Pirandello in the Classroom:  
On the Possibility of Equal Educational Opportunity in American Culture

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For some people, the history of American education is marked by valiant attempts to offer equal opportunity to all children. One has only to consider the introduction successively of compulsory education, standardized testing, racial integration, compensatory education, and, most recently, the placement in regular classrooms of children labeled as physically or mentally handicapped to appreciate the deep commitment to equal education by both the government and most citizens. Although the innovations most often have been phrased in ideological terms, it would be a mistake to dismiss them as merely ineffectual democratic altruism.

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2Both authors are anthropologists; they work with psychologists, linguists, and behavioral analysts in interdisciplinary research on children and social relations. Both authors have taught grade school in New York City.
rather, they can be understood as reasonable adaptations by people who primarily want anything for themselves in a modern technological society. It has been argued that this type of society is marked by the overall rational effort to get the best people to do the most important jobs and, accordingly, by educational efforts that begin with equal opportunities for all. In this vein, we can look sympathetically upon American education as "the embodiment of the fundamental value of equality of opportunity, in that it places value neither on initial equality, nor on differential achievement" (Pamuk, 1959). Historically, it is exactly this initial equality that reform efforts have been directed toward. Questions remain, however, on whether they have succeeded and whether it is possible that they can succeed.

Although the equalizing efforts of educational reform in America may appear to be, at first glance, both reasonable and for the good of all, each has been attacked severely. Each has been seen as the effort of people who have access to political and economic resources to limit that access to themselves. Compulsory education, for example, does not necessarily bring equal education to all. Making sure that all children go to school, and then failing some and passing others, can be interpreted as a means to justify and give more power, and credibility to the socially fabricated fact that some people are more deserving of the rewards of our society than others (Tayck, 1976). In this interpretation, it is not an accident but, rather, a reflection of class power that our schools reproduce generations of upper classes that do better than the lower classes, and generations of whites who do better than blacks, and so on (Berg, 1969).

Take a second example. The testing services originated in traditional democratic motives. However, it has become horribly apparent that the excessive assumption of "standardized" conditions in testing, given the reality that such an assumption is seldom warranted, works against efforts to bring equal education to any child different from the test maker's (and test giver's) limited social milieu (Orasanu, McDermott, Boykin, & The Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1977). People with resources have ways of keeping them. This truism operates even for democracies (e.g., America and Japan) that have insisted on universal testing for a rational egalitarian sorting of the population into occupational slots. In Japan, for example, where a much less diversified population than in America feeds into the schools, the affluent have erected a defense against a universal testing system. They have taken their children out of the public schools and sent them to the more exclusive private schools that more efficiently prepare the children for the competitive testing controlling entrance to prestigious high schools and universities (Robertson, 1977).

More recent reform efforts also have been attacked. Racial integration in American schools has been claimed to be a racist solution to a racist problem. The failure of compensatory education has led to speculation by majority education about the genetic inferiority of some minorities, and also to charges of paternalism and cultural imperialism from the minorities the programs theoretically were designed to help (Levin, 1977). Whatever the arguments, equalization of opportunity is not an obvious trend in schools. In fact, the lack of success by minorities in schools has helped to give rise to strong ethnic movements in the last two decades. Observation of these developments caused Parkes (1975) to add the "redistribution" of ethnic groups as a counterpart to his earlier description of the equalizing and rationalizing trends of modern industrial societies. Apparently, there are reasons to be cynical about the possibility of initial equality in American education.

A New Reform in an Old Context

It is not clear which interpretation of our educational history, visionary or cynical, ought to carry more weight, and it is difficult to use the past as a guide to the future. Public Law 94-142 now mandates the inclusion in regular classrooms, insofar as possible, of all the children who have been classified previously as in need of special educational facilities. Many children who were originally removed from regular classes in order to receive the extra help they needed to keep up with their peers apparently have been stigmatized in the special programs, and the new law has been passed in the name of the children's right to an equal and nonstigmatized educational opportunity. When placed against the background of past efforts, the optimism of the supporters of the new law must pale before the cynical interpretations of reform efforts. Yet the recurrence of reform efforts to bring the vision of equality into practice is by itself an impressive dimension of American life (Mclhermott, 1974). To achieve its potential, we must learn to better equip our optimism with the fighting tools of dedicated social change agents.

The integration of special education children into regular classrooms is within the educational reform tradition. Teachers may help children to learn some particulars in school, but children get their fundamental education from the total community in which they are immersed. The value of classroom integration is that it will bring all the children into full view of each other. This is critical for us if we are to maintain some sense of community -- of shared problems (Arensberg & Kimball, 1965) -- in our everyday lives. Further, it may also cut down on the excesses of mislabeling, overlabeling, and stigmatizing children (Holmes, 1976). Finally, the new law may offer us a potential victory (although temporary, and contradictory to its spirit) by making the pupils who are presently failing in our classrooms look more like average kids in comparison with those who are now excluded.
Unless, however, observance of the law is accompanied by mas-
size institutional changes that can alter the allocation of interactivi-
tial resources for teachers to maximize the development of their
pupils, there is little reason to think that the integration of handi-
capped children will help us to make educational opportunity more
equally available (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). At the present time,
we know of only one serious proposal for such institutional changes
(Church, 1976). Without such an effort, it is difficult to imagine
how the new reform will have a different fate from the preceding
inspiring, but unsuccessful, equalizing movements.

