September 20, 2012

NE: UNL health center privatization draws advisory board’s concerns. The student board members wanted to know how the university would ensure the new provider would maintain the same quality of services the health center offers. Because students and health center faculty weren’t consulted in the decision to issue an RFP and privatize the health center, the board wanted to know how it will be able to express its opinion in the provider selection process after the RFP is due Oct. 5. Daily Nebraskan

IL: What does the Chicago strike mean for the national fight against privatization and corporate “school reform”? By early this week, the truth was hard to avoid and impossible to deny. The Chicago Teachers strike threatened to expose the vast gulf between some of the president’s rhetoric about preserving public education and protecting teachers, and the savagery of the Obama administration’s Race To The Top initiative, which ties federal education funding to how many public schools are closed and privatized, how many public school teachers fired, and how many of those remaining are evaluated according to business-friendly norms like test scores. Voice of Detroit

LA: Plan to Drive Working-Class Blacks out of New Orleans Preceded Katrina. The story of black displacement from New Orleans typically describes a post-Katrina conspiracy of white conservative elites and ambitious black politicians to change the city’s economic, political and social character. Low-income African-Americans displaced by the flood were denied financing for home repairs, and their public housing was demolished. But as John Arena demonstrates in
his passionate new book, **Driven From New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization**, this displacement strategy was conceived, and implementation began, in the late 1980’s, well before Hurricane Katrina.  

**GA: Toll lanes move ahead.** State transportation leaders vowed they are full steam ahead on the plan to build optional toll lanes in metro Atlanta, including building new ones on I-85 north of Old Peachtree Road. Even so, their biggest toll project ran into unusual dissent on the Department of Transportation’s board Wednesday… But at the board meeting Wednesday, arguments about the project erupted. Board member Dana Lemon said she was “really concerned” at the “huge” amount of state gas tax money that would go toward this project alone: $300 million, or perhaps much more. [The Atlanta Journal-Constitution](https://www.ajc.com/)

**On Teachers.** Teachers, educators, intellectuals, and concerned citizens of all calling rose up—in one voice, with one statement: children are not widgets. Children, they said, should be the last treated as lab rats by Wall Street tycoons fanatically invested in privatizing all public institutions; and the Bush Administration knew the fight wouldn’t end simply by facing down insurgent teachers, for bullies, in the end, are greatly unpopular. Thus the scheme of paying “good” teachers—those who followed instruction to the T—and firing “bad” ones—those who questioned why a child’s ability for greatness had to pass through channels of narrow questions with even narrower sets of “multiple” answers. And many fell for it—even liberals otherwise committed to alleviating the profound political burdens crushing teachers. And in one fell swoop, the neoliberal cast cleaned house. [Counterpunch](https://www.counterpunch.org/)

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**Beyond "Good" and "Bad"**

**On Teachers**

by TOLU OLORUNDA

The teacher must have a genuine interest in mental activity on his own account, a love of knowledge that unconsciously animates his teaching.

—John Dewey, *How We Think*[1](https://www.counterpunch.org/)

[1](https://www.counterpunch.org/)
Teachers cannot follow the medieval tradition of detached withdrawal from the world. … They cannot be pedants or dilettantes, they cannot be mere technicians and higher artisans, they have got to be social statesmen and statesmen of high order.


Social relations in the classroom that glorify the teacher as the expert, the dispenser of knowledge, end up crippling student imagination and creativity; in addition, such approaches teach students more about the legitimacy of passivity, than about the need to examine critically the lives they lead.

—Henry Giroux, Teachers as Intellectuals[3]

The slam poet Taylor Mali is best known for “What Teachers Make,” a prescient poem recounting a dinner party conversation with a witless lawyer whose views, while acidic, well reflect dominant thought in this society:

He says the problem with teachers is, “What’s a kid going to learn

From someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?”

He reminds the other dinner guests that it’s true what they say about teachers:

Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.[4]

“I mean, you’re a teacher, Taylor,” the lawyer pesters on. “Be honest: What do you make?”

While Mali took hold of this moment to remind him why intelligent people, the world over, consider teaching the most important profession, this question, of what teachers make, elicits not so bad a concern. The National Education Association reports that from 2007–2008 starting salary for teachers dipped low as $24,872, with most earning on average between $37,764 and $59,304, contingent on area income of living, district funding, etc.[5] Another report revealed in 2006 teachers “earned 85.7% as much (14.3% less or $154 less) in weekly wages as did those in … comparable occupations”—based on “raw skill requirements” and “market valuation of these skills”—“representing a 2.3 percentage point erosion in relative teacher pay since 2002.”[6]

Society does not care much for its teachers—no ground-breaking declaration. Yes, it demands teachers of the highest caliber command classrooms. Yes, it rewards the “good” ones and punishes the “bad” ones. Yes, it moralizes on and on about why schools serve as critical sites of social activity, and why this Great Equalizer must employ the best and brightest taxpayer dime can afford. But society has proved, consistently, unwilling to take timely steps to ensure affordable living wages and encouraging environments that make the work easier done.

