

Coming to terms with the power of teaching

By Deborah Loewenberg Ball

SOMEHOW, despite repeated failures and disappointments of past efforts to improve schools, and despite clear evidence of the persistent racism that underlies normative educational practice, optimism persists about the possibility of “reform” (Cuban, 2020; Mehta & Datnow, 2020). But the probability is that the next round of proposed improvements are likely to *reimagine* and *recreate* versions of the same ideas that were envisioned by those who came before us. Real change requires more than optimism and hope. It also demands humility and honesty.

Looking to the possibility of a better, more just future requires us to start by looking back. It requires us to take an honest look at our history of education “reform.” It requires understanding why business as usual has been the dominant theme.

Asking why, in light of new progressive ideas in the early decades of the 20th century, schools did not change, David Cohen (1989) argues that the common explanations — focusing on the organization of schooling, the conditions of teaching, flawed designs for improvement, and inadequate incentives — miss a crucial point. Lacking is attention to the practice of teaching itself and what makes change in instruction difficult. Analysts regularly overlook both the dynamic relational dimensions of students’ and teachers’ work and the ways that these complex relationships are situated in and permeated by broader historical, sociopolitical, and cultural environments (Ball, 2018; Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003).

I focus here on the practice of teaching precisely because it has so often been taken for granted or misunderstood. I choose it because of its power for harm, but also for substantial good. Putting teaching practice in the spotlight requires that we put aside old dichotomies, patterns that pervasively shape both discourse and thought about classroom instruction. We are limited by the paucity of language with which to communicate about teaching. While most other languages have a single word for teaching-and-learning that honors the fundamental relational and connected work, English separates this concept into two different words. And compared with many Indigenous languages, rich with a “grammar of animacy,” in which verbs greatly outnumber nouns, English is also noun-locked, implicitly turning so much of our thought to things rather than doings (Kimmerer, 2019).

Imagining teaching toward a more just society entails confronting why ordinary teaching so effectively conserves and reproduces what is “normal.” By normal, I mean the practice born of public schools in the mid-19th century. In their push to institute “common schools,” education reformers argued that a universal mission would ensure the development of citizens who would think rationally, be inculcated into the values of the society, and sustain the new nation. They sought to establish schools to form a “model idea of a healthy, industrious, frugal, temperate, wise Christian Commonwealth” (Mann, 1848). These aims were reinforced by the development of “normal schools,” aptly named institutions

dedicated to training teachers, whose purpose was to align teaching with societal needs and values, explicitly those of a white supremacist and Christian society.

These roots of contemporary public schooling have been durable and have foundationally shaped the practice of teaching. Designed for white children, the common schools employed white teachers, mostly women, themselves raised in the values that teaching sought to promote. Immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and other European countries, unhappy with the dominance of Protestant puritanical values, created their own schools (Katznelson & Weir, 1985). Emphatically normalizing white supremacy and Christianity, white educators enforced separate systems for Black and Indigenous children. In the case of Native children, white reformers brutally removed them from their families, effecting mass assimilation and destruction of Indigenous knowledge, language, and centuries-old community traditions for raising young humans (Lomawaima, 1994; Schuller, 2021). In the Indian schools, white supremacy formed the curriculum, explicit and implicit.

Segregated Black schools have typically been viewed through a deficit lens and judged to have been of poor quality. However, a closer look reveals the importance of the relational and humanizing approach of these schools, and offers a view of teaching practice that contrasts with the “normal” practice of the common white school traditions. While acknowledging the unequal and inadequate resources of the Black schools, Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) shows us a more intimate portrait of these schools, attending to what was good there. She asks, why it was that graduates of these schools remembered them with such respect and appreciation? Her detailed historical accounts reveal these schools fostered deeply caring environments in which families, communities, and teachers were connected in the fundamental

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mission of developing children. This work was a deeply spiritual undertaking. She cites N. Longworth Dillard, principal of Caswell County Training School, in North Carolina, for his fervent belief in Black children's humanity: "As a human being, he has a mind, and as a teacher it is our job to so guide, so direct, and so motivate his mental progress to the end that he may become a responsible member in our society. What more glorious task is there to perform" (Siddle Walker, 1996, p. 150). The Black teachers in these schools saw their work as a "religious calling," helping to develop human beings as whole people. They consistently enacted their belief that these young humans could grow to be anything they wanted to be. Caring was fundamental, and permeated teachers' work. If the children were whole people, the work of teaching was also whole. At the center were the children and the development of futures. Teachers knew the children's parents and families; the communities knew their teachers. It was collective work to develop young humans into the best people they could be.

