School Sucks, Then Reality Bites
An Essay Review of *School Sucks!*

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When I saw the title of this book, *School Sucks!*, I was intrigued, especially as the subtitle intimated arguments for alternative education. What I read was a compendium of essays divided into three sections: Tales from the Field; Urban Education; Praxis of Urban Education Reform

The subtitle was a bit misleading, since all of the essays focused on impoverished and sometimes abused urban children of color. The message of the editors was clear: this group of

students was most in need of alternatives in education. No doubt this is profound and compelling. However, what I thought I might find was a broader discussion of why we need to deal with some types of students differently (Fantini, 1976; Smith, 1974; Smith, Barr, & Burke, 1976).

Tales from the Field

The Tales from the Field were intriguing and poignant. Knaus focused on the intimacy between teacher and student and an atmosphere of anti-oppressiveness. He emphasized connecting with students through "free" writing. The important issue he raised regarding student objections to school was that they saw their "success" as their ability to "shut up and listen to the teacher."

Goodman spoke to *disengagement* in telling the stories of Bear and Antoine. The signal assertion, taken from his earlier work, was that "some alternative schools are unable to break from the heavy rule sets that make them strikingly similar to the schools from which they were removed" (p. 50). This is, indeed, one of the major criticisms of alternative schools.

What we have seen is students who have difficulty in traditional classrooms and with traditional curricula being removed because of disruptive behavior or substantial lack of achievement. Their removal provides relief to the teachers who do not have the patience, energy, or techniques to deal with these individuals productively. The alternative settings, many times, are the same as the traditional ones, with staff dealing with the students in the same way. The only thing different is that now there is a uniform,

segregated group of "miscreants," who can no longer impede the learning of others. The school districts get credit (funds) for the attendance of these students, but the students may fare no better academically. Of course, the end result is that many of these students drop out.

Woodard recounted the struggles she had identifying who she was and how she found her voice. For those whose backgrounds are very different, she provided an unadulterated view of how one person coped with difficult situations.

Knaus reprised his position of allowing for free expression and self identification, but pointed out that these outlets do not prepare students for the world of work. He cited the colonial purpose of schools, with Blacks being excluded or simply trained for menial tasks (and obedience).

DeFreece focused on racism in schools, especially with regard to Blacks. He saw two purposes: (1) meeting the standard, and (2) White investment in Black degradation.

There was some vacillation among the authors as to what to call the groups of color: Blacks, African Americans, Chicanos, Hispanics, and Latinos. However, poor was poor.

A friend of mine struggled with how to identify himself and finally decided he was a "Black American of African descent" (Campbell, 2007). That is quite a "mouthful," but he explained with good clarity why this classification worked for him.

The Pedagogy of Urban Education

How do we teach children in need of or in alternative education? Lewis, Chambers and Butler question the accuracy of dropout information. More importantly, they see current alternative urban education as *resegregation.*

The ground-breaking *Brown v. Topeka* case, which supposedly outlawed segregation in schools, or at least struck down the separate-but-equal doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was greeted with hope. However, the following year, *Brown II* specified that desegregation be implemented *"with all deliberate speed."*

Yet today we continue to see some type of segregation – racial, socioeconomic, ability to follow classroom rules, etc. Racial and socioeconomic segregation may be choice or chance. To get to the multicultural and multiracial mixing that would lead to *integration,* decision makers would have to legislate how neighborhoods would be comprised or some other technique. Of course, this is not likely to happen. People will live where they are able or where they choose. The result is what we see in schools today, irrespective of various strategies to change – busing, magnet schools, and other means at least one step removed from the reality of social patterns.

The continued dissatisfaction with public education has foisted and nurtured vouchers, "segregation" academies, increased non-public school enrollment, and charter schools. So we see *separation* and *inequality*.

Some of the inequality can be seen in a test score gap. This led Lewis, Chambers and Butler into a discussion of social capital. Higher standardized test scores is the capital that leads to higher education. This seemed to be the intent of the federal *No Child Left Behind* initiative. We saw "annual yearly progress" as a guiding principle for educational success, or the converse – lack of progress leading to escalating sanctions.

Much of what we can see in distinctions has to do with what is visible. Race is visible; poverty is visible; abuse can be visible. Where there is perceived inequality, lawsuits and court cases have followed.

When a group of black citizens pointed out that there was a disparity between black and white students' test scores in 1980s Little Rock (AR), the federal court mandated that there be a reduction. How do you reduce disparity – hold the upper stratum constant and improve the lower, or reduce the achievement of the upper stratum, thereby closing the gap. Neither would be acceptable to those in the upper stratum. Improving achievement for both groups would maintain the gap.

After many years, the federal judge rescinded the order and allowed the Little Rock School District to deal with the issue as it would. The disparity was not caused by race; it was a function of socioeconomics. Humphries (1996) affirmed this fact by holding race constant in her study. She found the disparity fell along the lines of children who qualified for the federal meal program in schools and those who did not. The non-qualifying group were from families with higher income and performed better. This group was composed largely (but not exclusively) of white families.