We present here some reasons for this conclusion. Our position is
neither negative nor fatalistic, although we offer no hopeful pre-
dictions as long as the school system retains its present structure.
To support our position, we offer a characterization of how schools
work, not just to back a claim that reform most likely will not
change the stratifying practices of our schools but, rather, to sug-
gest how a move like integrating the handicapped might help con-
siderably if it were accompanied by other forms of change.

Basically, we suggest that American schools are designed to
produce and stratify differences in the intellectual achievements of
different children. Culture can be taken as a set of interrelated prop-
ositions about the world, propositions which the members of the
culture consistently use with (and on) each other in the demonstra-
tion and enforcement of the common sensibility of their own be-

"(address, 1976; Murphy, 1976). In America, at the core of the
propositions that make up our cultural resources for dealing
with one another are evaluations of the worth and potential of per-
sons on the basis of their supposed natural, inherited, and unalter-
able intellectual abilities (Henry, 1960; Spindler, 1959). Almost all
cultures have ways of distinguishing people by the speed and level of
mastery with which they pick up different skills (Edgerton, 1970;

American culture, however, and perhaps most other Western
cultures, are marked by an excessive attention to (a) the location of
minor differences in a person's behavior as representative of differ-
ces in natural ability, and, more specifically, (b) the measurement
of these proposed natural abilities on the basis of the persons' per-
formance on a limited set of intellectual tasks in school tests. We do not
have to follow these practices. In our attempts to sort children
efficiently into the occupational roles of our market place, we may
be doing more harm than good.

In other cultures, people do not necessarily interpret each other's
behavior in terms of inherent characteristics: among the Zapotecs
of Mexico, for example, it has been claimed that the people under-
stand and act upon each other's behavior as if it consisted of sensi-
tible adaptations to the limited social circumstances that each must
deal with at any given time (Selby, 1975, 1975). And even in cul-
tures in which a child's personality and cognitive make-up are
made explicit and taken to be the source of consistency in the child's behavior across time, there is generally much less concern
with measuring personality and cognitive make-up on the basis of
situation-specific tasks, such as school tests.

In American culture, however, our preoccupation with locating
the natural intellectual skills of our children is so great that we ac-
cept the flimsiest of evidence during the first days of school. Once we
have categorized the children as more or less able, we then, by
way of self-fulfilling prophecies, arrange to have the children desig-
nated as less able actually accomplish less than the others. Every
school must have its failures, whatever the long-range potentials of
the children who are to be sorted out. Our communities and our
economy demand such variation. If our schools were completely
fair, we suspect that there still would be differential achievement
because of the children's different experiences in the social worlds
both within and beyond the classroom. Ideally, such differential
achievement is recognized across subject matter rather than across
children. However, because our schools are presently organized
with a heavy emphasis on sorting the able from the less able, the
question we all face is whether the present perceived distribution of
differential achievement by children in school is necessary or fair.
Do all children get an equal chance at achieving their potential from
the start of the school experience? We suspect not. We have orga-
nized our schools to sort children into achievers and nonachievers,
and that is what we get. If we organized our schools for the maxi-

mally rich development of all our children, we could get something
quite different.

What are the criteria our schools use to sort children initially? At
how, the children are sorted by their differential preparation for
school. For whatever reasons, some children enter school with more
developed skills, both intellectual and social interactional, than oth-
er children. This differential should have to do with what they
eventually learn. But if they enter a class in which they are handled
unequally, if they are given less adequate learning environments on
the basis of their less developed entering-school skills, the chances
of their catching up or even fitting in will be minimal. We present
some details on such a case. We do not discuss schools at their
worst, in which children are sorted on the basis of even more arbi-
trary markers of natural abilities, such as skin color, ethnicity, or
ways of speaking or dressing; this kind of evil is visible, and we all
can do battle with it. We are more interested in how the vast majori-
ty of us, as people of good will, still can create the circumstances
for inequality in our schools.

This paper is organized as follows: (a) We elaborate on our posi-
tion on how inequality is induced in the early school years. (b) We
try to elaborate on how the self-fulfilling prophecies at work in our
classrooms actually do the job of preserving inequality. We indi- cate, for one classroom at least, the nature of these prophecies and the environments in which they are embedded, and we suggest a play by Luigi Pirandello as a metaphor for how self-fulfilling prophecies work in this classroom. The contrast, of course, is Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) use of Shaw's "Pygmalion" as a metaphor for how schools induce differential achievement unfairly. Also, in this section, we offer some data to support our stand. (c) By way of conclusion, we claim that by itself the integration of handicapped children into regular classrooms will do little to alter the stratifying tendencies of our schools, and we point to some additional organizational changes that could help to make a difference.

