

Chapter Six

RETHINKING AGENDAS Social Reproduction and Resistance

I wouldn't cooperate in the remaking of myself. I played the dumb Indian. They couldn't make me into an apple—red outside and white inside.

Lame Deer

A THEORETICAL MERITOCRACY

Education is widely touted as the way to get ahead in American society. From the moment they enter school, children are told that it is necessary to do well in school in order to do well in life. Teachers talk about students "making something of themselves," of "becoming somebody" as a result of their school work. Students hear over and over that if they work hard, do well, get a good education, then success—most often interpreted as a bulging paycheck—will follow as surely as night follows day. High grades are a form of pay for this preliminary work, low grades a kind of punishment for the unambitious, or a reality check for the unintelligent. In either case, grades foreshadow what students can later expect economically: "No work/no brains, no pay."

This perspective on education is central to America's faith that its citizens occupy their particular economic and social slots because those slots are what they *deserve*, what they have earned when given a chance to prove their worth. Public schools are supposed to offer everyone an equal opportunity to prove themselves and to monitor educational competition carefully to see who shows ambition and talent and who doesn't. If everyone has equal educational opportunity, then the American race for power and status is fair, and the losers have no cause to complain. Theoretically, the winners who eventually attain wealth and power *earn*

them by demonstrating superiority in the classroom; the losers who achieve less status *deserve* less, because they failed to excel when given the chance in school.

The belief that a fair competition occurs in schools helps keep our democracy operating reasonably peacefully, despite its stunning discrepancies in wealth and privilege. How can the poor rebel when they've been given a fair chance to better their lives and failed? What more can citizens reasonably ask for than a fair chance to compete for the gold ring? If a person's lot isn't a happy or prosperous or powerful one, whom can he blame for his fate but himself?

The scenario sounds fair and reasonable, says the critical theorist, but it often bears little resemblance to the lived reality of many students. Rather than serving to give nonprivileged students a genuine opportunity to do better than their parents, schools far more often serve as a mechanism to keep students in whatever class they started out in. It's a fairly intricate but essentially circular process, like the mazes in which a ball is released into a series of chutes and gadgets, and then goes up, down, and around—only to mysteriously return exactly where it began. And there it begins again, repeating the process over and over, despite all of the intricate interventions en route. In critical theory, this process is known as “social reproduction”: the schools' tendency to take students in, to run them through a variety of placements, evaluations, and coursework—only to deposit them years later in precisely the same social class where they began.

Of course, since we can't count on fooling all of the people all of the time, long before their release from school many students realize that, for them, the educational process is a maze leading nowhere rather than a fair race. With this realization, their relation to the school may become strained. When students come to believe that they are being judged on qualities other than intelligence and ambition, when they lose faith in the educational sorting system or in the rewards it promises them, they often refuse to continue playing the game.

In such cases, students find a variety of ways to reject the system and all of its components, a reaction critical theorists call “resistance.” Resistance is the equivalent of getting up and walking away from the card table when you've figured out that the other guy has stacked the deck. Unfortunately,

the result remains the same: while students can't win a rigged game, they also can't win if they don't play. Educational inequity is a lose/lose situation for disadvantaged students.

After discussing both "social reproduction" and "resistance" in more detail, I'll share a real life example of exactly how they can undermine the potential of a gifted student. The example comes from a videotape that is available from PBS, one that (as I'll say again later) I'd urge readers to see for themselves.

FLAWED SORTING MECHANISMS: STANDARDIZED TESTING

My own experience provides the most telling example I can imagine to demonstrate the many problems that exist with standardized testing, one of the most common and most powerful sorting strategies schools use to monitor the educational race and divide students into groups of winners and losers.

Needing to pass a language test for my doctorate, which I was trying to complete while working full time in one city and maintaining a family life in another nearly three hours away, I decided to be pragmatic. I'd studied Spanish for years in college, but hadn't done anything with it for well over a decade. I couldn't help wondering if it was remotely possible that I would remember enough to pass a language exam. Rather than spend time studying if I didn't have to, I eventually decided to take the test without any preparation, a calculated risk. If I passed, wonderful; then I would save time I could spend on other work. If I didn't pass, it would cost me only another \$20 to take the test again, because there was no academic penalty for failure. At test time, I knew I was in big trouble as soon as I opened my booklet. The first half of the exam was on fine points of Spanish grammar and usage, the equivalent of English tests forcing a choice between *who* and *whom*. An accent over the *i* in one word made the word *yes*; no accent, and the word became *if*. That I knew, but I was clueless on most of the others. I had no chance of passing this portion of the test based on what I remembered of my Spanish classes, for sure.

