

JONATHAN KOZOL "Preparing Minds for Markets"

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A noted child advocate laments the redefining of learning in proprietary terms

Three years ago, I was visiting an urban school in Columbus, Ohio, that had in place a program of surprisingly explicit training of young children for the modern marketplace. Starting in kindergarten, children in the school were asked to think about the jobs they might choose when they grew up. The posters that surrounded them made clear which kinds of jobs they were expected to select.

"Do you want a manager's job?" the first line of a kindergarten poster asked.

"What job do you want?" a second question asked in an apparent effort to expand the range of choices that these 5-year-olds might wish to make.

But the momentary window that this second question seemed to open into other possible careers was closed by the next and final question on the wall: "How will you do the manager's job?"

The tiny hint of choice afforded by the second question was eradicated by the third, which presupposed that all the kids had said yes to the first. No written question asked the children: "Do you want a lawyer's job, a nurse's job, a doctor's job, a poet's job, a preacher's job?" Sadly, the teacher had not even thought to ask if anybody in the class might someday like to be a teacher.

Work-related themes were carried over into almost every classroom. In a 1st grade class, for instance, the names of children and their assigned classroom tasks were posted on the wall, an ordinary thing to see in classrooms everywhere. But in this case there was a novel twist: All the jobs were described as management positions! There was a "Coat Room Manager" and a "Door Manager," a "Pencil Sharpener Manager" and a "Soap Manager."

In the upper grades, the management positions became more sophisticated and demanding. In 4th grade, for example, I was introduced to a "Time Manager" who was assigned to hold the timer to be sure the teacher didn't wander from her schedule and that everyone adhered to the prescribed number of minutes that had been assigned to every classroom task.

In another 4th grade class, an "earnings chart" had been taped to every child's desk. On each chart, a number of important writing skills had been spelled out and, next to each, the corresponding earnings that a child would receive if written answers he or she provided in the course of classroom exercises displayed the necessary skills. There was also a Classroom Bank in which the children's earnings accrued. A wall display beneath the heading of the Classroom Bank presented an enticing sample of real currency in order to make clear the nexus between cash rewards and writing proper sentences.

As I chatted with the principal, I asked her whether there was a reason those two words "management" and "manager" kept popping up throughout the school. "We want every

child to be working as a manager while he or she is in this school," the principal explained. "We want to make them understand that, in this country, companies will give you opportunities to work, to prove yourself, no matter what you've done."

I wasn't sure of what she meant by "no matter what you've done" and asked her to explain. "Even if you have a felony arrest," she said, "we want you to understand that you can be a manager someday."

Students as Workers

"We must start thinking of students as workers," said a high-ranking official of one of the nation's teachers unions at a forum convened by Fortune magazine in 1988. Is this really what it all comes down to? Is future productivity to be the primary purpose of the education we provide our children? Is this to be the way in which we will decide whether teachers are complying with their obligations to their students and society?

Admittedly, the economic needs of a society are bound to be reflected to some rational degree within the policies and purposes of public schools. But even so, most of us are inclined to believe there must be something more to life as it is lived by 6-year-olds or 10-year-olds or by teen-agers for that matter than concerns about successful global competition. Childhood is not merely basic training for utilitarian adulthood. It should have some claims upon our mercy, not for its future value to the economic interests of competitive societies, but for its present value as a perishable piece of life itself.

Few people who are not involved with inner-city schools have any idea of the extremes to which the mercantile distortion of the purposes and character of education have been taken or how unabashedly proponents of these practices are willing to defend them. For instance, the head of a Chicago school who was criticized for emphasizing rote instruction, which, his critics said, was turning children into robots, found no reason to dispute the charge. "Did you ever stop to think that these robots will never burglarize your home and will never snatch your pocketbooks? He asked, "These robots are going to be producing taxes."

