

Confections of Apartheid Continue In Our Schools

By Jonathan Kozol From *Phi Delta Kappan*

MANY Americans I meet who live far from our major cities and who have no firsthand knowledge of realities in urban public schools seem to have a rather vague and general impression that the great extremes of racial isolation they recall as matters of grave national significance some 35 or 40 years ago have gradually, but steadily, diminished in more recent years.

The truth, unhappily, is that the trend, for well over a decade

now, has been precisely the reverse. Schools that were already deeply segregated 25 or 30 years ago, like most of the schools I visit in the Bronx, are no less segregated now, while thousands of other schools that had been integrated either voluntarily or by the force of law have since been rapidly resegregating both in northern districts and in broad expanses of the South.

“At the beginning of the 21st

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century," according to Gary Orfield and his colleagues at the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, "American public schools are now 12 years into the process of continuous resegregation. The desegregation of black students, which increased continuously from the 1950s to the late 1980s, has now receded to levels not seen in three decades...."

"During the 1990s, the proportion of black students in majority white schools has decreased ... to a level lower than in any year since 1968.... Almost three-fourths of black and Latino students attend schools that are predominantly minority, [and more than two million, including more than a quarter of black students in the Northeast and Midwest,] attend schools which we call apartheid schools [in which 99% to 100% of students are nonwhite.]"

The Civil Rights Project cites the four most segregated states for black students as New York, Michigan, Illinois, and California. In California and New York, only one black student in seven goes to a predominantly white school.

As racial isolation deepens and the inequalities of education finance remain unabated and take on new and more innovative forms, the principals of many inner-city schools are making choices that few principals in schools that serve suburban chil-

dren ever need to contemplate.

Unable to foresee a time when black and Hispanic students in large numbers will not go to segregated public schools and seeing little likelihood that schools like these will ever have the infrastructure and resources of successful white suburban schools, many have been dedicating vast amounts of time and effort to create an architecture of adaptive strategies that promise incremental gains within the limits inequality allows.

Castigation

New vocabularies of stentorian determination, new systems of incentive, and new modes of castigation, which are termed "rewards and sanctions," have emerged. Curriculum materials that are alleged to be aligned with governmentally established goals and standards and particularly suited to what are regarded as "the special needs and learning styles" of low-income urban children have been introduced.

Relentless emphasis on raising test scores, rigid policies of nonpromotion and nongraduation, a new empiricism and the imposition of unusually detailed lists of named and numbered "outcomes" for each isolated parcel of instruction, an oftentimes fanatical insistence upon uniformity in teachers' management of time, an openly conceded emulation of the rigorous approaches of the military, and a frequent

use of terminology that comes out of the world of industry and commerce—these are just a few of the familiar aspects of these new adaptive strategies.

Although generically described as “school reform,” most of these practices and policies are targeted primarily at poor children of color. And although most educators speak of these agendas in broad language that sounds applicable to all, it is understood that they are valued chiefly as responses to perceived catastrophe in deeply segregated and unequal schools.

“If you do what I tell you to do, how I tell you to do it, when I tell you to do it, you’ll get it right,” says a South Bronx principal observed by a reporter from the *New York Times* in laying out a memorizing rule for math to an assembly of her students. “If you don’t, you’ll get it wrong.”

Skinner’s Ideas

This is the voice, this is the tone, this is the rhythm and didactic certitude one hears today in inner-city schools that have embraced a pedagogy of direct command and absolute control. “Taking their inspiration from the ideas of B.F. Skinner,” says the *Times*, proponents of scripted rote-and-drill curricula articulate their aim as the establishment of “faultless communication” between “the teacher, who is the stimulus,” and “the students, who respond.”

The introduction of Skinnerian approaches, which are commonly employed in penal institutions and drug-rehabilitation programs, as a way of altering the attitudes and learning styles of black and Hispanic children is provocative, and it has stirred some outcries from respected scholars. To actually go into a school in which you know some of the children very, very well and see the way these approaches can affect their daily lives and thinking processes is even more provocative.

On a chilly November day four years ago in the South Bronx, I entered P.S. 65, the elementary school in which I met Pineapple for the first time when she was in kindergarten. Her younger sister Briana was now a student here, as were some 25 or 30 other children I had known for several years. But I hadn’t visited the building since Pineapple graduated, and there had been major changes since that year.

Silent lunches had been instituted in the cafeteria, and, on days when children misbehaved, silent recess had been introduced as well. On those days, the students were obliged to stay indoors and sit in rows and maintain silence on the floor of a small room that had been designated “the gymnasium.”