Of course, what I *did* know a lot about was standardized testing, having tutored many high school students on the SATs. I knew about when to guess and when not to guess, and I knew a lot about how tests were scored. I also knew how many points my department considered a passing score (interestingly, "passing" scores varied from department to department). Since there was no point in my thinking about Spanish grammar as I sat there, I analyzed the test statistically instead, groping for some strategy to eke out enough points to pass.

I mentally wagered that I'd do much better in the second part, involving reading comprehension. I estimated that I could get nearly two-thirds of the comprehension questions right, and calculated how many points I could earn there. Then, estimating that I'd answer no more than one in four grammar questions correctly, I calculated how many questions in that section I'd need to attempt in order to have a prayer of earning the points I needed.

I answered exactly the number of grammar questions I thought I *had* to, carefully selecting those that I felt I had the best chance of guessing correctly. And, I was immensely relieved to find later that I did indeed understand the reading passages pretty well, even the memorable one on sarcophagi. (Now there's a word every doctoral student needs to be able to identify in a foreign language!)

And, I passed the test—literally by a point or two. But what, exactly, did my passing score signify?

If being successful on the test was supposed to demonstrate industriousness, I should have failed; my only preparation had been reading Spanish signs at the Miami Zoo. If being successful was supposed to demonstrate that I knew the finest points of the most formal use of the language, I should have failed. I didn't *know*; I *guessed*. I had little of the knowledge that half the test targeted.

But I didn't fail. And, I would argue, I should *not* have failed, because what I did know was more important than what I didn't. I *did* have sufficient command of the language to be able to read original texts in it, which seems to me a primary skill for a researcher. Certainly being able to read in the language ought to have mattered more than being able to identify a linguistic faux pas equivalent to using *who* instead of *whom*

(especially since I wasn't allowed access to a reference book; do test makers imagine that researchers work without dictionaries and other references at hand?).

The test, however, focused equally on faux pas and comprehension, suggesting they were equally important. The result is that even though I could make sense of a text far removed from my own specialty (sarcophagi are about as far removed as one can get from English education), I *would* not have passed without my extensive understanding of the structure and grading of standardized, multiple choice tests. My passing score depended not on my knowledge of Spanish grammar and spelling, but on privileged knowledge about testing I had because of my background—because of my cultural capital. As I often say to my students when I tell them this story: “Go figure. Who can say what my test scores *meant*, really?”

Here, in the nutshell of this one experience, are all the reasons that the standardized tests so often used to slot children into gifted or “special” classes, or into academic or vocational tracks, are untrustworthy. As most teachers know (even if statisticians refuse to believe it), standardized tests often do not measure what they are said to measure. And, what the tests do measure is often of little consequence, except to people obsessed with grammatical purity, or with *the* answer *they* think is right. What sense does it make, really, to think that a student who knows the difference between *among* and *between* is smarter or more able than one who doesn't? And, what talents remain hidden when tests ignore student knowledge that is actually more important than material on a test? For example, wouldn't it have been useful for my professors to know whether, left to my own devices with a dictionary and handbook, I could write a reasonably correct sentence in Spanish? Surely that's a more important skill than how well I can guess where an accent mark belongs in a sentence written by someone else.

As if these problems weren't enough to discourage standardized testing, many researchers have noted that students may lack cultural knowledge that a test presumes, as when students don't understand the form or impact of standardized tests, or when urban elementary students are asked a question related to the structure of a “porch,” or rural students a question related to a “stoop.”

So many examples of stupid testing abound that it's somewhat mystifying why the educational establishment continues to rely on them. Well, that's disingenuous on my part. Many of us know that how much it *costs* to administer a given test will determine whether it's used or not. We use the test formats and the information that are easiest and cheapest to administer, even if results are likely useless or misleading. Generally, educators and testing agencies are much more interested in the *appearance* of being rigorous than in gaining useful information.

