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Out of Our Minds: A Review

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Howley, Craig B., Howley, Aimee & Pendarvis, Edwina D. (1995). *Out of Our Minds: Anti-Intellectualism and Talent Development in American Schooling* NY, NY: Teachers College Press. Pp. 265; \$24.95 (Paper)

Out of Our Minds: Anti-Intellectualism and Talent Development in American Schooling will probably make a lot of people mad. Conservatives who pick up the book on the basis of title alone, expecting a rant-and-canon, will hate it. Radicals attracted by the authors' exploration of the role of capitalism and its imperatives in the intellectual impoverishment of students and teachers may find themselves discomfited to find that critical theory becomes, in places, the subject of the book's critique. The authors, Craig and Aimee Howley and Edwina Pendarvis, have already been accused of teacher-bashing in reviews of early drafts of Chapter 2, which exposes the ways in which teachers and schooling (including the university) are key mechanisms of anti-intellectualism, not its remedy. Part of a larger Teachers College Press series devoted to Education and Psychology of the Gifted, the book is bound to raise the hackles of those whom James Borland, the Series editor, calls "steadfast defenders of the faith who regard any challenge to 'gifted programs' as typically constituted in educational practice as errant and pernicious nonsense" (vii).

For others, however, that delicious set of disappointments may well constitute the very attraction of this book. There is no shortage, these days, of exposés of the failure of schools. As a teacher and researcher, I am generally attracted to these books the way I am attracted to smash-ups on the freeway: I don't want to look, but I can't seem to help myself. All too often,

critics and their remedies follow either predictable ideological grooves or hawk warmed-over fads from schools of management *Out of Our Minds* isn't like that, however. From the outset, its tone is both honest and impassioned. Admitting, in the Preface, that the book captures both the anger and the arrogance that permits them to write about matters of anti-intellectualism in schools at all, the authors touch on a sore point for grouchy, between-the-fingers readers of exhortatory texts on school improvement: How dare someone sitting in a comfy office miles away from the mess and complication of my life as a teacher write about what I need to do to improve myself? How dare they?

The authors get that out of the way right from the start. There is an arrogance in presuming that what you believe, is good for another to know. No sense scuffing the toe of your academic shoe in the dust and pretending it ain't so. As a teacher who also writes, I had to admit my own necessary arrogance in sending words about my work in classrooms out into the world: How dare I write these neat and tidy pieces about the wonderful work my students do (okay, okay, the wonderful work I do as their teacher) as if there were not moments, hours, sometimes days and weeks at a stretch of my own failure, stupidity and confusion. How dare I?

On the second page of the Preface, I was hooked. There is a presumption in writing about the work of others that has a shadow few will claim. Yet rage at the injustice that debases the lives of children in school makes such speaking out morally imperative at the risk of colonizing the lives of others; at the risk of being dismissed as teacher bashers; and at the risk (or so I find it in my own work) of exposing all the places in which one's own practice falls short and disappoints; at the risk of papering over exactly these holes and fissures. Claiming the territory into which they are about to move, the authors insist:

that anger and arrogance ought not to disguise who we are in ordinary life: We have regular jobs, we have the usual troubles, we are too seldom able to do the right thing in terms that approach what we truly believe. We bite our tongues too often, despite the sharpness of the critique in this book. The dilemma we are writing about is our own.

And I like that. The stated aim of the book is not to sneak peeks at johnny-come-lately schemes for school improvement. Instead, its authors intend to invoke and to invite sustained conversation about educational reform that is emancipatory and deeply respectful of human intellect and potential, however conflicted and difficult the actual life of obligation that a call to such reform demands.

Structure of the Argument

The argument of *Out of Our Minds* is wide-ranging and complex, but its organizing motif is the refusal of schools to claim an intellectual mission. Placing responsibility for the institutional debasement of the life of the mind squarely in the political realm, Howley, Howley and Pendarvis point directly to "the things to which the economy, the polity, and the society ascribe value; in short, to the organization of production, governance, and social relations..." (xiii). The capitalist goal of global domination that has been so explicitly a part of American school reform efforts since Sputnik turns schools, they argue, into institutions whose central purpose is instrumental, not intellectual: the production of patriotic job-holders. They quote Michael Apple on "the threat that this goal for public education poses for the commonweal" (xiv):

This transformation [of the purposes of education...] involves a major shift--one that Dewey would have shuddered at--in which democracy becomes an economic, not a

political, concept and where the idea of the public good withers at its very roots.