The school still had a high turnover of its teachers (Briana’s classroom was in chaos the day I was there because her teacher

had just walked out of the building without warning and it would be several weeks before another teacher could be found), but the corridors were quiet, and I saw no children outside of their classrooms.

The words "Success for All," which was the brand name of a scripted program used within the school, were prominently posted at the top of the main stairway and, as I would later find, in almost every room. Also displayed throughout the building were a number of administrative memos that were worded with unusual directive absoluteness.

"Authentic Writing," said a document called "Principles of Learning" that was posted in the corridor close to the office of the principal, "is driven by curriculum and instruction." I didn't know what this statement meant and later came back to examine it again before I left the school.

I entered the fourth grade of Mr. Endicott, a man in his mid-thirties who had arrived here without training as a teacher, one of about 15 teachers in the building who were sent into this school after a single summer of short-order preparation. As I found a place to sit in a far corner of the room, the teacher and his young assistant, who was in her first year as a teacher—Mr. Endicott was in his second—were beginning a math lesson about building airport runways.

"When we count the edges

around the runway," said a worksheet that was on the children's desks, "we find the perimeter. When we count the number of squares in a runway, we find the area.... Today we are going to conduct an inventory of all the different perimeters."

Portfolio Protocols

On the wall behind the teacher, written in large letters: "Portfolio Protocols: 1. You are responsible for the selection of [your] work that enters your portfolio. 2. As your skills become more sophisticated this year, you will want to revise, amend, supplement, and possibly replace items in your portfolio to reflect your intellectual growth." To the left side of the room: "Performance Standards Mathematics Curriculum: M-5 Problem Solving and Reasoning. M-6 Mathematical Skills and Tools...."

My attention was distracted by some whispering among the children sitting to the right of me. The teacher's response to this distraction was immediate: His arm shot out and up in a diagonal in front of him, his hand straight up, his fingers flat. The young co-teacher did this as well. When they saw their teachers do this, all the children in the classroom did it too.

"Zero noise," the teacher said, but this instruction proved to be unneeded. The strange salute the class and teachers gave each other, which turned out to

be one of a number of such silent signals teachers in the school were trained to use and children to obey, had done the job of silencing the class.

"Active listening!" said Mr. Endicott. "Heads up! Tractor beams!"—the latter meaning "Every eye on me."

Wasted Time

On the front wall of the classroom in handwritten words that must have taken Mr. Endicott long hours to transcribe there was a list of terms that could be used to praise or criticize a student's work in mathematics. At Level Four, the highest of four levels of success, a child's "problem-solving strategies" could be described, according to this list, as "systematic, complete, efficient, and possibly elegant," while the student's ability to draw conclusions from the work she had completed could be termed "insightful comprehensive."

At Level Two, the child's ability to draw conclusions was to be described as "logically unsound"—at Level One, "not present." Approximately 50 separate categories of proficiency, or lack of such, were detailed in this wall-sized tabulation.

An assistant to the principal remained with me throughout the class and then accompanied me wherever else I went within the school. Having an official shadow me so closely is a bit

unusual in visits that I make to public schools.

Principals who feel relaxed and confident about their teachers typically invite me to sit in on classes without constant supervision and to visit classes that have not been pre-selected. Also unusual was that Mr. Endicott, whom I had met before, did not say hello to me until nearly the final moments of the class and didn't actually acknowledge that I was there except by stopping by my desk and handing me the worksheet on perimeters.

A well-educated man, he later spoke to me about the form of classroom management he was using as an adaptation from a model of industrial efficiency. "It's a kind of 'Taylorism' in the classroom," he explained, referring to a set of theories about management of factory employees that was introduced by Frederick Taylor in the early 1900s. "Primitive utilitarianism" is another term he used when we met some months later to discuss these management techniques with other teachers from the school.

His reservations were, however, not apparent in the classroom. Within the terms of what he had been asked to do, he had, indeed, become a master of control. It is one of the few classrooms I had visited up to that time in which almost nothing even hinting at spontaneous emotion in the children or the

teacher surfaced in the time I was there.

I had visited classes that resembled this in Cuba more than 20 years before; but in the Cuban schools the students were allowed to question me and did so with much charm and curiosity, and teachers broke the pace of lesson plans from time to time to comment on a child's question or to interject a casual remark that might have been provoked by something funny that erupted from a boy or girl who was reacting to my presence in the class. What I saw in Cuban schools was certainly indoctrinational in its intent, but it could not rival Mr. Endicott's approach in its totalitarian effectiveness.

