

The Genteel Unteaching of America's Poor

From the President's View

Kylene Beers

Senior Reading Advisor to Secondary Schools, Reading and Writing Project, Teachers College
President, National Council of Teachers of English

IN THIS REPORT

- The Human Context for the National Day on Writing
- The Scene: One Large Inner-City High School
- The Cast: "Those" Kids
- The Theme: Segregation by Intellectual Rigor
- The Ongoing Denouement: Our Journeys

The Human Context for the National Day on Writing

A few years ago, I shared an eye-opening encounter with some teachers in a large urban high school, an encounter that affected my perspective and provided the foundation for the scene I am about to set. The memory of that experience is vivid as the National Council of Teachers of English prepares for the National Day on Writing (October 20, 2009). Writing, more than any other intellectual endeavor, sharpens our thinking. Yet, in too many schools, especially schools overwhelmed by poverty, writing is not about thinking but about copying; not about creating but about editing; not about persuading or telling or sharing or clarifying but about completing fill-in-the-blank activities or circling verbs in blue and nouns in red or counting the number of sentences in a paragraph to make sure the requisite three (or four or five) are there.

As President of the National Council of Teachers of English, I hold many expectations for the National Day on Writing and our National Gallery of Writing; the highest and most ambitious expectations are connected to how this day will give all students—not some, not many, not most, but all students—the opportunity to show the nation a part of themselves through their writing. Assistive pieces for teachers and parents will be found at the National Day on Writing site (<http://www.ncte.org/action/dayonwriting>) so that everyone has access to tools that will help each student write well. It has been said that reading can serve as a window to the world; if that is true, then writing is what opens the window. That window must be opened for all.

The Scene: One Large, Inner-City High School

This particular window looks out on a large, inner-city high school where I observed instruction several years ago. Too many students crowded into too small classrooms that held too few books and offered too little support created a climate that was at best depressed and at worst oppressive. The teachers' parking lot was surrounded by an eight-foot cyclone fence looped with barbed wire. The gate into the lot was locked after the last

NCTE National Council of
Teachers of English

©March 2009 National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096; <http://www.ncte.org>; 1-800-369-6283. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright holder. A full-text PDF of this document may be downloaded free for personal, non-commercial use through the NCTE website: <http://www.ncte.org> (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader).

car arrived. Students and teachers entered the fifty-year-old building through front doors framed by ten-year-old metal detectors. Hallways were bare except for the occasional poster that reminded students “Truancy Is a Crime” or “A One-Two Punch Is a One-Way Ticket to Suspension.” Classrooms all looked the same: graffiti-covered desks in long straight rows; battered blackboards etched with profanity; worn-out overhead projectors on wobbly stools sending dim images toward screens hung precariously from crumbling ceilings; windows covered by broken blinds; faded green walls reflecting fluorescent lights . . . when they worked.

Each day as students entered the building, security guards instructed them to empty their pockets, empty their backpacks, empty their purses, stand over here for pat downs, hurry up and gather materials, stop pushing, stop yelling, stop cursing, get to class. At the same time, teachers were arriving in the main workroom to sign in and check their mailboxes, only to hear the principal reminding them how many days remained before *the test*, meaning, of course, the state assessment.

“Make today count,” he said each day, as teachers filled Styrofoam cups from one of three stained Mr. Coffee Makers. “If I walk by your room, I want to see standards written out on the blackboard and students in their seats and working. In their seats and working.” One day, not able to listen to his admonition yet again, I asked if he was serious—that students always needed to be in their desk seats to work.

“Yep,” he replied.

“Why?” I asked. “What if they need to be standing up, say, to give a report?”

“Not our kids,” he said. “Our kids stay in their seats.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, sure that he was going to break out in a smile, and we’d laugh at his comment.

He stared at me with no hint of a smile, not even a twitch. “Some kids,” he said, nodding out toward the bus lot teeming with students, “like those out there heading to class right this minute so they aren’t late, learn best with rules. Rules and structure. We give it to them.” And then he walked away.

