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Illiteracy, Psychotherapy, and Self-Esteem

Do Schools Want Children To Read?

It took the Japanese Speaker of the House to say out loud what American politicians are afraid to say: 30 percent of U.S. workers "cannot even read, so managers cannot convey their orders in written form." Cast in the unlikely role of the little boy who dared to say that the emperor has no clothes, 79-year-old Yoshio Sakurauchi's comments have stirred up a firestorm of Japan-bashing.

Most of the newspaper and television comment quoted Americans as indignantly retorting that U.S. workers are not "lazy," that the Japanese school system is not superior to ours, that our productivity compares favorably with Japan's, and that Sakurauchi shouldn't have said what he said. One had to search hard to find any mention of the crucial issue. After all, the real question is not what Japanese politicians think or say, but whether it is true that nearly a third of U.S. workers are illiterate.

The *New York Times* reported a long denial from the U.S. Department of Education, but it included the admission that only 21.1 percent of Americans aged 21 to 25 years old can understand the main argument in a long newspaper editorial. It is interesting that the news report failed to say that 78.9 percent **cannot**.

I recently taunted a newspaper reporter with the accusation, "How does it feel to be working for a dying profession, since so many young people can't read?" She replied, "We know that. Our surveys show that the average age of our readers used to be 27, but now it is 42."

Sakurauchi's 30 percent figure can be easily corroborated from many sources. For example, Lauro Cavazos said while he was Secretary of Education in 1990 that "13 percent of our citizens are illiterate, 27 million are functional illiterates, and another 40 to 60 million could be called marginally illiterate."

What in the world is wrong with the U.S. public schools that they can't teach children to read? That is the schools' number-one mission, and if they can't do that, nothing else really matters.

After years of watching the schools fail at this task, all the while prevaricating about what they are doing, I have come to the conclusion that they don't want a nation of readers. Consider, for starters, a 1981 speech given by Harvard Professor Anthony Oettinger.

He said, "The present 'traditional' concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the real question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society? Do we really have to have everybody literate — writing and reading in the traditional sense — when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?"

A couple of other well-known Harvard reading researchers, Harman and Sticht, said in 1987: "Many companies have moved operations to places with cheap, relatively poorly educated labor. What may be crucial is the dependability of a labor force and how well it can be managed and trained — not its general educational level, although a small cadre of highly educated creative people is essential to innovation and growth."

They added, "Ending discrimination and changing values are probably more important than reading and moving low-income families into the middle class." So much for you, poor little fella! Just stay illiterate, and you'll never move up into the middle class!

This attitude explains the irrational and intolerant determination of many of the public schools to refuse to teach first-grade children to read by the proven best method, phonics, and instead to force them into the dead-end system called "whole language." Under this procedure, the child is not taught to read, but instead is taught to memorize stories after they are read to the class by the teacher, and to guess at or to predict what the text probably says by looking at the pictures on the page.

The "whole-language" virus is spreading through the public schools faster than AIDS, and it is being insulated against parental objections by fraudulent tests that merely test what the child feels or guesses instead of reading skills. Professor Marie Carbo, a leading proponent of "whole-language," told teachers at a conference in Portland, Maine in 1988 that "new tests better suited to whole-language teaching methods are being introduced into the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)."

The failure to teach first-graders to read over the last couple of decades has resulted in a high percentage of children being diagnosed as having dyslexia. A new research study published in January in the prestigious *New England Journal of*

Medicine reports that 72 percent of children classified as dyslexic in the first grade showed no signs of dyslexia in the third grade even though they had been given no remedial programs, and by the sixth grade 83 percent were okay.

It looks as if dyslexia is just another way of trying to exonerate the public schools for their appalling failure to teach children to read.

So, if children haven't learned to read in the elementary grades, what are they doing all day in school for 12 years?

Michigan Has a Model for Many Things

The state of Michigan has imposed on public school children a controversial "comprehensive health education" curriculum called the "Michigan Model." It is used in 500 of the state's 565 school districts, affecting one million students in kindergarten through eighth grade, and has been copied or imitated in many other states. Parents object to many aspects of this curriculum, particularly its New Age overtones.

The Michigan controversy came to public attention in November 1989 when 19 parents filed a lawsuit against the White Pigeon and Calhoun school districts. A pretrial hearing was held last year. The suit alleges that the Michigan Model amounts to the "unauthorized practice of psychology and psychiatry by the teachers." The suit also asserts that the goal of the curriculum is to change children's values, attitudes and behaviors. Parents strenuously object to "social engineers" trying to do just that.