For example, another test idiocy I am familiar with comes from the experience of a friend who teaches high school English in New Jersey. She was so dismayed at the form of a much ballyhooed "new and improved" state writing test that she conducted her own research to demonstrate that what was being tested was *not* what the test makers claimed (Coyle 1992). Specifically, one section of the test was said to measure students' "revision" skills. In this section, students responded to multiple choice questions requiring them to "revise" targeted sentences using one of four options provided. As the teacher's research demonstrated, the test reveals little about students' actual revision skills.

For starters, never in the real world does anyone revise a sentence targeted by someone else, using one of four options designed by someone else. It's a tad difficult to imagine a situation in which a boss might say: "Bill, I really like what you've drafted here, but I think you should revise this sentence in one of these four ways. Of course, three of these options are wrong, so you better know your grammar and usage." Where is the sense of this format?

Another problem was that most of the questions focus on the same sort of silly editing problems that I faced in my Spanish test, more *who/whom* equivalents. Most English teachers have long since agreed that such choices are editing problems (simple rule-based problems) rather than revision problems (significant problems involving content and organization). Solutions to editing problems can be found in dictionaries and handbooks; solutions to revision problems must be designed by the writer and an infinity of solutions are possible. Still, test makers continue to design tests suggesting that getting a comma in the right place is the ultimate test of effective writing.

And, test conditions forbidding the use of dictionaries and other references routinely imply that in the real world no one will ever look anything up or ask someone more knowledgeable for help. I can't help wondering if these test writing folks work in some special vacuum where no one ever calls across a room—as they do everywhere else in my experience—“Hey! How do you spell *accommodation*?”

Finally, there are an infinite number of ways to shape any idea into written language; when left to their own devices, students demonstrated that they were likely to correct problems using far more sophisticated options than those provided. In fact, because the test makers' “correct” answers were so often awkward, students frequently rejected them on the reasonable grounds that they “sounded funny.”

On the whole, this section of the state test shows only how well students can guess how test makers think, *not* how well they themselves can revise. It is impossible to imagine a multiple choice test that would reveal anything about students' true revision skills because there is *never* a single appropriate revision response to any text with a weakness. But rather than explore other, more appropriate—and certainly more expensive—assessments, authorities settle for a cheaper option actually focused on editing. The results can be reported authoritatively to the public—accuracy and usefulness be damned. Another prompt from a state test I've critiqued gives students five minutes to write a letter to a fictional character from a story they read the day before. In the story, the character dies of exposure in a cold climate. The students (who live in a somewhat southern state) are required to write a letter offering the (fictional) character (who is already dead) advice on how to stay alive in extreme cold. Immediately *following* this exercise, they read an informative article on hypothermia. Think about it.

Anyone who checks assessment literature will soon discover that researchers have provided copious critiques and arguments about the discrepancies between what standardized tests may *claim* to assess and what they actually *do* assess. Some of the most exemplary work has been done by Clifford Hill, a linguist who has clearly and thoroughly documented problems in a test widely used with children entering elementary school, and in some state tests as well. As Hill's work (a mere

drop in the ocean of critical literature) persuasively indicates, not only are test questions often impossibly skewed by the test maker's perspective, but variations in students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence results in several ways that have nothing to do with intelligence or ability.

Is the test taker well-versed in test-taking strategies? Practiced in taking standardized tests? Or, if the test is written in English, is the student fluent in English and so able to understand the problems posed? Is the student familiar with the cultural experiences and vocabulary necessary to make sense of reading passages? If the student applies information from a different culture, does a different answer become logical? What about environmental influences the student can't control? Has she had a good night's sleep and a good breakfast? Does she understand, or believe, that this test will affect her future? To what extent, in short, might numerous experiential variables affect test results?

No matter what magical mathematical formulas statisticians apply to standardized tests, the tests themselves are devised and taken by live human beings who do not come from standardized molds. One test maker defines reading this way, another that way, and voilà! We have two entirely different reading tests claiming to measure precisely the same thing.