Would any educator feel at ease in using terms like these in reference to the children of a town like Scarsdale or Manhasset, N.Y., Glencoe or Winnetka, Ill., or the affluent suburban town of Newton, Mass., in which I attended elementary school and later taught? I think we know this is unlikely. These ways of speaking about and perceiving children are specific to the schools that serve minorities.

The general idea that schools in ghettoized communities must settle for a different set of goals than schools that serve the children of the middle class and upper middle class is widely accepted. And much of the rhetoric of "rigor" and "high standards" that we hear so frequently, no matter how egalitarian in spirit it may sound to some, is fatally belied by practices that vulgarize the intellects of children and take from their education far too many of the opportunities for cultural and critical reflectiveness without which citizens become receptacles for other people's ideologies but cannot frame their own.

Stealing Options

Perhaps the clearest evidence of what is taking place is seen in schools in which the linkage between education and employment is explicitly established in the names these schools are given, such as Academy of Commerce, and the work-related goals that they promote. Starting about 10 years ago, the term "school-to-work" emerged to specify the

purposes these various academies espouse and is the unflinching designation that has since been used to codify these goals.

Advocates for school-to-work do not generally describe it as a race-specific project but tend instead to emphasize the worth of linking academic programs to the world of work for children of all backgrounds and insisting that children of all social classes ought to have some work experience in high school, for example.

But the attempt at even-handedness in speaking of the ways this idea might be applied has been misleading from the start. In most suburban schools, the school-to-work idea, if educators even speak of it at all, is little more than seemly decoration on the outer edges of a liberal curriculum. In many urban schools, by contrast, it has come to be the energizing instrument of almost every aspect of instruction.

Some business leaders argue that this emphasis is both realistic and humane in cases where a high school student lacks the skills or motivation to pursue a richly academic course of study or, indeed, to write a simple paragraph or handle elementary math. If the rationale for this were defined in just so many words by the administrators of our schools, and if it were not introduced until the final years of secondary education when other options for a student may appear to be foreclosed, an argument could certainly be made that school-to-work is a constructive adaptation to the situation many teen-age students actually face.

But when this ethos takes control of education almost from the start, before a child even enters middle school, it's something very different. It's a prior legislation of diminished options for a class of children who are not perceived as having the potential of most other citizens. It's not acceding to their preferences. It's manufacturing those preferences, often to the direct exclusion of those options other children rightly take as their entitlement.

In some urban neighborhoods today, where children must apply to a middle school, they are in effect required to choose careers before they even enter adolescence. Consider, for example, the Paul Robeson School for Medical Careers and Health Professions in the South Bronx. The school's name and the way it described itself in a brochure that was given to local 5th-grade students led some to believe that enrolling there would help them fulfill their dream of being doctors. However what most 10-year-olds would have no way of knowing was that the Robeson School, perennially ranking at the lowest level of the city's middle schools, sent very few students into high schools that successfully prepared a child for college and that any likelihood of moving from this nonex-school into a medical career was almost nonexistent.

"I want to be a baby doctor," Timeka told me when I asked her why she had applied there. But the program at the Robeson School did not provide the kind of education that could lead her to that goal. As was the usual pattern for a child who spent three years at Robeson, Timeka went from Robeson to a 97 percent black and Hispanic "industry-embedded" school called Health Opportunities, in which only one-fifth of the 9th graders ever reached 12th grade and from which Timeka dropped out in 11th grade.

I had known Timeka since she was a jubilant and energetic 8-year-old. She was smart and quick, good with words and very good in math. If she had gone to school in almost any middle-class suburban district in this nation, she'd have had at least a chance of realizing her dream. And if she changed her mind and settled on a different dream or many different dreams, as adolescents usually do, she would have been exposed to an

array of options that would have permitted her to make a well-informed decision. The choice of a career means virtually nothing if you do not know what choices you may actually have.

Defending Decisions

Some school-to-work advocates attempt to frame job-related programs as essentially egalitarian in spirit, and some even go so far as to suggest that these proposals for refashioning an urban school around a corporate agenda somehow find their genesis in the ideals associated with iconic heroes of progressive education like Thoreau. In fact, some school-to-work academies do try to embody the progressive concept of combining practical experience with genuinely intellectual instruction.