The Cast: “Those” Kids

He didn’t say it unkindly, that comment about “those” kids. Upon reflection, I realized he said it with sincerity, perhaps concern, and certainly with conviction. Somehow along the way, he had concluded that those kids, *those* kids whose lives are lived in the gaps—the poverty gap, the health care gap, the nutrition gap, to name but a few—and whose lives are spent wondering—wondering where dinner will come from, where they’ll sleep tomorrow, what they’ll do when they’re approached about joining a gang, what they’ll do when someone in their family is sick and no one can pay for a visit to the doctor, what will happen when there’s no money for rent or the paperback novel for English class or the poster board for their history project or

even the bus fare to get to the store—*those* kids will do better if we just require that they stay in their seats. *Those* kids just need some structure. And we do them an important service by providing it.

I watched teachers in the building use instructional material that required chanted replies; I saw them distribute photocopied packets that re-

duced complex topics such as the Holocaust to a series of questions requiring only literal thinking and written answers in complete sentences, black ink only. I asked teachers if they thought classroom discussions might be helpful. All answered no, not for their students.

“Those kids, well, they live in such turmoil at home that we provide structure, quiet, orderliness, here at school,” one social studies teacher explained to me. An English teacher echoed his sentiments, “Students here need to get the basics; we don’t have much time with them when you look at all they need to learn, so we must drill the basics into them. They do better with strong discipline.” The science teacher chimed in: “Some kids can handle the higher-level thinking discussions you might see in other schools, but not the kids here; the kids here haven’t had anyone show them how to act, so we do. We demand they sit still and answer questions, and they learn how to do that. We demand that they memorize information that they would

And there it was—that declaration that those kids, those kids whose lives are limited not by their potential and not by their poverty but by the interpretation of what that poverty means they can achieve, those kids require an education that does not look like the education of children whose lives are lived in the security of abundance, or if not abundance, then at least the security of enough.

otherwise never learn. In fact, if we can get them to memorize facts, we believe we've come a long way. That's what those kids need."

I looked out into the hallway as students walked past. "Those kids?" I asked. They nodded. "Don't you think they'd enjoy conversation? Discussion? Ideas to debate? Sitting in groups and figuring things out? Making connections to their own lives? Speculating and wondering? Don't you think they would benefit from learning that memorizing isn't enough, that experimenting and doubting and revising and debating options and thinking through multiple solutions is critical?"

The Theme: Segregation by Intellectual Rigor

One woman teacher leaned toward me, patted my arm, and interrupted my litany: "You mean well, I'm sure," she said, "but you just don't understand what those kids need. It's a little hard at first," she continued, "but then you realize that those kids, well, they need you to treat them differently if they're going to make good grades."

"Differently from what?" I asked.

She stared for a moment before answering, "You know, from other kids, other kids who don't need this type of structured education."

"What type of education do other kids need?" I asked.

She bristled through her smile and said it was obvious to her that some kids could handle the freedom that allowed them to do more creative things, to "handle the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy," to interact more with their peers, and if I understood more about the students in their high school, I'd understand that.

And there it was—that declaration that those kids, *those* kids whose lives are limited not by their potential and not by their poverty but by the interpretation of what that poverty means they can achieve, *those* kids require an education that does not look like the education of children whose lives are lived in the security of abundance, or if not abundance, then at least the security of enough. That assertion was accompanied by the genteel smile of someone assured that I, too, would see the value of this diminished educational experience once I had spent time with *those* kids.

We are left with an education of America's poor that cannot be seen as anything more than a segregation by intellectual rigor, something every bit as shameful and harmful as segregation by color.

That declaration has guided too many instructional decisions in too many schools. Too many school boards, superintendents, principals, and even teachers choose instructional materials and strategies for *those* kids that in all likelihood would not be offered to the gifted kids or the kids whose parents know how to demand and can afford better technology, libraries, textbooks, teachers, supplies, tutors, playgrounds, gyms, and . . . well, anything that can be bought with the money these parents will willingly, can easily, supply. No one would ever suggest that a scripted program be used to teach these kids; that's the curriculum for *those* kids, because those kids need *that* help, *that* kind of education.