And it is the public good that concerns the authors throughout. They point to the failure of schools to nurture the talents of the intellectually gifted as a particular educational travesty, arguing systemic neglect of human potential even in programs for the gifted, surely the place one might expect to find it most carefully guarded. However, their concern for gifted students is located in a larger concern for the intellectual fate of all children in American schools, especially those who, lacking birthright privileges of race, class, ethnicity and gender, are most denied access to social goods and to an education that values the life of the mind.

They argue, against the grain of much educational theorizing, that intelligence read as inborn ability, is not the salient construct, even in an analysis of the experience of gifted children in school. Regarding IQ as an artifact of educational psychology, they are not especially interested in quantifiable, instrumental and individualistic measures of practical performance designed to predict academic success. Rather, they insist that schools ought to be about the stewardship of intellect: the fostering of intellectual habits of thought, meaning-making and discourse in all students regardless of their putative (and arguably) inborn potential. Intellect, in this light, "represents the complexity of understanding, critique, and imagination of which the human mind is capable....Intellect [has] to do with what passes between minds and generations of humans...[through] explicit, negotiated meaningfulness" (p. 4).

For the authors, what passes between the minds and generations of students and teachers bound together in schools is thin gruel, indeed. Whether the schooling offered most children in America derives from traditional, conservative assumptions or more progressive, liberal ideology, the end result, the authors insist, is strikingly similar: an instrumental approach to the purpose and structure of schools that subjugates intellect to the service of practical action and the acquisition of the "little literacies" of problem solving and skill accumulation. A true education, they argue, has three characteristics glaringly absent from contemporary schools: respect for the interest of the intellect (contemplation, interpretation, understanding, meaning-making, and critique); respect for the artifacts of intellect (particularly the ability to speak and write well); and respect for the intellectual potential of all students.

Examining the origins of the anti-intellectualism that makes sustained dialogue between individual students and the historical community of learning almost impossible, the authors focus directly on the anti-intellectualism of teachers and the institutions of public education and the university. It is this analysis that early reviewers dismissed, incorrectly, as "teacher-bashing". As a teacher for more than a quarter century, I recognized the world they describe. It is a world in which few of my colleagues read much (they cite studies showing as few as three books a year, and those most often popular fiction), in which few make a special effort to pursue advanced study in a subject discipline, and in which the penalties for presenting oneself as an intellectual are swift and severe. It is a world in which the outspoken and unconventional (both child and teacher) invoke the ire of the organization. And this world of schools, they argue, is in cahoots with parents, the anti-intellectual university and society at large to ensure that future employment, not the cultivation of the life of the mind, is the major focus of education. It is a world in which bright students deal with schools about as well as other children do: that is, badly. And it is a world in which the pernicious effects of racism, sexism and poverty stunt the development of intellectual potential.

Throughout, the authors take steady aim at important targets: the elitist notion that neglecting gifted education means neglecting society's brightest and best resources; the claptrap that has arisen around much school and curriculum reform literature over the past thirty years; and the insidiousness of research, theory and practice that support meritocratic explanations of career and academic success, particularly as such theory and practice ignores systemic discrimination against girls and women, visible minorities, and the poor. No one is spared, not

even the remedies suggested critical theorists with whom the authors claim closest kinship in their analytical framework.

Rethinking the Potential of Schooling

I like the angry, overtly political tone of this book. My teaching and research partner, Sharon Friesen, and I have been in hot water for things we have written over the years, for intemperate outbursts at dinner parties, for stony silences in staff meetings around whatever reforms du jour are currently circulating through our school districts like snake oil. We get mad a lot. And somehow, stubbornly and intractably, we keep teaching anyhow, determined to make things different for the children in our care, having long since given up hope that systemic reform is actually possible, but called (naively, perhaps) to a vision of teaching and learning that makes a difference in the lives of children and their parents.

All through the reading of the early chapters, I disciplined myself from flipping to the part that I really wanted to read: the final chapters on suggested changes to schools and teaching practice. As depressing as I found the experience of revisiting my own frustrations with school through the authors' analytic framework, I resisted the temptation to rush ahead to the end. I'm glad I did, for the urgency of their demand for systemic, fundamental change provides a necessary background for understanding why they also believe (as do I) that the suggestions they offer as alternatives are unlikely to be implemented on any large scale. We are stuck with schools as we know them, they argue, either because we can't seem to imagine that they might, in fundamental ways, be otherwise, or because we cannot tolerate "the mismatch between citizens who are schooled in the intellectual habits of inquiry and critique and a political economy that is dependent on mute and compliant workers" (181).

