Testing, Tracking, and Toeing the Line: A Role Play

CORPORATE EXECUTIVE
You are an executive with a large and prosperous corporation. There are a lot of problems in the country, problems that pose serious challenges to public education. In your eyes, the schools have not been meeting these challenges very successfully. For example, before 1900, fewer than one out of every 10 kids between the ages of 14 and 17 was enrolled in high school. This is a real problem because people not in school become juvenile delinquents, turn to crime or worse, join radical groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). And besides, there simply aren’t enough jobs to go around for everyone who wants one.

Also, lots of those entering schools are immigrants. They don’t speak much English and haven’t learned anything of what it means to be an American. Instead of identifying themselves as Americans, these immigrants see themselves as Hungarians or Italians. Some identify with the working class against the owners, or even see themselves as radicals.

In Lawrence, Mass., in 1912, a massive strike involving 30,000 workers—teenagers, men, women, almost all immigrants—led by IWW radicals, defeated the mill owners. What is this country coming to?

You need to make sure that the children of immigrants identify themselves as loyal, responsible Americans—and that they don’t identify with one social class against another.

Besides all the immigrants arriving in Central City, there are lots of people leaving the farms to come to the city. These immigrants and farmers aren’t used to the factory ways of the city. They aren’t used to being prompt, working by the clock, doing repetitive work, obeying orders from a boss, etc.—all skills and attitudes needed to succeed as a factory worker.

Their children are not ready to meet the challenges of modern life. You want the schools to turn out good factory workers—but also serve the needs of your children, who are certainly not going to be factory workers.

Up until now, the high schools in Central City have been “common schools” with one curriculum for all students. With few exceptions, everyone took the same subjects in the same classes: boys with girls, bright kids with dull kids. The problem is that in earlier times, very few people went to school, so if you had a high school diploma, it meant something—you could get a good job in the business world.

These students tended to be from upper-class or middle-class families. But now, with all these farm kids and immigrants entering the schools, there’s no way that all of them are going to get these high-paying jobs. You need to figure out a way for the school system to train the future bankers and the future factory hands in the same classrooms—or at least in the same schools.

Courtesy of Rethinking Schools, from its book, Rethinking Our Classrooms, Volume 1, by Bill Bigelow. www.rethinkingschools.org
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HUNGARIAN IMMIGRANT

Let's get one thing straight: You didn't move to the United States to take anybody's job. At the turn of the century conditions were tremendously difficult in Hungary. You owned a little plot of land, but when wealthy farmers began buying machinery to harvest their crops, you simply couldn't compete. You could starve or move.

When labor contractors began showing up, they promised good jobs and high wages if you would travel to the United States—a real land of milk and honey. The traveling conditions both in Europe, on the ship coming over, and within the United States were difficult beyond belief. But finally you arrived in Central City, home of Miller and Jones, a giant manufacturer of railroad cars.

Instead of milk and honey you found grease and grime. Even though in Hungary you were a skilled farmer, here you were called “unskilled labor.” Your pay was low, but at least work was steady—for a while. But then you realized that you were guaranteed nothing.

Often you'd work only six months out of the year and be laid off the rest of the time. Needless to say, during these periods there were no unemployment benefits. As an unskilled worker you had no security. At times your friends would not be hired back by Miller and Jones; younger, stronger workers would be hired to take their places. With no formal education, no access to additional training, and no big bank account, you have little hope of escaping this life of poverty.

There may be little hope for you, but there is hope for your children. In America, education is free. You’ve been told that a high school diploma guarantees a young person a decent job. Just because you are an unskilled laborer doesn't mean that your children will suffer the same fate. They might be teachers, clerks, shopkeepers or even doctors or lawyers. That’s why you will sacrifice anything to send your children to school.

They will be in the same classes with the sons and daughters of bankers and businessmen, architects and artists. They will read the same books, write the same essays and solve the same equations. In school, rich and poor will mean nothing. Your children are smart. There will be no limit to what they can accomplish. You want them to learn to be Americans, but you are proud of your Hungarian culture and also want them to value that heritage. Your children learn quickly and already speak two languages. You have absolute confidence they will be able to thrive in high school and go on to get good jobs.

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**BLACK ACTIVIST**

You are a black activist in Central City. Over the years you’ve worked with a number of organizations to promote civil rights and independence for black people. Sometimes you’ve worked with groups that make alliances with whites, other times you’ve worked with black-only organizations. You join with whomever you see as capable of effectively fighting racism in Central City and the country as a whole.

For years there weren’t many black people in Central City. Most blacks came North during World War I. Conditions were horrible in Mississippi. Your family worked as sharecroppers there, growing cotton and a few vegetables. It seemed like you were always in debt to the white landlord.

Everything you had to buy was expensive, but they paid you next to nothing for the crops you raised. Anyone who protested would be beaten or even killed. Blacks were denied the right to vote and the kids went to crummy schools. When people heard there were jobs up north, practically your whole county emptied out overnight.