These traditions that rooted the work of Black educators and that might have enriched "normal" practice in desegregated schools were lost in the aftermath of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision. This ruling promised a more just future for the education of Black children by uprooting the "separate but equal" logic of racial segregation (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). Instead, when schools were consolidated and desegregated, white school officials fired many thousands of Black educators, while retaining their white counterparts, which resulted in increased segregation, decimation of the Black teaching force, and a dramatic loss of Black principals (Fenwick, 2022; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Black children were now taught by white teachers who lacked knowledge of Black families and communities and did not embody the pedagogical orientations held and enacted by Black teachers. And further, the collective knowledge of the overwhelmingly white teaching profession

crucially lacked the wisdom and practice of the Black educators who lost their jobs. Norms of whiteness, including valued forms of behavior and creativity, forms of language, and control, were taken for granted as good and underscored deficit views of communities of color. In the aftermath of *Brown*, whiteness was reinforced.

Dan Lortie's (1975) ambitious study of the teaching profession showed that the structure of the occupation contributed to this reinforcement. Teaching was successful at attracting people who enjoyed school, and who were apprenticed to teaching practice through their own experience as students, successfully reproducing "normal" practice. Teacher preparation was a weak intervention to disrupt the apprenticeship, and the normalization of whiteness was at its core. While teacher educators bemoaned their lack of impact on teachers' habits of "telling" and their views of knowledge as objective, they did not, in the main, try to disrupt the whiteness of normalized practice (Brown, 2014; Haddix, 2017; Love, 2019). Teacher preparation reproduces whiteness in its curriculum, in whom it recruits to teaching, and in who the faculty are who teach future teachers.

Developing young people is about supporting them to grow as individuals and as members of society. The Black segregated schools in this country took this mandate as core to their mission. Yet growing human beings into "responsible members of our society" has never been a simple good and has often meant using public schools to stratify. Contemporary concerns about the global economy and U.S. competitiveness, about the STEM and technical workforce, echo the urgency of the Sputnik era. Because schools have successfully grown the next generation of citizens in ways that reproduce the social order, an important question is whether that power could be marshalled to prepare people for disrupting injustice and anti-Black racism? That would take shifts in power and interests that most critical scholars would argue are improbable.

In his 1963 essay, "A talk to teachers," James Baldwin identified the challenge:

[T]he crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society... The paradox is precisely this — that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which one is being educated.

Baldwin points out that the goal of developing people who think critically and independently, who question and create, is, in fact, at odds with the perpetuation of the social order: "What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society." He argues that this goal of compliance to the existing order yields a "schizophrenic" identity for Black children. On one hand, they are educated as Americans, pledging allegiance to an ideal of "liberty and justice for all." On the other hand, their education perpetuates myths about Black people, erases their culture and achievements, and distorts the nation's history with respect to Black people and Indigenous nations and lands. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1994) named as "double consciousness" how Black people are constrained to see themselves, always "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on with contempt and pity" (p. 2). The ideal of developing children to contribute to and be thriving members of society, as central as it was to the Black schools of the South and to Indigenous communities, was enacted to reproduce what philosopher Charles Mills (1994) called "the racial contract." Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the education of Black and Brown children in white schooling has never been a liberatory or progressive project. Liberatory education has been possible only where schooling was owned, developed, and rooted in the pedagogical and educational traditions and cultures of these communities, not in the mainstream of America's history and the contemporary practices of "common schools."

So how does looking backward help us look forward? What direction does it offer, and what hope for using the power of teaching does it provide?