And yet, as they point out, from time to time, in small pockets and in the practices of individual teachers who have found ways to resist and to create something new, we catch glimpses of how life in schools might be otherwise. The final chapters of the book tease out some of those possibilities in terms of their central image of stewardship. Invoking Norbert Weiner's injunction in *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950), the authors insist that it is time that educators get busy and figure out what human beings are for. Schemes, they say, that "try to warrant educational practices on the basis of trite claims about "future needs" and posturing for global domination are unethical, undemocratic, and ugly" (p. 184). Human beings are for making meaning, they insist, and the sacrifice of meaningful engagement with work, with one another and with nature that our narrowly instrumental institutions demand are, to these authors, nothing short of evil.

Stewardship in education, they say, "comprehends the need for humans to take pleasure in their work and to care for the human artifact. Stewardship also comprehends care for generations past and generations to come. This sort of stewardship is a commitment due students from teachers, children from parents, and the world at large from the people within it" (p. 185). Correctly, I believe, they insist that the ethical, political, and aesthetic choices people make determine what their world will be. Education is all about the quality of those choices.

Admittedly sketchy in their remarks about what classrooms devoted to the stewardship of intellect might actually look like, they nevertheless invite dialogue by sharing some of the principles they have glimpsed as they have worked with teachers whose practice gives them hope. They identify ways of thinking about "the problem of the canon": how do you decide which works are worthy of sustained engagement? How do you construct educational processes that honor "the fact that human beings are at work on themselves (p. 188, emphasis in the original)? Educational processes worthy of the name provide, they say, conditions for insight, vision, and epiphanies that lead students not, as is now the case, to learn woefully less than we might hope, but to learn, instead, far more. And what students might learn in morally, politically and

aesthetically reformed schools would come closer, they suggest, to the kind of schooling the world actually needs.

I found their ideas appealing and exciting because the principles they outline are ones my teaching partner and I have struggled to bring into being in our classroom for the past six years. We have begun to document our struggles and our successes, exploring and explaining what children's work looks like when we take seriously the search for answers to questions like the ones this book raises. Some of that writing is published in print, the most readily accessible being our article, "A curious plan: Managing on the twelfth" originally published in *Harvard Educational Review* in the fall of 1993 and most recently reprinted in *Class Acts: Teachers Reflect on Their Own Teaching Practice*.

For ease of reference in this review, I have also put three of our other papers on line: [Hard Fun: Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century](#), originally written for the Government of Canada as part of a series of articles on innovative social policy; [Landscapes of Loss: On the Original Difficulty of Reading](#) a chapter in a forthcoming book on action research, and [The Transgressive Energy of Mythic Wives and Wilful Children: Old Stories for New Times](#), first presented at the 1995 JCT Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice and now under consideration for inclusion in a book on education and mythology. And last week, we put examples of Grade Two children's response to an extended study of [The Odyssey](#) on our school website.

I offer these examples in the spirit of teacher scholarship that Howley, Howley and Pendarvis describe. Schooling as they envision it "ought to cultivate a true education, assisting students to make personal and collective sense out of their encounters with the culture in both its intellectual and popular forms" (p. 190). This aim, they acknowledge, calls forth very different kind of teacher-scholars, ones who honor "through their customary practice a personal commitment to the life of the mind" (p. 191): who pursue scholarly pursuits in their own fields, and who take pedagogical encounters as opportunities for reflection and for action. At the beginning of the book, they express the hope that their readers will take part in "a conversation begun long ago and that must continue well into the future" (xii). They hope that others will be drawn into the conversation as they think, speak and act; as, indeed, I felt drawn in as I saw the possibility of the work Sharon and I do contributing a particular kind of flesh to the backbone of this book's argument.

And now, as I hope the readers of this review might themselves feel drawn. This on-line journal seems particularly well positioned to encourage actual, not just virtual, dialogue among educators; dialogue that welcomes the voices of children and teachers so conspicuously absent from much of the theorizing done on their behalf.

I think the authors of *Out of Our Minds* would approve.

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