Teachers might receive less pay but are more monitored. They are constantly called into offices to have their works, teaching styles, and instructional models reviewed. They are watched closely by administrators seemingly overprotective of the students placed in their cares. They wield little autonomy over curriculum content and its application in the classroom. They must
operate within narrow, allotted time schedules to carry out insurmountable loads of work. They are often berated by parents when kids fail tests and unappreciated when the same kids succeed. They face sharp, unannounced wage cuts while still expected to carry on business as usual—even when unable to secure decent housing to sleep at night. Through all, they arrive first and leave last—constantly grading papers and engaging in other laborious, time-sapping work. They help students see a world far beyond the hierarchical design schools are dominantly structured after. They inspire hope in the minds of children whose homes speak of anything but life and meaning.

Here, I speak of honorable teachers—better yet, educators; best yet, transformative intellectuals. Conventional wisdom suggests the scrawls of a leftist thinker shouldn’t contain these words: but not all teachers serve the public good. Some are simply technicians, de-skilled instructors—utterly disengaged from the lives and identities of the students into whom they breathe life daily—while others, with courage and compassion, help redeem millions of kids once thought of lost and irrecoverable. And I speak a great deal from experience.

I’ve had teachers I often conjured semi-violent fantasies about. And I’ve had teachers whose unrelenting empathy pushed through to pull me out of academic burning houses, lit with the matchsticks of apathy. I’ve had teachers I believed had personal vendettas or scores to settle against me, for whatever reasons; and I’ve had teachers who displayed deep interests in seeing me successful and great at school. I’ve had teachers whose smugness and cowardly hubris pushed me far away from class; and I’ve had teachers whose love kept me in antsy anticipation of the next day’s work.

There are teachers who simply go with the flow, concerned only about the paycheck a month’s hard work brings. And there are those who reject the narrative that kids must be stripped of their agency, seated in straight lines and taught objectively.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 drew a distinct line between these two kinds of teachers. It knew those who failed to find students endless sources of inspiration, filled with limitless potentials, wouldn’t dare raise objection to the crude thought of Teaching to the Test. But it also knew thousands across the country would never take this sweeping assault on the educational process lying down; teachers who understood curriculum delivered in an “engaging, exciting manner” makes “teaching to the test … unnecessary.”[7]

Teachers, educators, intellectuals, and concerned citizens of all calling rose up—in one voice, with one statement: children are not widgets. Children, they said, should be the last treated as lab rats by Wall Street tycoons fanatically invested in privatizing all public institutions; and the Bush Administration knew the fight wouldn’t end simply by facing down insurgent teachers, for bullies, in the end, are greatly unpopular. Thus the scheme of paying “good” teachers—those who followed instruction to the T—and firing “bad” ones—those who questioned why a child’s ability for greatness had to pass through channels of narrow questions with even narrower sets of “multiple” answers. And many fell for it—even liberals otherwise committed to alleviating the profound political burdens crushing teachers. And in one fell swoop, the neoliberal cast cleaned house. The trick worked: officializing the notion that obedient teachers equal great teachers and
submissive students equal successful students. Four decades back, radical educator Paulo Freire was sounding the alarm against this idiocy:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.[8]

Therefore, the better students relinquish all right to critical thinking, the greater their chances of straight A’s. Teacher orders “Sit!” and like trained dogs they must submit without protest. Teacher springs a “pop quiz,” and they must bow their heads and complete (compete?) complaint-free. Students, in this context, must be controlled at all costs, a concept which worked well with 1st grader “Lamya Cammon,” whose teacher late 2009 cut off some of her braids because she made noise with the plastic beads attached to them. “Stress” and “frustration,” the union said, provoked the teacher.[9]

Teacher as Totalitarian models measure intelligence not on artistic, scientific, or social skill, but on how successfully a student fully follows instructions. Other forms feature Teacher as Omniscient and Teacher as Sovereign—though not as sovereign as the principal or school board or chancellor, who can flip a pen and lay off hundreds at once. Teachers, within this frame, must inculcate into students unwavering obeisance to authority—a practice sure to end democracy faster than any plots conjured by cave-ensconced terrorists. Education theorist Janice Hale, documenting her son’s early-childhood experiences a decade ago, shared some of the creative language used to ring the message home:

When I picked up my son, I was told that he was definitely a smart little boy. He had correctly solved twenty-four of the twenty-six items on a language concepts test. However, he refused to participate in the other tests because he wanted to play with the toys and play with the other children.