Accountable Talk?

The teacher gave the "zero noise" salute again when someone whispered to another child at his table. "In two minutes you will have a chance to talk and share this with your partner." Communication between children in the class was not prohibited but was afforded time slots and was formalized in an expression that I found included in a memo that was posted near the door: "An opportunity ... to engage in Accountable Talk."

Even the teacher's words of praise were framed in terms consistent with the lists posted on the wall. "That's a Level Four suggestion," said the teacher when a child made an observa-

tion other teachers might have praised as simply "pretty good" or "interesting" or "mature."

There was, it seemed, a formal name for every cognitive event within this school: "Authentic Writing," "Active Listening," "Accountable Talk." The ardor to assign all items of instruction or behavior a specific name was starting to unsettle me.

It's understandable that teachers need to do this in their lesson plans and that terms like these are often used in teacher education and in programs of professional development. But in this class, in part because of all the postings of these items on the walls, it seemed the children too were being asked to view their own experience, even the act of sharing an idea, as namable as well.

The adjectives had another odd effect, a kind of hyping-up of every item of endeavor. "Authentic Writing" was, it seemed, a more important act than what the children in a writing class in any ordinary school might try to do. "Accountable Talk" was something more self-conscious and significant than merely useful conversation.

These naming exercises and the imposition of an all-inclusive system of control on every form of intellectual activity consumed a vast amount of teaching time but seemed to be intrinsic to the ethos here: a way of

ordering cognition beyond any effort of this sort I'd seen in the United States before.

The teacher, moreover, did not merely name and govern every intellectual event with practiced specificity; he also issued his directions slowly, pacing words with a meticulous delivery that brought to my mind the way the staff attendants spoke to the Alzheimer's patients at my father's nursing home.

Bizarre Rituals

As I sat there, somewhat mesmerized by Mr. Endicott's articulation of his phrasing and his strict reliance on official words, the naming rituals began to strike me as increasingly bizarre. Even the act of telling a brief story, for example, had been given a new name.

To write a story, according to a "standards" listing posted on the wall ("English Language Arts Number E-2," subtopic "D"), was to "produce a narrative procedure." The object-noun, although it did not fit the verb, appeared to lend a semi-scientific aura to the utterly pedestrian—"narrative procedure," unlike "story," suggesting something empirical and technical.

Meanwhile, the verb ("produce") seemed to escort the act of writing out of any realm of the aesthetic into an industrial arena. "Production" is inherently a different matter than tale-telling.

I remember, too, another aspect of my visit that distinguished this class from almost any other I'd visited up to this time. Except for one brief giggle of a child sitting close to me, which was effectively suppressed by Mr. Endicott, nothing even faintly frivolous took place while I was there. No one laughed. No child made a funny face to somebody beside her. Neither Mr. Endicott nor his assistant laughed, as I recall.

This is certainly unusual within a class of 8-year-olds. In most classrooms, even those in which a high degree of discipline is maintained, there are almost always certain moments when the natural hilarity of children temporarily erupts to clear the air of "purpose" and relieve the monotone of the instructor. Even the teachers, strict as they may try to be, cannot usually resist a smile or a bit of playful humor in return.

Nothing like that happened in the time I was in this class. When I'm taking notes during a visit to a school and children in a class divert themselves with tiny episodes of silliness, or brief epiphanies of tenderness to one another, or a whispered observation about something they find amusing—like a goofy face made by another child in the class—I put a little round face with a smile on the margin of my notepad so that I won't miss it later on. In all the 15 pages that

I wrote during my visit in this classroom in the Bronx, there is not a single small round smiling face.

Later, looking at my notes, I also noticed that I couldn't find a single statement made by any child that wasn't prompted by the teacher's questions, other than one child's timid question about which "objective" should be written on the first line of a page the class had been asked to write. I found some notes on children moving from their tables to their "centers" and on various hand gestures they would make as a response to the hand gestures of their teachers.

No Personality

But I found no references to any child's traits of personality or even physical appearance. Differences between the children somehow ceased to matter much during the time I observed the class. The uniform activities and teacher's words controlled my own experience perhaps as much as they controlled and muted the expressiveness of children.

Before I left the school, I studied again the definition of "Authentic Writing" posted in the corridor. Whatever it was, according to the poster, it was "driven by curriculum." That was it, and nothing more. Its meaning or its value was established only by cross-reference to another school-bound term to

which it had been attached by "drive" in passive form. Authenticity was what somebody outside this building, more authoritative than the children or their teachers, said it should be.