From a positivist paradigm, standardized, one-right-answer tests may make sense; the only need is to figure out which test is right and reliable and which is wrong and unreliable. From a constructivist perspective, however, where all of experience is open to multiple interpretations, such efforts at measurement fall little short of absurdity. They might, in fact, be amusing, if certain groups of students weren't routinely sorted into the same slots over and over again based on standardized test results, which many educators, parents, and politicians take very seriously indeed.

However much faith many profess in standardized tests, more than one educational researcher has reviewed results and noted, credibly, that—given the correlation between family income and standardized test scores—we might as well skip the expensive testing process and just assign students places based on their financial status right from the beginning. That, at least, would be more honest, if no more fair.

FLAWED SORTING MECHANISMS: LANGUAGE, RACE, GENDER

As I explained in the last chapter, students who come to school lacking a command of standard English lack a kind of cultural capital that costs them a great deal in schools. If English is not their first language, they may receive academic instruction in a language they cannot fully comprehend. This means that they are introduced to unfamiliar concepts, like division, in unfamiliar language, making it doubly difficult for them to comprehend new content in subject areas. Or, they might be grouped into an ESL math class—where the teacher covers material more slowly, in light of their linguistic difficulties. But in either case, children whose first language is not English are slowed down while native English speakers forge ahead. Unfortunately, it is far more likely that their falling behind will be interpreted as an indication of lesser intelligence, rather than the consequence of not receiving instruction in their native language.

The above is intended as a realistic portrayal of the consequences of English-only instruction, not a dismissal of the many arguments favoring it, or of the very real financial and staffing constraints that preclude other arrangements. Bilingual education is a serious and complex issue, but a discussion of its pros and cons is beyond the scope of this text. Still, it is relevant to note here the fact that a student who begins elementary school without mastery of English does not compete on a level playing field with native English speakers.

Even for those who do speak English, however, language can be a handicapping issue. Dialects that vary from standard English, or unfamiliar cultural speech habits, may signal inferiority to a teacher steeped in the cultural notion of what a smart person sounds and acts like. The use of “ain’t,” as I’ve noted, generally triggers the thought that the speaker is stupid, for example, and loudness is routinely thought to signal aggression. So culturally ingrained is the latter perception, in fact, that young visitors to my home have fled behind their mothers’ skirts in terror at my husband’s booming greeting. Because he and three brothers competed as children for their mother’s attention, loudness early became a speech habit for all four

men. Children, especially children with no siblings, routinely find his normal speaking voice threateningly loud, and his brothers report similar experiences. And, it is a rare teacher who will not have a negative reaction to a student he perceives as aggressive.

Such preconceptions about language and voice carry over into evaluation of written work as well. A piece using the phrase "should have" is likely to receive a higher grade than the one using "should of," even if the latter has more impressive content. (It is, after all, so much easier to diagnose errors than weakness in reasoning.) Always, student performance is judged against the idealized cultural template of what "an American" sounds like, and routinely, students are evaluated academically based on the surface form of their thoughts, rather than on the intelligence or creativity of their content.

Caucasians, as well as other racial groups, suffer such language discrimination, but non-white races are likely to suffer from other forms of prejudice as well: "Everybody knows Asians are good at math; everybody knows African-Americans and Mexican-Americans just aren't, well, as intelligent or ambitious as some other folks." However much we would like to think that racism is over, the facts suggest it is not. For example, the recently best-selling argument for the inherent inferiority of African-Americans, *The Bell Curve* (Hernstein 1994), is prime, recent testimony that many continue to insist on the inherent inferiority of non-Caucasian races. Many whites claim that academic standards will fall when African-Americans begin attending a given school, and often standards *do* fall—to the dismay of parents seeking rigorous schooling for their children. Research has indicated that many teachers and administrators start easing standards and expectations downward when the population changes, based on their assumptions about what children who look or sound a certain way will be interested in or capable of. While there are, of course, schools where racism does not play itself out in lesser expectations and evaluations for African-American or Mexican-American children, there are countless schools where that is exactly what happens. Knowing that students rise and fall to teachers' expectations, we also know that any first grade teacher who looks at a racially mixed class and expects from Day One that one group of students will do better than some other group is also slanting the level

playing field children are assumed to compete on.