Diversifying teaching

One clear lesson is that we must prioritize the development of a diverse teaching force with the qualities needed to help children thrive. Almost half of Americans identify as people of color, as do more than half of children in school. Yet more than 80% of current teachers are white people, a consequence of the *Brown v. Board* decision. Black and Brown children are thus extremely unlikely to have teachers with whom they identify or who understand and share their experience. This is critical. For Black children, having even one same-race teacher across their K-12 experience significantly increases the probability of graduating from high school and enrolling in college (Gershenson et al., 2018). Further, the lack of role models means that students of color are less likely to see themselves as teachers, and less likely to become teachers, thus compounding and perpetuating the whiteness of the teaching force (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2004). White students, too, rarely have teachers of color, which leaves them without opportunities to learn from their experience and expertise. That the teaching force is so disproportionately white has consequences, too, for professional knowledge. That knowledge base continues to lack the contributions, wisdom, experience, and perspectives that would come from having a greater concentration of Black teachers and other teachers of color (Givens, 2021; Irvine, 2003; Milner & Howard, 2004). Building a teaching force that reflects this country's demographics will not be easy, however, given that the conditions of work and the pervasiveness of whiteness are deterrents to prospective teachers of color (Carver-Thomas, 2018), and given that teacher preparation programs often only compound the problem. Moreover, preparing teachers of color will also require confronting the internalized racism that permeates their experience across their schooling and in their everyday experience (Cherry-McDaniel, 2017; Kohli, 2014).

Humanizing practice

Another crucial priority is to create and learn new practices that lift up Black and Brown children's humanity and development. This requires uprooting the deep social and historical patterns that dehumanize and disrespect children and families. Jarvis Givens' (2021) close examination and illumination of the traditions of Black educators' practice offers a roadmap to practices that characterize liberatory education — what he terms “fugitive pedagogy.” He points out that neither anti-racism nor anti-racist teaching are new, and that the contemporary calls for “anti-racist teaching” (which arose in mainstream discourse following the horrific murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other Black Americans) are problematic in that they fail to acknowledge the historical practices of Black educators, whose:

conceptions of teaching went beyond conventional academic subjects and forms of relation imposed by the bureaucratic structures of schools. Black educators recognized that repairing and resisting the damage of racial domination required attentiveness to what gets deformed by both oppression and the ongoing struggle against it — including the ability to appreciate beauty, matters of recreation, and other needs that exceeded the narrowly construed responsibilities of the teacher: elements of human life that were essential for Black children to flourish in a hostile world. The traditions of Black teachers reveal a more expansive and, at times, nonintuitive approach to anti-racist education. They offer important lessons for our time. (Givens, 2021)

Deficit views of Black and Brown children and their families have roots that are old and gnarled. Simply labeling practice as “antiracist” and adopting superficial correctives cannot uproot these harmful tropes. Instead of add-on strategies, we must wipe out the harmful disciplinary control practices

that punish and push out Black and Brown children (Milner, 2018; Epstein, Blake, & Gonzáles, 2017). Connected to the larger throughline of anti-Black violence (Stevenson, 2017) and the school-prison nexus, these everyday patterns reveal the power of teachers' discretion as they interpret children — for example, reacting to a Black girl as belligerent and disrespectful while seeing the same behavior by a white girl as confident. These are habits of whiteness that are inscribed in teaching practice. Embedded in core norms of teaching, these are patterns that criminalize Black and Brown children in the everyday moments of classrooms and schools (Noel, 2018).

Embracing wholeness

A third priority is to embrace the wholeness and complexity of teaching and reject a simplistic perspective of what the work entails. Teaching rests on commitments and beliefs. It requires historical and foundational understanding. It is specialized and it is common, carried out in communities and families. And it is practice. It is all of these things, not one or the other. False dichotomies eclipse the sacred responsibilities of the work. One aspect of this is to confront the myth that anyone can teach and that the necessary knowledge of content is simple. People who have never taught often assume that it cannot be that hard, for example, to explain the number $\frac{3}{4}$ or show students how to write an effective summary. Many adults do not appreciate the nuanced complexity of connecting students and ideas and making skills learnable, at any age. Being able to do something oneself is not the same as helping someone else learn to do or understand it.

