Resisting the Specter of Fierce Neatness

You will try. And try again. And again. And you will smile. Because it's so much healthier than crying or throwing up.

—Molly Ivins

Whenever my principal complained about my mess of a desk with "Cluttered desk, cluttered mind," I responded in kind, "Empty desk, empty mind." In our tough city school, this ritual exchange substituted for, "Have a nice day." Appearances notwithstanding, I admire tidiness, and yes, I'm tempted by the Lorelei lure of all those sleek organizational systems on the Web offering me a *beautifully organized future*. But life intrudes, and I'm skeptical of form triumphing over substance.

Years ago, then-*New York Times* metro reporter Michael Winerip wrote a fascinating piece about a member of the Association of Professional Organizers, people paid top dollar for organizing other people's closets. Winerip asked to see the professional organizer's own closet and reported that for every piece of clothing, this woman keeps a note card of matching accessories: With her green suit, she always wears her green shoes, amber pin, and beige pocketbook. "I never have to think about anything, it's great," she said.

I used to pull out this clipping when speaking at conferences, insisting that teaching isn't neat and tidy and predictable; we can't always wear the green shoes with the amber pin. We have to clean our own closets, and though some suggest otherwise, we can't hire somebody to invent and arrange our curriculum. Or expect kids to read *Tuck Everlasting* or *Call of the Wild* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* on schedule—just because there's a grand plan. Think about it; the graveyard is a neat and tidy place.

The professional closet organizer is a great counter-metaphor for teaching as a craft of uncertainty. It is a counter-metaphor for a profession where you have to think about a lot of things at the same time and can never count on being able to present the same lesson twice. Nonetheless, decrees are issued, dictating everything from the reading schedules to the bulletin board content. Daily, teachers send desperate messages to my Web site telling me about the scripts they must follow in an effort to keep all kids on the same page. The Georgia Department of Education, for one, offers lessons. *Grammar and Sequencing Work* asks students to rewrite each grammatically incorrect statement about *Lord of the Flies* into standard discourse. In a teacher tip, they provide Web sites containing important quotes from the novel—so teachers can rewrite Golding's words, inserting "mechanical errors to allow other students an opportunity to correct them."

If that possibility doesn't leave you breathless, the Georgia Department of Education also offers *General Accommodations for Non-Readers*. Here is

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my favorite: *Rewrite student's text using pictures for key words, using Writing with Symbols software*.

I respectfully suggest that the teacher choose a different novel for those who can't read the one she is trying to teach.

How School Is 'Spozed to Be

My mother insists that she sent me to school as a lefthander, but noticed in second grade I was writing with my right hand. She asked me what was up and I told her that I'd learned that in first grade. She asked me why I hadn't told her what was happening. How could I? A kid only knows how school is 'spozed to be by attending one. As a first grader, I figured school was where they made you do things their way. Or else.

That experience just rolled off my back. My searing memory of first grade is being relieved I wasn't Jimmy, the kid with the pinched, scared scowl who couldn't make the letters go the right way. He was so terrified of our teacher's high standards that periodically he peed in his pants, leaving the puddle of his failure on the wooden floor.

I knew it then and I know it now: Something is seriously wrong when schools cause kids to panic. I draw my teaching credo from memories of Jimmy and from advice I received my first week on the job. Hired by the New York City Board of Education on an emergency credential to fill in at a high school larger than my home town, I complained to my department chair that one ninth grader refused to read the prescribed *Johnny Tremain*. The chair advised, "Then find a book he *will* read." That solution stayed with me for the next 20-plus years: Find a book they will read. At once practical and wise, this simple advice speaks to the heart of this issue's theme: how best to teach individual middle schoolers who have learning differences, physical handicaps, and social and emotional problems that make learning even more challenging than it is for regular middle schoolers.

Regular middle schoolers: now *that's* a thought. Surely the wonderful reality of middle schoolers is their dominant irregularity. Our job must be to welcome and nourish students whose irregularities interfere with their learning, not to march them lockstep through state standards and testing. Getting all children in the class through the best literature has to offer is not the same as helping children learn what they need to learn. Far from it.

P. L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act

Providing the necessary materials for my two blind students that first year was small potatoes compared with the resources, talents, and dispositions required to accommodate students with cognitive, developmental, and/or emotional problems. After leaving New York City, I taught in a middle school that used P. L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, as an excuse to put students with special needs into educational freefall. *The Red Pony* for all.

