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The KULT of KIPP: An Essay Review

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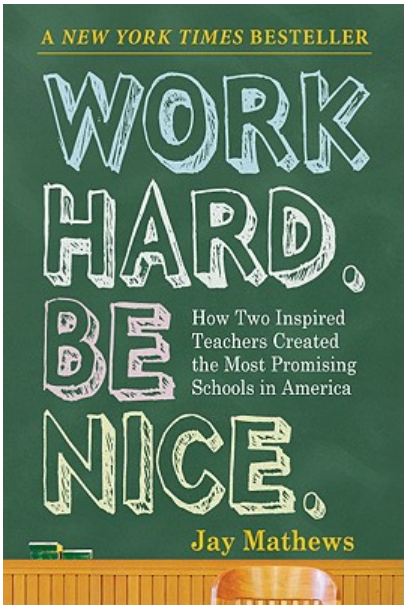
> What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative . . . .
>
> ~John Dewey

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, a former Yankee general and son of a missionary educator started a teacher training and agricultural school for freed slaves in Hampton, Virginia. His mission was to prepare African-American teachers to prepare Black Southern children with an education that celebrated the dignity of hard labor and the willing acceptance of second-class citizenship for those such as themselves who were born of an irredeemable moral weakness that had doomed the advancement of their race. Samuel Chapman Armstrong's Hampton Model of industrial education offered a way to school and to pacify the freed Black population of more than three million souls who were clamoring for that magical thing called "education." Freed slaves, educated in the Hampton Model, would offer a reliable stream of cheap, compliant laborers who could be

counted on to rebuild the South without fear of protest or strike. They would seek humble redemption and acceptance through the power of their unceasing work and compliant, patient behaviors. (Anderson, 1988)



Armstrong's Hampton Model was soon embraced by leading politicians and philanthropists in the North, from Theodore Roosevelt to Andrew Carnegie, as the solution to the "Negro Problem," (Anderson, 1988, p. 72), thus inspiring the spread and perpetuation of other industrial training schools as the appropriate schooling for generations of African-American, Hispanic, and Native-American children. Hampton's most famous alumnus, Booker T. Washington, became the leading Black proponent for the Hampton Model when he was put in charge of the new Tuskegee Institute in 1881. Washington would go on to become the Black spokesman for the incrementalist approach to social apartheid. He believed, as a good student of Armstrong, that apartheid could only be remedied by earning the respect that would undoubtedly come to those who persisted in working hard at whatever job was offered, while developing the winning character traits that would eventually overcome a host of inherited moral weaknesses and environmental degradations. The history of this largely unexamined and tragic chapter in our educational history is explored in James Anderson's book, *The Education of Blacks in the South: 1860-1935*.

Jay Mathews has written a history of sorts about a very contemporary model of schooling for yet another generation of disenfranchised minority students. His chronicle is as celebratory of the KIPP, Inc. schools as James Anderson's (1988) history is critical of the Hampton Model. And although Anderson's treatment is scholarly and abundantly documented, Mathews's offers an historical screenplay of sorts without endnotes or references. As such, it is a popular account that focuses on KIPP's charismatic founders, Michael Feinberg and David Levin, two former Ivy-Leaguers and Teach for America volunteers, who created their Knowledge Is Power Program, or as some critics uneasily jest, "Kids in Prison Program."

For some years now, Mathews has written with unsparing enthusiasm about KIPP in the pages of the *Washington Post*, where he does a weekly mix of education opinion and news that is not unlike what he has done in this book. The book, in fact, has 52 column-length chapters crammed into just more than 300 pages, a device that works best when Mathews does not stray too far from a linear rendering. The chapters, for instance, that take us from early KIPP to present-day KIPP, crop up as artificial and arbitrary interjections without cues, thus getting in the way of a flow that, otherwise, remains

unimpeded by any theoretical or conceptual mass that could cause the reader to brake or evade. For the most part, *Work Hard, Be Nice* is an easy cruise with little to slow the reader on this high-speed portrayal of Dave and Mike's excellent educational adventure.

