

TITLE, AUTHOR, AND HARD-BITTEN SCHOOLTEACHERS

I considered several titles for this book. The first was *Educating Our Children and Handling Theirs*. This was based on the observation that schools have learned how to educate the children of the gentry and how to “handle” children of the working class—those who had been handled in school themselves.¹

Jonathan Kozol’s book entitled *Savage Inequalities*² traces the notoriously unequal results of schooling between rich and poor children to segregation (both on the basis of race and family income) and unequal funding. This book is also about savage inequalities, but the sources of inequality I examine are in fact so subtle that the average parent, teacher, student, and taxpayer are not conscious of them at all. I considered calling my book *Subtle Inequalities*, but I immediately realized that the inequalities I address are every bit as savage as Kozol’s. It is the mechanisms that underlie them that are subtle, and so I tried a new title *Subtle Mechanisms, Savage Inequalities*.

However, as I discussed the book with others, the more I described the mechanisms, the more insistent they became in wanting to know what can be done about them. From the start, I had an answer: Paulo Freire. Freire was a professor at the University of Recife, a city in northeast Brazil. In the early 1960s he started an adult literacy program for the city’s teeming, illiterate poor.

There had been numerous literacy campaigns earlier in Brazil, motivated by the desire to make the poor better workers, better citizens, and better Christians—classic reasons for literacy campaigns among the poor since the invention of the printing press. All of these previous campaigns had failed.

Freire believed that while the benefits of such literacy campaigns were obvious to the people behind them, they were not at all obvious to the illiterate poor. He took a different approach. Before he started to teach reading and writing, he asked his students to reflect on the concept of justice—a radical and dangerous thing to do in a country where a huge divide separated a small number of very rich and a vast number of very poor. He asked his students what they might do to secure justice and suggested that literacy would make them far better able to engage in the struggle they would certainly face if they tried to get a better deal. Then he was ready to talk ABCs, and so were they.

The literacy they acquired would not be literacy to become better citizens, workers, and Christians as the rich defined those roles for them; it would be literacy to engage in the struggle for justice. This was dangerous literacy, and for a while I considered the title *Making Literacy Dangerous Again*, alluding to the fact that after the printing press was invented, literacy among the masses was viewed with fear and trembling among the ruling classes of Europe.

But it also seemed to me that the literacy Freire wanted for the poor of Brazil was literacy *with an attitude*. That sounded to me like a great title for a book.



I was the eighth of nine children—six boys and three girls—in a blue-collar, Irish Catholic family in an Irish Catholic neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. The south side, which is predominantly African American now, was mostly white and mostly ethnic—Irish, Polish, and Italian. My father was Irish. There were also a number of Czechs who referred to themselves as Bohemians. My mother was Bohemian.

My father was a plumber and my five brothers became plumbers. I did not follow the family trade because of a birth injury that left my left arm slightly paralyzed. The family did not quite know

what to do with me, and so I was encouraged to stay in high school until I graduated. I was pretty good at school, but after working two years in a minimum-wage, dead-end, white-collar job I think I astonished everyone by going to the local teachers college and becoming a teacher.

One of my first teaching jobs was at the Carol Jason Banks Upper Grade Center³ in a black neighborhood on Chicago's south side. There were about four hundred eighth graders who were sorted by reading scores from the highest to the lowest and divided into fifteen classes, 8-1s being the highest, 8-15s being the lowest. But they didn't divide them exactly equally. While the 8-1s through the 8-13s started out with around twenty-seven students, the two lowest classes started out with only around fifteen. The theory was that the slowest students would get more attention in smaller classes. The reality was that as the year wore on there were spaces available in the "lower" classes to dump troublesome students from "higher" classes. And so by Christmas there were likely to be more than twenty students in the 8-14s and 8-15s, fifteen of whom were originally assigned because of low reading scores, and an additional five or six who were "sent down" because of discipline problems. You want to talk about a tough teaching assignment?

I taught double periods of language arts and social studies, and so I had only four classes. When I started, I had the 8-7s, 8-8s, 8-9s and 8-10s. Teachers with seniority had the higher classes. The younger teachers who had proven their ability to "handle" them had the lower classes. By the third year I had the four lowest classes, the 8-12s, 8-13s, 8-14s, and 8-15s. I was a huge success.

I was from the working class and I knew how working-class and poor kids related to authority. They expected people in authority to be authoritarian, and I gave them what they expected. It was an exhausting job, but my classroom was nearly always quiet. The children were nearly always working. The assistant principal told me once that he always walked visitors *slowly* past my classroom so that they could see what could be done with students in our school.

But, in fact I was schooling these children, not to take charge of their lives, but to take orders. I taught them to read and write a little better, and I taught them some facts about United States history, but control was uppermost in my mind. When I discussed

discipline problems with other teachers, a frequent topic of discussion in the teachers' lounge, I would talk about my teaching methods as methods of control. I had work assignments on the board when the students entered the classroom, and so there wasn't a moment when they didn't have anything to do. I didn't say to an errant student, "What are you doing?" I said, "Stop that and get to work." No discussion. No openings for an argument.

I made the assignments easy so the least able students could do them. I had "extra credit" assignments for students who finished early, usually not too challenging, but time consuming. I corrected and graded and returned every paper by the next class so the students felt that completing assignments mattered, or put another way, students were punished with a zero if they did not do their assignments. But, of course, that meant assignments had to be easily correctable, fill in the blanks, matching, one- or two-word answers on numbered lines on spelling paper.

