Where Have All the Strong Poets Gone?

The approaches that are being touted as ways to improve our poorest schools are themselves impoverished, Mr. Jones finds. He urges educators to take a stand against the current policies and to muster the imagination to devise true solutions.

BY ALAN C. JONES

JOHNATHAN Kozol’s latest book, The Shame of the Nation, documents the landscapes of the two education systems in America. One system is located in the suburbs, where mostly white students sit in classrooms with teachers who possess the content knowledge to construct engaging lessons that accurately reflect the content and structure of the discipline that they teach. The breadth and depth of the curriculum in these suburban schools provide students with the knowledge and skills to do well in postsecondary settings. In addition, these suburban schools have sprawling campuses that possess all the accoutrements of Ivy League universities — a high-quality library, computer labs with the latest technology, state-of-the-art science labs, and a rich variety of support services that will enhance the social and emotional development of young people.

At the same time that white suburban students are being prepared to become the future bosses in our country, African American and Hispanic students sit in classrooms with young, inexperienced teachers whose minimal training in their content areas leaves them with little ability to construct lessons that will adequately prepare students for postsecondary schooling. Instead of being offered engaging lessons that reflect state-of-the-art approaches to curriculum and instruction, students in our urban and rural areas are subjected to an instructional program that Kozol calls “a test-preparation boot camp.” Inductees in this boot camp are expected to listen to scripted lessons, complete practice test-preparation exercises, and take an endless stream of tests. The facilities in these “boot camps” are as deplorable as the instructional program. Students sit in classrooms without windows, go to bathrooms that do not function, and work in labs without chemicals or specimens.

Why has the resegregation of our nation’s schools into two systems — one poor and urban and one well-off and suburban — remained unnoticed by the public and our policy makers? The parents of poor urban students do not possess the political or economic capital to generate outrage at, or sometimes even awareness of, the dilapidated buildings and dead-end curriculum that their children are subjected to every day. Suburban parents, who do possess the political and economic power to call attention to the deplorable conditions in our urban schools, remain silent simply because they have the schools they want. White suburban schools, especially the elite white suburban schools, have it all — why talk of funding formulas and social policies that would require wealthier parents to share the resources that are currently being lavished on their children?

As for state and national policy makers, they have diverted attention away from the deep political, social, and economic forces that have conspired to segregate our schools, our neighborhoods, and the futures of our children by using the high-sounding rhetoric of equal educational opportunities for all children — “all children can learn” and

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“no child left behind” — and the vocabulary of business accountability measures — test, inspect, and reconstitute. The relentless use of a vocabulary of equality married to a whole host of school accountability measures has proven to be a potent strategy for dodging the thorny policy issues that might actually develop the conditions that “no child left behind” was meant to achieve — equal-funding formulas, scattered site housing, universal health care, and a high-quality child-care system. The cruelty of this policy shell game is to punish the schools that serve the poor and voiceless in our society and to reward the schools that serve the wealthiest and most powerful.

In an era of “greed is good,” I can well understand why state and national policy makers and their suburban constituencies have adopted a vocabulary and an ideology that mask gross inequalities in our nation’s schools. Sadly, the general tenor of our nation appears to have forsaken the social justice concerns and the civil rights movement that motivated our young people during the Sixties for a “gated-community” mentality that aggressively fights any encroachment on the rights and privileges that wealth and power have bestowed on their sons and daughters.

However, what I do not understand is why our nation’s professional education organizations and the academic community not only have remained silent about the conditions, the facilities, the pedagogy, and the curriculum that urban children are subjected to on a daily basis, but have supported and pursued accountability measures that can only worsen the educational futures of urban youths. A brief visit to an education convention or an urban school, or a cursory look at a popular education journal, would quickly confirm how the education establishment in our country has all but surrendered the high ground of the ideals expressed in Brown v. Board of Education. Rather than pursue policies, curricula, and instructional strategies that would provide all children with rich instructional environments, education consultants, professors of education, school administrators, and state and national educational leaders have stood by in silence or have actively supported punitive strategies for holding students, teachers, and school administrators responsible for student achievement. Even worse, many have promoted “how to” approaches for implementing accountability measures that straitjacket teachers and systematically destroy whatever self-esteem urban children bring when they enter the schoolhouse doors.