How Schools Induce Inequality in Educational Opportunity

Increasing evidence is accumulating that, given an appropriate learning environment and enough time, almost everyone can do well on basic school tasks. It is unlikely that school tasks are gener- ally harder than many tasks people normally work on in everyday life. No doubt, school tasks are unique in demanding certain kinds of mental activities in particular combinations; the combinations take much practice, and they are cumulative. It is not easy to pick up a skill in an advanced subject matter without a mastery of vari- ous prerequisite skills. In this way, school skills are similar to most other skills developed in daily life.

It is questionable whether proficiency on school tasks is superior to and more generalizable than proficiency on other complex tasks, long an assumption in various literatures dealing with the relation of schooling and the development of various competencies. In fact, some recent empirical work on the effects of schooling in different cultures has led to the conclusion that early school learning is good for later school learning and certain kinds of bureaucratic jobs that demand similar skills, but it is not uniformly generalizable to other tasks demanding elaborate intellectual operations (Cole, Sharp, & Lave, 1976; Lave, 1977). This work has been complemented by the documentation of the conceptual complexities underlying the be- havior of various unschooled peoples who are faced with environ- mental challenges similar to those of the early years of school. (This may be seen in the sense of a superior and more generalizable form of learning.

How, then, is it that so many of our children do not make it in school? Alternatively framed, why do we so persistently perceive and document such differential performances on school tasks by children who, in everyday life, are judged to be intellectually quite normal? The answer to this question lies in the fact that learning in school is primarily an organized learning experience. Learning is best understood in terms of the time a child spends on a task, some may learn faster than others but, with time, almost any child can learn what has to be learned in school. The contrast, of course, is that children learn what has to be learned in the proper organ- izational constraints for getting the child on task are present (Ben, 1974). The question of why some children achieve more than others should be approached as a question about the environ- ments in which some children are consistently organized to attend to school tasks in classrooms while others are not.

Classroom environments often are the context for a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. Certain children, who, for whatever rea- sons, come to school behind their peers in the development of classroom skills, frequently constitute both pedagogical and interac- tional problems for most teachers. Teachers say that these children are harder to teach; part of this reaction stems from the fact that they need more of the teacher's time if they are to catch up to their peers. In addition, they must learn under the pressure of knowing that they are behind. This pressure results from a classroom situation that allocates status on the basis, in part, of the children's intellectual ranking in the classroom (at least until puberty, at which time the peer groups in many classes appear to get their revenge by award- ing status on the basis of how bad children are). That is, to say, on how good the children are at achieving school failure (McDemott, R. P., 1974). For these reasons, and for some others that are elabo- rated later in terms of a specific case, the children in the bottom echelons of the classroom hierarchy are organizationally more diffi- cult to get on task. These are the children who generally need to spend extra time on task. If they were already in possession of read- ing skills adequate for achievement independent of the teacher, then the various pressures of classroom organization would not fall so hard on them. However, if they are starting without reading skills, the teacher is their primary resource. Without the teach- er, they can make progress only by solitary effort.

Thus, for every day in the classroom, the children who are less skilled and often considered less able fail further behind their con- temporaries and, consequently, provide the teacher with additional reasons to handle them differently. The small differences among children in the early years of school expand quickly to the drastic forms of differential performance that become obvious in later years. At the root of these differences is not so much the extreme complexity of the school tasks, nor the differences in the learning potentials of the different children, but the differential environments we offer the children for getting organized and on task so that learning can take place.

Notice that in evoking a self-fulfilling prophecy as a mechanism for the widely differential performances of children on school tasks.
we did not invoke the teacher's attitude. We do not believe that teachers constrain pupils' performances simply as a result of negative attitudes. We suggest that self-fulfilling prophecies consist of something more durable and far more hidden. The problem, generally, is not with teachers but with school systems that insist the children be measured against each other and differentially reward and degrade for both what it is that they know and how fast they come to learn it. To understand this problem more fully, we need to know more about self-fulfilling prophecies and how teachers and children are entrapped by the prophecies presently in use in our schools.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies at Work in Classrooms

In their controversial little book, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) used G. B. Shaw's play, "Pygmalion," as a metaphor for some important points about the acquisition of social structure in schools. The play is about, among other things, how members of the upper social classes consistently elicit what they believe to be inadequate behavior from members of the lower classes by expecting less of them in various situations. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) argued that much the same thing occurs in schools. In other words, teachers consistently elicit inadequate behavior from some children by expecting less of them. Whether the much maligned research was adequate to prove the case is not an issue here; but three interesting points follow from the writers' argument. We have reason to agree and disagree with each.

