

Common Beliefs and Common Sense in Educational Policy and Practice

Avi I. Mintz
The University of Tulsa

F. Tony Carusi's thoughtful commentary about the conceptions of "common sense" in contemporary educational theorizing is a welcome and important contribution to the conversation about the current tides in educational reform and society generally.¹ Carusi helpfully points out that Frederick Hess and Kevin Kumashiro, two educational thinkers who agree about very little in terms of educational reform, each hold relatively simplistic notions of "common sense." Carusi finds that Michael Apple offers a more nuanced conception of common sense as something culturally and historically situated, but he argues that Giambattista Vico fills out the picture and provides educators with model for both disrupting common sense and producing alternative worldviews in it. In my response essay, I will revisit Hess's and Kumashiro's conceptions of common sense to offer a friendly critique of the Carusi–Vichian model of the commonsense educator.

COMMONLY HELD BELIEFS VS. COMMON SENSE

It seems to me that Carusi correctly characterizes Hess as promoting a version of commonsense educational reform that entails neoliberal premises. Further, Carusi is right that Kumashiro opposes common sense because, among other things, it entails neoliberal premises. Though both Hess and Kumashiro use the phrase "common sense" and though both present it as entailing neoliberal positions, I believe that they each understand common sense differently. For Kumashiro, common sense is essentially tantamount to inherited, prereflective, commonly held, and often prejudiced opinion; any educational policy or practice based on common sense will result only in the status quo (or insignificant steps away from the status quo). Hess understands common sense as that which is required to challenge inherited, prereflective, commonly held beliefs. Like Kumashiro, Hess is centrally concerned with challenging the status quo. Kumashiro has people like Hess in mind when he describes the status quo reformers who seek "to improve schools through standards, high-stakes tests for students, and repercussions for 'failing' schools."² When Hess talks about the status quo, however, he targets thinkers like Kumashiro and specifically names Henry Giroux and Apple.³ Hess believes these status quo reformers to be educational do-gooders who are blinded by the inherited wisdom of progressive educational thought; Hess writes that the people who are at the reins of educational reform are "utopians, apologists, and well-intentioned practitioners who...trample common sense beneath jargon, grandiose schemes, and earnest aspirations."⁴

Kumashiro maintains a position in which commonly held beliefs are equivalent to common sense. For Hess, however, common sense describes something distinct from commonly held beliefs. Hess understands common sense to be the capacity for critical reflection that can cut through inherited beliefs. Despite the fact that they are

diametrically opposed on almost every core idea, both Kumashiro and Hess view their scholarly efforts as projects in challenging and disrupting prereflective, shallow, inherited thinking about education; they are both centrally concerned with cultivating a climate of critical reflection on commonly held beliefs. Though they each use the phrase “common sense” they are not describing the same phenomenon.

EDUCATING COMMON SENSE

My distinction between commonly held beliefs and common sense in Hess is a relatively minor point. Yet I think that it helps to shed light on a potential problem in the Carusi–Vichian model of the commonsense educator. Carusi writes, “rather than attacking neoliberalism in education from the outset... a commonsense educator acknowledges the prereflective status neoliberalism already has in education and teaches in a manner that brings awareness to the contexts that arise out of our current (re)productions of common sense.” I take it that Carusi, who values the Vichian understanding of the social embeddedness and historical contingency of common sense, maintains that common sense is not something that ought to be confronted head on. Rather, the disruption of common sense must be subtle and inconspicuous if it is to be effective.

The problem that this model of the commonsense educator encounters, in my view, is that there exists no consensus on what commonly held beliefs constitute the (non-Hessean version of) common sense of American students or American educational reformers and policy analysts. The disagreement between Hess and Kumashiro on which commonly held beliefs dominate educational thinking highlights this lack of consensus and raises a concern about what some might call the surreptitious agenda of the Carusi–Vichian commonsense educator. Consider the following. Parents with Carusian political leanings who have children in the classes of a commonsense educator with Carusian political leanings would likely be quite receptive to the teacher’s approach to raising awareness of the problematic aspects of neoliberal hegemony. But parents with Carusian political leanings whose children are in the classes of a commonsense educator with Hessean political leanings would be alarmed at what they might regard as an insidious agenda to reform their children’s common sense by raising awareness of the hegemonic utopian thinking that resists sensible, results-oriented improvements in schools and society.

One might object that Hess is simply wrong about America’s commonly held beliefs and Carusi, Kumashiro, Apple and the other authors Carusi cites are right; thus, the only legitimate engagement with common sense will be that of the educator who intends to counter hegemonic neoliberalism. But given the fact that claims about the political direction of the country will always be contested (for better and for worse in any well-functioning democracy), one will always encounter students and teachers with Hessean political leanings (or political leanings that will fall somewhere on the right of the spectrum). Given this situation, my friendly critique is as follows: I think that Carusi is basically right that profound change in common sense cannot arise if one views common sense, as does Kumashiro, as the problem rather than the means by which common sense itself may be reformed. Carusi, in essence, offers a powerful challenge to Kumashiro’s “pedagogy of crisis,” in which

inciting a crisis in the student is taken to be a radical but necessary step in anti-oppressive education.⁵ Kumashiro's proposals may result in students experiencing crises; but, if Carusi is right, while experiencing crises, students may become isolated and alienated from their communities, diminishing their ability to change them, and teachers may be neglecting a key foundation for pedagogical interaction.

Yet if there is indeed room for debate about which commonly held beliefs about education currently dominate educational policy and practice, then perhaps the commonsense educator ought to be more forthright in her challenge to common sense. Kumashiro's virtue is that he would have educators explicitly confront commonsense views in such a way that students would not be mistaken that their beliefs have been challenged. Without going to Kumashiro's extreme, the disruption of common sense could be more explicit so that parents and students need not fear the inculcation of a surreptitious agenda with which they disagree. By advocating that changes to common sense be made only subtly, the Carusi–Vico model reduces students' capacity for resistance. Ultimately, it is this capacity to resist, and to defend one's beliefs, which is crucial to developing the critical disposition that Carusi and others rightly desire. The pliable students who are the objects of the commonsense educator may raise the kind of critical questions that their Hessean or Carusian teacher might help them ask, but easing them into their critical dispositions may come at a cost to their autonomy.

Ultimately, I share Carusi's concern that education can and ought to encourage and enable students to challenge their inherited beliefs, and I agree that Vico helps us see that this education must occur within the networks of students' beliefs. In my friendly critique, I have suggested that the Carusi–Vichian model must ensure that the ability to resist and critically engage the agenda of the authority figures in one's life, whether their political leanings are left or right, be cultivated as well.

1. Carusi's attention to the historical treatment of the idea of common sense as a resource for improving our thinking about contemporary educational problems is also especially welcome. For another fine and recent effort to retrieve a concept of common sense that may aid our contemporary thinking about education, see Darryl M. De Marzio, "Dealing with Diversity: On the Uses of Common Sense in Descartes and Montaigne," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 3 (2010): 301–13.

2. Kevin K. Kumashiro, *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning Toward Social Justice* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), xxii.

3. Frederick M. Hess, *Common Sense School Reform* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 8.

4. Hess, *Common School Reform*, 1.

5. Especially Kumashiro, *Against Common Sense*, 17–30; and Kevin K. Kumashiro, *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Antioppressive Education* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002), 62 ff.