Gender, too, can put half the population of any school at a disadvantage from their earliest experiences, as extensive research sponsored by the American Association of University Women has demonstrated. Reports of subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination against females is well documented in that organization's publications *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (1991), and *Hostile Hallways* (1993), and in research reported by David and the late Myra Sadker (1994). The cultural template that urges girls to passivity puts them at a disadvantage in a classroom where boys aggressively seek the teacher's attention. The notion that boys are better at math and science than girls by nature leads again to lowered teacher expectations and lowered performance. And, sexual harassment of girls lessens their comfort and self-confidence in school, although it is often overlooked on the "Boys will be boys!" principle. Moreover, the typical school administrative structure, in which a powerful man heads up a staff of women who do little more than follow instructions, teaches females by example that they are to be followers rather than leaders.

Of course I am painting these areas with tremendously broad brush strokes that do not apply to every teacher or every school. Still, copious amounts of research verify that the biases and preconceptions I've described do directly affect the fate of students in schools.

By far, African-American, Mexican-American, and Native American students are assigned to less challenging courses. I am, of course, painting the situation with tremendously broad brush strokes that do not apply to every teacher or every school. Still, copious amounts of research verify that the biases and preconceptions work to channel specific groups of student into vocational courses of study. By far, wealthy students are given more and better counseling and preparation for higher education than poorer students. By far, boys outnumber girls in advanced math and science classes and in math and science professions as well. It is no accident, in view of all this, that men in American society still hold, by far, a greater number of powerful positions and earn, by far, larger salaries than women. *Some* men, some Caucasians, and some wealthy folk are surely more able than *some* women, some non-Caucasians, and some poorer folk. But consistency in comparisons, when analyzed in light of documented prejudicial conditions in schools, indicates that at least *some* people are

where they are because the game was fixed in their favor, not because they competed hardest and best.

FLAWED SORTING MECHANISMS: *SAVAGE INEQUALITIES*

The term "savage inequalities" was coined by Jonathan Kozol, cited earlier as a researcher documenting the educational fate of poor children. His book by that name provides over 200 pages of evidence that the way we finance our public schools systematically ensures that poor children will *not* receive the same educational opportunities that middle-class and wealthy students do. Under the circumstances, it is virtually impossible for poor children as a group to compete with children from wealthier homes.

Kozol documents conditions in several geographic areas, showing the link between tax base and school conditions. Because school funding depends largely on property taxes, schools in areas with high property values—generally enclaves of the affluent—routinely have nearly unlimited resources. Meanwhile, essentially next door, schools in areas with low property values routinely lack funds even for such essentials as repairing broken windows or purchasing pencils and paper. For example, Kozol reports that before court rulings mandated change, a low-income city near Los Angeles was spending \$595 for each student, while nearby Beverly Hills was spending \$1,244 per student—despite the fact that residents of the low-income area were taxed at double the rate of the Beverly Hills residents.

The idea that education will never provide a level playing field until schools are funded more equitably has not been widely endorsed nationwide, despite America's constant prattle about equal opportunity. For example, even in California, where the courts mandated a more equitable system, the result was for voters to pass the legislation known as Proposition 13, which restricted funding for *all* schools. As a result of voter reaction to the court mandate, California's financial support for its public schools dropped to become one of the lowest in the nation, even as residents in affluent areas uncovered creative ways to channel extra money into their schools, merely restructuring the inequities the courts intended to outlaw. And, of course, children of the privileged can always be sent to

well-endowed private schools, a luxury the poor have no way to access.

In chapter after chapter, Kozol documents conditions poor children endure as a result of inequitable financing that middle-class parents wouldn't tolerate for a moment. For example, Kozol reports that in Chicago on an average morning, 5,700 children in 190 classrooms have no teachers; in one school, eighth-graders work from a text that names Richard Nixon president; two working bathrooms that serve 700 children are short on soap, paper towels, and toilet paper because funds are short. In Camden, N.J., children learn typing on manual machines that their parents also used, a school fire alarm has been dysfunctional for 20 years, and there are *no* books for the ninth-grade English class. In Cincinnati, the single instructor for the remedial reading program sees 45 children per day; four computers serve a total school population of 600; nearly two-thirds of the school's current population can be expected to become high school dropouts.

