Teachers are being prepared for schools as they are, Goodlad writes, rather than graduating with the ideas, drive, or moral sense necessary to fuel a reform in education.

Consider what the study says, for example, on what it means to make the transition from the status of "student" to the office of "teacher." For most students this was an occupational rather than an intellectual change. Students shifted from being students to being teachers in a school, rather than becoming "inquirers into teaching, learning, and enculturation." Becoming a teacher meant being "able to do it" as the mentor teacher did it. Goodlad draws the following critical conclusion from these findings: "Neither of these orientations could be considered intellectual."¹¹ And that is really the end of the story, is it not? Without the active use of intelligence, one is hard put to even call it teaching. We might call it something like "automated humanoid instruction" perhaps, but it defiles a high art to call it teaching.

History and philosophy of education have passed away with the hornbook of the eighteenth century. I will admit that taking a survey course in the history of education or philosophy, taught by lecture from a four-pound textbook, probably did what many ill-taught academic courses do for students—made them hate it. But as long as it was there, there was hope. Goodlad says we typically have an introductory education course in its place (also taught by lecture) which deals with such intellectually engaging topics as program requirements, how to manage a class (removed from a sound educational theory and a concrete example, general prescriptions for "classroom management" inevitably slip into anti-intellectual how-to recipes), or how to pass a minimum competency test. Other topics included AIDS instruction or multicultural education, with one class period devoted to each.¹² The atomized chop-chop of the high school curriculum has filtered up to higher education. If we want professional teachers who are fired up about educational reform and whose techniques emerge from the pursuit of a demanding educational and social vision, do not expect most teacher education institutions to share the dream.

How can discipline be truly taught if the content and means employed to teach it are themselves professionally and intellectually undisciplined?

Gary Campbell sampled an array of ERIC studies as well as articles on in-school teacher education in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Educational Leadership*, and the *Harvard Educational Review* for the years 1978–89. Other publications, such as those from the National Staff Development Council, were also reviewed. He located 405 documents from all sources, of which 104 were narrative or descriptive studies. Most of the studies were research studies in the experimental-quantitative tradition. Campbell chose mostly journals read by principals and superintendents because he believed the articles published were a better index of what educators in practice were doing and concerned about than were articles published in research-oriented journals.

Over 90 percent of the narrative and descriptive accounts of inservice programs suggested that they were fragmented, were devoid of a conceptual framework, emphasized teaching skills, and were directed to very specific goals (such as increasing student scores on standardized achievement tests).

The quantitative studies revealed a similar pattern. Over 80 percent of the inservice programs were based on the findings of the research on effective teaching or the research on effective schools. These studies draw inferences about effective teaching or effective schools based on statistical correlations between specific teacher behaviors or school characteristics and student scores on standardized achievement tests. Because of the research methods used, variables that can be easily quantified are studied. Most of the inservice programs ignored the thinking processes teachers use to select and organize their actions while teaching. The theory behind the prescriptions, weak as it is, was not discussed.

Fewer than 10 percent of the inservice programs Campbell reviewed dealt either with such student outcomes as thinking or problem solving or with such important outcomes as how to encourage students to take an interest in learning, to exercise responsible initiative, and to feel better about their talents and abilities. None of the in-school programs required serious reading or discussion.¹³ (The effective-teaching research as a reform is critically discussed in chapter 4. The effective-schools research is briefly described and critiqued in appendix C.)

Campbell's literature review is not exhaustive. His review is part of a practitioner's systematic account of a five-year reform ef-

fort to remake a secondary school. This reform effort was rooted in the idea of a dialogue among the school's staff which brought reading and ideas to bear on school practice.¹⁴ Campbell made test borings through the soil and rock of the inservice literature and drew conclusions about the quality of its core based on one intellectual perspective. If the literature is selected on other grounds, to inform school improvement efforts, or on ways to build a professional environment for teachers, which Ann Lieberman has done so well, a different literature emerges.¹⁵ This literature deals less with more routine inservice work.

Since the intellectual and professional environment educators create for themselves is a critical and overlooked condition for reform—and because it is something which educators directly influence—I want to give one last bit of evidence that suggests how impoverished this environment is in many school systems. When a story about the inservice education of teachers hits the front page of a major metropolitan newspaper, it is a sign that something very serious is amiss.

