

# Urban Schools

## *Day Camps or Custodial Centers?*

---

*Mr. Haberman would encourage those engaged in reconstruction and reform of urban schools to devote some effort to reconsidering their assumptions about what a school is and what the participants do there.*

BY MARTIN HABERMAN

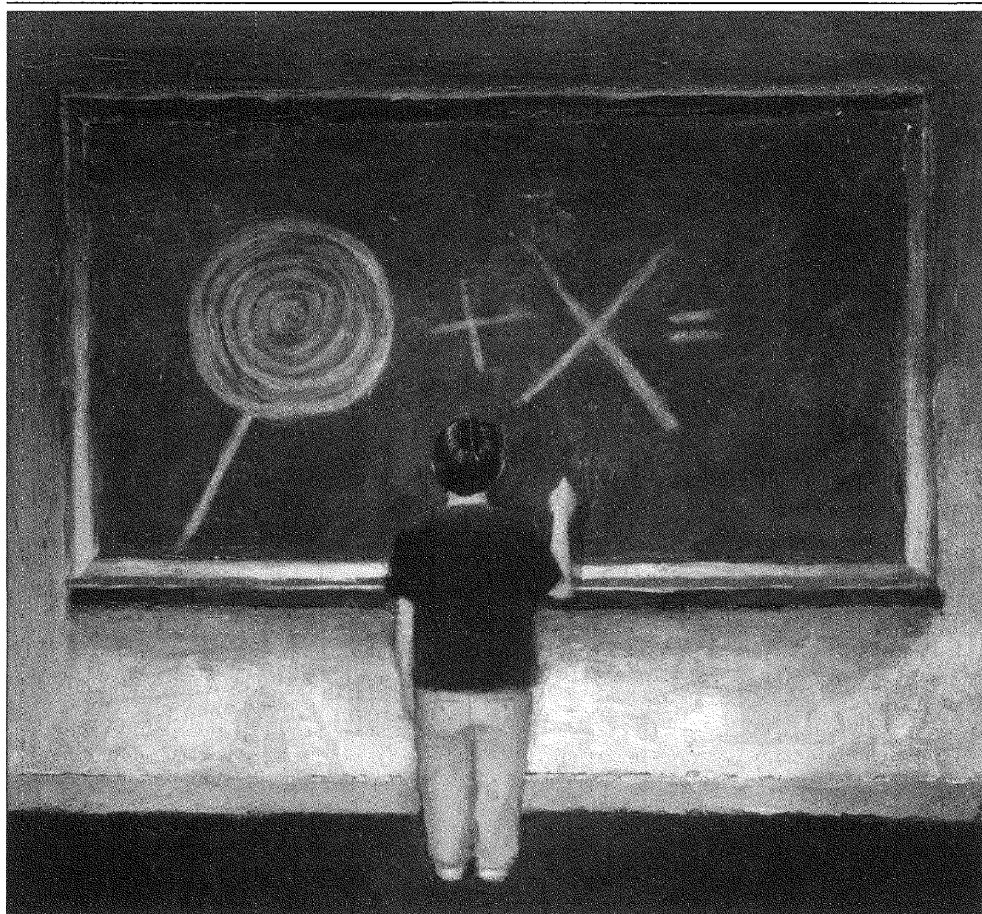


Illustration by Bill Tsukuda

**L**ANGUAGE IS NOT an innocent reflection of how we think. The terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement. We can see only as far as our language allows us to see.

In common usage, the places children and youths who live in urban poverty are required to attend for 180 days each year are “schools.” We call them schools because the people who pay for them, work in them, and send their children to them assume them to be schools. It is certainly true that teaching and learning do occur there — for part of the day, for some of those involved. But using a part-time activity as the defining term for the institution would also support calling these places cafeterias, recreation centers, or community centers because eating, playing, and socializing also occur there for part of each day. Indeed, in many urban “schools,” more time is actually spent on these other activities than on teaching and learning.

Whether a place is really a school also depends on its stated purpose and its actual functioning. Of course, we must determine whether that stated purpose derives from an assumption of what these places should be or from the perceived purposes of those who inhabit them and who actually determine what takes place in them. Clearly, our urban schools are schools by legal definition. But equally clearly, in terms of what they do, they are not.