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Youngsters dumped willy-nilly into the mainstream were left to suffer embarrassment in front of their peers when they couldn't read aloud or solve math problems at the board or locate rivers on a map. Predictably, chaos and hysteria ensued, with teachers more hysterical than students. Discipline problems piled up in the principal's office. When teachers complained, they were told that students were mainstreamed for social reasons—"to learn how to get along with others, to make friends, to increase their self-esteem."

Pardon me? Isn't sitting all day—in every class—as the kid who doesn't get it rather damaging to self-esteem? I worried then and I worry now that people who claim that all children can work on the same subject but at different levels of complexity shortchange those children who need something different. The everybody-can-learn-everything crowd says, in effect: Give every child *Lord of the Flies* or *Foundations of Democracy* or *Modern Biology*. The Robins can read the whole book; the Blue Jays need read only half; the Pigeons can copy the table of contents five times (that is, if the teacher doesn't have time to rewrite

the text, substituting pictures for difficult words). The Robins can dissect a frog; the Blue Jays can watch a movie about a frog; the Pigeons can play leapfrog. In this environment, the Pigeons are cheated from learning what they can learn—and what they need to know.

In *The Broken Cord*, Michael Dorris provided a heartbreaking account of his adopted son Adam's struggles in school. When Adam was 18, Dorris laid out report cards documenting his progress over the years. One report announced that Adam had "demonstrated good ability and understanding with regard to our unit on geometry," but at age 18, Adam couldn't tell time and had no notion of money. And despite yearly report cards that proclaimed Adam's great progress in making friends, Dorris noted that, in all his school days, his son "never once received so much as a telephone call or an invitation from a 'friend.'"

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When I read that, I cried—for Adam and for my own students. Dorris's book challenged my basic curriculum convictions: In the name of helping students mainstream into other "regular" classes, what had I failed to teach them that they needed to know—and that they could have learned? Wouldn't Adam have been better off learning to make change than participating in a unit on geometry?[1]

I know that good teachers can bring children with reading difficulties into a literature circle and help them participate in that group's interactions, but I question whether this is good enough. The hard question we must ask is if that time might not be better spent in helping students find books they can read on their own, without crutches. I want these students to spend more time reading books than talking about them.

Trying Something Different

Language arts classes are held in our middle school every day, but at one point, those students identified with reading difficulties came to my partner and me during half of them. This meant that kids with the lowest skills were getting half as much exposure to *The Red Pony* as their more able peers. It's no wonder they ended up in the principal's office.

My partner and I decided to approach the principal with a plan: abolish remedial reading and declare us fulltime language arts teachers to the school's rotten readers. We threw in a caveat: we wanted them for two periods a day (and we had a plan for fitting it into the schedule). It didn't take long for the principal to see the benefit of turning *those* kids over to teachers who never sent students to the office.

I know, I know. Segregating students goes against so many progressive tenets. I recognize the pitfalls, not the least of which is condemning students to a low-level curriculum and the absence of stimulating contact with non-disabled peers. Nonetheless, we argued that for readers in crisis, extreme measures are needed. Our students had plenty of so-called socialization opportunities in the school day. For language arts, we wanted to provide a safety zone. Our language arts class didn't offer grand discussions on literary classics, but for two periods in their school day, students were free from the stigma of being the rotten reader in the group, and they found daily success working on material at their individual levels. Parents expressed enthusiasm and gratitude for this success. Nick's mother called in tears. "You're not going to believe this but we were halfway down the driveway heading for our vacation. Nick insisted he had to go back and get his book. I don't know that he actually read during vacation, but he wanted that book 'just in case.' This is the first time in his life he's wanted to take a book anywhere."

I wish the standards setters and the curriculum developers who insist on raising the bar as

[1] I wrote about this in "P. L. 94-142: Mainstream or Quicksand," *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1990, an article roundly denounced by professors of special education. One group even received grant money to write an article proving me wrong.

they shout "No excuses!" could have heard Arnold's oral report on George Washington. He told his audience of eight, "When George was born his father looked at the dollar bill and said, 'I think I'll call him George Washington,' and that's how the baby got his name."

I must have looked startled because Arnold addressed his next remarks directly to me, "You *have* seen his picture right there on the dollar bill, haven't you?" He reached into his pocket, pulled out a dollar and held it up. "That's how he got his name. Right off the money."