Teachers working in a school like this have little chance to draw on their own inventiveness or normal conversational abilities. In the reading curriculum in use in the school, for instance, teachers told me they had been forewarned to steer away from verbal deviations or impromptu bits of conversation, since each passage of instruction needed to be timed (Mr. Endicott had a wind-up timer in his room) and any digression from the printed plans could cause them problems if a school official or curriculum director happened to be in the building at the time.

Supervisors from the organization that designed and marketed the scripted reading program also came into the classroom to police the way it was being used—"police" being the word the teachers used in speaking of these periodic visitations.

The pressure this imposes upon teachers to stick closely to the script leaves many with uncomfortable feelings of theatricality. Teachers tell me they feel they're reading "lines" from a commercial playbook, written by an unnamed author with no literary talent other than a stolid gift for keeping to a continuity of theme. ►

Sometimes it seems to do the job of moving children through their lessons almost automatically, and when it does, the teacher may be praised for what I've heard described as "managerial proficiency." But it's a curious proficiency, contrived and glazed, as even school officials who enforce these policies will frequently concede.

Emphasis, reiteration, and assertiveness in pushing what is only half-believed, or not believed at all, too often take the place of sending out authentic signals of conviction that a child listens for. Thus "authenticity," no matter how much it's promoted to the children by the posters in the halls, is pretty much denied to those who teach.

All teaching is theatrical to some degree. Almost all teachers have the obligation at some point or other to present materials or lessons that don't terribly excite them, and they learn to simulate enthusiasm they don't always feel. However, in a relatively normal teaching situation, these are improvised theatrics, and the teachers are allowed to come up with their own inventive ways of capturing the interest of their students.

And there are also many portions of the day in which the teacher teaches something that she actually selects and truly cares about, in which case there need be no theatricality at all. The difference in too many

schools like P.S. 65 is that nearly the entire school day comes to be a matter of unnatural theatrics that cannot be improvised to any real degree without the risk of teachers being criticized by their superiors.

Not Spied Out

When I later met and talked at length with Mr. Endicott and other teachers at his school, they spoke about this feeling of enforced theatricality, but they reminded me of the high state of vigilance they must maintain in order not to be spied out in deviation from the school-wide norms. Anxiety-ridden days were common among teachers at the school, they said, and children, not surprisingly, picked up some of the same anxiety as well. "The school, admittedly, is not a mellow place," said Mr. Endicott.

Anxiety, for the children, was intensified, according to a fifth-grade teacher, by the ever-present danger of humiliation when their reading levels or their scores on state examinations were announced. "There must be penalties for failure," the architects and advocates of programs such as these increasingly demand, and penalties for children in this instance were dispensed not only individually and privately but also in the view of others, for example in a full assembly of the school.

"Level Fours, please raise your hands," the principal re-

quested at one such assembly. In front of nearly all their schoolmates, those very few who were described as "Level Fours" lifted their arms and were accorded dutiful applause. "Level Threes, please raise your hands," the principal went on, and these students, too, were rewarded with applause. "Level Twos," she asked, and they were given some applause as well.

What lesser applause, one had to wonder, would be given Level Ones, the children reading at rock bottom? The Level Ones, as it turned out, got no applause at all. "The principal didn't ask the Level Ones to raise their hands," according to the teacher who described this series of events to me. "It was like the Level Ones weren't even there."

Shaming Kids

Most grown-ups remember moments in their schooling when a principal might draw attention to the children in a class who had received good grades and, for example, at a school assembly or a meeting of the PTA, might name the children in each grade who made the honor roll because they got straight A's, or A's and B's, which was the cut-off point for the honor roll when I was a student.

Few principals, however, would have shamed the children getting only C's and D's—nor, in my memory at least, did principals address us by our letter

grades or numbers, as if these defined not only how well we did but also who we were. You "got" a B. You "got" a D. But you did not *become* that B or D. Calling children "Level Fours" or "Level Ones" is rather new, and children so labeled soon begin to use these labels to refer to one another or themselves.

"Reginald is a Level One," Pineapple's sister Briana said, a little scornfully, I thought, when she was telling me about the children in her room that year. "Melissa and Shaneek are Level Threes."

"How are you doing this time?" I inquired. She wrinkled her nose and looked at me unhappily. "I'm just a Level Two."

