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All Else Equal: Are Public and Private Schools Different?

Luis Benveniste, Martin Carnoy, & Richard Rothstein, Routledge Farmer, 206 pages, \$19.95.

Education, Inc.: Turning Learning into a Business.

ed. by Alfie Kohn and Patrick Shannon, Heinemann, 179 pages, \$19.

In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization.

Deborah Meier, Beacon Press, 200 pages, \$24.00.

Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement.

John U. Ogbu, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 320 pages, \$32.50.

Reviewed by Tom Gallagher

In housing projects and corporate boardrooms, from left to right, Alaska to Alabama, it seems everyone's got something to say about the performance of America's schools. If we can speak of such a thing as an American national philosophical debate, this may be it.

Readers of Benveniste, Carnoy, & Rothstein's comparison of public and private schools, *All Else Equal: Are Public and Private Schools Different?*, may actually be surprised to learn that about 90 percent of the nation's kindergarten to twelfth grade students attend public schools and that this proportion has remained steady for the past half century. After all, as Kohn and Shannon's anthology, *Education, Inc.: Turning Learning into a Business*, documents, there have tremendous efforts in recent years both to privatize public education as well as to standardize it. Renowned public school principal Deborah Meier's *In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization* decries this latter development in particular as inimical to what public education ought to be, could be, and — in the schools with which she has been connected — has been. She also notes that "So much of the (education) debate, across political lines, is about children of color, even when it is not explicitly so." This relationship between schools and race is generally treated with averted vision, but this is decidedly not the case with John Ogbu's *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*, a book that for that very reason will not receive the attention it deserves.

No disrespect to his successor intended, but *The New York Times'* decision to replace Richard Rothstein as its national education columnist earlier this year was a great loss for serious writing on education outside of publications aimed specifically at educators. Fortunately Rothstein, along with World Bank Education Specialist Luis Benveniste, and Stanford professor Martin Carnoy, has maintained his high standard in *All Else Equal*, an investigation of the proposition that private schools are more capable of innovation because of the "bureaucratic rules and rigid labor unions" that hamper public education.

After studying eight public and eight private schools in California, they concluded that “The most important variations between schools may be between schools of all types in different communities, not between public and private schools in the same community.”

They found wealthier parents more demanding in general, whether their kids went to public or private schools. In fact, so much greater was their ability to contribute time and money that parental over-involvement was actually considered something of a problem at some schools, to the point where teachers would leave over it. For lower-income parents, on the other hand, “Nonacademic matters, such as school safety and behavioral concerns, took precedence over strict academic concerns.” And private schools did have the edge in that area, because of their “prerogative to refuse admission to applicants or to return students with academic and behavioral problems to the public system.” On the other hand, they found “The discourse in lower-income public schools ... more focused around academic expectations and pedagogical matters” than in their private counterparts.

Surprisingly, they didn’t find the drastic difference in personnel policies that the general lack of unions in private schools might suggest. They note two cases in which principals and pastors wanted to fire unmarried pregnant Los Angeles Catholic school teachers for violation of their contract stipulation that they lead a “moral life,” only to be nixed by the Archdiocese, presumably because of the court battles it feared might ensue.

“Businesses criticize the job our schools are doing and then proceed to nail down every tax break they can get, further eroding the school’s ability to do the job.” This citation of the late Ohio Senator Howard Metzenbaum might well stand as a general preface to Education, Inc., anti-megatesting campaigner Alfie Kohn and education professor Patrick Shannon’s collection of fifteen essays devoted to the forces of commercialism, “market logic” (that’s testing), and privatization that currently press on public education.

Russ Baker’s essay “Stealth TV” describes one use to which business may put the savings won by successful anti-tax campaigning — buying advertising. Advertising in the schools. On Channel One, with its captive audience of millions of school children that it claims constitutes “a teen market 50 times larger than MTV’s”. Two of every twelve minutes those kids watch will be commercials like the back-to-back Mountain Dew and Twinkies ads that Baker watched. School districts go for the program because it meets someone’s notion of a legitimate use of instruction time, plus they get the equipment free and can broadcast on it themselves. And the deal is that the kids have to watch — a couple of Ohio kids drew a day in the County Juvenile Detention Center for refusing to.

Stephen Metcalf’s “Reading Between the Lines” concerns the big business of big testing, recounting how a publishing company executive told a group of stock analysts shortly after the 2000 election that a campaign quote on state testing and school-by-school report cards from President-elect Bush (I don’t really believe that either, but it was his official title at the time) “almost reads like our business plan.” Barbara Miner’s “For-Profits Target Education” includes the story of the cancellation of the Edison Schools’ charter by San Francisco’s Board of Education, the subsequent rechartering by the state, and the company’s hiring of a professional organizing and marketing company to drum up its “grassroots” support.