Initially, Michigan school administrators thought they could get rid of the objections by treating parents in the patronizing and intimidating way that schools usually treat parents who dare to criticize curriculum. Schools frequently stonewall parents by warning them that they have neither the expertise nor legal right to critique curriculum, and sometimes get nasty, labelling parents "censors."

When the Northville school district demanded that parents produce specific examples of what they object to in the Michigan Model, they got an answer in spades. A group called Parents Concerned With the Improvement of the Michigan Model produced a 70-page booklet which documents more than 400 objectionable items, with the basis for each objection concisely explained and a recommendation given to correct each problem.

The leader of this group, R. Kraft Bell, Ph.D., is a professional business "problem-solver" who does consulting work for major U.S. corporations. The booklet, called *Improving the Michigan Model*, is an excellent critique of the psychological courses which now fill hours of the public school child's day, replacing time formerly spent on the basics.

Dr. Bell organized the 400 objectionable items into five major problem areas. The first is the well known strategy called values clarification, that is, changing children's values through ignoring traditional standards and authority. The children are presented with hypothetical moral dilemmas, such as what to do if a child finds a purse containing \$500. This dilemma is "solved" by having the children vote on what to do, rather than giving them an ethical or legal basis for action.

The second problem area is the teaching of "responsible" use of sex and illegal substances. Children are encouraged to make a personal choice about their own use of illegal

substances and premarital sex, without reference to moral or state law. Parents believe that students should be taught that illicit drug use and premarital sex are wrong. They cite studies showing that the emphasis on "responsible" use leads children to believe they can use illicit drugs and engage in premarital sex "responsibly," and that attitude leads to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

The third problem area is the Michigan Model's consistently negative portrayal of parents and families. Parents assert that this "anti-family bias" creates fear, insecurity, and confusion in the children.

The fourth problem area is the use of techniques that could produce altered states of consciousness (such as deep breathing), some of which are similar to the meditative techniques of Eastern religions. Dr. Bell asserts that these "can disrupt the delicate balance of a participant's parasympathetic nervous system with far-reaching consequences" and cause "profound psychological problems of disorientation."

The fifth objection documented by the 70-page booklet is the invasion of family privacy. Children are encouraged "to divulge personal and family information to peers and teachers" which are none of their business.

This massive documentation of objections to the Michigan Model came to the attention of the Michigan State Legislature. The Michigan Senate held three months of hearings on the controversial curriculum in September, attracting crowds of up to a thousand parents. Michigan parents scored a stunning victory when the state Department of Education in the fall of 1991 told local public schools to remove the use of a deep-breathing technique from the Michigan Model. Parents had complained that this exercise is linked with "New Age" religious practices and can produce altered states of consciousness, posing serious medical and psychological risks to the children.

Although the school administrators have shown a new willingness to remove other objectionable features, Dr. Bell says that parents' efforts for real improvement in the curriculum have just begun and they are not going to acquiesce in cosmetic changes or the same abuses under a new name.

Some Schools Recognize Parents' Rights

Parents of children in the Boulder Valley (Colorado) School District won a landmark victory in September 1991 when the superintendent mailed to every family a 17-page pamphlet entitled "Students' and Parents' Rights." The publication of this pamphlet capped a two-year campaign by Boulder parents to protect their children from intrusive psychological procedures in the classroom such as hypnosis, psychodramas, psychological fantasizing, and nosy questionnaires.

Section C on Student Psychological Services affirms that "only those persons holding relevant certificates or licenses . . . may expose students to a psychiatric or psychological method or procedure." The pamphlet states that "parents can exclude a student from any psychological service by an advance written notice" and that "allowed procedures may only be performed after acquiring written permission from a student's parent or guardian."

Section A on Health Education assures parents that they have the right to be "notified in writing, prior to the student's

attendance in a health education course, of topics to be taught." They also have the right to "inspect all health program materials during school hours upon request" and to "exclude their child from all or part of health instruction by submitting an approved exclusion form."

The right to exclude their children from "all or part" of sex education is particularly important to parents because the entire course may be objectionable to some, but only a small part may be objectionable to others. Many public schools now have a policy called "infusion" under which they integrate psychological or explicit-sex materials with academic work and then tell the parents that it is "impossible" to separate the one from the other.

