



The Shame of the Nation

The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America

by Jonathan Kozol

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[In his newest book, Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities*, exposes the shameful levels of segregation and inequality present in U.S. schools.

In researching the book, Kozol visited nearly 60 schools in 11 states in the past five years and notes that the level of segregation today is higher than any time since 1968. His book is a fierce indictment of segregation, funding inequalities, and the "drill-and-kill" curricula that are heavily promoted in schools that serve low-income students and students of color. Kozol's book calls upon us to confront and remedy the dire system of inequality that reigns in U.S. schools today.

-- The Rethinking Schools Editors]

Is the Dream Alive?

One of the most disheartening experiences for those who grew up in the years when Martin Luther King and Thurgood Marshall were alive is to visit public schools today that bear their names, or names of other honored leaders of integration struggles that produced the temporary progress that took place in the three decades after Brown, and to find how many of these schools are bastions of contemporary segregation. It is even more disheartening when schools like these are not in segregated neighborhoods but in racially mixed areas in which integration of a public school would seem to be most natural and where, indeed, it takes a conscious effort on the part of parents or school officials in these districts to avoid the integration option that is often right at their front door.

In a Seattle neighborhood, for instance, where approximately half the families were Caucasian, 95 percent of students at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School were black, Hispanic, Native American, or of Asian origin. An African-American teacher at the school told me of seeing clusters of white parents and their children on the corner of a street close to the school each morning waiting for a bus that took the children to a school in which she believed that the enrollment was predominantly white. She did not speak of the white families waiting for the bus to take their children to another public school with bitterness, but wistfully.

"At Thurgood Marshall," according to a big wall-poster in the lobby of the school, "the dream is alive." But school assignment practices and federal court decisions that have countermanded long-established policies that previously fostered integration in Seattle's schools make the realization of the dream identified with Justice Marshall all but unattainable today.

"Thurgood Marshall must be turning over in his grave," one of the teachers at the school had told the principal, as he reported this to me. The principal, understandably, believed he had no choice but to reject the teacher's observation out of hand. "No, sister," he had

told the teacher. "If Justice Marshall was still roamin' nowadays and saw what's goin' on here in this school, he would say 'Hallelujah' and 'Amen!'" Legal scholars may demur at this, but he had a school to run and he could not allow the ironies of names, or history, to undermine the passionate resolve he brought to winning victories for children in the only terms he was allowed.

In the course of two visits to the school, I had a chance to talk with a number of teachers and to spend time in their classrooms. In one class, a teacher had posted a brief summation of the Brown decision on the wall; but it was in an inconspicuous corner of the room and, with that one exception, I could find no references to Marshall's struggle against racial segregation in the building.

When I asked a group of fifth grade boys who Thurgood Marshall was and what he did to have deserved to have a school named after him, most of the boys had no idea at all. One said that he used to run "a summer camp." Another said he was "a manager" -- I had no chance to ask him what he meant by this, or how he'd gotten this impression. Of the three who knew that he had been a lawyer, only one, and only after several questions on my part, replied that he had "tried to change what was unfair" -- and, after a moment's hesitation, "wanted to let black kids go to the same schools that white kids did." He said he was "pretty sure" that this school was not segregated because, in one of the other classrooms on the same floor, there were two white children.

There is a bit of painful humor that I've heard from black schoolteachers who grew up during the era of the integration movement and have subsequently seen its goals abandoned and its early victories reversed. "If you want to see a really segregated school in the United States today, start by looking for a school that's named for Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks." In San Diego, there is a school that bears the name of Rosa Parks in which 86 percent of students are black and Hispanic and less than 2 percent are white. In Los Angeles, there is a school that bears the name of Dr. King, 99 percent black and Hispanic, and another in Milwaukee where black children also make up 99 percent of the enrollment. There is a high school in Cleveland named for Dr. King in which black students make up 99 percent of the student body, and the graduation rate is only 38 percent. In Philadelphia, 98 percent of children at a high school named for Dr. King are black. At a middle school named for Dr. King in Boston, black and Hispanic children make up 98 percent of the enrollment.

In New York City, there's a primary school that's named for Langston Hughes (99 percent black and Hispanic), a middle school that's named for Jackie Robinson (96 percent black and Hispanic), and a high school named for Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the great heroes of the integration movement in the South, in which 98 percent of students are black or Hispanic. In Harlem, there is yet another segregated Thurgood Marshall School (also 98 percent black and Hispanic), and in the South Bronx, dozens of children I have known went to a middle school named in honor of Paul Robeson in which less than half of 1 percent of the enrollment was Caucasian.