But conditions in Central City have become increasingly difficult since the war. Perhaps the biggest problem is job discrimination. Employers hire blacks in only the most dangerous, worst-paid and dead-end jobs. Even when you have the skills and education that qualify you for good jobs, the jobs still go to white people.

The Ku Klux Klan is a strong force in Central City. They want to make sure that blacks stay poor and powerless and don’t get too “uppity” and start demanding good jobs, better housing, and decent schools.

You are especially concerned about the education of black children. While schools are not formally segregated in Central City, you know that black children are discriminated against. One recent study found that 50 percent of black girls in Central City schools were classified as “retarded” and put in “special classes,” whereas only 4 percent of native-born whites were classified this way. For this you blame racist administrators and teachers.

Many school officials say that they want to teach children the skills they will need in “real life.” They assume blacks will continue to be janitors and maids and so want to teach you to be good—and happy—janitors and maids. But you want your children to get a good academic education so they can become anything they set their minds to.

However, some people complain that this kind of education will only make black children resentful. As one judge warned recently, education should not put “fool ideas of rising and equality into black folks’ heads, and [make] them discontent and unhappy.” In your view, in an unjust society, education should make young people discontented. It should fill their heads with dreams of equality and give them the tools—reading, writing, knowledge of their history—that will allow them to make their dreams real.

You hope that the more education children have, the unhappier they will be with the racism in Central City and the larger society. A good education should help give children the skills to organize for a better, more just, society. What you want from the superintendent of schools in Central City, and the school system as a whole, is a commitment to fight racism.

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INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD (IWW) MEMBER
You live in Central City, USA, and are a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical labor union. You’re concerned about school because you care about children, but also because you see schools as a place where people learn about what is expected of them by society. You see changing the schools as part of a larger movement for changing the whole society.

Much is now different in America. The society is more and more divided between rich factory owners and workers who own nothing but their own ability to labor. As far as you and the IWW are concerned, the problems of working people will only begin to be solved when workers take over all the workplaces and run them together for the benefit of the whole society—not just for the private profit of the owners.

As long as owners run industry for their own profit, there will be continual conflict between them and the workers they control. You believe that all wealth is produced by the workers, so all wealth should be controlled by the workers—what do owners produce?

Thus, the goal of the IWW is not only for higher wages or shorter hours, but to change the whole society. Workplaces and all of society should be run by the people who produce, the people who do the work. And schools should help people learn the skills to run the whole society.

In the IWW you don’t believe in the idea of “follow the leader.” Your goal is for every worker in the country to be a “leader.” Recently, you read a speech by Eugene Debs, an IWW founder. Debs summed up the IWW belief:

   The average working [person] imagines that he must have a leader to look to; a guide to follow, right or wrong. ... You have depended too much on that leader and not enough on yourself. I don’t want you to follow me. I want you to cultivate self-reliance. If I have the slightest capacity for leadership I can only give evidence of it by “leading” you to rely on yourselves.

That’s what democracy is all about as far as you’re concerned: everyone a leader, a thinker, a participant—regardless of race, sex or class background. And that’s what schools should promote for all the students, not just the ones from rich families. Schools should model a truly democratic, classless society.
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MIDDLE CLASS PERSON

You consider yourself “middle-class” — maybe upper-middle-class. You manage a small variety “five and dime” store; your father was a clerk for a large machine shop in town. The changes going on in Central City make you nervous — not so much for yourself, but for your children.

When you were young, the common wisdom was that if you went to high school and you graduated, you were guaranteed a good, solid middle-class or business job. You might become a clerk or a factory superintendent, or go on to college to become a lawyer or a doctor. The ticket was high school graduation, and for the most part only the upper and middle classes went to high school.

But now everything is changing. In the last twenty years or so the population of Central City has tripled. Quite a number of people are coming into town off the farms, but most of the newcomers are immigrants from overseas. These people, many of whom can’t even speak English, think that in America the streets are lined with gold. Problem is, the immigrants think that the way to get some of that good American gold is to send their kids to high school.

Why is this a problem? Because there aren’t enough good jobs to go around.

A university did a survey recently. They asked high school kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. Just over 90 percent wanted to be some kind of professional person, clerk or business person; only 4 percent wanted to work in a factory. But in the real world, only about 18 percent of the jobs are those kind of decent middle-class jobs. Over 60 percent are factory jobs or farmwork of some kind. You hate to think of yourself as selfish, but these statistics mean that there are going to be lots of people competing for the jobs that should belong to your children.

You know that in a fair competition your child would succeed. But what is happening now is that all these immigrant kids and farm kids who can barely read or write are crowding into the same classes. Soon, a high school diploma won’t be worth anything. You want your child to read classic literature, take mathematics, write essays and research papers, learn the history of this great country and master the workings of our form of government. But all these slow learners are going to hold everyone back. And they are also disruptive, many of them juvenile delinquents.

The world is a different place. Today, good jobs require more education. You might even have to send your children to college. But what if they’ve had an inferior high school education because of all these rowdy newcomers?

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