TEACHERS REVERSING THE CYCLE

Checking the Dangers of NCLB

Joe Kincheloe was always ahead of the curve; he seems to have seen and thought beyond what we experience in the present. Joe saw so far ahead of the curve that the curve became a circle, or rather a cycle that he saw strengthening as it spiraled out of control. In his 1991 chapter “Exposing the Technocratic Perversion of Education: The Death of the Democratic Philosophy of Schooling” in James J. van Patten’s *The socio-cultural foundations of education and the evolution of education policies in the United States*, Kincheloe recognized the same cycle of technicalization in education and society that envelops us today. Technocratic society imposes technique-centered policies upon education, which then feed technocratic-minded citizens back into the society to perpetuate the cycle. Kincheloe engages dialectically with recent historical and current educational and cultural dynamics in anticipation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which threatens to be the centerpiece of the societal technocratic overtaking of teaching. Although NCLB was not enacted until 2002, 11 years after the publication of Joe’s piece, in it he demonstrates his ability to foresee “the subtle and insidious ways that technicalization invades our workplaces, our schools, and our assumptions about human nature and education” (1991, p. 194), which he believed would be created by a laser-pointed, unconsidered focus on one-size-fits-all standardized testing.

Kincheloe’s philosophy is grounded in a participatory, critical theory of democratic education—one that promotes the interests of the people and practices social equality. At the conclusion of the van Patten chapter, in a section called “what is to be done,” Kincheloe lays out what are some of the guiding principles of his argument. On page 220, he insists that the “continuing drift toward technicalization” in education “conflicts with the various goals of education in a democratic society.” Referencing John Dewey, the father of American progressivism, Kincheloe maintains that we should be in a constant state of creating “the most democratic society possible.” He asserts that the truly democratic society “would serve the best interests of as many individuals and groups as possible.” Furthermore, democratic schools would be committed to passing along learning and knowledge to prepare and empower individuals and groups who would serve the ideals of democracy. His model school would not assign students social roles or career goals, but rather would teach learners to think deeply, critically, and freely; and to attempt to understand all dimensions of the human experience, so that they would be capable of choosing their own best-suited career paths. These schools would be liberatory for students, “free[ing] [them] from ignorance” (1991, p. 199). He says, “Education should begin
with the assumption that every person desires to be occupied in work which will make the lives of others better worth living” (1991, p. 222). What Kincheloe exposes is the technicalization in education which he predicts will tempt teachers to teach to tests at the cost of context and meaning and thus manipulate students to perpetuate the status quo. Students (and teachers) shaped in this way cannot possibly serve as citizens who would further the aims of a free, constantly improving, lively, democratic society. “To avoid the dehumanization that such over-emphasis of technique brings about,” Kincheloe believes, “educators must first recognize that there is a problem” (1991, p. 194). Recognizing the problem, however, requires a breaking of the technique-focused mindset and, thus, the technocratic cycle.

Joe’s prediction has been borne out, perhaps beyond even his expectations. In 2005, after witnessing the effects of the first few years of NCLB, Kincheloe decries that “[i]n the twenty-first century, the idea that teachers understand the complexity of the educational world is a radical proposition in and of itself,” with “many educational reformers see[ing] no need for teachers to be rigorous scholars” (2005, p. 5). “Indeed,” Kincheloe continues, “the No Child Left Behind reforms require disempowered teachers who do what they’re told and often read pre-designed scripts to their students” (2005, p. 5). The disempowerment of the citizenry thus begins with the disempowerment of the public school teacher—the focal point of education for the majority of our young people and the leaders in the classroom. “[S]uch actions” as the NCLB reforms “are insulting to the teaching profession and are designed ultimately to destroy the concept of public education itself,” Kincheloe concludes (2005, p. 5). In his 1991 article Kincheloe outlines the subversive, perverting effects of technicalization that find their logical conclusion in NCLB. In the 14 years between his first article and Kincheloe’s 2005 critique, he watched NCLB insult the teaching profession, as well as individual teachers themselves, and begin the process of destroying the credibility and functionality of public schooling if not the notion of public education itself.

One of the most devastating consequences of high-stakes testing is the phenomenon of cheating by teachers. A series of Dallas Morning News stories in 2004 reports finding extensive test cheating on the elementary school level in Texas (Benton and Hacker, 2004). A state investigation identifies 22 teachers and other educators in poor, urban schools in Dallas and Houston as improperly assisting students on the TAKS test, including distributing answer keys in some cases. The false “Texas miracle” stands as the most infamous but just one of many cases of principals and teachers knowingly participating in academic fraud. (See also Grow [2004] for an overview of nationwide NCLB cheating by teachers.) In this extreme case, teachers were pressured by the educational and political systems, as well as their principals, to demonstrate that students could achieve passing (or improved) test scores—even if they did not, or could not. The stakes in the standardized test score game range in severity depending on many different factors, perhaps most importantly the amount of local funding of the school. If a loss of federal funding represents a significant piece of the school’s financial pie, the test results weigh that much heavier on a teacher’s mind. Disempowered, dehumanized as Joe predicted, and perhaps unconscious of the long-term consequences, these lost and desperate educators