And, in an East St. Louis school, raw sewage routinely floods the bathrooms and kitchen, as it does homes in the area, because the municipality lacks funds to repair its sewage system. Science labs are 30 to 50 years old and have no water. In winter, the eternally malfunctioning heating system turns classrooms into sweltering boxes with temperatures in the 100s. Texts, as in many schools, are scarce. Children routinely come to school suffering physical damage from exposure to grounds contaminated with arsenic, mercury, and lead. They talk casually about a specific site near the school where someone's young sister was raped, then murdered.

And, they know where they are and what is happening to them. The following words happen to come from children in Camden, but in Kozol's text, similar words echo over and over from children nationwide:

"I have a friend," says Jezebel, who is in the eleventh grade. "She goes to school in Cherry Hill. I go to her house and I compare the work she's doing with the work I'm doing. Each class at her school in Cherry Hill, they have the books they're s'posed to have for their grade level. Here, I'm in eleventh grade. I take American history. I have an eighth-grade book. So I have to ask, 'Well, are they three years smarter? Am I stupid?' But it's not like that at all. Because we're kids like they are. We're no different. And, you know, there are *smart* people here. But then, you know, they have that money goin' to their schools. They have a nice *clean* school to go to. They have

carpets on the floors and air-conditioned rooms and brand-new books. Their old books, when they're done with them, they ship them here to us."

"Look at this." She hands me a paperback volume with no cover and with pages falling out. "You see this book? We have to read Charles Dickens. That's the book they gave me. Pages are missing. *A Tale of Two Cities*. We don't even have enough for every student. There are just ten students in that class! . . . Why are we treated like this?" (152, 154)

Another child asks Kozol similar, poignant questions:

"You visit other schools. Do you think the children in this school are getting what we'd get in a nice section of St. Louis?"

I note that we are in a different state and city.

"Are we citizens of East St. Louis or America?" she asks. (30)

Another tells of being the only black student in a fifth-grade class at a white school, of being taunted by the other students:

To tell the truth, it left a sadness in my heart. Now you hear them sayin' on TV, 'What's the matter with these colored people? Don't they care about their children's education?' But my mother did the best for me she knew. It was not my mother's fault that I was not accepted by those people. (35)

"It does not take long," notes this student's classmate, "for little kids to learn they are not wanted." That lesson—that society is indifferent to the fate of poor children—is evident in every facet of the alternately sweltering and freezing, understaffed and undersupplied, dirty and unrepaired schools Kozol describes. It is amazing to me—and to my students, and to Kozol himself, I think—that although this book has been available since 1991, there has been no outraged response insisting that we *must* remedy this national shame of inequity, and we *must* do it *now*. So disturbed was one of my students by this text that she bought copies and mailed them to Bill and Hillary Clinton, with an eloquent plea for their attention. But nothing seems to make anything happen.

In a conversation with Bill Moyers on PBS, educator Mike Rose, who specializes in teaching writing to the "underprepared" college student, talked about the injustice of the educational sorting system that routinely

discriminates against large groups of intelligent and creative human beings. He argued, on the one hand, that justice demands that schools change the way they do business. But he also noted, with a good bit of historical evidence to support his point, that it is both foolish and dangerous for comfortable America to continue ignoring the fate of poor children.

What can we expect to happen when young people learn that a fraudulent story of America, Land of Opportunity, has been systematically fed to them? What will happen when they realize what the children in Kozol's book seem to have realized when they were still very young indeed?

RESISTANCE

Riots and looting in Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict, as well as earlier riots in other places, have demonstrated what can happen when the disadvantaged come to believe that they have been systematically lied to and cheated by the society they inhabit. While some may continue to suffer in silence, others will choose more active responses to their circumstances.

Critical theorists suggest that when students realize that they do not in fact receive the equal educational opportunity America brags about, a common response is to resist what they are offered, to refuse to cooperate in any way with whatever seems expected of them. Of course, many teachers who still believe in the myth of equal opportunity cannot understand resistant behaviors, which often strike the adults as inexplicably bizarre.

