

Wild Flowers: ***Aesthetics in the Classroom in The Age of*** ***Uniformity dictated by No Child left Behind*** by Jonathan Kozol

During the course of forty years of work among schoolchildren, I have developed a very close attachment to hundreds of our classroom teachers—especially, I will confess, to those who work with little children in the elementary years. I think that teaching is a beautiful profession and that teachers do one of the best things that there is to do in life: bring joy and beauty, mystery, and mischievous delight into the hearts of young people in their years of greatest curiosity and growth.

In the past five years, however, much of education policy has been taken over, to a troubling degree, by people who have little knowledge of the classroom, and no knowledge of the hearts of children, but are the technicians of a dry and mechanistic, often business-driven version of “proficiency and productivity.” State accountability requirements, correlated closely with the needs and wishes of the corporate community, increasingly control the aims of education that are being thrust upon the principals and teachers in our public schools.

But teachers are not servants of the global corporations or drill sergeants for the state and should never be compelled to view themselves that way. I think they have a higher destiny than that. The best of teachers are not merely the technicians of proficiency; they are also ministers of innocence, practitioners of tender expectations. They stubbornly refuse to see their pupils as so many future economic units for a corporate society, little pint-sized deficits or assets for the U.S. economy, into whom they are expected to pump “added value,” as the pundits of the education policy arena now declaim. Teachers like these believe that every child who has been entrusted to their care comes into their classroom with inherent value to begin with.

Many of the productivity and numbers specialists who have rigidified and codified school policy in recent years do not seem to recognize much preexisting

value in the young mentalities of children—in particular, in children of the poor. A bullying tone often creeps into their way of speaking. A cocksure overconfidence, what Erik Erikson described as “a destructive conscientiousness,” is not unfamiliar, too. The longer they remain within their institutes of policy or their positions in the government, the less they seem to have a vivid memory of children’s minuscule realities and their vulnerable temperaments, their broken pencil points, their upturned faces when the teacher comes and leans down by their desk to see why they are crying.

This, then, is the challenge and dilemma for young teachers and for those who educate our teachers. As the highly controversial law No Child Left Behind intensifies in its effects, an unhealthy emphasis upon the “measurement of productivity” by the instrument of high-stakes standardized examinations as the sole determinant of success or failure in a given school is threatening the educational and psychological development of children and compromising the integrity of teachers and their principals. Principals in many schools are living in a state of permanent anxiety and, because of fear of sanctions if they cannot pump the scores enough to satisfy the state or federal government, are doing things they tell me privately that they abhor.

In many schools, at least one quarter of the year—and, in the poorest inner-city schools, as much as three quarters of the year—is stolen from instruction to drill children for exams. Recess is increasingly abolished. In Atlanta, they have purposely constructed schools that have no playgrounds so that no time can be “wasted” on activities that have no payoff on exams. Chicago has largely abolished recess, too; the only exceptions that I know are a few high-scoring schools, mostly in affluent communities.

More troubling, perhaps, the teaching of the liberal arts has been truncated in these kinds of schools as well. Subjects that will not be measured by high-stakes examinations—history, geography, science, art, and music—are either abandoned altogether or presented to the children only on a token basis that denies them any opportunity to gain the cultural capaciousness that is enjoyed and valued by the children of the privileged.

Worst, perhaps, is the distortion of the language arts in increasing numbers of these schools. In many districts, teachers are being handed scripts to read, “aligned,” as it is said, with items to be tested on exams. The questions teachers ask are dictated by the script, and the answers children must provide are in the script as well. Teachers are also sometimes told they must hold timers in their hands. Not one minute can be wasted on a moment of frivolity, an episode of whim, a bit of interesting repartee, that might slow the rapid pacing of the drill demanded by the script.

What happens to a lively and excited teacher in one of these heavily test-driven schools? One of the things she quickly learns is that she cannot just go up to a chalkboard on a cheerful Monday morning and write, in big bold letters, “Outcome of the Lesson: I read my kids a poem of Langston Hughes—or Gwendolyn Brooks or, for that matter, a lyrical verse of William Butler Yeats—and discovered that they loved it!” As a bright, young teacher in one inner-city school observed to me irreverently, “What’s love got to do with it?” It was a good question. The word “love” does not appear in *No Child Left Behind*. Nor do the words “exhilaration,” or “compassion,” “kindness,” “joyful curiosity,” or “delight in what is unexpected”—all of which would probably come first for almost any teacher working with young children.

Saddest of all, because of the tight timing—everything within this kind of classroom has to be “on task,” a dreary term imported from the business world—a child who wants to tell us something that is not on task becomes a threat to the curriculum.

Six-year-olds, as every first-grade teacher knows, are experts at subverting lesson plans. One of the likable tendencies of children of that age is to meander off into the blissful kingdom of irrelevance as frequently as possible. “Teacher?” the child says. “Guess what?” “What?” the teacher says. “I went to the zoo on Sunday with my Uncle Pookey—and guess what?” “What?” the teacher says again. “I saw a baby bear!” And then the child starts to pile on the “ands” and “buts” for one of those seemingly eternal run-on sentences that cheerfully forgets where it began.

But sometimes at the end of all those “ands” and “buts” there’s a piece of hidden treasure where the child tells us something that we never knew about him up to now. And good teachers use that piece of hidden treasure to unlock motivation and to bring that child back into the classroom work that must be done, but with a sense of purpose now that would have been absent, and remained invisible to her, if she had been forced to cut him off.