Education Inc.'s greatest strength is its juxtaposition of the arguments for the need for greater innovation in education with the frequently contradictory calls for greater standardization, both of which are used to argue for increased private sector participation and control over public education.

If you happen to be one of those people who thinks the whole national testing mania may be somewhat beside the point but figures it probably won't hurt anything that much, Deborah Meier wants to talk to you. In arguing that standardized tests, and the preparation for them, represent a theft of precious time from the true goals of education, her *In Schools We Trust* constitutes about as flattering a paean to the spirit of public education as you'll find anywhere these days.

Meier founded her first "community of learning" at New York City's Central Park East school in the early seventies within the district then considered least successful in the entire city. In five years there were three lower grade schools and then a high school; by 2000 there were forty high schools in the city working on the model. Amidst a citywide average high school dropout rate of 50 percent, 90 percent of Central Park East high school students were graduating and 90 percent of them were going to college. Meier is today principal of Boston's Mission Hill School, one of the "small pilot schools with much of the autonomy of charter schools but embedded firmly with the city's public system" that resulted from a proposal by the city's teachers union.

And what are these "communities of learning"? Well, Meier can tell you a lot about them; they involve "small classes, multiple-age classes, older students working with younger ones, adult volunteers, activities that cut across age and skill levels," but she can't exactly tell you what they are because part of the point of the small schools that she advocates is that there is no one way. "Learning in the company of adults" is about as tightly as she's willing to define the universal goal of schooling, but in that pursuit she is adamant that "we can create public schools for all children more like what we have traditionally offered our very best and wealthiest students."

Documentation is no small part of this process. To graduate from eighth grade at Mission Hill, students have to compile six portfolios of their work to present to a Graduation Committee. But one way in which they will not be evaluated, at least not any more than the state requires, is through standardized tests. For Meier, "the new regime of standardization is deadly medicine, with no redeeming virtues."

First off, there is what she calls the Lake Wobegone syndrome that has swept the country — the need for all of our children to be above average, as is the situation in the hometown of Garson Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* radio show. While many may not realize it, the grade level comparison tests so frequently in the news are "normed" to the performance of the average student. In other words, by definition, half always score above and half below 'grade level'. Yet, she reports, "Oklahoma now has a law specifying that 90 percent of its students in third grade should be on grade level on a currently normed test by 2007," adding that, "If the superintendent is lucky, that is sufficiently far in the future so that he or she will have moved on to another job somewhere else by then."

And what do the tests measure? Who know the right answers? And why? Meier notes that the makers of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests have compiled the scores on all questions by race and have noted some peculiar anomalies. For instance, despite the fact that "African Americans have consistently scored more than a hundred points below

white and Asian Americans,” there are some math problems that they are consistently more likely to get right. Why? No one knows. Examples are in the book; perhaps you can figure it out.

Then there’s the often laughable nature of state standards of instruction: “Students will research art genres (e.g., landscapes, seascapes, portraits), name an artist who worked in the genre, describe the artist’s work, and then create an artwork that reflects the genre.” From the curriculum of the Massachusetts College of Art? Nope, from California’s arts standards for kindergarten. (Those are five-year-olds, in case you’ve forgotten.)

That Meier’s small schools work is really beyond dispute at this point: “In the year 2000 the nearly forty small New York public high schools that came out of this period of work put together sufficiently compelling data to convince even a group of reputable and established test experts gathered together by a hostile commissioner of education that they were on to something important.” Rather, what Meier has had to confront is the argument that such schools cannot exist throughout the public school system because they are by their very nature a minority phenomenon dependent on the presence of an extraordinary leader. Although she thinks this is absolutely not the case, it has not yet been possible to persuade school superintendents to take the steps necessary for their proliferation.

The plight of America’s black students is generally recognized, but that does not mean that it is comfortably discussed. So when a 1997 story in *The Shakerite*, the public high school newspaper of Shaker Heights, Ohio, reported that the average Grade Point Average of the school’s black students was 1.6, compared to white students’ 2.87, it made for an uncomfortable situation in that affluent Cleveland suburb.

The facts of the story were not in dispute, but they were particularly hard to take in the Shaker Heights school system. The town had no blacks — or Jews — until the 1960s, only to subsequently become a seemingly model desegregated city. Thirty percent of the city’s population of 28,000 was now black, and black middle class parents took pride in getting their children into this system that was considered one of the best in the state.