The other, lower-performing group were mostly from families of color.

Lewis, Chambers and Butler also noted disparities in gifted and special education programs. Gifted programs had lower proportion of children of color, and special education programs had higher proportions of children of color.

Beachum and McCray introduced two terms – cultural collision and cultural collusion. The collusion stemmed from the collision when blacks became "free" to be part of society as equal members. These were the historic underpinnings of black education.

Liberation was seen to be the outcome of education. However, this was thwarted by limited opportunities for work and upward mobility in urban areas. Poverty maintained the wealth gap, irrespective of the education provided for children of color.

The media and school culture added to the collusion. What black children brought with them to school was different than the predominant culture of their peers, especially where they were in a minority. The distinctions served to continue to divide.

Blacks had little to identify with that was unique to the homes and neighborhoods from which they came. Dramatization of one attempt to reduce the difference and change the culture was seen in "Remember the Titans," a recounting of a successful football program at a Virginia high school. Bringing races together was a huge challenge that was made somewhat easier with a successful sports team.

Cultural change is hard, if not impossible. Clarke County (GA) dealt with removing *de*

facto segregation in its schools at the end of 60s and into the 70s by bringing blacks and white together in all of its schools. Occasioned by the building and opening of a new, second high school, the structure of the district changed. It evolved from an elementary (1-6), junior high (7-9) and high school (10-12) organization to an elementary (1-5), middle school (6-8) and high school (9-12) organization. (Kindergarten was still not the statewide norm.)

The transitional years saw elementary schools (1-5), a 6th grade school, junior high schools (7-9), a 10th grade school (the former black high school), and a high school (11-12), the former white high school. The collision of cultures warranted some substantive changes. At the high school, the name was changed, as was the mascot and school colors (which took a color from each of the former schools.

Sheriff deputies roamed the halls for the majority of that year and were gone the following year, when the new (9-12) high school opened. A new rivalry developed, but it was between the two high schools, not the races. While some in the community may have fumed and rued the changes and loss of identity, little outward opposition fomented. (There was some loss of students who moved to "Christian" academies, but it was minimal.)

Mirón looked at the locus of resistance in urban schools. He saw it as a disconnect between the curriculum and the urban poor. This was followed by Goodman and Hilton's examination of urban dropouts and their perception of cultural collision.

Urban schools are large and alienating. They do not prepare students for real-life, *attainable*,

opportunities. Moreover, there is a cultural mismatch between teachers and students. Goodman and Hilton saw the teachers as largely white and female, having little or no experience with the students they taught or the lives they led.

As a very young and naïve teacher, working in the inner city of Atlanta, I lived the cultural collision. I had no clue about the background and the home life of the students in the high school where I taught. It was 99+% black. The faculty was roughly 2/3 black and 1/3 white. Most of the black faculty had done their collegiate preparation at historical black institutions and had come from similar schooling themselves.

As for all of us, we would teach as we were taught and would not break from the experience we knew best, *unless* they were a compelling reason. For me, I sensed early that the standard English I knew and used was not going to have the same currency as the patois and ergot my students brought with them. As I had to learn to understand different sentences patterns, I realized my students functioned quite well with them. I did not correct different pronunciations or lapses in *correct* grammar in conversation. Instead, I taught English as a "second" language, and my students did just fine. They understood transformational grammar, but its use ended at the classroom door.

Fuhrman, in the next essay, saw urban school challenges as the structuralism that exists in schools. The extant organizational patterns are part of the problem. She argued for improvement, not reform.

Praxis of Urban Education

Brock said that good urban teaching will require a "new epistemology" plus a practicum. No longer can we presume that what worked for us as students or what worked in the past will yield the necessary positive results.

Sleeter looked at the issues through a lens of social justice. Deficit-oriented approaches are the least effective. The remedies offered through Title I and bilingual education may have some moderate success, but student need more. They need a curriculum that will be emancipating – one with a culturally relevant pedagogy, one that will allow them to be critically and culturally responsive. For this, teachers will need concomitant professional development, either pre-service or in-service.

This focus on pedagogy is the critical aspect of where educators might head. Yes, cultural cachet is important, but finding appropriate ways to connect with students is critical.

Thomas added metanarratives of African Americans as a way of punctuating the focal needs. Following, Ellis, Fitzsimmons and Small-McGinley looked at why students are discouraged and what works and what does not. They suggested that teachers approach students with several strategies:

1.   Winning students over from the outset
2.   Respect
3.   Providing encouragement
4.   Caring
5.   Making learning enjoyable
6.   Discerning and supporting student learning needs
7.   Seeing students as nice people

For me, this emphasized a *process* approach for success.

Bean-Folkes saw literacy as critical. Perhaps, this is the pivotal point of today's Common Core. She spoke of "Schools of Hope."

Brock reprised with a "Pedagogy of Wholeness." She said we need a transformational pedagogy that is both sociopolitical and deals substantively with life transformation. Adding that finding ways to encourage productive criticism in dealing with knowledge is part of what we must do.