There is a well-known high school named for Martin Luther King in New York City too. The school, in which I've had the chance to visit classes many times, is like Seattle's Marshall School in that it isn't sited in a deeply segregated inner-city section of the city but is, in this instance, in an upper-middle-class white neighborhood where it was built in the belief, or hope, that it would attract white students by permitting them to walk to school while only their black and Hispanic classmates would be asked to ride the bus or come by train. When the school was opened in 1975, less than a block from Lincoln Center in Manhattan, as *The New York Times* observes, "it was seen as a promising effort to integrate white, black and Hispanic students in a thriving neighborhood that held one of the city's cultural gems." Even from the start, however, parents of the neighborhood showed great reluctance to permit their children to enroll at Martin Luther King and, despite "its prime location and its name, which itself creates the highest of expectations," notes the *Times*, the school before long came to be a destination for black and Hispanic students who could not obtain admission into more successful schools. It stands today as one of the most visible and problematic symbols in the nation of an expectation rapidly receding and a legacy substantially betrayed.

The principal of Martin Luther King in autumn of 2000, which was the first time I visited the school, was Ronald Wells, a tall, distinguished-looking man who had grown up during the civil rights campaigns and whose commitment to the values of that era had not wavered with the years. A religious man who was ordained in the United Church of Christ and was, in the year we met, the only black male principal in the Manhattan high school district, he told me that his family roots were in the South and that his mother came from Charlotte, where the Brown decision was successfully enforced for many years and where the integration of the public schools became a fact of life for an entire generation.

From the moment that one walks into the school, one is compelled to look into the heart of history. "I have a dream," read the words of Dr. King that are displayed across the rear wall of the lobby, "that one day . . . the sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood." But, at the time of my initial visit, student enrollment at the school was 54 percent African-American and 42 percent Hispanic. Only 3.8 percent of the 2,600 students in the building were Asian, white, or "other."

"We used to have more Vietnamese and Polish students . . . , a few Russian immigrants as well," the principal informed me. "Now almost none." A growing portion of the student population was Dominican, he said, and traveled to the school from Washington Heights, a neighborhood to the north of Harlem, which is a long ride for a teenager to take out of a neighborhood with countless segregated schools in order to attend another segregated school -- "busing," it turns out, for purposes entirely different from the one with which the word, derided frequently today as an unwelcome strategy for racial integration, is historically identified.

Segregated schools like Martin Luther King are often tense, disorderly, and socially unhappy places, and when episodes of student violence occur, the inclination of the parents of white children to avoid such schools is obviously reinforced. Martin Luther King has had its share of violence across the years, and it was in the news again in January 2002 when two of its students were the victims of a shooting in a hallway of the building on the anniversary of the day Dr. King was born. The mayor of New York noted the irony of timing and some of the media reminded readers that the legacy of Dr. King had been one of peace. He had been a "man of peace," "preached peace," "taught about peace," as the city's newspapers observed. There was less reference to the "other" important legacy of Dr. King. Although some press accounts alluded to the unsuccessful efforts to attract white students to the school, no headlines pointed to the segregated status of the school as a dishonor to that portion of his legacy.

The media discussed some of the strategies that might reduce the likelihood of violence recurring at the school. An advocate for small schools argued that a large school in itself, where students' "personal circumstances" are not known to teachers, makes it harder to keep weapons out of a building. ("Small schools are safer because people get to know the kids and have relationships with them," he said.) Architectural aspects of the school were mentioned as potential problems too. The school had "numerous nooks and crannies," which might have encouraged misbehavior, said one news account, and "its 12 doors make it easier for people to sneak in."

The impression one derived from much of this was that a smaller segregated and unequal school, if better designed, perhaps with fewer doors, might represent a practical solution to the problems that had led to shootings at the school. All this is true to some degree. The school was subsequently broken up into a number of much smaller schools, and some of the tensions in the corridors and other common areas diminished as a consequence. Still, reading these reflections on the violence that had erupted at King, one might have hoped that there had been some reference to the fact of virtual apartheid in itself as one, at least, of many governmentally determined forces that contribute to the social turbulence of adolescents in so many schools like this.

Almost all reflections of this nature tend to be dispatched quite easily these days (this is "victim-thinking," we are sometimes told), and almost everything that we have learned from empathetic social scientists who have examined the direct and indirect emotional and psychological effects of segregated schooling through the course of many years is pretty much dismissed as well. Only rarely are considerations of the possible distortions wrought upon the spirits of these children by the fact of concentrated poverty and racial isolation in themselves admitted to the table of acceptable deliberations when a strategy for overcoming student anguish and controlling student desperation is pursued. That which can't be named as a potential cause cannot be touched upon in looking for a plausible solution. The search for less provocative solutions makes it possible perhaps for those who shepherd the debate to stay away from problematic places.