Why, teachers wonder, do so many students dye their hair purple or green or blue? Or shave it off entirely? Why do they dress in leather, in feathers, in skin-clinging spandex, in pounds and pounds of jewelry—sometimes including even safety pins and pacifiers? Why do they pierce eyebrows, navels, noses, and tongues as well as ears? Why do they say *up* whenever a teacher says *down*? Why do they use every possible combination of profanities in the classroom, even in direct address to teachers? Why are they frequently destructive, breaking this and setting fire to that? That is, why do students do all this when they actually *come* to school? And how

do we explain all those students who won't come, the ones who play football outside the schoolroom window as their class proceeds on the other side of the glass (as a friend teaching on an Arizona reservation recently reported to me about her students)?

Of course, some of this is the perennial need of youth to rebel. But critical theory suggests that much of it has a far more subtle and more worrisome cause. Such refusal to play along, such defiance and insistence on maintaining an identity clearly different from the one the school would impose, is what critical theorists term resistance. Resistance embodies the idea—surely novel to many educators—that students might choose to refuse to be remade in the teacher's image, to insist on maintaining their own integrity and dignity, to refuse to agree that their native culture and selves are inherently inferior. Students embracing this stance conclude that if the price of "success" is to look, sound, and act *white*, and middle-class white at that, then the price is too high. The concept of resistance does much to answer teachers' befuddled, wailing questions "But *why* do they have to look like that? *Why* do they have to talk like that? *Why* won't they cooperate and do what I ask? *Why* don't they care about their grades, about getting an education?"

Critical theory suggests that often, the only way students can maintain their self-respect is to refuse to endorse the premises that American schools embody: that there is *a* way for Americans to dress, move, and talk; that only the knowledge the teacher thinks is important matters; that there are right answers to everything, and teachers are the only ones who know for sure what they are; that if they allow the schools to remake them, and if they work very hard while they're cooperating, then they are sure to achieve whatever goal they pursue. "Play the game we offer you," schooling suggests, "and you'll win—if you're worthy."

But many students need only look around their neighborhoods to know what a lie these premises constitute. People of all shapes and sizes, speaking in all sorts of languages and ways, embody dignity and intelligence and creativity—so it must not be true that *only* if you look and sound a certain way can you be an admirable human being. Moreover, people willing to work hard, who may have gotten high school diplomas, are everywhere unemployed, or working for wages too low to support a

family in dignity or comfort.

Glass walls and ceilings surround disadvantaged students and everyone they know, and students learn quickly that their schools are no more substantive than cardboard props. It's revealing, in fact, that many *poor* schools post multiple copies of the poster bearing the legend: "I know I'm somebody because God don't make no junk." Apparently, the posters are needed to counteract the message that poor children are nobodies, as the shabby provisions made for them in schools imply. Any meaningful learning that happens inside schools in poor areas too often happens not because society is intent on providing equal educational opportunity, but because there are good human beings to be found everywhere, and the ones who work in poor schools are at times nearly saint-like in caring for their students, in overcrowded and neglected surroundings, with few or no supplies.

Those students who lose faith in schools may remain in them anyway—because the law requires it, or because everybody has to be somewhere, and school is a place where a youngster can be sure of having a lot of company. But being there physically does not require being there mentally, and being disruptive can, from a certain perspective, equate with being honest in the context of a fraudulent system. Like *Lame Deer*, who refused to be made into an "apple" (red on the outside and white on the inside), and like many African-Americans who refuse to be made into what they term "oreo cookies," many students simply refuse to renounce the cultural identity they inherited at birth. Their acting out in classrooms is often the equivalent of someone angrily trying to knock over a card table after realizing the dealer has been using a marked deck—while telling the losers what lousy card players they are ("Anyone who works hard enough will succeed—so you people must not have worked hard enough or been smart enough").

Given these circumstances, I have long since stopped wondering why a student would choose to derail classes and to ensure his or her own failure in school. Now, instead I wonder at and admire the number of students who hang on, trying to be loyal to their families and cultures and to attain mainstream success at the same time. It can't be easy, as the following example demonstrates.

A VIDEO CASE STUDY

A video aired as part of a Bill Moyers program on PBS (1992) that compared the experience of two New York City students offers a startlingly clear example of how the inequities in school financing cheat poor students of opportunity and produce resentment and resistance among young people. Produced by a small group of New York City high school graduates, the video compares the experience of Lonnie, a student at South Fordham in the Bronx, with the experience of James, a student in the nearby, more comfortable area of Riverdale, during their first year in new, upper-level schools. Both schools are in the same district, only a few miles apart geographically, but because of differences in their tax bases, they have widely disparate resources.