1. Success or failure in school is a matter of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Teachers evaluate the learning potential of children in their classes and then offer the differential learning environments in which the children can live out the teachers' evaluations by behaving as expected.

2. Underlying many of the teacher's self-fulfilling prophecies that lead to school failure are negative attitudes or expectations for certain kinds of children (children with brown eyes instead of blue, to make the case ridiculous but possible; children with black skin instead of white, to make the case more realistic). In a later work, Rosenthal (1976) elaborated on how such attitudes are fostered in different environments. And it is the environment rather than the established members of any group that constitute the environment with which a newcomer must make sense. They constitute the environments or contexts or systems of relevancy for the choices which newcomers are forced to make. And it is the established members that inform newcomers about the adequacy of their choices.

Socialization for any institution is necessarily the product of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Church, 1973; McDermott, R. P., 1976; McDermott, R. P., & Church, 1976; Spindler, 1973; Wieder, 1974). How could it be otherwise? The established members of any group constitute the environment with which a newcomer must make sense. They constitute the environments or contexts or systems of relevancy for the choices which newcomers are forced to make. And it is the established members that inform newcomers about the adequacy of their choices.

Schools necessarily work by self-fulfilling prophecies. The question is whether we can construct more useful and more egalitarian self-fulfilling prophecies to socialize our children. At the present time, there is no doubt that different children are handled differently, and they achieve different levels of learning in the schools accordingly. For this reason, we are all concerned about the conse-
quences of integrating children who are negatively labeled as "special" into regular classrooms.

The self-fulfilling prophecies currently in use in our classrooms are particularly rough on children who are different from their teachers' expectations. Children from special education programs who are integrated into regular classrooms are likely to be caught in this system and to be sorted into unsuccessful and even indiscernible categories, and treated accordingly. Although Rosenthal and Jacobson may concur with this observation, our alternative description of and solution to the problem differs from theirs.

Thus, our second argument is that the mechanisms for self-fulfilling prophecies in classrooms are only incidentally people's attitudes or expectations. If only things were that simple! Sometimes, in order to understand how some children will do in a class, all we need to know are the teacher's attitudes, as, for example, in the case of minority children in the classroom of an arastyric in our school. But our problem is that teachers have positive attitudes toward and great sensitivity to the different kinds of children in their classrooms and can act inadequately conflicting environments for some of them.

More powerful factors than teachers' attitudes appear to be at work. Although these factors are often revealed in people's attitudes (e.g., the many positive correlations cited by Rosenthal, 1976, in his review of the expectancy research), they are hidden below the level of attitudes and exist in the organization of classroom learning. It is the structure and the demands of the system as a whole that create and maintain learning problems. As part of our daily practice, we create children who are pedagogical and organizational problems. Once created, we respond to them differentially on the basis of how much of a problem they are. This issue is greater than that of individual differences and the individual children. It is true that a child at the bottom rung in one class may find a special relationship with a particular teacher to be just the right formula for success (see the case history in Sarason's paper). However, the time given to one student means less time for others. In addition, it is no accident, but rather a built-in feature of classroom organization, that certain children get less attention. Thus, most classrooms are organized for both success and failure; most teachers expect and are required to find and certify some children to be better students than others.

Our third argument is that the source of social change is in the resources we offer teachers for organizing sustained learning environments. We do not want to change people's attitudes in order to change our educational system; our job is, in fact, much more difficult than that. What we have to do is to change the everyday pressures on our teachers to produce, as if from a cookie cutter, children of uniform skill levels by certain dates. Certainly we can write laws that mandate teachers to treat everyone fairly. And we can train teachers to see the strengths of different kinds of children. But until we free teachers from the relentless pressures of sorting children into those who can make it from those who cannot, most children will have little chance to actually reach their potential. We must demystify the consequences of not achieving in the prescribed manner. The learning process, which may be very different in regular classrooms, must be affirmed even if necessary, at the expense of safety and sort, must be affirmed even, if necessary, at the expense of safety and sort.

It will not be easy to reverse this sort tendency. Our communities demand the sorting of children. Our educational language pits children against each other, promotes achievement-motivated against achievement-motivated, advanced against disadvantaged, and so on. Our system of goals give a questionable credence to the sorting practices. And the market place that eventually employs the children continues to assume, against considerable evidence, that schooling is the best measure of most personnel. All these conditions generate the self-fulfilling sorting practices of teachers. We can turn now to a description of the environments that embody these dictates to sort.