These places are not schools any more than they are nutrition centers, playgrounds, or youth clubs. I would extend the argu-

---

*MARTIN HABERMAN is a Distinguished Professor in the School of Education, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. ©2000, Martin Haberman.*

ment further and add that the licensed professional staff members who work in these places are not “teachers,” that the children and youths in attendance are not “students,” and that the groups of youngsters gathered together in separate rooms are not “classes.” The unexamined assumption that the common usage of these terms carries universal meaning across all settings is a major obstacle to our understanding of what is really happening in “schools” that serve urban children and youths in poverty.

Analysts and researchers have written a great deal about and studied closely the failures of urban education. They have been misled — and in turn have misled others — into believing that the failure of urban “schools” has known causes and solutions. Essentially, more money, better teachers, better parenting, smaller classes, stronger principals, more testing, computer-assisted instruction, charter schools, and vouchers for parents will supposedly close the gap between children in urban poverty and their more advantaged counterparts.

Those who study urban “schools” seriously and those who merely report about them are equally handicapped. They assume that the common terms they use are informing their explanations when in fact the terms themselves prevent us from seeing events that are obvious and recurrent. The terms lock us into concepts that lead

us to misinterpret the real world of urban education. For all of us — including social scientists, educators, and the public — reality exists primarily in our mind’s eye. We are led to see by the terms that build our concepts, and the concepts are assumed to have universal meaning applicable to all settings. It is a process that inevitably lets us see a limited set of events in narrow ways and blinds us to other events that may be more powerful explanations of reality. Any one way of seeing leads to one way of knowing. Particular language sets up each way of seeing by limiting the categories we have chosen. Consider the following study.

I play a tape of samba music in my office. I then look out of my window and conduct a study of how well the people across campus are dancing to the music on my tape. I fill out rating scales that assess their grace, rhythm, and creativity. The problem with my study is that I am arbitrarily imposing these categories on the events. The “subjects” don’t understand that they are subjects. They believe they are waiting for a bus, talking to a friend, walking to their cars, or smoking a cigarette. My imposition of arbitrary language, concepts, and categories on the events outside my office window prevents me from gaining any real understanding of the behavior of the people I am observing. It al-

so limits and distorts my predictions of their future “dancing” achievements.

Imagine further that in my office I am surrounded by research colleagues and doctoral students who agree that my study is a valid test for assessing the dancing ability of those outside. Since they engage in the same type of studies, they are very familiar with the literature we have compiled to create our field. We conduct study after study and get very reliable results. It is not hard to imagine how, over time, we have come to delude ourselves into believing that we have valid understandings of our subjects’ “dancing” achievements. We have even identified factors that will impede or improve their “dancing,” such as the amount of snow, the outside air temperature, and whether or not they smoke in pairs. This imaginary example can shed light on the following events that actually occurred in a school with which I am familiar.

A new math program was being tested in an eighth-grade classroom in an urban middle school. More than 70% of the students lived in poverty. The program being demonstrated required that the students in the experimental classroom follow every aspect of the program for one period each day for one academic year. The producers of the math program had signed a very costly contract with the school board. The



---

contract guaranteed that more than 80% of the eighth-graders who completed the program would pass the district's math proficiency test and thereby be eligible to move on to high school.

In September, a representative of the math program arrived for a site visit. He was shocked to see the way in which the program was being taught to students. He determined that students were actually working on the program for less than half of the 50-minute period and that at least six students did no work at all. He reported that the class was "out of control" more than half of the time and that the math program was not receiving a fair test in this school. The final sentence of his report stated: "The students in these classrooms are not being required to spend their time on task, and the math program is not getting a fair trial." Looking out of his window, this researcher determined that these dancers were not even trying to keep time with the music.

As we think about what was actually happening in this middle school, we need to reconsider our use of the term "school." Half a period with most students on task is more than is typical in this school. When asked his highest priority, the principal of this "school" replied: "My job is to provide a safe and orderly environment. No teaching and learning can occur unless everyone here feels safe and secure — and really is." But what if most of everyone's time and energy every day is being spent on issues directly or indirectly related to creating a safe environment? An examination of the criteria used by the district to evaluate principals suggests that this might in fact be the case. While much is *stated* about student achievement as the district's highest priority, the only principals who have ever been removed or reassigned are those who have "lost control of their buildings."