James's school is clean and boasts well-groomed, outdoor sports areas in addition to an after-school community center where children are welcome to gather and socialize when classes end. Teachers in the school are certified in the subjects they teach, and in James's science lab, there is a microscope for every student. Students interested in music have the opportunity to play in a fully equipped band, with instruments ranging from trombones to flutes. Asked about their plans for the future, James and his friends talk about Ivy League institutions like Columbia, Harvard, and Yale. They talk of becoming professionals, and James's goal, to become a veterinarian, remains constant throughout the school year.

Lonnie's school, on the other hand, has far fewer resources. A cramped gym hosts several games at one time and is not available to the students for after-school recreation. A young man, whose qualifications are primarily that he has taught dance and swimming, teaches Lonnie's science class. With a shout, he urges the class to try to behave "like human beings for a change" when they talk among themselves instead of engaging in class activities. Specifically, students are not interested in the "experiments" conducted in this class with no equipment: climbing up and down on their chairs, checking the effect of the activity on their pulse, and lifting their notebooks to gauge the effect of nonstrenuous activity on their muscles. Few teachers are certified in the subjects they teach, and few have

appropriate equipment to work with. The music teacher has not an assortment of band instruments, but minimal keyboards, to offer students.

In this environment, Lonnie—who, in elementary school, was an honor student in advanced classes—soon loses interest in schoolwork. Although he begins the year talking about becoming a lawyer, by mid-year his mother is sitting in on his English class to monitor his classroom behavior, and he falls into serious trouble in his science class. He becomes sullen and uncooperative. In a year-end meeting, Lonnie's mother tells the guidance counselor that Lonnie is bright and that he is bored with the work he's been given. In response, the disbelieving and patronizing counselor tells Lonnie that his grades offer no evidence that work he's been given is too easy for him.

In conversation at the video's end, Lonnie talks defiantly not of being a lawyer, but of being a basketball player. He tells his mother he won't return to the school, and when she says he must because they can't afford to move, he discusses the futility of time spent there: "What am I gonna learn in that science class?" he asks, knowing full well that in nearby schools students are receiving instruction from well-qualified teachers in well-equipped laboratories. Despite his mother's interest and support, despite his own intelligence and ambition, Lonnie's fate seems predetermined. He insists that he *could* be a lawyer, that he's smart enough to do the work it would take, but that he'll never get the chance because of the incredibly weak education his school can offer him. His mother notes, "He's right. If we stay here, he's *not* gonna make it." Even with straight-As, a student leaving his high school will never be equipped to compete with students leaving James's school.

Anyone who *believes* that America offers *all* of its children an equal opportunity to achieve their dreams needs to *see* this video (*Listening to America with Bill Moyers: Unequal Education*). Together with Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, it offers incontrovertible evidence that much of the American faith in education as the great equalizer is sadly misplaced, that schools are far more effective at social reproduction than they are at equal opportunity. Together, the video and text also make it startlingly clear why students might choose to exhibit resistance—to reject schooling as fraudulent in its claim to be the path to a better life.

WHAT'S A TEACHER TO DO?

Surely, many teachers *intend* school to offer disadvantaged students an opportunity to attain a brighter future. In fact, many teachers work tirelessly, hoping that their efforts will help students attain their dreams.

What critical theory suggests, however, is that because the current system works so well to the *disadvantage* of so many students, working within the framework of the accepted system is not only futile, but even harmful. Efforts aligned with the current framework, however well-intentioned, nevertheless enable an ongoing and inequitable fraud.

What students *need* to change their life circumstances, argues the critical theorist, is *not* the factoids of standardized tests, but an understanding of their circumstances, of the forces that have produced those circumstances, and of what kinds of action might change them. Such understanding is somewhat akin to the fish of the Zen fable mentioned in chapter one actually *seeing* the sea it is immersed in for the first time, actually *noticing* for the first time that the sea is influenced by its many inhabitants and their needs as well as by natural forces, like tide and light. Paulo Freire has called this state, this acute awareness of the dynamics of one's environment, conscientization (1970). It provides a new goal for educators, and it is the subject of the next chapter.