That declaration, that genteel declaration, so easily accepted as wisdom, hides behind the well-intentioned and soft-spoken statements of "they need structure" and "they need discipline" and "they need the basics." In the end, we are left with an education of America's poor that cannot be seen as anything more than a segregation by intellectual rigor, something every bit as shameful and harmful as segregation by color.

These are harsh indictments from me, I realize, and I know that many would never teach any student, especially students of poverty, in such a way. You are as dismayed as I am at the attitudes and comments of some of the

teachers and the principal in that high school. This segregation by intellectual rigor under the guise of "helping those kids find some sort of success" is an appalling injustice that must be addressed.

I should mention that as I spent more time in the school described here, I did find some more reflective thinking. Many teachers believed that the educational experiences they offered to students at this school were forced on them by district-level administrators who, in turn, felt pressure from state and federal policies. Others eventually reported that they lacked needed knowledge on how to help underachieving students, explaining that while they didn't like what they were doing, they lacked the research base and practical experience to try a different approach themselves, let alone to encourage administrators or colleagues to try something else.

While I remain dismayed at the number of schools that turn to scripted programs and highly structured class

routines—sometimes almost militaristic environments—guided by the belief that “those” kids require an education that is mostly about learning to follow rules, I am always heartened by teachers who stand in opposition to such practices and offer students, all students, rich, exciting, and powerful educational experiences. I find those teachers in cities and towns across the nation, and know that they are changing the lives of the students they teach.

The Ongoing Denouement: Our Journey

Any story has its heroes, its strong characters who lead us on a journey to a satisfying conclusion. Our story has those heroes, too. We have leaders out there right now, talking to teachers, to media, to politicians and administrators and parents, and they are working hard to institute change based on research, experience, and common sense. But our story of educational reform is not complete. It requires what is likely to be a long and difficult journey. We have a lot to fix in education, bigger things than we’ve dared imagine.

Not too long ago, we had a Secretary of Education who wrote that Ford’s assembly line factory model is the right one for our schools. I am ashamed of such a statement. Schools aren’t about the mass production of the exact same product. Some of our students will emerge as writers, others as mathematicians, and others as artists or scientists or athletes or mechanics or homemakers or orators or . . . well, the list is as divergent as our students.

Additionally, in public schools—and this is what I like the most about public schools—everyone is welcome.

Unlike assembly lines that discard materials that can’t guarantee a predetermined uniform result, public schools don’t discard any child. Children can come hungry or filthy; they can speak English or Spanish or Vietnamese or Hmong; they can be athletic or clumsy, artistic or musical; they can be black or white, Latino or Asian; they can be gay or straight, rich or poor; Muslim or Jewish or Christian or Hindu or atheist. They can know a lot or a little. In public schools, teachers take students as they are, respect all as they are, and promise to teach all, *as they are*. It might be the plaque on the Statue of Liberty that says, “Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” but it’s public schools that live that message daily.

It might be the plaque on the Statue of Liberty that says, “Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” but it’s public schools that live that message daily.

Somewhere along the way, we’ve forgotten that the teachers in our midst do live that message daily. We’ve forgotten that the best teachers are thoughtful, creative, independent thinkers, not passive, restrained script-followers; these teachers teach from a cornucopia of pedagogy, choosing the right instructional strategy for each student; these teachers value the probing question from the curious—even angry—student far more than the right answer from the passive one. The best teachers and principals demand that *those* kids receive the same rigorous education we want for *all* kids, the rich education each student deserves. Those teachers and principals—the ones I see far more often than not—stand boldly against such bigotry, such racism, such low expectations. Those educators will lead this nation in true educational reform. In so doing, they will remind us of all that is lost with the genteel unteaching of America’s poor.