The past two pandemic years have made visible the uncommon ways of knowing and being that teaching requires. At home with their children, parents and family members often found it frustrating and difficult to explain things that seem simple. Being able to read or to calculate an average is different from knowing how to help a child learn to make sense of printed

language or to understand what an average means. Perhaps more importantly, teaching is about more than explaining. Teaching requires hearing children's ideas and their thinking by using practices of attentive, open, and attuned listening, so as to understand what they already know and think, and connecting to those (Ball, 1997). And while one lesson from the pandemic is that teaching is harder than it looks, another lesson may be that learning is optimal when it is culturally relevant, grounded in community and family activities. Parents and other family members were able to help children learn when they wove together ideas and practices in context at home. Clearly, holding the complexity and wholeness of teaching requires connecting the learning at home with school learning.

Policy makers and curriculum developers seek to control what happens inside classrooms, from standards about what students must be taught and at what age, with what materials, and at what pace, to assessments of whether they have learned those things. Yet they repeatedly fail to appreciate that teaching is dense with "discretionary spaces," and teachers' everyday practice is filled with their own judgments, habits of action, and decisions that remain out of reach of external control (Ball, 2018). Teachers' practice is also profoundly shaped by their experiences in this society and as students in school, and thus often reproduces the "normal" — the dominant social order. The discretionary spaces of teaching also offer pathways for dismantling the regressive "normal," however. These discretionary spaces can be an enormous resource for good, because it is through them that teaching can be practiced in ways that are culturally responsive to communities, that build on their resources and ways of knowing and doing, and that responsibly serve the children and families that are so often harmed.

The three priorities I describe above, meant to bring into the light the powerful work of teaching, are crucial to finding a hopeful and resourceful path forward. I do not, however, claim that

these are all that is needed. I claim only that we should know by now that we must not take teaching for granted, nor leave its quiet power in the shadows of our aspirations for change.

If we are to seize and use the opportunity of these times, and begin to build a profession of teaching that deploys its power for the flourishing of all children — and really mean "all" — we cannot be naïve about our histories or about the grip that white supremacy has on what is seen as "normal." Our eyes must be wide open and we must understand the hard work and displacement from the center to the margins that it will require (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

I close with excerpts from a beautiful essay, entitled "Repair, Renew, Revise, Revise, Revise," by Kiese Laymon (2021), a writer who describes himself as someone who "bends genres." His embracing of the tasks of repairing, renewing, and revising inspire me when I imagine what teaching might be able to be 25 years from now, and what it might take for it to be revised:

A freed land was a repaired land in my grandmother's estimation, and a repaired land gave all who worked it an equitable chance at economic and spiritual renewal. Yet neither renewal nor repair were possible unless one willed themselves into a faithful revision of what we'd been told was normal, and really, possible. (p. 965)

And a few pages later:

We cannot free the land unless we work on finding ourselves in the unending process of restoration. Collective freedom is impossible without interpersonal repair. . . . Repair what you helped break. Restore what responsibly loved you. And revise, revise, revise. (p. 972)

The work of coming to terms with the power of teaching will be one of repairing, which will involve looking back; of renewing, which will be to work in the present; and of revising, which is to work in the future, never finished, but

always growing. It will take "bending the genres" of normalized teaching away from whiteness and ending the dichotomized discourses of teaching. We will have to imagine with wisdom and ambition, with courage and care. We will have to practice realistic optimism and act with hope, and remember always, in the words of bell hooks (1994), that our work toward a practice of freedom is sacred (p. 13). And that will require humility and radical honesty.

I hope that 25 years from now, when educators are imagining what could be nourishing and good education for the children of this country, they are not still seeking to revise these same unrepaired practices. I hope that those who come after us will be moving forward — building on, learning from, and revising teaching toward its potential as the fundamental practice of freedom. ■

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