High school students with whom I get to talk in deeply segregated neighborhoods seem far less circumspect and far more open in their willingness to look into those problematic places. "It's like we're being hidden," said a 15-year-old girl named Isabel I met some years ago in Harlem, in attempting to explain to me the ways in which she and her classmates understood the racial segregation of their neighborhoods and schools. "It's as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don't have room for something but aren't sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don't need to think of it again."

I asked her if she truly thought America did not "have room" for her or other children of her race. "Think of it this way," said a 16-year-old girl sitting beside her. "If people in New York woke up one day and learned that we were gone, that we had simply died or left for somewhere else, how would they feel?"

"How do you think they'd feel?" I asked.

"I think they'd be relieved," this very solemn girl replied.

Welcome to "Zero Noise"

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 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 as "the gymnasium." The school still had a high turnover of its teachers (Briana's classroom was in chaos on 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 expression 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-30s 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 year -- 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."

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 too. 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."

On the front wall of the classroom in handwritten words that must have taken Mr. Endicott long hours to transcribe: 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 capability to draw conclusions from the work she had completed could be termed "insightful . . . , comprehensive." At Level Two, the child's capability 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, I realized later, 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 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 that 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 introduced by Frederick Taylor in the early 1900s. "Primitive utilitarianism" is another term he used in trying to describe the ethos that appeared to underlie these management techniques. 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 that 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 could not rival Mr. Endicott's approach in its totalitarian effectiveness.

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 that had been posted on the wall. "That's a Level Four suggestion," said the teacher when a child made an observation 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, which was 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.

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," seeming to suggest something empirical and technical. The verb ("produce") meanwhile 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 from almost any other class 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 best I can recall. This is certainly unusual within a class of 8-year-olds. In most classrooms, even those in which a high degree of discipline may be 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 that 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 that 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 smile.

When I was later looking at my notes, I also noticed that I couldn't find a single statement made by any child that had not been 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 they 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; 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 that 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" that was 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 of this building, more authoritative than the children or their teachers, said that it shall be.

An expansive academic industry has now evolved around the elements of what is known generically as "standards-based reform." Graduate schools of education offer courses in accountability reform, not for future teachers but for future leaders in the world of education policy, which are often taught by people who have no experience in education but whose expertise lies in the world of systems management.

"There is no strong evidence linking additional resources to improved performance. . . . Stronger accountability will combat inequality, since schools will now face penalties if students do not meet expected goals," according to a bright young education analyst in summarizing the "ideologically consistent" message given to the students in a class on standards-based reform which she took two years ago at one of the more prestigious universities in Massachusetts. "Teachers will work harder, since there will be negative repercussions if they do not. . . . School segregation still exists, but it does not determine whether students receive greater

opportunity than others."

State and federal education officers, by this point, have devoted so much time and effort to creating programs that respond to these beliefs -- measurement systems, "intervention" programs, multiple items from the "what works" inventories, and the like -- that it comes as an affront to many when the confidence they have invested in these principles and practices is seriously challenged. "We adhere, as though to a raft, to those ideas which represent our understanding," wrote John Kenneth Galbraith nearly 50 years ago. "For a vested interest in understanding is more preciously guarded than any other treasure. It is why men react, not infrequently with something akin to religious passion, to the defense of what they have so laboriously learned."

This may, in part, explain the fierceness with which Mr. Paige lashed out against the critics of his policies during his final months in office. It may also help explain why state officials often are so brisk in their dismissal of the discontent expressed by veteran educators such as Deborah Meier and so many of the younger teachers I have cited, some of whom have since left public education out of their dismay at the impersonal and mechanistic practices mandated by the states. Few teachers, of whatever age, can take it as evidence of even minimal respect for their intelligence to be provided with a "teacher-proof" curriculum. Yet the imposition of such practices, which are believed to guarantee the uniformity of "product," is defended stoutly by large numbers of administrators at the state and local levels.

The receptivity of many urban principals to these approaches is heightened, as we've noted, by the instability of staffing and the other factors of perceived emergency which they encounter when they are appointed to a school with a long history of failure. But these factors in themselves do not explain why a significant number of these principals do not merely seize upon directive practices that can restore decorum in chaotic situations, which any sensible administrator would be forced to do before real learning can take place, but have also turned their backs on almost every aspect of progressive thinking that is still regarded with respect, if moderated in its applications, in most of the better elementary schools that serve suburban children. There is at least one other reason why progressive values are rejected and, indeed, derided often by some of the tough, no-nonsense principals I meet. As painful as it is for educational progressives of my generation to concede, I don't think we can exempt ourselves from a substantial portion of responsibility.