The booklet sets up accountability about materials used in sex education classes. It states that "all audio-visual and supplementary classroom instructional materials related to human sexuality shall be reviewed regularly by a committee of teachers and administrators."

Parents believe it is important not only that they have the right to exempt their children from any or all of the school's health education programs, but also that the school must make full disclosure of all health education curricula to parents and students. The exemption and disclosure requirements together help to achieve a friendlier relationship between parents and school administrators.

The Boulder Valley school policy is the result of a state law that went into effect July 1, 1990 (Colorado Revised Statute 22-32-109.2) requiring all boards of education "to formally adopt a policy concerning the delivery of all educational programs and courses of instruction or study which expose pupils to any psychiatric or psychological methods or procedures involving the diagnosis, assessment, or treatment of any emotional, behavioral, or mental disorder or disability."

The law required the state department of education to "prepare model policies to provide guidance to boards of education" about this policy. In addition, the law requires that all boards "provide adequate opportunity to allow review by and receive recommendations from" parents and others.

Parents generally don't know what, if any, their rights are in relation to their local public school, and oftentimes a school system conceals or tries to evade parental rights laws. This booklet opens with a message from the superintendent encouraging "parent involvement in the educational programs of their children" and inviting parents to call the superintendent or principal "if you have questions."

Since the publication of the booklet, the Boulder Valley schools have been much more open about curriculum. Materials sent home to parents now provide a good overview of courses that contain psychological or health content, a list of the dates on which controversial topics will be discussed, instructions about how to find out more information, and an easy form for parents to use if they want to exempt their children from any or all of the course.

As a result, it is now a routine and simple procedure for parents to exempt students from courses in self-esteem, stress, suicide, death and dying, sex, and experimental courses on AIDS.

The "Students' and Parents' Rights" pamphlet also incorporates into the Boulder Valley policies the entire federal Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, which requires prior

written parental consent before a student can be subjected to psychiatric or psychological examination or treatment by materials funded through the U.S. Department of Education.

School Desks or Psychiatrists' Couches?

Many school administrators have convinced themselves that the reason students do poorly on test scores is that they lack self esteem. Instead of addressing the need to raise the SAT scores, many schools have invaded the classroom with pseudo-psychiatry and inflicted children with courses in "self-esteem" or "self-concept." A typical example is a psychotherapy course used in Texas called *It's Up To Me*, sponsored by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.

Parents' first objection to this course is its numerous privacy-invading exercises. The child must complete such sentences as: "If I had 24 hours to live," "If I had a gun I would," "People can hurt my feelings most by," "I am hurt most easily when," "I am afraid to," "I feel most mistreated when."

The child is required to check which of a list of 36 ways he might react to "stress." These include: "smoke . . . hate myself . . . think about suicide . . . take drugs . . . shoplift . . . lie about things . . . drink . . . skip school . . . vandalism . . . stay away from my family . . . feel like running away . . . steal."

Very young children are asked the questions, Whom would you tell "that you had a scary dream . . . that you had taken money from your mother's pocketbook . . . that there is a superstition that you have . . . that you once saw something you think you shouldn't have seen . . . and who is your best friend?"

Parents' second objection is that the course establishes a sort of pseudo-religion of "the power of self concept," "human potential," and "tuning into yourself." "Spiritual wellness," defined as "a unifying force in strong relationships," is the theme of the course.

The class is required to engage in group recitals of such mantras as "I am me," "I own everything about me — my body, including everything it does," "Because I own all of me, I can become intimately acquainted with me . . . love me and be friendly with me in all my parts," "I own me, and therefore I can engineer me," "I am me and I am okay."

In a direct attack on religion, the course teaches children that the "origin of values" is their "own experiences" (rather than, for example, God's law). As an example, the child is taught that "everyone is entitled to his/her own opinion about abortion."

Instead of presenting values as standards to live by, values are described as "dilemmas" and "value discussion items." Children are taught that "it's up to me" to decide: "is it all right to take drugs, is it O.K. to watch R-rated movies, is it O.K. to read pornographic magazines, is anyone hurt if I steal little things, is it really important to go to church, do little white lies really hurt, should I respect what my parents say and do?"

Parents' third objection is that the course presents children with a "decision making process" which tells them they need not accept the authority or wisdom of their elders. Instead the child is taught to use the following formula: "recognize a decision needs to be made, gather information, identify alternatives, examine potential alternatives, consider personal values and goals, make the decision, evaluate the outcome."