At the end of the report, one of the students asked Arnold if he'd ever met George Washington. "No," replied Arnold. "But I've seen him on TV lots of times." Nobody disputed this, and it wasn't out of politeness. Plenty of them had seen George on TV, too.[2]

In our class, Keith,[3] a 14-year-old seventh grader, read his first book. This was after he bluffed his way through a three-year-stack of *National Geographic*, biographies of Davy Crockett, Frederick Douglass, and Babe Ruth. Plus a set of encyclopedias. These encyclopedias were one of two junior sets our librarian had managed to snag from a closing elementary school. The library in our new, multi-million dollar school housing seventh and eighth graders had been stocked by a Standardista who didn't stick around to cope with the results. The library contained no picture books, no easy-read books, no riddle books. Instead, the shelves were filled with classics such as *Absalom!* or *Crime and Punishment*, books that even our advanced readers avoided. One day, fed up with Keith's penchant for loosening the screws on our bookshelves so everything came crashing down and his whining insistence that he'd read every single book in our classroom, I grabbed *Hop on Pop* and shoved it at him. "Read this!" I commanded in a voice he recognized as non-negotiable. I walked away and Keith started turning the pages quickly, his method of reading all books. But then something caught his eye. He stopped and looked at a page, really looked. Then he went back to the preceding page and examined it closely. Keith stared at that page for a long time. Then he turned to the first page and started mouthing words.

As he hunched over that book sounding out the words, Keith did not move for the rest of the period. Other kids picked up on the enfolding drama and, unusual for this group of roughnecks, they remained silent in the presence of a miracle: Keith reading a book. I am not exaggerating when I say the rest of us presented a frozen tableau rather like that old game of "Statues," while Keith, oblivious to the outside world, concentrated on his book.

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Keith finally looked up from the book and exclaimed, "I did it. I read this book." He looked at me. "Seriously, Miz O. I read it. For real. I read this book. You wanna see?" It was a magical moment for Keith and for me. No matter what happens to Keith in his future, nobody can ever say he hasn't read a book. Since that day, I've lived in three different states, carrying that tattered copy of *Hop on Pop* with me. Now I look at it and wish I'd given it to Keith, but at the time he didn't ask for it and I clung to it as my red, white, and blue badge of pedagogy: *find a book they will read.*

Like anybody who loved the *Son of Black Stallion* or *Rocky XIV*, Keith moved on to other Dr. Seuss volumes. And when I brokered an agreement with his teacher for social studies credit, he presented a one-minute oral report on an easy-read biography of Daniel Boone to our class.

Although many of the students in our class were much more sophisticated than Keith or Arnold, all were at risk, and a classroom containing two teachers and a maximum of 16 students offered safety. Standardistas can talk until the cows come home about establishing benchmarks and

[2] Editor's note: Susan has written full descriptions of Arnold and his classmates in *Caught in the Middle: Nonstandard Kids and a Killing Curriculum* (Ohanian, 2001).

[3] Editor's note: Keith's full story can be found in *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* (Ohanian, 1999).

gates and hurdles and moats, but insisting that everybody must learn the same things is a terrible fraud. When kids with serious learning difficulties are taught everything, they end up not learning much of anything. It's far better to read *Hop on Pop* than no book at all.

My partner and I read aloud—books ranging from *The Acorn People* to *Incident at Hawk's Hill* to *The Great Gilly Hopkins* to *Flat Stanley*. Yes, *Flat Stanley*. Volatile and vulnerable seventh and eighth graders need the silliness of *Stanley* as much as the deep ethical challenges of the *Acorn People*, which was, by the way, the perfect book for our group, which became known throughout the school for mentoring children with Down Syndrome; Keith was their greatest mentor.

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I place high value on students hearing good words, but listening and appreciating isn't reading. I insist that at its core, reading is a solitary act: each student sitting with a book—in silence. Of course there is a community of learners, but it still comes down to the kid and the book. Success in a language arts classroom is when each child finds a book that will knock his socks off.

Resist Much, Obey Little

When I taught at an alternative high school, our two-room learning center was officially part of the district, but our charge was to keep our irregular students out of the regular school. We had three rules: No drugs, no swearing, and read for half an hour a day in material not related to the curriculum. I judged a book a success when a student closed the last page and asked, "Do you have any more?" Does any kid look up from mandated curriculum and ask, "Do you have more?" Students told me they'd read more books in three months at our center than they'd read in ten years in regular schooling.

I know some colleagues will agree with the inspector from the State Education Department: all this reading may be fine in its place, but it isn't *literature*. Herr Standardista saw students reading Dick Francis, Max Brand, Paul Zindel, William Goldman, Paula Danziger, and Cynthia Voigt and complained about the quality of our *literature*. I pointed out that many of the students had also read Poe stories, Frank Conroy, Ambrose Bierce, Frank Stockton, James Thurber, John Hersey, and so on. One student borrowed Bettelheim's *Truants from Life* off my desk. But the inspector insisted, "What major work do your ninth graders read?" I told him Janelle was reading a book that combined *Romeo and Juliet* with *West Side Story*. Herr Standardista wanted to see class sets. I wrote a letter of protest to the state commissioner of education, insisting that if they wished to send out any more inspectors, they'd have to do it after schools hours, as I would not again subject my students to anybody sneering at the books that overflowed our shelves and kept them reading.