In order to understand this, it may help to look at some of the unfortunate excesses of a naïve version of progressive education that were viewed noncritically by many intellectuals, most of whom were white and had had little prior contact with black children, but who came into the black community during the last years of the 1960s and the early 1970s in the belief that their ideas would be accepted in these neighborhoods. Veteran urban educators, to this day, recall with much unhappiness the "open education" movement of that era, in which "process" and "autonomy," and what was sometimes called "organic spontaneity of learning," were too frequently permitted to displace almost all elements of continuity and sequence in the process of instruction.

The parents with whom I was working here in Roxbury opposed this movement strongly at the time and were disturbed when highly privileged young people who had had the benefits of culturally strong, well-balanced, and successful education came into the neighborhood denouncing lesson plans and any concentrated emphasis on basic skills as "instruments of cultural oppression" and who spoke of "children's independent learning" as if it were incompatible somehow with grown-ups' conscientious teaching. An aversion to giving poor black children difficult work -- real work at all, indeed -- was one of the familiar attitudes that parents noted with dismay among some of these well-intending but unconsciously quite patronizing intellectuals.

"He's a beautiful child. When he's ready for books," or "when he senses his organic need," "he'll let us know." Parents whose 9-year-olds did not know how to read found this preposterous, and dangerous. I also worried that this movement, which was highly publicized, would lead a lot of absolutely reasonable people to reject progressive values altogether and would be exploited by educational conservatives to drive the nation's public schools as far as possible into the opposite direction. With the rise to power of some very angry and impatient education figures such as William Bennett in the middle and late 1980s, I believe these fears proved to be justified.

As a matter of reality, there were never more than a small number of what were described as "open schools" (or "free schools," as some people called them) in the urban districts, and not many in the suburbs either, even though the media attention they received conveyed the misimpression that this movement was pervasive almost everywhere. It is also a matter of reality that virtually no public schools like these exist today in either black or white communities. Even among progressive friends of mine who value a high degree of informality and unmanipulated self-discovery within the education of their children, very few dismiss the need for substance, thoroughness, completeness, and continuity. Most parents recognize that certain things that matter in a child's education do require hard work and well-organized sequential processes of learning and expect their children's teachers to provide the framework in which this is possible.

Nonetheless, and even to this day, the argument is sometimes heard that "middle-class education" (or "white education," as it's sometimes said by very conservative and ethnocentric urban educators) is essentially devoid of structure, lacking in substance, and bereft of serious intentionality, and that schooling more in line with military practices and "road-to-Rome" predictability now represents a necessary antidote for inner-city children who, it is argued, have too little discipline and order in their neighborhoods and homes. "If you do what I tell you to do, how I tell you to do it, when I tell you to do it," said the South Bronx principal I cited earlier,

"you'll get it right. If you don't, you'll get it wrong." This tough didacticism is the polar opposite of the romantic mantra of the 1960s counterculture -- "do your own thing" -- which had at least an indirect effect upon the open classroom movement, as ephemeral as that movement proved to be. Both are extremes, however; neither, in the opinion of most thoughtful educators, represents a wise or healthy way of educating children.

The notion that school systems have to choose between euphoric freedom as serene apotheosis for one class of children and mercantile delivery of product as a sad alternative for children of another class is unconvincing to the principals and teachers of most public schools in the United States. It is only in the most calamitous apartheid settings that school principals have often been stamped into an acceptance of the second of these two extremes, and frequently because this is the only option that has been purveyed to them by their superiors.

As the distance widens and these protocols become encoded as the proven methods of instruction for the children of these neighborhoods, as increasing numbers of administrators are recruited to enforce these practices and more and more young teachers are indoctrinated to accept their premise and deliver their particulars, the logic of attempting to move children of their caste and color into racially desegregated settings is accordingly diminished. If the differentness of children of minorities is seen as so extreme as to require an entire inventory of "appropriate" approaches built around the proclamation of their absolute uniqueness from the other children of this nation, it begins to seem not only sensible but maybe even ethically acceptable to isolate them as completely as we can, either in the segregated schools they now attend or else in wholly separate tracks within those schools in which some mix of economic class and race may now and then prevail.