Since that day at P.S. 65, I have visited nine other schools in six different cities where the same Skinnerian curriculum is used. The signs on the walls, the silent signals, the curious salute, the same insistent naming of all cognitive particulars, these became familiar as I went from one school to the next.

"Meaningful Sentences" began one of the listings of proficiencies expected of the children in the fourth grade of an elementary school in Hartford, Connecticut (90% black, 10% Hispanic) that I visited a short time later. "Noteworthy Questions," "Active Listening," and other similar designations had been posted elsewhere in the room. ▶

Here, too, the teacher gave the kids her outstretched arm, with hand held up, to reestablish order when they grew a little noisy, but I noticed that she tried to soften the effect of this by opening her fingers and bending her elbow slightly so it did not look quite as forbidding as the gesture Mr. Endicott had used.

Over her desk, I read a "Mission Statement," establishing the school's priorities and values. Among its missions, according to the printed statement, also posted in some other classrooms of the school, was "to develop productive citizens" with the skills needed "for successful global competition," a message reinforced by other posters in the room. Over the heads of a group of children at their desks was a sign anointing them "Best Workers of 2002."

Another signal now was given by the teacher, this one not for silence but to achieve some other form of class behavior, which I could not quite identify. The students gave exactly the same signal in response. Suddenly, with a seeming surge of restlessness and irritation—with herself, it appeared, and with her own effective use of all the tricks she had learned—she turned to me and, in a burst of furtive anger, she said, "I can do this with my dog."

I had had a thought like that at P.S. 65 while watching Mr. Endicott. However, temporarily

at least, he seemed to take pride in how well he could do it, while this teacher seemed to feel almost alarmed. She also spoke with sharp discernment of the race-specific emphasis of the curriculum. "If we were not a segregated school," she said, "if there were middle-class white children here, the parents would rebel at this curriculum, and they would stop it cold—like that!"

Named and Numbered

There was no single wall-sized chart of stipulated ways to praise or criticize a child in this Hartford classroom, nothing like the list that Mr. Endicott had copied on his wall, although there were many smaller lists and charts of subdivided competencies worded in official phrases and identified by numbers on the walls of this and other classrooms in the building.

Teachers forced to spend so many hours compiling these lists and charts and matching mini-skills with numbers for each lesson they teach have told me they sometimes feel reduced, as one Massachusetts teacher worded it, to "servile tabulation." Teachers also note that, as a consequence of the continuous cross-referencing between the learnings of the children and the state-mandated skills and numbers posted on the walls, there is little sense that anything a child learns has inherent value of its own.

Its value is established only if it is connected to a grievously extended skein of namable "objectives" that have been determined outside of the school and are aligned with items that will show up later on a standardized exam.

The teacher cannot simply say, "I read an early lyrical poem of William Butler Yeats with my third-graders and discovered that they loved it." Instead, she must position what she did within a recognized compartment: "I used a poem of William Butler Yeats to deliver Elementary Standard 37-A," or something of that sort, which she must then identify by naming the intended outcome for the reading of the poem, which might be something as specific as "the recognition of analogies" or, depending on grade level, "understanding meter in an unrhymed poem."

Killing Discovery

The listing of objectives in a lesson plan is, of course, a normal practice among teachers in most public schools. If they did not do this, utter randomness and impulse would prevail. It isn't the practice in itself, it's the remorselessness with which it is applied to almost every little possibility for natural discovery—and pleasure in discovery—that many teachers in these schools make clear they dislike. By giving every particle of learn-

ing an official name, we strip it of uniqueness.

By forcing it to fit into the right compartment of significance or meaning, we control its power to establish its own meanings or to stir the children to pursue a small exhilaration in directions that may lead them to a place the experts haven't yet had time to name. Fascination and delight, no matter what lip service we may pay to them, become irrelevant distractions. Finding "where it goes" and what it "demonstrates" and how it can be "utilized" become the teacher's desolate obsessions.

Teachers who come into elementary education with some literary background tell me that they sometimes feel they are engaging in a complicated kind of treachery when they are forced repeatedly to excavate a piece of poetry or any other literary work of charm or value to extract examples of official skills that have some testable utility. Most administrators, even in these highly regimented schools, pay tribute on occasion to the worth of art and aesthetics for their own sake.

But this notion does not hold up well within a setting in which even Eeyore's sorrowful pronouncements or the soft perplexities of Pooh have to be treated as a kind of "quarry" from which named and numbered competencies have to be hacked out and held up to the bright

light of curricular illumination. There is an awful gravitation to the commonplace in this.