When I showed Jack an article in *Harper's* about Scrabble hustlers in New York City, he noted that serious players prefer the *Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary* because it has lots of extra word lists, words beginning with the same prefix, and so on. I insisted that for launching his Scrabble career, our *American Heritage Dictionary* would surely be adequate, but Jack pestered until I ordered *Funk and Wagnall's*. To tell the truth, I felt pretty good about telling my supervisor that a student had requested a dictionary recommended in *Harper's*.

Jack moved to a back corner of the room, taking the Scrabble board and the new dictionary with him. He stayed there for six months. As the most obnoxious of the obnoxious, Jack probably started playing himself in Scrabble because nobody else would go near him, but then a passion for the quest took over. Jack sat there muttering, cursing, leafing through the dictionary. He spent long hours reading the dictionary. During this Scrabble marathon, Jack also read novels for at least half an hour a day, but he did no school assignments.

During Jack's Scrabble study, none of his classmates asked me, "How come?" How come they were working on school assignments and Jack wasn't? My experience is that most kids want to be regular and they don't complain when an

oddball gets irregular treatment. The simple matter was that nobody wanted to be like Jack. My supervisor, however, couldn't resist a few digs. He'd walk into the room, nod toward the corner, and say, "Jack still playing Scrabble?" I'd reply, "Yes, he's still *working* hard at it." Give the man credit. Having hired me, he then allowed me to be responsible. I won't pretend that my smile didn't become a little forced by the third month and even desperate by the fifth, but no one can *make* a student study anything. Remember Frank Smith's advice that when a student persists at the same irregular activity, doing it over and over, he isn't wasting time, isn't trying to get out of real work. Whether it's a third grader reading *Rumpelstiltskin* 16 days in a row or a kid obsessing over Scrabble, he persists at that activity because he's getting something important out of it.

Jack was engaged in the most difficult work of all—that silent, solitary, internal task of coming to grips with one's self, with one's own deepest needs. Jack's work meant first changing his view of himself and later figuring out where he might find a place for himself in the world. Finally Jack decided he was ready, and he challenged me to a game of Scrabble. He trounced me badly. It was an electric moment, more wonderful than words can express. The immediate results were that other students wanted to play Jack in Scrabble and Jack started working on the school curriculum.

Arnold and Keith and Jack and a few other students have become such an important leitmotif in my professional career that I can't stop telling their stories over and over. I knew at the time that Jack's Scrabble work was important, but years later I'm still learning about what it meant. In *Word Freak: Heartbreak, Triumph, Genius, and Obsession in the World of Competitive Scrabble Players*, Stefan Fatsis shows the reader that Scrabble at this level is about weirdness, extreme weirdness. It's also about linguistics, psychology, mathematics, memory, competition, doggedness. Scrabble at the national competitive level and with one out-of-kilter kid in a classroom set up for misfits is about mastering the rules; it's about failure and it's about hope.

Standing by Words

It is true that we are what we teach, but it is also true that the kids are what we teach. Six years of team teaching with someone who knew the 16 rules of syllabification didn't heal my own hyphenation deficits, but it showed me a whole lot about teaching temperament. Except in our shared dedication to teaching both to and from individual student needs, we were polar opposites, and yet we liked and respected one another and worked extremely well together. Surely there's no one best teaching style any more than there's any one best learning style. What a teacher needs to do is find her own style and gnaw her own bone, ignoring the clamor of bandwagons that go careening by. In Jung's words, "The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases."

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Wendell Berry, Kentucky poet, farmer, and teacher, tells us what does apply in all cases. Berry writes often of the accountability of words and of deeds faithful to words. If we "stand by our words," insists Berry, then we must speak in specifics about this child and this curriculum. When we are unable to stand by our words, we fall back on the dictates of Standardistas, resorting to the slippery language of public relations, which means abandoning our students to political abstractions.

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Susan Ohanian, a longtime teacher and freelance writer, is a fellow at the Vermont Society for the Study of Education and the Education Policy Research Unit at Arizona State University. She maintains a Web site of resistance to Standardistas at http://www.susanohanian.org, and can be reached at susano@gmavt.net.

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