The insistence upon nothing less than a distinctive pedagogy for these children makes it easier, of course, for parents of the middle class and upper middle class to put away for good whatever inclinations some initially may have to see their children educated in the same schools as black and Hispanic children. Why, they understandably may ask, should they inflict upon their children a compendium of stick-and-carrot practices and strange salutes and silent signals and direct commands modeled upon military terminology when they have reason to believe their children can be educated well and wisely by instructional techniques that draw upon a child's thirst for learning rather than relying on the inculcation of docility and fear? Why should their children be denied exposure to the arts and music, history and science? Why should they also lose the healthy exercise of recess? Why, too, should all the virtues of the Eriksonian enlightenment in early-childhood instruction -- the entire legacy identified with humanists like Erik Erikson, Robert Coles, Jerome Bruner, Fred Rogers, and Jean Piaget -- be ripped away in order to accommodate what are alleged to be the strategies of preference for the children of subordinated people?

"No excuses!" say the architects of these determined strategies. "No excuses!" say the government officials who inscribe these battle-cries in their political denunciations of resistant teachers. "No excuses!" says the thoroughly intimidated and, therefore, intimidating principal in exhortation to the students of her slogan-loaded school; but wise psychiatrists and thoughtful parents understand that there will always be "excuses" -- good ones, too -- for children to resist some of these all-controlling items of adult manipulation at some moments in their first 15 or 20 years of life and that those who give our children messages like these, no matter what the short-term gains they hope to get, are likely to exact a devastating price.

The longer this goes on, the further these two roads divide, the more severe and routinized these race-specific pedagogies may become, the harder it will be to find a place of common ground on which the children of the many ethnic groups and social classes in our nation's public schools will ever actually meet.

Some may see in this no loss for now. Those who are convinced that educational efficiency is better served by targeting one group of children with one method of instruction, and another with a very different method, may regard the racial separation of our children in their public schools, no matter how distasteful it would be to say this, as a matter of convenience and of simple practicality. Those who have invested their careers in the development of these distinct curricula may reassure us that the data that they have at hand confirm the benefits to be derived from serving wholly different kinds of pedagogic fare to children who, in their belief, have wholly different kinds of psychological and pedagogic needs. Municipal and business leaders, who are likely to be more concerned with the defense of civic equilibrium in their communities than with potentially incendiary efforts to revise the patterns by which children are assigned to school, may not be sad to see the racial status quo unshaken for another period of years. White educated people who believe in racial integration as an ultimate ideal, but long ago abandoned public schools in which they had a chance to make it real, will have their old recordings of the songs of freedom that they used to sing when they were young, and they may dig them out and play them now and then when they're nostalgic for the days when everything seemed possible.

But something good will have been lost. It will be lost not for a brief time, but enduringly. Once these things are set in stone -- and pedagogic malformation of the wish-creations, preference-holdings, concept-makings of a generation of young people is as hard as stone can be -- they may prove impervious to change for decades yet to come.

"It is a hard thing," wrote W. E. B. DuBois more than a century ago, "to live haunted by the ghost of an untrue dream," to know that "something was vanquished that deserved to live.... All this is bitter hard." He spoke of his people as "the children of disappointment" and, exception being made for children of black and Hispanic people who have had the means to exit from the segregated schooling

systems altogether and who often send their children to the schools attended by the children of their white co-workers and acquaintances, the masses of children of the black and brown within our urban schools are disappointed still.

The widening gulf in math and reading levels between minority high school students and their white contemporaries -- a devastating five-year gap between the races, as the Education Trust observed -- does not pose an optimistic prospect for admissions of black students to our four-year colleges and universities during the years ahead.

The promulgation of new and expanded lists of "what works" inventories, no matter the enthusiasm with which they're elaborated, is not going to change this. The use of hortatory slogans, as enlivening as they may sometimes be, is not going to change this. Desperate historical revisionism that romanticizes segregation of an older order (this is a common theme of many separatists today) is not going to change this. The "Production of a Narrative Procedure" will certainly not change this. Turning 6-year-olds into examination soldiers will not change this. Denying 8-year-olds their time for play at recess will not change this. What these policies and practices will do, what they are doing now, is expand the vast divide between two separate worlds of future cognitive activity, political sagacity, social health, and economic status, while they undermine the capability of children of minorities to thrive with confidence and satisfaction in the mainstream of American society.

"I went to Washington to challenge the soft bigotry of low expectations," the president said again in his campaign for reelection in September 2004. "It's working. It's making a difference." It is one of those deadly lies which, by sheer repetition, is at length accepted by large numbers of Americans as, perhaps, a rough approximation of the truth. But it is not the truth, and it is not an innocent misstatement of the facts. It is a devious appeasement of the heartache of the parents of the black and brown and poor and, if it is not forcefully resisted and denounced, it is going to lead our nation even further in a perilous direction.