In one large city where I consult, approximately 100 principals were judged to be failing on the criterion of student achievement in their annual administrator evaluation. The district leaders then decided that they had no way to replace so many principals. The result was that almost all the principals who were "failures" on the achievement criterion were retained, and six principals who had "lost control of their buildings" were transferred. In other districts, principals deemed to be failing on the criterion of student achievement are reassigned to central office positions until the districts run out of positions

where the principals can do less harm.

In one midwestern state, the state legislature decided to help its main urban center by offering a lucrative early retirement package to the principals in its city schools. At last, a way to get rid of many failing principals! Unfortunately, after more than 200 principals chose to retire, the district realized that it could not replace them all and still comply with state certification laws. The result was that these principals were "officially retired" but hired back as day-to-day "consultants" at an exorbitant daily rate. The net effect of trying to get rid of principals whose schools did not raise achievement levels was to make them all double-dippers — on both the state and city payrolls. In city after city, the talk about using student achievement as the basic criterion for evaluating principals is just that — talk.

Prior to the start of the 1999 school year, Milwaukee's 160 principals were addressed by the police chief. The principals wanted a commitment that the police would help them cut down on violence. They were clearly miffed when the police chief urged them to solve their own problems and stated, "I don't want to take into custody every child who says, 'Johnny punched me.'"

The nation as a whole may be shocked by suburban and small-town school violence, but the urban story is quite different. There is a long history in this country of trying to solve the problem of urban school violence by locking it down and fencing it off. The general society places a higher priority on making the city safe as a workplace and as a locale for recreation than on making its schools safe or effective. It is not surprising, except perhaps to urban school principals, that the police chief would suggest that they handle their own problems and let him keep the city functioning.

When the teachers at the middle school that tested the math program were asked their most important function as teachers, they made such statements as the following: "My first job is to establish and maintain a well-managed classroom. That means having a few very important rules and following them religiously. If I don't do that from day one, there will be chaos, lots of stress, and wasted time." These comments were also supported by the perceptions of the building principals and central office administrators, who unanimously agreed that the teachers' first job is to create a well-

organized classroom in which everyone knows what is expected and understands the consequences of misbehavior.

But what if teachers expend most of their energy on classroom management and discipline? And what if teachers spend most of their time interacting and communicating with students on issues of living more effectively in and outside of school? As is the case with principals, while much is said about the accountability of teachers for student achievement, teachers are not removed because their students are not learning enough but because they are unable to manage and control their classrooms.

The primacy of classroom management in determining who is a satisfactory teacher mimics the criterion used to evaluate principals and schools. It is also accepted as the centerpiece of teacher training. If student teachers or interns are asked why they don't even apply to teach in urban districts or if practicing teachers are asked why they have quit or failed in urban schools, they typically respond that they are afraid that they will be unable to manage the classroom or that they will be unable to deal with the continuous stress of doing so.

After 40 years of studying urban schools nationally, I have never dealt with a school board, superintendent, central office administrator, principal, teacher, or teacher aide who did not agree that the ability to manage and organize students is the operational criterion for evaluating professional staff. The other common reasons for seeking to remove a principal or teacher from an urban school also focus on matters other than learning. They involve various forms of moral turpitude, the inability to get along with school staff, complaints from parents, the teaching of evolution, the inability to complete required paperwork, antagonizing local religious groups, committing a crime, hitting a student, or using inappropriate films, books, or materials. Urban educators who *can* control and manage their classrooms and schools are not removed simply because students are not learning.

A recent study of Title I (an eight-billion-dollar program focused on disadvantaged students) shows that teacher aides spend 60% of their time actually teaching (41% of this time without a teacher present). In many cases, aides are teaching in situations that call for the most sophisticated level of professional practice. They are expected to teach students the teacher cannot control or relate to and has kicked

---

out of class or students with learning problems or students who need to be motivated. These very demanding tasks, which require the most knowledge, skill, and experience, are being performed by individuals with little preparation. The more highly trained professional (i.e., the teacher) teaches those without problems or those who will follow directions. If the teacher works on keeping things under control and the aide actually teaches the most challenging students, what does that tell us about the primary purpose of "teaching" in the urban "school"?