SIX CHILDREN IN SEARCH OF A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Rather than Shaw's "Pygmalion," we consider Pirandello's (1922) "Six Characters in Search of an Author" (written in 1922) as an ideal dramatic metaphor for how inequality is arranged in our elementary schools. The play is about six characters who have been written into a script that remains incomplete. The unfinished and emotionally wounded characters walk out of the script, take human form, and show up at a theater looking for an author to complete their story. The story is ugly: it involves various kinds of marital intrigue and incest, and most of the characters tend toward and self-destruction. It is, in short, deeply hurt by most of the other characters. All of them would like to have the play rewritten with a decent ending. They want to have their story told in the way they feel it should be told. At the theater, they meet a director and some actors, and they tell the unbelieving crowd what they want. As they bare their lives with each other in front of the actors and the director, they relive their lives, they recreate the environments that occasioned their original struggles. With every step, they relive the hate, the embarrassments, the identity struggles, and their battles with each other. At the end of the play, there is the realization that their lives, as they have created them, have made this conclusion inevitable. The only course of action for the characters is to leave this stage in search of another author to rewrite their story. It is not a real play: it is a dramatic and amusing in the same way that theater-of-the-absurd dramas often are. To us, it speaks very much to the point of what is happening in our schools. We hope to demonstrate this parallel in the rest of this paper.
For the past two years, we have been studying two films of children in a first-grade classroom: one classroom, one day, one hour; one top group of readers, one bottom group of readers, around the same table. One film is of the bottom group, the other of the top group. The films, it became clear to us that the top groups were much like the characters in the Pirandello play. They come to a classroom every day in search of an adequate ending to their story. They come to school to learn as their mothers and fathers have told them to do. In particular, they come to school to learn to read. They put tremendous attention and work into getting each other organized in order to get down to the page, in order to get some reading done. Yet, only the top group manages to stay down on the page. The children in the bottom group keep struggling to write an appropriate ending to their story. Somehow, they never seem to find the time to get them longer to get down to the page and, after they are there, they do not last very long.

Much like the characters in search of their author, the six children in the bottom group keep creating the environments for each other that keep them from their desired ending. Because they come to school reading less well than the children in the top group, they need more time on task. But it is the children in the bottom group who get much less time, in fact, as the children in the top group. If we could understand how this situation is arranged, we would know what we are up against in calling for equal opportunity in the schools.

Before offering some of the details of this real-life drama, we must consider some methodological and reservations. Although we may seem often to be considering a reasonable sample of all schools in the country, our discussion is limited to the one classroom in which McDermott spent hundreds of hours during the 1973-1974 school year. Even more specifically, we concentrate on the films of the two reading groups. What is most in need of our attention is how the different problems in the classroom are interrelated, as representative, not because every classroom is not different but, because of the problems which must be solved, classrooms across the land are similar enough to allow a detailed analysis of an excellent teacher’s problems and solutions to speak to all of us for the time being. Few classrooms are free of the problems generated by children of diverse backgrounds and learning paces in school systems that expect and demand uniform progress.

We have mentioned only one way in which our study might be read as incomplete. Not only have we limited ourselves to one classroom, we have considered only the individual relationships between the teachers and the children put on each other while at their reading table. Obviously, a great deal is being left out. The culture that brings all these persons to this particular place with their particular set of skills, desires, hang-ups, and the like is a more pervasive influence than what we can see at the reading table. This omission is a problem to the extent that various parts of our argument hinge on the reader’s assuming along with us that certain dimensions of this culture are rampant and present in most schools. For example, we offer no proof of the pressure on teachers to sort children for administrative reasons and to get them longer to get down to the page and, after they are there, they do not last very long.

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Much like the characters in search of their author, the six children in the bottom group keep creating the environments for each other that keep them from their desired ending. Because they come to school reading less well than the children in the top group, they need more time on task. But it is the children in the bottom group who get much less time, in fact, as the children in the top group. If we could understand how this situation is arranged, we would know what we are up against in calling for equal opportunity in the schools.

Before offering some of the details of this real-life drama, we must consider some methodological and reservations. Although we may seem often to be considering a reasonable sample of all schools in the country, our discussion is limited to the one classroom in which McDermott spent hundreds of hours during the 1973-1974 school year. Even more specifically, we concentrate on the films of the two reading groups. What is most in need of our attention is how the different problems in the classroom are interrelated, as representative, not because every classroom is not different but, because of the problems which must be solved, classrooms across the land are similar enough to allow a detailed analysis of an excellent teacher’s problems and solutions to speak to all of us for the time being. Few classrooms are free of the problems generated by children of diverse backgrounds and learning paces in school systems that expect and demand uniform progress.

We have mentioned only one way in which our study might be read as incomplete. Not only have we limited ourselves to one classroom, we have considered only the individual relationships between the teachers and the children put on each other while at their reading table. Obviously, a great deal is being left out. The culture that brings all these persons to this particular place with their particular set of skills, desires, hang-ups, and the like is a more pervasive influence than what we can see at the reading table. This omission is a problem to the extent that various parts of our argument hinge on the reader’s assuming along with us that certain dimensions of this culture are rampant and present in most schools. For example, we offer no proof of the pressure on teachers to sort children for administrative reasons and to get them longer to get down to the page and, after they are there, they do not last very long.
important to make these points because, difficult as it may be to teach a first grade that includes children who do not know how to read, it may be even more difficult to learn to read in such a classroom. We are blaming no one; we simply are trying to describe the problems that are faced upon children and teachers and result in their performing so badly in school.