“Okay, sweetie, that’s a beautiful story that you told us. Now let’s see if, when we go back to our desks, you can write it down for me with all those interesting details you included. . . .”

And this, of course, is not limited to young children; students at the secondary level also like to venture off on interesting tangents, albeit to reveal deeper and perhaps more important insights into their personal lives, accomplishments, and challenges.

But in too many inner-city schools, where teachers work beneath the sword of stipulated time-constraints dictated by the testing pressures that they face, the teacher has to cut that child off before he tells his story and never gets to find that treasure in his heart and never gets to turn that key that might reveal to her the deepest sources of his motivation and potential.

What, then, should good teachers do? How can a grown-up who knows very well, because of her own first-rate education, that practices like these would never be permitted in the schools that serve the children of the white and middle class, navigate the challenge of surviving in one of these schools? How can she practice her profession in a school devoted to the drill-and-kill regime that one of my teacher friends refers to as “the Pure Unhappiness Agenda” and is driven by the methodologies of stimulus-response that are prescribed almost exclusively for children of the poor?

In college, in her early education courses, the teacher has been thoroughly immersed in the enlightened world of Erikson, Jean Piaget, Vigotsky, Robert Coles, as well as in the limitless delights of opening our children’s minds to literary works such as the beautiful and tender books of Eric Carle. If she’s like most teachers that I know, she also holds close to her heart the legacy of my

beloved friend and my best mentor, the irreplaceable Fred Rogers, who cautioned us repeatedly to give young children time to ask their questions and to listen to them carefully.

Suddenly, she walks into the icy universe of B. F. Skinner. She did not become a teacher out of a desire to train children in subordination of their spirits or to subdivide the continuity of learning into mini-chunks of balkanized cognition, as required by those endless lists of “requisite proficiencies” that must be posted on her classroom walls.

On the other hand, the lists are there, and so, too, are the tests. And teachers who dislike these regimens, no matter how intense their feelings, do not have the right to simply shut the whole thing from their minds, because their students, like it or not, are going to be judged and sorted by the scores that they receive. So here, as in so many other situations teachers face, they have to balance some of their most deeply held convictions against the practical necessity of defending students from the punishments and sanctions they will otherwise incur.

How does a teacher handle this? How does she soften the effects of this regime, and how does she express her reservations about other aspects of instruction taking place within her school, without ending up as an outsider in the school and ultimately undergoing what is now politely known as “termination”?

I try, as gently as I can, to offer those who ask these questions answers that some of the best and most successful younger teachers have passed on to me. First, I urge beginning teachers to treat with great respect the best among the veteran teachers in their buildings who are seasoned in the complicated politics of public schools. If novice teachers turn to them, these teachers will not only share with new arrivals teaching strategies they have acquired from their own years of experience, but will also feel protective towards them and try to defend them, if this is needed, in encounters with administrative figures.

Second, I urge young teachers, if they sense that they may find themselves dissenting from some of the pedagogic practices enforced within their schools, to

be sure that they are very, very good in other areas that are held in high importance at most public schools. The maintenance of sensible and firm control over a class of energetic little kids is, properly, a matter of concern to almost any principal. Especially with a group of children who have suffered from high turnover of teachers in preceding years, with the often riotous results this has in fostering an insurrectionary atmosphere within a class, a teacher who is able to restore an element of serenity becomes a precious asset to the school. No matter how distressing to a principal her deviations from a scripted regimen may be, that teacher becomes nearly indispensable.

Third, I'd recommend a good, big dose of sly irreverence and the saving grace of what I'd call a subtle and ironical detachment in the face of certain policies and practices a teacher bitterly dislikes but must observe in order to protect her children and her job. Many teachers, for example, even without ever speaking these explicit words, have figured out a way to make it clear to children that they consider high-stakes testing, at the very best, to be a miserable game they and the students are obliged to play, but that their judgment of the children's intellect and character and ultimate potential will have no connection with the numbers tabulated by a person who is not an educator, and has never met them, working in a test-score factory three thousand miles away. Some gutsy teachers also say this openly to children, especially because increasing numbers of their principals now feel exactly the same way.

Finally, even in the most adverse conditions, the most inspired and most energized and incandescent younger teachers I have known bring into their classes a contagious sense of merriment from the very happiness they feel in being in the company of children. No matter what the obstacles they and their children face, they believe the work of a good teacher ought to be an act of stalwart celebration. It is in that sense of celebration that good people who have chosen out of love to work with children find their ultimate salvation from the cold winds blowing down from Washington and from the technocrats of uniformity who are for now, but will not be forever, in positions of great power.

To these glowing spirits—and there are more of them than ever coming to our urban schools from colleges and universities today—I always say: Resist the deadwood of predictability. Embrace the unexpected. Gather the children around you on the reading rug and shower their years of innocence with all the soft epiphanies and eccentricities and unpredictables of wonderful imaginative literary work. Immerse them in the satisfaction of aesthetics for its own sake, not for any god-forsaken “economic” purpose. Listen to their stories, too. Revel in their run-on sentences. Dig deep into the world of whim. Sprinkle your children’s lives, no matter how difficult many of those lives may be, with hundreds of brightly colored seeds of jubilation. Enjoy the wild flowers!

About the Author

Jonathan Kozol *is a renowned educator, activist, and National Book Award-winning writer. In his new book, LETTERS TO A YOUNG TEACHER, he gently guides a first-year teacher into "the joys and challenges and passionate rewards of a beautiful profession."*

Books by Jonathan Kozol

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