This process encourages children to believe they have the wisdom and maturity (which they do not) to make their own decisions about drugs, alcohol, sex, and other high-risk behavior; and the result is that they become easy prey for the drug peddlers and peer pressure. Absent from the course's decision making process are such questions as, is it wrong, is it illegal, is it contrary to what my parents have taught me?

Parents' fourth objection is to the guided imagery. The course includes such "trips" as "Close your eyes and take a journey in your mind to a mountaintop, a castle or some other imaginary place." The class makes up a "Time Line Floor Board" on which they identify the appropriate age for "first marijuana cigarette, begin smoking, midnight curfew, first can of beer, first kiss, first sip of wine, experience of being drunk."

Parents object to the depressing nature of many of the exercises. The children are asked: "Which would you least like to be: very poor, very sickly, disfigured?" "Which would you rather be: an only child, the youngest child, the oldest child?"

Children are given a "lifeline exercise" which is a real downer. They are asked: "How long do you believe you will live? At what age do you think you'll die? Guess how many years you will live. Write your estimated date of death."

It's Up To Me is presented as a course to increase self-esteem and promote a positive self image. That would be funny if it weren't such a betrayal of trust by the schools. Psychotherapy does not belong in the public school classroom.

Alabama Parents Win a Textbook Battle

Alabama parents have proved that it is really possible to win a textbook battle with the public schools.

Alabama is a state which has state textbook adoption, that means that the State Board of Education approves the textbooks which may be purchased by local schools with state funds. The year to select textbooks on home economics was 1991. If you think "home economics" means cooking and sewing, you are far behind the times. Home economics in today's public school parlance means classroom courses in such volatile and nonacademic topics as sex, drugs, death, and suicide.

Of the dozens of textbooks submitted by publishers in last year's reviewing session, ten were singled out as objectionable by eight members of the State Textbook Committee. When the eight members, on a close vote, found themselves a minority, they filed a minority report. The minority report is quite a model for other parents to follow.

The minority spelled out their objections to the textbooks, respectfully, specifically, and with documentation; so they successfully persuaded the State Board of Education to reject the ten controversial textbooks.

The minority objected to one book because it contained activities that "personalize and dramatize suicide." Called *Creative Living*, it was criticized by the minority because of its "highly inappropriate and potentially deadly activities." This book asks students to share their experiences and feelings about movies, television shows, and books dealing with suicide. The prescribed activities include asking students to research the topic, write a dialogue, develop skits, role play, and discuss and share their feelings about suicide.

The minority asserted that "this type of approach is not in the best interest of the students." The minority documented

their conclusion with a study published earlier in 1991 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which concluded that such classroom courses "may have a lethal effect" because some teenage suicides are imitative and suicides actually increased after teenagers were given information or feature stories about suicide.

Second, the minority objected to five textbooks about sex and AIDS because they "would give students a false sense of security about sex with contraceptives. These texts either fail to give the failure rates of contraceptives or understate the failure rates."

The minority took the position that "truth and accuracy must be the hallmark of any AIDS and sex education instruction," and asserted that the five textbooks did not meet this standard. "Students have a right to know what the risks are," the minority said, and it is incumbent on textbooks that imply a "safe sex" message to "inform students of contraceptive deficiencies so they will not be misled to take lethal risks." The minority quoted many authorities and concluded that "the use of inaccurate or misleading information about the failure rates of contraceptives could only serve to increase rather than decrease promiscuity, with all its resulting problems."

Third, the minority objected to three textbooks which recommend Eastern religious practices, including Transcendental Meditation, yoga and visualization. The minority report quoted from the World Book Encyclopedia to show the essentially religious and mind-altering elements of such practices. One of the textbooks actually states that "Meditation is a technique used to alter the state of consciousness." It then instructs the teacher to "practice the relaxation response technique."

The minority concluded that, "by teaching Eastern religious practices, these texts violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution." Furthermore, the minority wrote, "by asking untrained students or teachers to lead students into altered states of consciousness, these texts would violate professional ethical standards."

Fourth, the minority members of the State Textbook Committee objected to another home economics textbook "because of its grossly misleading presentation of homosexuality." The committee pointed out that the text tried "to present homosexuality in a favorable light by using misleading statements."

By presenting this factual, documented, and well reasoned minority report, the minority on the State Textbook Committee became the majority on the State Board of Education and the offensive textbooks were rejected.

Of course, some people claim that any expression of opinion by parents is "censorship." But the law gives parents the right to present their input, and they should exercise it.

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