Teachers also tell me that these numbering and naming rituals are forcing them to sacrifice a huge proportion of their time to what are basically promotional, not educational, activities. Hours that might otherwise have been devoted to instruction are consumed in restless efforts to position little chunks of subdivided knowledge in acceptable containers.

And the ritual often continues after children are dismissed and teachers are obliged to stay at school until late afternoon compiling inventories of the outcomes they have named and, once a year at least, participating in meetings at which every separate inventory must be reconciled and unified into a single statement of collective purpose.

Some of these activities take place in suburban schools as well, but their relentlessness is greatly magnified in inner-city schools that are, for instance, under state review because of disappointing scores. In such schools, enormous documents known as "Improvement Plans," which stipulate specific gains a school must make in a specific period of years (and which bring to mind those famous five-year plans for steel production in the Soviet era), and sometimes even longer documents that specify a school's "strategic answers" to

these plans, create a massive paper-clutter that takes on a kind of parallel reality with only an indistinct connection to the actual experience of teaching.

The amount of time that this consumes is all the more frustrating when one realizes that most of this is being done under the business-driven banner of "efficient management of time." Nothing could be less efficient than this misappropriation of a teacher's energy and hours.

Do a Number on Kids

"There's something crystal clear about a number," says Tracy Locklin, a top advisor to the U.S. Senate committee with jurisdiction over public education, and this point of view is reinforced in statements from the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Education and from the White House.

"I want to change the face of reading instruction across the United States from an art to a science," said a top assistant to Rod Paige, the former education secretary, in the winter of 2002.

But the longing to turn art into science doesn't stop with reading methodologies alone. In many schools, it now extends to almost every aspect of the operation of the school and of the lives that children lead within it. In some schools, even such ordinary acts as filing to lunch or recess in the hallways or the stairwells is subjected to the same determined kind of em-

phasis upon empirical precision.

"Rubrics for Filing" is the printed heading of a lengthy list of numbered categories by which teachers are supposed to grade their students on the way they march along the corridors in another urban district I have visited. Someone, in this instance, did a lot of work to fit the filing proficiencies of children into no more and no less than 32 specific slots.

"Line leader confidently leads class.... Line is straight.... Spacing is tight.... The class is stepping together.... Everyone shows pride, their shoulders high, no slumping," according to the strict criteria for filing at Level Four.

"Line is straight, but one or two people are not quite in line," according to the box for Level Three. "Line leader leads class," but not "with confidence" this time, and "almost everyone shows pride...."

"Several are slumping.... Little pride is showing," says the box for Level Two. "Spacing is uneven.... Some are talking and whispering."

"Line leader is paying no attention," says the box for Level One. "Heads are turning every way.... Hands are touching.... The line is not straight.... There is no pride."

The teacher who handed me this document believed at first that it was written as a joke by someone who had simply grown fed up with all the numbers and

accounting rituals that occupy much of the day in many over-regulated schools. It turned out that it was no joke but had been printed in a handbook of instructions for the teachers in the city where she taught.

In some districts, even the most pleasant and old-fashioned class activities of elementary schools have now been overtaken by these ordering requirements. A student teacher at an urban school in California, for example, wanted to bring a pumpkin to her class on Halloween but knew it had no ascertainable connection to the California standards.

Only Exam Stuff

She therefore had developed what she called the 'Multimodal Pumpkin Unit' to teach science (seeds), arithmetic (the size and shape of pumpkins, I believe—this detail wasn't clear), and certain items she adapted out of language arts, in order to position "pumpkins" in a frame of state proficiencies. Even with her multimodal pumpkin, as her faculty advisor told me, she was still afraid she would be criticized because she knew the pumpkin would not really help her children to achieve expected goals on state exams.

Why, I asked a group of educators at a seminar in Sacramento, was a teacher being placed in a position where she'd need to do preposterous cur-

ricular gymnastics to enjoy a bit of seasonal amusement with her class on Halloween? How much injury to state-determined "purpose" would it do to let a group of children have a pumpkin party once a year for no other reason than because it's something fun that other children get to do on autumn days in public schools across most of America?

"Forcing an absurdity on teachers does teach something," said an African American professor. "it teaches acquiescence. It breaks down the will to thumb your nose at pointless protocols—to call absurdity 'absurd.'" Writing out the standards with the proper numbers on the chalkboard, even though these numbers have no possible meaning to the children, has a similar effect, he said.

Spitting It Back

And doing this is "terribly important" to the principals in many of these schools. "You *have* to post the standards, and the way you know your students know the standards is by asking them to *state* the standards. And they do it—and you want to be quite certain that they do it if you want to keep on working at that school."