And, in fact, the system’s black students did academically outperform black students in the rest of the state and the nation. But after the publication of the article, the local black-white gap could no longer be ignored, so the black community and the school district jointly hired U.C. Berkeley Anthropology Professor John Ogbu to study the situation, which resulted in *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. The fact that Ogbu is a Nigerian immigrant was undoubtedly critical to his choice, but it has not immunized him from accusations of blaming the victim.

The city’s whites generally thought the educational gap was due to differences in social class; blacks attributed it to racism. Shaker Heights’ black population’s economic standing is lower than that of its whites -- 58 percent of white households had 1990 income in excess of \$50,000, compared with 32.6 percent of black households, but Ogbu considered the economic difference insufficient to explain the academic gulf. Black students in the school district scored lower than whites on IQ tests and “they performed considerably lower on the SAT than predicted by their performance on the IQ test,” Ogbu writes. Sensitive stuff, given that only three years prior to the school newspaper article,

Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*, which claimed that blacks were less intelligent than whites, had been, as Deborah Meier writes, "a center of serious debate -- and serious praise ... and not just among right-wink racist kooks."

Ogbu would even find this view represented among the black student body itself. One student told him, "You know we're not as smart as they are. They don't have any muscles; we have muscles." But, as Ogbu knew, the superior performance of students of immediate African and Afro-Caribbean descent rendered an interpretation of academic performance based on racial characteristics meaningless. What interested Ogbu instead was social characteristics, or "community forces," as he describes them -- "the ways minorities interpret and respond to schooling."

While not dismissing the factors of discrimination and economic inequality, and making "no assumption that community forces are the only cause of, or play the most important role in, the academic gap," he thought it was essential to look at them. Since he started studying the public school education of minorities in 1968, Ogbu has drawn a distinction between what he calls "voluntary" and "involuntary" minorities within American society. Voluntary minorities are immigrants in search of a better life. Involuntary minorities include blacks brought here as slaves, Native Americans whose continent was taken from them, and Mexicans living in areas subsumed by the United States. A voluntary minority's American Dream might be an involuntary minority's nightmare.

Ogbu found a fundamental ambiguity in the attitudes of black Shaker Heights parents who often had to work quite hard to get their kids into the school system, but fundamentally did not trust it. And he describes their belief in the value of education as being only "abstract," because "many generations of a lack of connection between school success and success in adult life probably resulted in skepticism about the real value of schooling." As one student put it, "there were laws simply to oppress Black people ... Black people came to believe that it was always good, you know, if you could find some way, just somethin' small, you know, just to annoy society."

The students told him that they didn't think they worked as hard, that they would place sports ahead of academics more frequently than whites, and that kids often considered doing well in school to be "acting white," an phenomenon that Ogbu compares to anti-academic success attitudes previously found in studies of sectors of the British working class, and precisely the opposite of the current often identified among Asian-American students.

But it was one thing for Ogbu to have students tell him that among the "White" activities to be avoided were enrolling in honors classes and "being smart during lessons," but it is quite another for him to deal with an education scholar's critique of the "protocols of attentiveness found in Eurocentric teaching styles." He fumes that "Apparently in Black culture students are not expected to pay attention during class!"

Ogbu's book has predictably drawn withering criticism from such critics, who may not be quite as radical as they think they are, in that while claiming to understand the educational situation of blacks as a social phenomenon, they nonetheless immediately look for individual culprits close at hand, such as teachers with low expectations or racist administrators. Ogbu's concept of "involuntary minorities" could potentially be very useful to the cause of black equality, in that it identifies an aspect of the situation of contemporary black students as directly attributable to the way in which their forbears

arrived in this country — in other words, to slavery. The question of reparations for slavery made its way back into the news last year with the filing of lawsuits against still-existing companies that had profited from the institution. By any measure reparations remain a long shot, but if they have any shot at all, wouldn't education offer the best chance for their realization? America may not demonstrate the same concern for the well being of all of its citizens that some other countries do, but the ideal of a land of equal opportunity is closely held and nowhere more so than in the belief in the right to an education. An undeniable fact of our past that demonstrably interferes with the equal realization of that right might just be something America could latch onto.

Would reparations in the form of an infusion of money for lower teacher-student ratios and greater one-on-one attention for black students make a difference? Well, as Deborah Meier writes, "I'll believe that money doesn't count the day that the rich stop spending so much on their own children."