There are considerable differences in the behavior of our top and bottom groups because different environments are provided for the children in the two groups in which to work at learning to read. The top and bottom groups are faced with different problems to solve during their time at the reading table.

Since the teacher is the only person participating in both groups, her perspective on the tasks facing the groups is an important source of contrast. By her own account, the children in the top group represent less of a management problem. They appear to have already mastered the basics of reading. When they are sitting at the reading table, the teacher establishes a sequence in which they read and she lets the length of the reading assignments dictate the pacing of the sequencing. After the first child is called on, the teacher counts the pages of the story and the number of children at the table, and the normative order is thereby made available for all to see. In Figure 1, it is clear that the children act out that order rather perfectly: first one child reads a page, then the next child, and then the next. The accomplishment of this order requires constant monitoring and interactional work by everyone in the top group. However, for present purposes, it is possible to claim that the order achieved leaves most members of the top group considerable freedom. After the teacher calls on one of the children, they all move down into the book. After the reading turn is in progress, different children look around the room or whisper to each other until the turn ends. At the end, the members must shift most carefully to the group as the teacher assigns a new turn to a new child. In terms of reading, the children must attend carefully to the sections they read, and the teacher must attend carefully only to the occasional problems the children run into in reading their pages. The children's problems in reading their pages constitute the topics of the reading lesson. Occasionally, the children create problems by word calling instead of reading for meaning, and the teacher's main pedagogical task is to convince the children that there is living language on the page. Thus, one child reads monotonously, "But Ricky said his mother..." and the teacher corrects her: "Let's read it this way. 'But Ricky said his mother...'." With the bottom group, the teacher has rather different problems. Accordingly, the teacher and the children constitute rather different environments for each other in the different groups. The children in the bottom group do not read as well as the children in the top group, and the teacher attends less to the language on the book's pages and more to the phonics skills needed to interpret any given word in the text. Thus, there are many more stopping places in the children's readings, and the story line, which could help to hold the lesson together, is seldom alluded to and never developed. In addition, the teacher does not order the sequence of reading turns in the same way that she does in the top group. In the bottom group, each turn to read is negotiated on the basis of who calls for a turn, who is able in the teacher's eyes to read the page in question, and who has already had a turn to read. In Figure 2, it is clear that the different procedures have their effects on the order of who gets a turn.

There may be various reasons for the teacher's proceeding in this manner with the bottom group. Her only one is made apparent in the film record. Some children in the bottom group do not read too well and they can only read a page after it has been read by someone else. By putting each turn up for grabs, the teacher picks the child who can do the best job. This strategy of not calling on the children in the bottom group in a fixed order is used by many
teachers as a device for keeping the potentially disorderly children constantly attentive (Caind, in press). In fact, this attentional device is built into the design of reading programs for the problem reader (Bartlett, in press).

This procedure is the consequence of giving no one, neither teacher nor children, any time out from monitoring each other for some idea of what to do next. Thus, it has the dual function of focusing everyone’s attention on a particular activity, in this case reading, and keeping the social order of the group dependent upon the uninterrupted functioning of the focused activity. And often it is successful. But with each turn to read hanging on the teacher’s attention to the details of each child’s call for a turn, every interruption by the teacher leaves the group without a procedure for moving into the reading task.

One considers the important information that the bottom group is interrupted for procedural, not pedagogical, reasons almost 40 times in its 30 minutes at the reading table, as compared with only 2 interruptions for the top group in its 23 minutes at the table. What is the source of these interruptions? Shockingly, almost two-thirds of the interruptions come from the members of the top group who go to the reading table while the bottom group is there, and from the teacher who deals with members of the top group as they busy themselves, or try to look as if they are busy themselves, with the individualized seat work the teacher has organized. (For some suggestions of how this pattern develops, see McDermott & Gospodinoff, in press.)

With all the procedural interruptions, the children in the bottom group get little chance to read. Not only do they spend time calling on the teacher for a turn, they also spend time waiting for the teacher while she attends to some members of the top group who have interrupted the time on task of the bottom group. Almost two-thirds of the time in the reading lesson is spent in either getting a turn or waiting for the teacher to attend to the group.

Perhaps the most disturbing interruptions of the bottom group come from the teacher herself. On one occasion, for example, she organizes the children to call for a turn to read their new books, "Raise your hands if you can read page 4." The children straighten themselves up in their chairs, form neat lines along the sides of the reading table, and either raise their hands for a turn or at least look at their books or the teacher. As their hands reach their highest point, the teacher looks away from the reading group to the back of the room. She yells at first one and then another child in the top group. The three children in the bottom group who had raised their hands, lower them to the table. One little boy who had not raised his hand pushes his chair away from the reading table and the teacher and balances on its two back legs. The other two children in the group simply look down at their books. The teacher returns and says, "Nobody can read page 4? Why not?" Eventually, the children recover, and someone gets a turn. But it all takes time. And worse, it cuts off the possibility that the teacher and the children will achieve trusting relations, that is, it cuts off the possibility that the teacher and the children will come to understand their working consensus about who they are and that what they are doing with each other is in their best interests. Such trusting relations appear to be an essential component of learning in groups (McDermott, R. P., 1977).