Forthun, McCombie and Payne evaluated the technique of Life Space Crisis Intervention (LCSI). How do we reach students who bring the vagaries of life outside school into the classroom?

LCSI includes crisis intervention skills, dealing with immediate and long-term needs and instilling a sense of self responsibility in students. These are important concepts, because learning cannot occur when students are in crisis or distress.

What are echoed here are things we have learned from Glasser (1969; 1986), Glasser and Dotson (1998), Canter (2010) and others. To be successful, students must take responsibility for their own behavior and seek solutions for what does not work. The LCSI analysis showed that teachers developed a greater tolerance for student (mis)behavior and that there were fewer referrals outside the classroom. A caution is that the group of teachers who participated were a select group.

The three significant impediments to success were:

1. Family environment,
2. Psychological factors within the child, and
3. Teacher causes.

The first two are, obviously, outside of the control of educators; the last most definitely is within the purview of what occurs in school.

Brooks-Tatum looked at transformative educational spaces, but these were either alongside or outside of the regular classroom. Many of the programs were arts- and performance-based, augmenting the regular curriculum through the use of outlets for expression.

This is reminiscent of a program I directed for three summers – MENTE, Migrants Engaged in New Themes in Education (see Rodriguez & Gilbert, 1985). We brought promising and talented migrant students to a university campus for six weeks in the summer for intensive work in academic and personal enrichment. One of the components was *teátro*, roles and role playing for self expression. Using a select group of collegiate and pre-collegiate instructors yielded remarkable growth – two years on the Stanford Achievement Test improvement over the duration of the experience. The culturally appropriate nature of the curriculum was part of the reason for success.

Hollowell and Moye told how therapeutic art, poetry, and personal worked well at a day school for troubled youngsters, mostly female. Providing means of expression is a useful technique, especially for children whose self expression may be sanctioned at home.

Brock's afterword highlighted Friere's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." This was the exclamation point, as indicated in the book's title. The focal group of youngsters discussed throughout were indeed oppressed and at serious risk of not preparing themselves adequately for their future. Some of their roadblocks were familial; others were societal.

Throughout the book, the writers emphasized how important it was to have culturally appropriate curricula to *engage* the focal group of students. Content seemed to be most important, with some mention of techniques to connect (free writing, et al.). What seemed to have little acknowledgment was how to connect with individuals rather than groups (cf. Bradley, Pauley, & Pauley, 2006; Gilbert, 2012; Gilbert, 2013; Pauley, Bradley, & Pauley, 2002), even though there were individual vignettes.

Education has taken mostly a "shotgun" approach to delivery. Within the current structure, teachers can "hit" most of the students. Those at the periphery may be missed.

Special education programs have mandated individual education plans (IEPs) to target the needs of students with identified exceptionalities. Using a similar approach for all students might make sense but is seen as prohibitive, both in terms of fiscal and staff costs.

Understanding what students need to keep them energized and connected to the teacher and the content is a starting point. These needs relate to their learning styles and motivation more than the content of the curriculum.

Attention to learning germinates different teaching styles. Shulman's early work focused on problem solving as a means of making the connections between concepts and their applications. He (1999) identified a behavioral pathology that we see, but we know does not work:

- Nostalgia – teaching the way we were taught, because what was good enough for me should be good enough for you,
- Amnesia – exemplified by the oozing, short-term memory loss we see in students right after the final exam,
- Fantasia – erroneous assumptions drawn from learning experiences, and
- Inertia – innate or inert learning that waits for prodding to be brought into focus or utility.

I added two other behaviors:

- Aesthesia – the seduction of instruction (more concentration on form than substance), and

- Anaesthesia – numbing and dumbing (changing the curriculum or presentation to focus on getting to the next level quickly or preparing for high-stakes testing). (Gilbert, 2013, p. 313)

Culturally relevant curricula are important to connect with the experiences of youngsters. Understanding that how they live and the baggage they bring to school provide some of the personal connections.

Knowing which students work better in groups, alone, or with another person also provides connections. Most (90%) teachers are intrinsic

in their orientations (Gilbert, 2013). They will connect naturally with the 65% of their students who are similarly oriented. They other 35% will not fare well with meeting teacher expectations, the basis for the grades that make up their GPA.

Their extrinsic orientation is a challenge for most teachers. It is the basis for why students veer from the task at hand. This is the group of students that is truly *at risk* (Cicinelli, 2013; Gilbert, 2012).

The other aspect of the message of the authors that needed greater address or explication was how to deal with the societal success looming in the future for all students. Does allowing free expression prepare the oppressed for the world of work? Does recognition of the poignant vignettes of their lives allow them to see how to become taxpayers instead of tax users?

School Sucks! was a compelling read. It opened the door and mind to the plight of students in need of serious educational intervention.

I understand that the authors were probably realistic about what they could address and what they could not. However, I think the arguments might have gone further. Changing the curriculum for the disenfranchised might keep them in school, but the overriding issue is what happens when and if they graduate.

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