Then, on top of all the rest, there are the bulletin boards one must put up not only in the classroom but throughout the school to be sure that state officials who drop by from time to time

to supervise instruction will see all their goals and standards properly displayed above whatever bits and pieces of a child's writing may be viewed as excellent enough to show to visitors.

These are nothing like the lovingly assembled postings of the work of children that most grownups who attended school in decades past are likely to recall. They differ in at least two ways. First, the principals in many of these schools refuse to let the less-than-perfect work of children who are struggling still to live up to the standards be displayed at all.

If such less-than-perfect work should be selected for some reason, teachers are pressured to correct mistakes. If the teachers clean up the mistakes, according to a teacher who insisted on anonymity in speaking to the *New York Times*, when officials walk by "with a clipboard" looking for the requisite "five elements of a good bulletin board," as the teacher puts it, "at least they won't take it down because of an eraser mark."

"The prevailing wisdom," says the *Times*, is that these inner-city schools with "long histories of failure and constant turnover of teachers" cannot afford to tolerate "misspellings or the other errors that in wealthier, more successful schools" might be perceived as "normal and even endearing."

This is the same message

I received from teachers at Pineapple's former school, P.S. 65, in which "display and pretense," as one teacher put it, took priority over the substance of the work itself and where, she said, "the cover of the book" is more important than whatever is inside:

The teacher said her principal had told her that these corridor displays were worth the time they consumed because the children "would take pride" in seeing their work exhibited for visitors. But the teacher said she disagreed: "I don't think the kids take pride in these displays," she said, "when they can see some of their words have been erased" and "rewritten in a teacher's hand."

I asked her, "Does that really happen?" "Yes," she said, "it does." She told me that she, like the teacher that the *Times* reporter had interviewed, had been assured that there were five—"exactly five"—criteria by which a bulletin board would be judged. When she refused to doctor writings by her students, she was warned that there would be "a letter" in her file, a warning that another teacher at the school told me that he was given too. "I'm so torn up," she said. "I'm thinking about law school."

There is a second way in which these wall displays differ from the ones we still routinely find in most suburban schools, as well as in many urban schools that serve the children of the middle

class. Almost any piece of writing by a child that is chosen to be posted on a classroom wall or in a school hallway tends to be lost beneath a large heraldic statement of the "standard" or "objective" it is meant to illustrate.

Overshadowing Kids

I once stood for a long time in a third-grade classroom in the Bronx examining a mobile that was hanging from a string above a child's desk. A state proficiency was named on the mobile. It had something to do with English language arts, as I recall, and had a number listed also. Almost imperceptible on the same piece of cut-out paper were about 12 words in child's writing that described a leaf. There was a drawing of the leaf as well.

The leaf and writing could have been displayed without the number and the designation that overshadowed them. But the obligation of the teacher to contain specifics in generics and to position even tiny particles of children's artfulness within allegedly "productive" patterns governs almost everything. No little leaf, it seems, will go without its number.

Children pick up these numbering and naming rituals, as did Pineapple's sister, for example, speaking of the other children in her class as "Level Ones" or "Level Threes." The over-inflated formal designations for their class activities seep into the

children's vocabularies too. Official words supplant the use of natural or even logical expressions when the children try to tell you what they're doing at a given moment of the day—or why they're even doing it at all.

“Meaningful”?

The words “Meaningful Sentences,” for instance, have been posted on the walls in many of these schools. Wanting to know how children understand the implications of that big word (meaningful), I once asked a group of fourth-graders to tell me what it means.

“It means you have to box the word you got in SFA [Success for All] and underline it in your sentence,” said one child. “You have to put a starred word in the sentence,” said another.

“I understand that part,” I told the children, but I said that I was still not clear on what this big word actually means. The children I was talking to seemed flummoxed by the question, and they looked at me, indeed, as if it wasn't a fair question. Then, instead of giving me an answer, they repeated what they'd said about “starred words” and “boxing.”

I asked about another term, “Word Mastery,” a more familiar classroom term that also had been posted on the wall. “If you're told to memorize something and you memorize it right,” a child who had been identified to me as one of the best students

in the class replied, “you get 100—and that's Mastery.”

When I said I still did not quite get the point of what this word itself was supposed to mean, a boy named Timothy explained it in this way: “Mastery means the number of words that you can master in five days,” which was, I learned, the span of days that was assigned to each subunit of the scripted plan.