Jay Mathews

In Mathews's telling of the KIPP tale, The Knowledge Is Power Program sprang from Michael Feinberg's Mac Classic one evening in 1994. He and pal pedagogue, David Levin, attended an inspirational speech by famed teacher, Rafe Esquith, whose classroom mottoes of "be nice, work hard" and "there are no shortcuts" would one day find prominent placement among the festoons and placards in KIPP classrooms. Borrowing from Esquith's "no shortcuts" approach, but leaving behind his casual warmth, Feinberg and Levin seem to have created a steroidal and manic version of the traditional classroom. They combine this vision with ongoing psychological interventions intended to breed an unwavering positive outlook among students. The energetic and bureaucracy-busting reformers also borrowed heavily from the inimitable Harriet Ball, whose teaching style offers a culturally-sensitive mashup of gospel, hip-hop, and Schoolhouse Rock, which, no doubt, loses some of its effect and charm in the hands of the white TFA teachers that KIPP has recruited since the early days in Houston. It was one of Harriet Ball's chants, as Mathews recalls, that inspired the name, Knowledge is Power Program:

> You gotta read, baby, read.
> You gotta read, baby, read.
> The more you read, the more you know,
> Cause knowledge is power,
> Power is money, and
> I want it. (p. 62)

The motif of this book is that urban schools are not designed to promote learning because teachers and administrators in them do not believe that poor children can learn at the same level as children in the leafy suburbs. Feinberg and Levin believe that poor children can learn at those levels and have created a learning environment that has repeatedly produced test scores to prove it, at least for those students who survive the treatment. Large numbers of these children do not survive; 60% were left between 5th and 8th grade in a study recently conducted in Bay Area KIPP Schools. (Woodworth *et al.*, 2008, p. ix) In the Mathews script, the cold, bureaucratic maze of the can't-do public schools provides the perfect foil for these fearless, brazen, and endlessly-energetic young men who are committed to creating schools that make sure their students' test performance exceeds that of most other students, rich or poor.

The pedagogical and political implications of accepting this premise as real are played out in the Mathews book, even though much of the irony that results from the rupture between rhetoric and reality seems to be lost on the protagonists, as well as the author. Such under-examined acceptance of an oversimplified view of learning, learning environments, psychological needs, and sociological contexts, offers a chance for rationalizations and practices to become accepted that might otherwise be considered hostile to the well-being of children. It is at the treacherous tipping point between commitment and cult that moral clarity is sometimes lost.

Mathews's airily-contextualized and repeated lapses in professional ethics, protocol, and the treatment of children at KIPP could make some readers shudder, whether or not they know anything about the NEA Code of Ethics. Strangely, many of the breaches do not seem to register with either of our basketball and beer-loving heroes or with their chronicler. Case in point: Even though public reports from visitors to KIPP, Inc. have documented that rule breakers are labeled (sometimes literally with signs) as "miscreants," Mathews never notes this labeling practice other than to use the label himself in describing a child who receives a private tongue-lashing for whispering on the first day of school. The teacher reminds this "miscreant" that

> You are too big for that kind of stuff. From now on, when a teacher is speaking, you are going to track your eyes on the teacher and listen to what he or she is saying. You are in KIPP now. It is a time to grow up. I am expecting a lot from you. (p. 67)

Another case, in which a kind of fingernails-on-the-blackboard irony fails to register for either protagonists or author Mathews, involved the exploitative use of children during the early days of KIPP to lobby school officials for a decision that would fit Feinberg's schedule to acquire more classrooms for his ambitious program. Feinberg is reprimanded by his supervisor, but he chooses not to tell his students about it for some reasons:

> They would eventually learn the rules for working inside a large organization. An explanation of the penalties for rebellion, he thought, was not appropriate for their grade level.
> "You are doing what no other fifth graders in the country are doing," he said. For once, he was fairly sure he was not exaggerating. "Knowledge is power. You are not sitting back being spectators and letting people drive you around. You are taking charge for yourselves. This is what we mean by team and family. *Viva la KIPP!*"
> *"Viva la KIPP!*" the class shouted happily.