The children in both groups started the year using the ITA (Initial Teaching Alphabet) system of reading. The children in the top group moved off the ITA onto the regular alphabet around January. The movie under analysis was taken in May. The children in the bottom group still had not made the move from the ITA, which is a disaster, considering that the second grade is not equipped with ITA material.

This account of the self-fulfilling prophecy at work is ugly. The children in the bottom group (a) enter the first grade behind in the development of their reading skills; (b) they get about one-third the amount of time on task in their reading lesson; and (c) they get little
instruction that will be useful to them in the second grade. Every day in the classroom the children of the bottom group fall increas-
ingly behind the children in the top group.

Although we suspect that there is no reason to talk of any of the children in the bottom group as organically or socially impaired, by the end of their second year in school, three of them were assigned to special education classes (labeled, respectively, as brain dam-
aged, emotionally disturbed, and slow). What is special about these children is that they were trapped early in school in a maladaptive learning environment. There is reason to think that placement in a special, but stigmatized program will not help the children to catch up to their peers (Hobbs, 1976). On the other hand, to return them to the classrooms in which they experienced their original school failure may prove to be a cruel hoax, unless we understand and transform the dynamics of failure in our regular classrooms.

Culture Against Kids

What is driving this whole system? How is it that both the chil-
dren and teacher in the bottom group have such a difficult time staying on the reading task? Together, they face both pedagogical and interactional problems not faced by the top group. Pedagogical-
ly, there is no doubt that it is easier for the teacher to practice read-
ing with the children in the top group than to struggle with the process of teaching decoding to the children in the bottom group. Interactionally, there is the pressure of competition between the groups and the scarred identities of the children in the bottom group. Not only do the children in the bottom group come to school not knowing how to read, but they have a teacher who expects them to know how to read and who cannot teach them to read while she has 20 other children walking around the room. And it is in this difficult situation that they must overcome the pressure of having the other children taunt them for their performances. Even within the bottom group we hear claims of one child against anoth-
er. ("Oh, you can't read"—"Better than you!".) Or we can point to a child in the bottom group who constantly calls for turns to read but, at the same time, appears to arrange her requests in ways that make it difficult for the teacher to call on her. Such anxiety is not visible in the behavior of the children of the top group.

In response to all these problems, the members of the bottom group make various adaptations. The one adaptation discussed here is that the teacher makes sure that no child is asked to read some-
thing too difficult. So the teacher uses the two different turn-taking systems with the two groups, and this adaptation has the conse-
quences, already described, of keeping the bottom group off-task for more than half their time at the reading table. Part of the self-
fulfilling prophecy drive in the classroom is the teacher's honest attempt to adapt to the needs of the children in the face of the com-
petitive and sorting tendencies of that classroom and the school in which it is immersed.

The details of this story are specific to this classroom. But the story should be familiar to us all, and the outcome in most other classrooms apparently seldom varies enough to make a difference.

The six children of the bottom group can continue their search for a more successful ending, but it is going to take a considerable reor-
ganization of the problems with which they have to deal in order for them to achieve it. For it is difficult to stay on task, that is, to learn to read, when the major efforts of the children are directed to protecting their identities from being sorted into the less-able pile.

In this brief excerpt from a far longer and more complex analysis of the behavior of children and teacher in two reading groups (McDermott, R. P., 1976), we have been trying to make three points.

1. Schools initiate inequality in the performance of different children on school tasks by self-fulfilling prophecy.

2. Given the incessant pressures on any teacher to sort the chil-
dren once and for all by natural ability on the basis of performance on certain school tasks, the self-fulfilling stratifying practices at work in our schools arise out of realistic evaluations of the problems different children present to the classroom teacher.

3. In the face of the social organizational and cultural roots of the self-fulfilling prophecies that lead to school failure, the possibil-
ity of using the schools as a vehicle for social change seems slim.

To establish initial equality in the schools, we will have to pay greater attention to controlling the stratifying practices that operate throughout our communities. Nonetheless, we can try to initiate changes in the classroom and in the organization of education in the hope that they will be a starting point. There may be opposition to both the methods and the values of the transformations we are suggesting. If there is a risk of confrontation or even a risk of fail-
ure, it is no less dangerous at this point than the conditions which we are now generating.

Conclusion

We have been making the case that our schools foster inequality. How might we change the schools to allow all children at least an initially equal chance to achieve competence in math and reading?