What we need in today’s educational climate are school leaders in the tradition of John Dewey, George Counts, and Paulo Freire who possess the intellectual power and rhetorical skill to make everything in the field of education look new and to change the way the public and educators look at schools. Richard Rorty refers to such individuals as “strong poets.” By strong poet, Rorty does not mean literally a poet; he means individuals who possess the imagination to create a new story about what teaching and learning should look like in our urban schools and who have the courage to develop an oppositional vocabulary that critiques the motives and the consequences of wealth and power.

What message and course of action should our Strong Professors of Education be pursuing in a country that has all but accepted a school system segregated by race and income? Strong Professors of Education should be using their classrooms, the educational media, and their research interests to identify and provide a rationale for curricular approaches and pedagogical techniques that are not harmful to urban young people and to expose the gross inequities that now exist in our public school systems. Strong Deans of Education should use their authority to voice opposition to accreditation measures and policy initiatives that intensify punitive accountability measures and that continue to promote inequalities in how we fund our schools. Both Strong Professors of Education and Strong Deans of Education should be teaching, writing, and creating courses of study that not only provide best practice in the field of teaching and learning for urban youths but also provide future teachers with methods and forums to study and discuss the relationship between the most vexing problems of our time — racism, poverty, sexism, violence, prejudice — and the routines of institutional schooling that historically have hidden and perpetuated these injustices.

Most important, Strong Poets in the academy must refocus the public’s attention on the real causes of poor achievement in our urban school systems. For too long the academy has allowed policy makers to shift attention away from the
effects that racism and poverty have on urban schools and onto bogus accountability measures — data-driven schools, retention, high-stakes testing — that have no effect on the long-term achievement of urban school children but that do great harm to the social and emotional well-being of these same children. Race and poverty have never been neutral when it comes to schooling — the academy must stop treating race and poverty as silent variables in urban school achievement.

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What should our Strong School Administrators be doing in the urban schools they lead? First, school administrators must have the courage and skill to become Strong Educational Leaders. It is dishonest for school administrators to portray themselves as “pawns” in the hands of powerful political interests and then disappear behind the curtain of the management functions of their job while the children in their schools languish in crumbling facilities and “drill and kill” classrooms. School administrators will always have control over the important allocation of time, resources, and instructional approaches in the buildings they lead. Strong Educational Leaders exercise that control in a way that provides teachers in their buildings with the time, the resources, and the instructional skills to make differences in the way urban young people read, write, compute, and think.

As with medical doctors, Strong Educational Leaders should first “do no harm.” Many of the current accountability measures — retention policies, special education placements, suspensions and expulsions, remedial services of all kinds — are destructive to the intellects and souls of urban youths. Strong Educational Leaders should be actively opposing these policies and making every effort to ameliorate institutional policies and accountability measures that are hurtful to urban young people.

Strong Educational Leaders need a strong understanding of the theories, ideas, and practices that govern teaching and learning in our schools. Much of the destructiveness of current “comprehensive reform proposals” occurs because there is no one in a leadership capacity who is mediating the effects of pure theory on young people’s learning. No theory of learning — no matter how “scientific” — should be unleashed in a learning environment without reformulating the components of that theory to be sensitive to the social context of the school. The important process of reformulating theories that enter a school can be accomplished only by school administrators who are knowledgeable about the ideas that underlie a particular school reform proposal.

Each year in our urban school systems we lose a generation of young people who have the potential to become productive citizens in our country. The substandard physical and educational condition of our urban schools remains tragically out of sight and out of mind for most Americans. However, professional educators are morally bound to provide a voice for those students and teachers who go to crumbling and debilitating schools.

Strong Poets, as Rorty describes them, possess a message that deflates accepted ways of seeing the world and, most important, the courage to voice the message in hostile settings. We, as professional educators, do possess the strong messages about what needs to be done in urban schools. What we are missing is the courage.