Unfortunately for these children, the penalty for any whiff of rebellion or hints of "miscreant" behavior are clearly demonstrated to them in various forms of ostracism and isolation, while the rest of the class is, indeed, driven around, and around, and around

again upon a whirlwind of chanting, tracking, singing, snapping, nodding, waving, and clapping in an exhibition of programmed unanimity that could be unsettling to a less enamored chronicler than Jay Mathews.

At KIPP, we find that even recess is considered by Feinberg and Levin as a "prime distraction," so much so that the original KIPPsters took recess in the form of a 45-minute dodgeball game after other children went home at 3:30. Even field trips became "field lessons" in which all stimuli along the way became grist for the unending learning mill that never stops recording, sorting, storing, and recalling.

In the end, Mathews offers something familiar to fans of Hollywood B movies, a predictable screenplay in which our heroes must contend with the stupid and bigoted system that is out to stymie these lads with hearts of gold and enough mischievous energy to have government bureaucrats pulling their hair. But in Dave and Mike's excellent adventure, their enthusiasm and rambunctiousness overcomes all obstacles erected by the gray government workers in their Soviet-inspired central offices, the ones who are determined to keep poor children ignorant by standing in the way of bold reform initiatives like KIPP.

Mathews offers a close-up look at Dave and Mike as they use the dissembling-and exaggeration-technique for recruiting children and their parents into KIPP. Potential clients are promised Disneyworlds that later become overnight "field lessons" in Washington, DC, where children and their chaperones sleep eight to a room and learn the assembly line by making their own endless supply of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Or see Dave and Mike load children into a windowless U-Haul trailer for a local field "lesson." See Mike as he smashes a chair through a plate glass window in front of children who do not show the proper contrition for talking during a movie. And in Mathews's glazed-over prose, these bizarre and dangerous acts hardly raise an eyebrow or cause a comma of hesitation.

And as in most Hollywood scripts, there is a love interest in this story. See Mike, himself one year out of Teach For America, as he endears himself to a member of the opposite sex by—gosh darn those institutional rules—plagiarizing a course description required of TFA faculty who are in charge of the four weeks of teacher training that TFA candidates receive prior to teaching. Mike is warned during a meeting about getting paperwork in on time:

> Right after the meeting, Dippel found Feinberg looming over her, trying to introduce himself. He liked sassy, attractive women. Dippel had the lean, healthy figure of a swimming instructor and resembled the actress Julia Stiles.
>
> "Oh, yes," she told him. "You're on my list. You haven't turned in your paperwork yet."

> Feinberg seemed delighted. "Oh, " he said, "I would *hate* to be your *worst* nightmare. "
>
> What a smart-ass, Dippel thought, but she was undeniably intrigued. Her doubts about the cowboy guy [Feinberg wore string tie, vest, and cowboy hat during his early years in Houston] increased when Feinberg turned in his project description, nearly identical to one she had received from her friend Mike Farabaugh, another corps member adviser that summer. She went to see Farabaugh.
>
> "Mike, what's with this guy? You wrote his course description."
>
> "I did not write his course description."
>
> "You're lying, but what's his deal?"
>
> "Well, why?"
>
> "Well, he's kind of cute."
>
> Farabaugh smiled. Teach For America summer institutes had their romantic side. "I'll set you up with him." (p. 167)

Oddly, it is as if Mathews set out to cast a whole host of serious indiscretions through the unchanging soft focus lens that puts an overly-rambunctious and youthful determination to do good into a foreground suffused with the glow of a 1950s TV sitcom uncomfortably adapted to the purposes of an educational training film. *Work Hard, Be Nice* offers an uneasy confluence of journalistic storytelling, authorized history, and policy talk that has to be read as a public relations piece for TFA and KIPP to appreciate its full import rather than as a serious treatment of a very controversial education reform initiative. (Perhaps that helps to explain why Bill Gates provided a copy of *Work Hard, Be Nice* to all attendees at his recent TED talk, which focused on four of the world's most pressing problems: malaria, AIDS, pneumonia, and teachers).