We are not sure of the answer to this question so we applaud any attempt to make a difference. We applaud the movement of children out of special education programs into regular classrooms, for it is proper in spirit and direction. Our only warning is to keep the bottom group off-task for more than half their time at the reading table.
ers are asked to deal. However, until we make it possible for teachers to have the time and interactional resources for handling each child according to need, changes in school may serve only to make the teacher's job more difficult (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Until we know how to make schools more egalitarian, we cannot ask the teachers to do the job for us by themselves.

Adults in every culture construe the behavior of their children differentially throughout the life cycle. The scheduling of these constraints and the behaviors constrained differ from one culture to the next (Spindler, 1959, 1974). In American culture, adults heavily constrain the behavior of children around the age of 6 by sending them to school and insisting that they learn to read. Although there is considerable evidence that this is not the only or even the best time for the children to learn to read (Downing, 1973; Rohwer, 1971), we have generally allowed little room for variation in the children's behavior, and we inflexibly measure every child against every other child, both within the classroom and across the land. It is not easy to discern the virtues of this system, and we ought to take seriously alternatives that do not pit children against their peers.

How can we remove the pressures on our teachers to misappropriate the potential learning time of the children considered behind? How can we remove the pressures on the children so that being behind becomes a learning problem to be solved in due time by concentrated effort instead of an identity problem to be hidden from onlookers? We may have to consider making our educational system less competitive, particularly at the lower age levels. Competition can be healthy in some learning situations, but not when it leads to the degradation of the losers. Recent research has made it clear that competition is a useful strategy for organizing the practice of already acquired skills, but it is less useful than cooperation in the organization of activities in which children must develop new skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Accordingly, the heavy reliance on competition in our classrooms may contribute to the problems of children who are behind in the development of particular skills when they enter school. The goal we must work for, and a goal which an emphasis on cooperation over competition may help to achieve, is the organization of classrooms to allow children who are behind the time and freedom from degradation to catch up with their peers.

The cross-cultural record offers us some astounding learning achievements in noncompetitive settings, as in music (McPhail, 1955), technology (Lewis, 1972), and even reading (Conklin, 1949). On the American scene, we have some accounts of minority children who fail in public schools but who achieve competence in traditional school subjects when they are transferred to schools run on a noncompetitive basis by members of their own ethnic groups (Collier, 1973; Hosteller & Huntington, 1971).

We believe that noncompetitive classrooms also could work to the advantage of Native American children (Erickson & Mohatt, 1977; Philips, 1972).

Competition appears to be at the core of our cultural predilections and it will not be easy to reduce its role in our classrooms. This is no reason for not attempting battle with the beast. Consider the Japanese, who run a fiercely competitive society, but who make an effort to control competition in the normal classroom. On the level of everyday life in Japanese institutions, members work hard to overcome competition and to create the conditions for harmony and cooperation (Befu, 1971; Rohlen, 1973). In the long run, there are some institutional rewards for the people who cooperate (Befu, 1974). In the classroom, children are encouraged to work together in the name of their school and community. Rivalry among peers is concentrated on, if not successfully limited to, national tests in which everyone competes with everyone else, a strategy that has made the Japanese "examination hell" world famous (Vogel, 1972). As pointed out, this system has its pathologies, including social class inequalities (Rohlen, 1977), but high rates of early school failure and functional illiteracy are not among them (Sakamoto & Makita, 1973). We do not want to follow the Japanese model in its details, but we can use it to guide our own efforts to appreciate the difficulties and rewards of creating conditions in which cooperation becomes a more dominant mode than competition for relating in the classroom.

Learning can be accomplished in isolation or in conjunction with others. The classroom social structure described here encourages individual students to learn basic skills for their own purposes. But it is clear that this method is failing to educate large numbers of students as either readers or individuals capable of making meaningful use of the contents of their education. We need to create classroom situations in which learning is a positive social achievement and individual identity is enhanced through contributions to group performance. In conjunction with efforts of this type, a move to integrate all children into regular classrooms could help us to release the powers of the children now held back and alienated in the early school years.

References


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Special Education and the Future: Some Questions To Be Answered and Answers To Be Questioned

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The point in studying the future is not to speculate and predict, rather it is to clarify the present and to probe needed redirection. (Rubin, The Future of Education, 1975, p. 199)

Numerous social and technological changes have occurred in the past decade, and some of them may influence special education. For example, we now have or soon will have the power:

Through human engineering, to modify indefinitely the bodies of selected individuals, for reasons ranging from scientific curiosity to prolonging life.

Through genetic engineering, to modify the characteristics of the human race and to shape the course of evolution . . .

To alter to unlimited extent man's mental and emotional characteristics including intellectual abilities, motivations, affect, personalities, and character . . . (Harman, 1969, cited in Rubin, 1975, pp. 24-25)

Other provocative projections have been made as well. One reads, for example, of the imaginative uses of technology in the service of education, plastic substitutes for human organs, and various techniques for manipulating conception, fertility, and death.

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