“But what does ‘master’ mean?” I asked Timothy. He looked at me as if I were way outside of the loop of what most educated people are supposed to know. “It means you get 100,” he replied.

The circularity of Timothy's response, I later thought, made perfect sense within the context of a very tightly closed containment of ideas and reference points. The children gave me answers in the terms that they had learned in the curriculum.

Stating meanings for these words in terms that would make sense *outside* of the curriculum—or, in the case of “meaningful,” in any terms they understood at all—was not expected of them. I wrote in my notes, “These children seemed ‘locked-in.’ Whatever the rationale for all of this, it opens up no doors to understanding.”

Although the principals and teachers in these schools are constantly reminded to hold out high expectations for low-income children, I thought the ex-

pectations here were very low. I thought the intellects of children were debased when they were asked to parrot language that they did not understand and weren't invited to explore and figure out.

The argument is sometimes made that scripted lessons and the other elements of order and control that we have looked at here are essential strategies for schools in which the teachers frequently are inexperienced and where there is high turnover of faculty members.

Worthless Sameness

If our urban districts cannot give these schools the continuity of staffing by experienced instructors that is found in schools that serve more middle-class communities, according to this reasoning, they can at least provide the artificial continuity afforded by a set of scripted lessons that leave little to the competence of teachers and can be delivered by a person who has never studied education and has no familiarity with the developmental needs of children.

The problem with this argument, however, is that many of the teachers who have been recruited to these schools, while those who are most insecure may be relieved at first to be provided with what are described as "teacher-proof" materials, ultimately reject them intellectually, as did many of the

teachers at Pineapple's school.

Or, if they accept them as a necessary recourse, as did Mr. Endicott, they do so with the deepest reservations and with torn allegiances, as Mr. Endicott made clear. "My main feeling, 98% of my reaction to this methodology," he told me flatly, "is that it's horrific for the teachers and boring for the children..., an intellectual straitjacket."

"I love my job because I love my students," said one of the younger teachers at the school, "but I also hate my job because I know I'm buying into something that I don't believe in."

Few of these new instructors, as a consequence, remain in these schools very long. All of the beginning teachers I met at P.S. 65 in the time Mr. Endicott was there—two of whom were graduates of Harvard, another of Cornell—have since departed from the school.

So a curriculum that was imposed, in part, to compensate for staffing needs of schools that had a hard time recruiting teachers ends up by driving out precisely those well-educated men and women that school systems have worked so hard to attract into these neighborhoods.

In a letter in which he spoke about the program in effect at P.S. 65, Mr. Endicott told me he tended to be sympathetic to the school administrators, more sympathetic at least than the other teachers I had talked with

seemed to be. He said he believed his principal had little choice about the implementation of this program, which had been mandated for all elementary schools in New York City that had had rock-bottom academic records over a long period of time.

"This puts me into a dilemma," he went on, "because I love the kids at P.S. 65." And even while, he said, "I know that my teaching SFA is a charade..., if I don't do it, I won't be permitted to teach these children."

The Poor Get SFA

Mr. Endicott, like all but two of the new recruits at P.S. 65, was a white person, as were the principal and most of the administrators at the school. Most of these neophyte instructors had, as a result, had little or no prior contact with the children of an inner-city neighborhood.

But, like the others whom I met and despite the distancing between the children and their teachers that resulted from the scripted method of instruction, he had developed close attachments to his students and did not want to abandon them.


At the same time, the class-and-race-specific implementation of this program obviously troubled him. "There's an expression now," he said. "The rich get richer, and the poor get SFA." He said he was "still trying to figure out my professional

ethics" on the problem this posed for him.

White children made up "only about 1%" of students in the New York City schools in which such scripted indoctrinational instruction was imposed, according to the *New York Times*: "The pre-packaged lessons" were intended "to ensure that all teachers—even novices or the most inept—would be able to teach reading.

As pragmatic and hard-headed as such arguments may seem, these are desperation strategies that reason out of the acceptance of inequity. If we did not have a segregated system in which the more experienced instructors teach the children of the privileged and the least experienced are sent to teach the children of minorities, these practices would not be needed and could not be so convincingly defended.

These are confections of apartheid, and, no matter by what arguments of urgency or practicality they have been justified, they cannot fail to further deepen the divisions of society.

"It would be of great concern to me and most of the people I know," says Lucy Calkins, a literacy specialist at Teachers College in New York, "if we had an educational apartheid system with one method of instruction for poor kids and another for middle-class kids." But, to a very troubling degree in many urban areas today, we already do. 

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