The Philadelphia Inquirer ran an article about one teacher in a suburban district who turned four videotape courses into an \$8000-a-year raise. Teachers are turning to “nontraditional courses,” which are often taught in one weekend in a classy motel and for which a semester’s credit is given. Communications courses offered in Disney World and other esoterica are popular. One teacher took a 45-semester-hour course in “Keys to Motivation” in five days at a Ramada Inn (the course was offered by a college in the area). She put her finger on one problem from the teacher’s side of reform when she defended this course by saying, “A lot of universities are teaching theory. What these courses teach are things teachers can use in the field.”¹⁶ Would that more colleges and universities taught theory! What this teacher means by “theory” is any course that is not perceived as how-to. A course in the “keys to motivation” removed from a more comprehensive view of education is practically and intellectually useless. To isolate “motivation” or “thinking” from the context of life in classrooms and schools is like a family therapist recommending a three-day course in “motivation for better family life” to a family that is in the process of falling apart.

I have sketched some of the factors in society and within education itself that condition our willingness to take on the moral and intellectual burdens of reform. There are many good reasons why we have not made significant progress in reforming our schools in intellectual and democratic ways since 1960. Our nation’s toler-

ance of poverty, for example, since the political coalition that launched Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" dissolved in the early 1970s,¹⁷ is not one of our country's great achievements, and it poses serious obstacles not only to reform but to what we might consider ordinary learning and teaching. One does not need to be a social policy analyst to know that children come to the school from families and to know that what strengthens the family strengthens the school. Poverty kills. It is as direct as that. I see once more in my mind's eye, as I think about the social disgrace that poverty is, the broken look in the eyes of the children and wives of white tenant farmers in Alabama as they stare at me from Walker Evans's masterful photographs, and I recall James Agee's words as he tore himself apart struggling with how to express in words the poverty he and Evans saw in 1936. In the early pages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee says of his struggle,

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here [in Alabama]. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech . . . phials of odors, plates of food and excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I would trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

A piece of body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.¹⁸

Until society sees a "piece of body torn out by the roots," educators, too, must live with poverty's dank smell.

Slick proposals from governors and presidents, visual images afloat on electromagnetic waves that invade our homes, egalitarianism and democracy in pursuit of quality in the manufacture of cars while meritocracy and authority drive the pursuit of better education for children—these things exist and influence educational reform. But they are beyond our direct control and pale before the damage we do by our inability to reconstruct the impoverished in-school teacher education programs we create for ourselves. If we cannot educate ourselves, on what do we rest our claim to educate others? Administrators must share the major responsibility for the poor quality of inservice programs because it is they who most often bring these skill-oriented "packages" to teachers.

If reform is to come alive, we must better attend to the intellectual and democratic quality of our own education. Surely the brief account I have given in this chapter, which delineates the anti-

Intellectual nature of the education we give ourselves in colleges and universities and in inservice programs, should give anyone who believes in the democratic social mission of the public schools cause for concern—if not outrage. Reform begins when we question what we *know* as we also question what we *do*. Reform is not a separate goal or prize to be pursued apart from the texture and quality of our daily practice; it is not an add-on like a stereo system in an old car. *As we make our practice of education more intelligent, we shall see that reform is no more than a by-product of thoughtful practice.* Reform evolves slowly as practitioners become more critical and thoughtful in their daily work. Grand strategies, national goals, and restrictive state standards imposed on an unthoughtful enterprise will do no more than tell us to run while placing boulders in our path.

If school practice and reform are to become more thoughtful, we must learn to ask not only, How effective is this reform? but to ask first, What is the educational worth of this reform? I discuss in the next chapter two concepts that guide my analysis of a reform's worth. The question of a reform's educational worth was rarely asked in the decades I studied. Its worth was assumed, or its worth was masked by a narrow interest in the promised effectiveness of the reform in improving the achievement of children living in poverty, for example, or in ways of teaching that made claims to effectiveness by invoking the findings of research. Faced with a blizzard of reforms, from interactive computers to thinking skills to mastery learning to whole language, educators need a rational and informed basis on which to judge a reform's worth.

In a profession of averted eyes that too often is reluctant to speak to the good, and is embarrassed to say that something is bad, I am hopeful that my analysis of reform, whatever its imperfections may be, might serve as an example of what a principal and a school faculty could do for itself as they improve the quality of their own learning. At the very least I hope to offer an alternative to the present practice of making numbers, rather than ideas and values, the primary basis for judging the worth of a reform proposal.

We must abandon the grand highways of routine practice and our fear of constructive criticism, either by ourselves or others. These roads do not jostle or disturb. The ride is pleasant if unremarkable, but these highways are taking us at high speed to the possible dissolution of the American public school system. Country roads have their charm. In the following chapters I try to show how an informed critique of proposed reforms can help teachers, princi-

pals, and others separate worthy reforms from unworthy reforms. My analysis is one example of what educators can do for themselves in their own schools through open and informed conversation. It is the country road of mind and conversation that we must travel if American schools are to begin to capture the power of intellectual and democratic values for *all* her children. Country roads bring us to reality. Here we see the colors and catch the scent of the forest and the field. Here we cannot forget the children.