

**The Education University of Hong Kong:  
Honorary Degree Ceremony  
Thank-You Address  
Professor Michael W. Apple**

Council Chairman Dr Pang Yiu-kai and members of the Council, President Professor Stephen Cheung, staff, students, and friends of The Education University of Hong Kong:

Thank you for the singular honour that you have bestowed on Dr Eric Li Ka-cheung and myself. I am confident that I am speaking for both of us in expressing appreciation for the warm reception that we, as well as our families and friends, have received.

As you know, I have grounded my work in a set of deep ethical commitments to make the institutions of our societies more responsive and just. These kinds of commitments are also clear in the more than forty years of service in over 100 governmental and non-governmental organisations with which Dr Eric Li Ka-cheung has worked. I am certain that these significant values also play a large role in the thoughts and actions of others on the platform and in the audience.

Many of the roots of my concerns can be traced to the fact that I grew up in a poor and working class family in a very poor community. But coming from a family of printers, one of the things that was always stressed was the importance of critical literacy, of an education that was connected to people's needs to be treated with dignity and respect and to change the social conditions that negatively affected their lives. For my family and profoundly for me, the dream was for me to become a teacher, to help create an education that lived out these ideals and commitments. I say all this here because these memories remind me of two things: first, of the crucial role that teachers and other educators have played in my own development and that of millions of people throughout the world; and second, of a number of the reasons I have devoted my life to building critical theoretical, historical, political, and empirical resources that are so essential to creating a richer and more detailed understanding of the society in which we live, of the politics of understanding and challenging the relations of inequality that we face, and of the roles that education can and does play in all of this. This is of course so very crucial to Hong Kong.

But these things should also remind all of us, most critically, that we owe a debt to those educators inside and outside of the formal educational system who asked us to think for ourselves and provided us with the space and resources to become who we are. And here too, this respect for an education committed to these principles is of major importance to Hong Kong as well.

Over the past four decades I and others in many nations throughout the world have been dealing with a number of "simple" questions. I personally have been deeply concerned about the realities of school reforms, about why so many of these reforms in curriculum, teaching, assessment, and basic policies often lead to more not less inequalities—and very importantly what we can do about this. In essence, I have been trying to answer a question that was put so clearly in the United States by the progressive educator George Counts (1932) when over 80

years ago he asked “Dare the School Build a New Social Order?” Indeed, the title of my newest book, *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013), speaks directly to this question.

The tradition of critically examining the realities of schooling and asking who benefits from their dominant forms of curricula, teaching, evaluation, and policy, of arguing about what they might do differently, and of asking searching questions of what would have to change in order for this to happen has a very long history. Indeed, Hong Kong itself has a rich tradition of asking and answering these kinds of questions. The fact that the two of us have been given these honours demonstrates that this tradition continues here.

Let me conclude by saying that these need to be seen as collective awards. They honour not only the two of us, but all those who have struggled and continue to struggle to build an education that is worthy of the name *education*. All over the world, teachers, students, administrators, community members, researchers, activists, government workers, and so many others are involved in actions to defend and create an education that is connected to the best in us, one that is not reduced to simply recreating a society as it currently is, but creating thoughtful and engaged citizens who are committed to building a society that extends its benefits to all.

This makes a university such as The Education University of Hong Kong even more vital. It can provide a model of what it means to be an engaged educator in these very difficult times. This of course will not be easy. But I am certain that the University will face these challenges with a sharp intellect and with honesty and integrity. On behalf of my fellow honorands, and the many guests assembled here, I thank you for the critical--indeed indispensable—work that you do.