The director explained to me that they wanted only children who do what the teacher tells them to do. … She said that they draw a circle of behaviors and accept only those children who fall within the circle.[10]

The circle forms a great metaphor for what schooling has largely become: an impenetrable cocoon suffocating all attempts at self-expression. Students don’t walk into the circle. The circle is drawn to enclose them, meaning many aren’t even aware they stand in the circle, much less begin coming to terms with its consequences. The “circle of behaviors” not so much connotes keeping “things in order” or ensuring “security,” as defining their destiny before they do so themselves. It is about building boundaries to curtail unacceptable conduct in neo-Nixonian terms of “Law” and “Order.” It is about prepping kids for a society not too fond of dissent and difference. “Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do,” as John Gatto observed two decades back:
This is the most important lesson of them all: we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives. If I’m told that evolution is a fact instead of a theory, I transmit that as ordered, punishing deviants who resist what I have been told to tell them to think. This power to control what children will think lets me separate successful students from failures very easily.[11]

Kids in many public schools today resemble greatly a model community of I, Robots—unquestioningly submitted to the policies and control of curriculum and corporations. And while mainstream liberal critiques of the education system usually aim well at government practices and problems, the encroaching corporate seizure of public education receives undue address. With growing autonomy wielded by companies over federal regulations, even governments fall serf to financial hostage from corporate overlords. So even if, by some stroke of luck and tireless activity, elected officials enact strident legislations to roll back the intrusion of private firms into public schools, far more work would be required, on a grassroots level, to ensure this last domain of moral democracy remains undefiled.

The greater work, yet, would have to come from conscionable teachers—whose students are most vulnerable. “Teacher authority can never be neutral; nor can it be assessed in terms that are narrowly ideological,” Henry Giroux informed a few years back. “It is always broadly political and interventionist in terms of the knowledge-effects it produces, the classroom experiences it organizes, and the future it presupposes in the countless ways in which it addresses the world.”[12] The role—far from function—of teachers demands more than tallying attendance, unleashing tests, and signing bathroom passes. It is no more satisfactory to say, I’m a teacher because I teach students, or I’m a teacher because I work in a classroom. And perhaps this best separates teachers from educators because no teacher of good conscience would rather call armed officers (an increasing, ubiquitous presence in public schools these days) on a student acting unruly, shutting firm the doors of redemption and delivering more disposable bodies into the belly of the punishment beast.

Nothing good comes of children arrested, humiliated, and dragged off in handcuffs for petty infractions. With raging frequency these days, ambitious and idealistic White teachers, lacking grounding in history or cultural sensitivity, trample down the self-esteem of Black and Brown students. Two years ago, a New York suburban middle school White teacher, trying to teach a lesson on slavery, bound the hands and feet of two Black girls, before having them crawl under desks representing slave ships.[13] Two years prior, a Kentucky high school White teacher, Paul Dawson, had ordered a Black student: “Sit down, nigger!” The honor roll student, Keysean Chavers, hurled the word first, Dawson claimed (though Chavers denied). “Stunned,” he blurted: “Get away from the door, nigger!” And he did so because “that’s sort of what I’ve been trained to do.” The school board, obviously concerned for Chavers, suspended Dawson for 10 days and palmed him with the All-Mighty Corrective of “Diversity Training.”

With Black men barely breaking 2% of the 4.8 million teachers nationwide,[14] no less dramatic a noun than crisis should command the attention of those who still think inner-city schools must be rectified—and quick!—to smash to bits the school-to-prison pipeline funnelling millions of Black and Brown youth into juvenile halls and jail cells. Surely if White men lacked so great a representation in classrooms, then town halls, conferences, emergency meetings, expanded
scholarship opportunities and the like would be at once dispatched to help salvage what would take expression as a National Tragedy.

For Black males born into female-headed, single-parent households, the issue complicates further. Teachers working in inner-city classrooms should respond with greater sensitivity to this truly national tragedy. A Black male teacher might serve as the sole worthy male factor (or father figure) in the child’s life. And for many low-income kids, the classroom often represents a rare steady, stable surrounding (even a healing community). The least asked of conscionable teachers is to make it as loving, caring, healing, and alleviating as possible.

Great teachers count because a child trapped in deleterious domestic conditions can, through the gift of learning, be removed from the pain and punishment of abuse and abandonment. Great teachers—not just “good” ones: those craven before neoliberal forces—help restore the humanity of a child whose world is frequently and arbitrarily turned asunder. Great teachers pose striking threats to the plan for privatization, making life hard for corporations to invade the classroom unopposed. Great teachers stay focused all times, “linking empowerment—the ability to think and act critically—to the concept of social transformation.”[15]

This essay excerpted from The Substance of Truth.

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