Beyond the apologetic rhetoric and the gauzy lens Mathews bathes his subjects in throughout the book, what do we find out about KIPP? For one thing, the first big private donation came to KIPP from a Texas entrepreneur, whose style of TV advertising inspired Feinberg and Levin as they perfected the recruitment script they would come to use repeatedly with fourth graders in Houston. His name is Jim McIngvale, better known as Mattress Mack. On the advice of another educational maverick, Dr. Thaddeus Lott, an autocratic principal who earned a reputation in Houston for his obsessive crusading for Direct Instruction, Mattress Mack gave an undisclosed amount of money to KIPP in return for a commitment to use the highly-scripted SRA reading materials. Even though Mathews plays up the fact that early KIPP students read quality literature, the reading of books is given to forty-five minutes of silent or oral reading from 4:15 to quitting time at 5 PM.

This kind of behind the scenes look with Mattress Mack is rare, however; those looking for the political or ideological back-story for KIPP will find this book a disappointment. We are told, however, that KIPP's media launch came from a 2,799 word story in 1994

on the front page of the *Houston Post*, but details are missing as to how this obscure little program that was KIPP at the time was chosen for such coverage. We find out, too, that David Levin contacted the conservative Manhattan Institute when he decided he wanted to return to New York in 1994 to open a KIPP. We are not told how this unknown and uncertified new teacher was given a job and multiple classrooms with support staff in a New York City school. We are told that KIPP students did a learning simulation for the Republican National Convention in 2000, but we don't learn any details on how that came about.

Nor do we see any mention of David Levin's ongoing association with positive psychology guru, Dr. Martin Seligman, whose work took on an added element of controversy this past summer when it was discovered that his techniques had inspired some of the interrogation tactics infamously used in recent years at the CIA (Jaschik, 2008). Even though Seligman's influence has been and continues to be central in shaping the "non-cognitive" behaviors that are central to the KIPP mission, behaviors that include self-control, adaptability, and patience (Tough, 2006), Mathews offers no mention of this core aspect of "character education" that some have referred to as "KIPP-notizing" (Brancaccio, 2007).

So while KIPP focuses on altering the test results and the minds of children who live in poverty, KIPP and the deep philanthropic pockets that support KIPP with hundreds of millions of dollars offer nothing to challenge the sociological reality of poverty in urban America or to prepare its children to examine, challenge, or change that reality. Instead, KIPP prefers to have children working hard and being nice as the ticket to some day escaping their ravaged communities. Implementing this social entrepreneurial agenda are the well-intentioned neophyte teachers from Teach for America that KIPP prefers who, with unwavering loyalty to the KIPP cause, insist that these children make any sacrifice, pay any price, to overcome the obstacles that politicians and philanthropists are unwilling to talk about, much less change. In bearing the inhumane expectation of changing themselves in order to change their lives, children are forced to give up being children, are forced to give up their friends, are wrenched away from their community connections, and forced to give up the larger portions of their souls.

If successful, then, these children become the ghettoized versions of the middle class children that their middle class teachers would like for them to be, if poverty had not already provided an insurmountable obstacle to that world. In this fantasy transformation, then, these children become the subjects of an inhumane psychological experiment, one that reflects a white middle class notion of social reform and education reform achieved on the cheap, with disposable teachers from TFA, and a bottom line outcome that is impressive only if we are willing to forget to count the losses. In these academic and behavioral boot camps that include ten hours a day plus two hours for homework, these children are caught between the world they have forsaken in order to be KIPPsters and the one they are incapable of entering, a distant and shining land that will

be waiting for those who work hard enough and are nice enough. The half or more who can't run the gauntlet are dumped back into the school-to-prison pipeline, where they absorb their own failure as an earned result for not working hard enough, or being nice enough.

So even with the well-honed gloss and glow that Jay Mathews brings to his subject, KIPP must still resemble less a viable education reform for urban schools than it does a New Age eugenics intervention that would seemingly hope to reclaim our youngest social defectives by changing the reality inside their heads, rather than intervening in the sad, poor, and defective worlds that these same children must return to at the end of their ten-hour segregated school days. The fact that such an experiment finds such a wide and eager following offers disturbing evidence that there is much we did not learn or have tragically forgotten about lessons so painfully rendered during the first half of the last century.

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