At the same time, it is impossible to overlook the fact that the strongest advocacy for these programs has come not from educational progressives but from business leaders and political conservatives who generally are silent, if not hostile, on the subjects of desegregation and equality of funding in our public schools.

Indeed, some of the most explicit arguments for school-to-work were made by author Charles Murray who, in his national bestseller *The Bell Curve*, advanced theories of innate genetic differences in intellectual ability between the races. In olden days, Murray suggested, public schools prepared students for the workplace by emphasizing daily attendance and the importance of following the teacher's (the boss's) instructions. Murray argued these practices are especially important for children who grow up in what he termed "disorganized homes" and "particularly... in urban areas." Although he made no reference to the racial origins of those for whom it was especially important to be trained as workers, his reference to "disorganized homes" and "urban areas" brought to mind the characterization of black children that he has advanced in other writings.

What cannot fail to break one's heart is hearing overburdened public school officials in so many of our regated districts giving voice at times to nearly the same sentiments. Sadly enough, it is a triumph of some sort for those who have forever looked with equanimity upon the practice of consigning children of poor people to subordinated economic roles in our society when principals who struggle to defend the interests of these children have been driven to the point at which they see no choice but to support the same utilitarian ideas.

When business and commerce are permitted to participate in determining the aims of education and the content of instruction, they bring with them a body of beliefs and biases. Business leaders tell urban school officials that what they need the schools to give them are "team players." Many of the brightest, most creative, independent-minded and ambitious kids I know are not team players and don't want to be and, indeed, would lose the very essence of what makes them full, complex and interesting people if they were.

There will be, I am afraid, fewer fascinating mavericks, fewer penetrating questioners and fewer powerful dissenters coming from our inner-city schools if this agenda cannot be reversed. Team players may well be important to the operation of a business corporation and they are obviously essential in the military services, but a healthy nation needs its poets, prophets, ribald satirists and maddening iconoclasts at least as much as it needs people who will file in a perfect line to an objective they are told they cannot question.

Recrafting Roles

In all the business-driven classrooms I have observed in the past five years, plastered as they are with corporate brand names and managerial vocabularies, I have yet to see the two words "labor unions." How is that possible? Teachers and principals themselves, who are almost always members of a union, seem to be so beaten down by this point they rarely even question this omission.

It is not unusual these days to come into an urban school in which the principal chooses to be described as "building CEO" or "building manager." In some of the same schools, teachers are described as "classroom managers." In when the children in these classrooms are selected to be "learning managers" or "line managers," there is a thematic continuity within the ranks from principals to kindergarten students. I have never been in a suburban district in which principals were asked to view themselves or teachers in this way. Like the task lists and the earnings charts, these terminologies remind us of how wide the distance has become between two very separate worlds of education.

In a quiet moment after we had visited several of her classrooms, one of the Columbus principals stopped me in the hallway, placed her hand impulsively against my arm, and spoke with sudden wistfulness about the differences in teaching styles and objectives between schools like hers and those that serve more middle-class communities. "I envy principals in schools where children are encouraged to think independently," she said.

Other principals have said things like this to me tentatively, almost nostalgically, not generally in school, more often in an evening's conversation. It is as if they're looking back at an ideal of education they valued deeply when they started out in their careers and value still but feel they have to set aside in order to respond to the realities before them in the neighborhoods of destitution that they serve.

ADDED MATERIAL

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Kozol at Conference

Jonathan Kozol will be addressing school leaders at AASA's 2006 National Conference on Education^T in San Diego.

Kozol plans to talk about the issues raised in his latest book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, with special emphasis on the unfair and unhealthy pressures imposed on school officials and what he terms "the sword of high-stakes testing" that places schools in a state of siege.

Kozol will hold a book signing at the conference following his Distinguished Lecture at the San Diego Convention Center on Feb. 25.