In the two urban teacher education programs in which I work, we fail teacher interns if we judge that the students in their classes are not learning. We refer to folders of student work and expect to see progress in students' work products. If the intern teacher we want to drop has children not learning but can control the classroom, the school principal and other teachers inevitably resist our decision. In the real world of urban schools, learning is not used as the primary criterion for judging teachers. Indeed, if an intern does not send students to the office, does not complain to parents, and can keep a lid on the classroom, that intern is considered successful regardless of how much or how little is being taught or learned in his or her classroom.

**G**IVEN THE limitations of our common language, I would describe successful and failing urban "schools" in the following manner. "Successful urban schools" appear to have many of the qualities of successful day camps. Attendees are cared for and treated well while they go through a schedule of daily activities. The members of the staff in these day camps relate well to the campers and generally seem to enjoy their work. They recognize that the campers are really in control; that is, the staff members do not try to coerce young people into doing things they find onerous or unpleasant because there would be resistance or even disruption.

Staff members in these day camps are sophisticated enough to realize that life will be more pleasant for everyone if the campers are kept mollified and busy. As a result, they choose activities that will keep the campers occupied; a few activities that the campers really enjoy are offered less frequently as rewards and incentives. These incentives encourage the

campers to engage in the less enjoyable time-filler activities. Many of the activities involve practicing a skill, picking up some information, and perhaps occasionally learning a concept. These are essentially incidental learnings that are not cumulative; they do not add up to any serious in-depth knowledge of any field of study. They are bits and pieces of random learning.

Such learning is typical of what happens in many good day camps. Campers enjoy their summer and in the process may learn a few things about nature, archery, or how to make a lanyard. Because their "studies" are pursued as time fillers and kept painless, there is little expectation that anything will be learned systematically or pursued to any great depth. A day camp, even a good one, does not have persistent learning in the basic disciplines as its goal. More likely, campers will remember the camp song, a contact with an animal they cared for, a fish they caught, or a friend they made.

Contrary to the stereotypes, many successful urban schools are actually pleasant places to be. The participants have feelings of attachment and belonging. They also feel affection and respect for many of the teachers.

"Poor urban schools," on the other hand, seem to be custodial institutions in which participants are held and managed without voluntary compliance. Again, language is difficult to find that can fully describe such settings. The "teachers" and the "students" are unhappy to be there. The activities may appear similar to those in the day camps, but the "teachers" are not as successful at making activities palatable and at engaging the students. The "teachers" escalate rather than de-escalate problems. The "students" are more obvious about their "try and make me" attitudes. Days pass amid much stress and even anger on the part of all participants. Little or no in-depth learning is achieved. The difference between the day camp and the custodial institution has to do with the quality of life, not the quality of learning. Many participants learn more math-like information and read more in custodial institutions than in day camps, while for others the reverse is true.

Clearly, school districts have intensified their focus on the custodial functions still further. To protect against possible violence, many districts have initiated policies of banning book bags or backpacks in order to avoid searches for weapons.

These districts have announced that they will provide two sets of books for all students so that carrying books back and forth will not be necessary.

But announcements such as these are media spin, not honest problem solving. In the 120 largest urban school districts (as well as in many smaller cities), there are not enough texts to go around, let alone enough for duplicate sets. In a typical urban school, some texts can be found that are 10 years old or older, and there are not enough of those. The book bag distortion is even more transparent when we are forced to admit that urban middle school students do not take textbooks home to do homework anyway and that for most males the practice of not carrying anything but food or balls begins in fourth grade or earlier. The number of urban children and youths who arrive each morning without even a pencil far exceeds the number who carry textbooks in their book bags. Actually, this is intelligent behavior on the part of the youngsters. Neither book bags nor pencils are required for participation in day camps or custodial institutions. The example of the book bags demonstrates that those who speak for urban "schools" are unaware or unwilling to admit that their institutions have been transformed.

The process by which a school is transformed is not easily recognized. The Chicago Public Schools have recently announced that district's intention to create a new school: the Junior ROTC School. It will be housed in an old armory building. The hours will be from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m., and each day will begin with breakfast. The teachers will be given the rank of captain and will be addressed by this title. Students who are determined to misbehave will be dismissed. The afternoon schedule will include recreational activities. The description of the program makes it clear that enculturation into the military will be the pervasive purpose of the curriculum. While opportunities will exist for graduates to prepare for postsecondary institutions, the avowed purpose of this school will be to increase the future pool of applicants to the military.

Most reasonable people would agree that this institution would be a real improvement for the youngsters who attend. They will be safe, fed, treated fairly, and have many more of their developmental needs met than might be true in a typical Chicago school. Their medical needs will be recognized and even treated. They will,

---

---

to some degree, be clothed. Parents will have the program clearly explained to them. Junior ROTC will be a good place to be, but will it be a “school”? Using that term may communicate many incorrect assumptions about what is and is not happening there and why.

But most urban schools will not provide the wraparound services of a Junior ROTC School. They will continue to be places in which many teachers will continue to feel stressed and frustrated because they spend so much of their time focusing on management issues rather than on learning. Other teachers will feel successful because they are relating well and connecting with the youngsters. Still others will be burned out and defeated because they can neither manage nor relate well. In a very real sense, urban schools are no longer involved in any culture war; they have been decisively defeated and transformed by the forces of poverty.

**WHAT WOULD** be the benefit of using new language to describe more accurately the nature of urban schools and what really happens in them? There would be countless advantages to being able to explain what is truly happening and to predict the outcomes of improvement strategies. Consider just three possible outcomes: cutting down the number of dropouts, improving teacher training, and increasing our understanding of what is happening.

If we examine the dropout rate from urban high schools, we are told that it is a little over 3% per year and approximately 13% over four years. But if we list the names of eighth-graders and then look for these youngsters four years later on the graduation lists of their schools, we find that more than half of them are missing. In some cities the number missing approaches 70%. Middle school youngsters who are at risk of dropping out are much more likely to quit or disappear *before* they even get to high school than they are to drop out of high school. In almost all the major urban districts, youngsters must now pass required tests in order to continue on into high school. Those who fail should not be regarded as just having failed in middle school. They have also failed to learn the skills and knowledge required of them in their previous eight years.

The high-stakes test at the end of middle school is the very first time that many

of these youngsters have ever been faced with learning criteria that have real consequences. It is very likely that they have attended nurturing day camps or custodial institutions where they have been cared for or simply watched over but not taught the stated curriculum. For these youngsters, catching up with all the skills and knowledge that were skimmed in their elementary “schools” is an insurmountable task.

While most people will agree that social promotion is wrong and should be stopped, it may very well be that these youngsters were not socially promoted. It is likely that they participated in whatever activities were offered to them. It would be more accurate to describe them as victims of a system in which the results of their previous achievement tests were never fed back into their school programs in any way. Youngsters were not passed to higher grades because the staff followed a policy of social promotion but because the youngsters were actually successful — success being defined as participating or being in attendance when the experiences were offered.

Participants cannot fail a day camp or a custodial institution. If the goal is keeping people safe and occupied, then the most rational criterion for judging them

to be successful is attendance; that is the reason youngsters largely untouched by serious teaching or learning are passed along. These youngsters have simply not been functioning as students or participating in schools. Little learning of any consequence can occur in a one-period jolt. Serious learning requires sustained activity over days, weeks, and months. And much of that activity is unpleasant *work*. In the “schools” that youngsters in poverty attend, staff members are fixated on management and getting through each day. By themselves, there is nothing wrong with activities such as making a turkey from a paper bag or visiting a museum or viewing a video on Eskimos. But whether the activities have learning potential or are merely jejune time fillers is determined by the teacher’s ability to generate sustained effort. The bits and pieces of disconnected things without any cumulative meaning that are typically offered to these youngsters do not meet the standard for learning in any recognized field of knowledge.

The second benefit of having a more valid analysis of urban “schools” relates to teacher education. Given the nature of most of the activities performed by most urban teachers most of the time, it is clear that traditional university programs of teacher



“Barry’s drawing — his mother is a dentist.”

---

preparation are simply irrelevant to practice. A new profession of urban teaching has been created that involves hundreds of thousands of teachers demonstrating expertise drawn from their own life experiences and ideologies. These teachers are, in effect, teaching what they are as people, rather than any coherent body of content using pedagogy learned at the university.

The knowledge bases that can inform the personal-experience base currently used by successful urban teachers include a great variety of studies. Urban teachers have sophisticated craft knowledge that enables them to de-escalate violence, deal with a wide range of handicapping conditions in the same class, cooperate with other human service and health professionals, communicate in the informal codes and languages of their diverse students, survive and function in the bureaucratic chaos of their districts, learn from parents and caregivers who are raising children and youths under extremely debilitating conditions, recognize the symptoms and uses of pharmaceuticals and street drugs, interact with teenage mothers in realistic ways, use computers and information systems for academic purposes and for securing services and opportunities for students, understand how religious participation is affecting the behaviors of their students, and deal realistically with the impact of peer groups on the lives of their students.

Such advanced craft knowledge in these and numerous other areas is not the same order of knowledge as that which might be gained from taking a university course. Indeed, it is highly likely that, for urban teachers, selection is far more important than training. But before we can add to these teachers' knowledge bases, we first have to develop language that more accurately describes the nature of their daily work. Referring to them as "school" teachers misleads us into assuming that 1) we know what they do all day when we don't, 2) we can improve their "teaching" when they may be practicing lifesaving instead, and 3) we can evaluate their performance using criteria that are completely unaligned with most of the functions they perform.

A third potential value of changing the language we use to analyze urban schools is that we would thereby gain a number of new, important, more valid insights. These would enable professional educators and the public to decide consciously whether they are engaged in a process of

trying to improve a school, a day camp, or some form of custodial institution. One example of a new way of looking at classrooms has to do with the perception of many teachers that they can control student behavior by shaping it. For example, when students finish an assignment, they may be given candy or a ticket for some free fast food. (Teachers in Milwaukee spend approximately \$550 of their own money each year on food and other rewards.) Unless we overcome the common language used to describe this transaction, we are trapped in the false assumption that completing an assignment means the students have somehow been led to learn something or become more interested in learning something.

But an outside-the-box observation and some different language might describe the situation this way. The students are not participating in any learning activity at all but in a game that involves obtaining some reward for doing as little as possible in the most superficial way. The game they are playing with the teacher might be called "What do I get for following your directions?" In this episode, it is the students who are shaping the teacher's behavior. By complying, they reward the teacher; by not complying, they punish him or her. Since teachers decide that an activity works or does not work according to whether or not the students comply, they are continuously and systematically being shaped by the students. Eventually, the teacher offers only activities that the students are willing to do. The rewards the teacher is able to offer to students (food, recess, and so on) are much less powerful than the rewards and punishments the students can offer the teacher. The students' compliance (rewarding the teacher) provides the teacher with feelings of efficacy, self-definition as a competent professional, and the approval of superiors and colleagues. The students' non-compliance (punishing the teacher) causes the teacher serious stress, self-doubt, nervous headaches, and sleepless nights.

Who holds the most potent means for shaping behavior? Actually, both groups are learning a great deal. The students learn not to do anything for its intrinsic value and not to persist in any activities beyond the time and effort needed to gain an immediate prize. The teacher learns that, if the children are not pushed beyond what they will readily do, everyone will be less stressed and feel more successful. The term

"teacher" is misleading here because it assumes that the individual occupying that role is more powerful than the "students." Our language and its underlying assumptions are what prevent us from seeing who is really in charge and the long-term consequences of such an arrangement.

In the larger sense, those who stay the 13-year course and graduate from urban high schools are greater victims than the dropouts. They have been led to believe that they have acquired knowledge and skills that they do not have. As they try to move into the world of work, they discover that they cannot meet employers' expectations. In postsecondary institutions, they realize that they lack the most basic prerequisite knowledge for benefiting from the courses. It is typical for students in European and Asian high schools who are learning English as a second or even third language to have more advanced English skills than many of the graduates of our urban schools.

The arguments and media stories about whether our students should study a Western curriculum or should be offered a more culturally diverse program are just so much piffle. We are talking about students who graduate from our urban high schools who have never read a book all the way through, who cannot explain what causes the seasons, who do not know the branches of the federal government, and who cannot compute with fractions. How is it possible that, after 13 years of full-time successful participation, students of normal intelligence are essentially ignorant of material required in fourth grade? The answers we have been given typically focus on the inadequacies of the students, their families, their cultures, their abilities, or their race and ethnic background. A more obvious answer needs to be considered: these individuals have not been attending schools; they have not been engaged in sustained learning. What it would take to enable teachers to engage in sustained teaching will require another transformation of urban "schools."

I freely confess that I have not yet developed language adequate to the task of fully describing these places and predicting events in them. I am equally certain that these places are not "schools." I would encourage those engaged in reconstruction and reform to devote some effort to reconsidering their assumptions about what a school is and what the participants do there. **KK**