Mind you, we had our lighter moments. We wrote news stories that might have appeared on the front page of a Boston paper the day after the Boston Tea Party. We colored maps with crayons, showing which European powers laid claim to which parts of North America in 1789, the year our Constitution was ratified. We wrote Mother's Day poems. We wrote summaries of television shows telling why we liked them—this sort of thing, very rarely, however, because they took too long to grade. But the good times (if you could call them that) would come to a sudden halt if the students got too boisterous, a fact of which they were frequently reminded.

"Good students" were obedient students, students who followed orders. The assignments were so easy that all obedient students got good grades, but I gave plenty of bad grades to students who were not obedient, who did not do their assignments. Obedient students were not kept in from recess, but most days there were one or two disobedient students kept in from recess. Obedient students' parents were not called up to school, but on one or two mornings a week I met a parent of a disobedient student who had been summoned to school at 8:30 A.M. before classes began. Obedient students did not get suspended, but disobedient students were suspended at my request at the rate of about one a semester

I was very flattered when the assistant principal remarked that he brought visitors past my room "so they could see what

could be done with our students,” but I look back at it now with chagrin. It would have been more accurate if he had said, “so they could see what could be done *to* our students.”

I must say that I did a whole lot more for these children than a number of “flower children” (this was the '60s) who came in with the message of universal love and not much appetite for the hard work that teaching, or even handling, children entails, and who were tossed out nearly literally on their behinds by the students in a matter of weeks.

On the other hand there was a woman who taught across the hall from me. Her name was Mrs. Kennedy. I can't remember her first name. I think we actually addressed one another as “Mrs. Kennedy” and “Mr. Finn.” She was a strikingly beautiful black woman, a recent graduate of Fisk University. Her classroom was always orderly, but I never heard her raise her voice. If the students saw me as an easily provoked drill sergeant, they saw her as a den mother, a den mother who didn't put up with much nonsense, but a den mother.

I think Mrs. Kennedy might have been doing a better job of teaching than I, but not a whole lot better. All of us—teachers and students—were locked into a system of rules and roles that none of us understood and that did not allow for much in the way of education. And I do not mean in just the “low classes.” For the most part, students in the 8-1s were also getting handled—schooled to take orders, to replace their parents at the bottom of the economic heap. My guess is that things are about the same today at Carol Jason Banks Upper Grade Center and thousands of schools like it throughout the country.



When I was twenty-seven, I married another teacher. At the time we were not entirely aware of it, but she was from a different world, a fiercely middle-class world—her father an accountant, mother a school teacher, one sibling, raised in a middle-class suburb, Methodist, Republican, educated at the University of Iowa (not an urban teachers college as I was), and she taught in the suburbs. Thus began a thirty-five year experiment in cross-cultural communication, which has been stormy at times and approached the shoals on a few occasions, but it has taught both of us that

most of what goes on in cross-cultural communication when it doesn't go well (which is often) is subtle, covert, unconscious, and often insidious.

I was pretty tuckered out after eight years of handling poor children. During that time, I had earned a master's degree in English. My talent for things academic and probably the know-how of my middle-class wife led me to other pastures. I quit teaching elementary school and went to work at Scott-Foresman editing literature textbooks for a few years. A little later, I taught English at City College of Chicago (where a majority of the students were working-class) and began to work on a doctorate in education at the University of Chicago. It was here I began to read such people as Basil Bernstein and William Labov, people who dealt explicitly with the impact of class on communication style, language, and school success. For the last twenty-five years I have been on the faculty of the Graduate School of Education at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where I have a handful of students working for their doctor's degrees and a whole lot of students working for their master's degrees.

And so for nearly thirty years I have been reading, writing, thinking, debating, and teaching about literacy and language and schooling and how they are related to inequality in our society, and at the same time I have been thinking about and teaching teachers how to teach language arts in the elementary school.



Since I teach at a graduate school, my students are a little older than the average person would imagine. They tend to be getting on toward thirty, with a sizeable number getting on toward forty, because they are changing careers or they took time off to have children. Nearly all of them teach full time. My classes are scheduled at 4:00 or 7:00 P.M., and the students, brave souls, come to me after a full day of teaching.

A small number of them are overtly political and they sometimes disagree with my conclusions—some because they are farther to the right and others because they are farther to the left than I. But most of my students are not overtly political. They put me in mind of myself thirty years ago when I was teaching eighth grade and going to graduate school evenings.

My favorite professor was John Carter. He was a widely recognized scholar on Edgar Allen Poe, and he wrote a best-selling novel, *Full Fathom Five*, in 1965.⁴ His father had been a physician, and he was raised in Oak Park, an affluent suburb west of Chicago. He sometimes talked to his classes about who he thought we were, and he would refer to us as “hard-bitten” Chicago school teachers.

We understood what he meant. First of all, he intended no disrespect. In fact, he admired us. Because we were mostly young we taught in the poorest neighborhoods. (Teachers moved to richer neighborhoods with seniority.) We wanted our students to succeed and move ahead, just as many of us had. We believed they could do it if only they would try. We knocked ourselves out every day and experienced little success, and so we blamed our students for not trying. That left us a little bitter.

John Carter found us problematic. He couldn’t get through to us. He loved Shakespeare and Keats and Byron and Poe and he wanted us to love them as he did, and he succeeded to a degree. But there was always a practical, down-to-earth element in our makeup that defeated him. If getting a master’s degree didn’t mean a raise in pay, most of us would not have been there. We took the seminar in Keats rather than Shakespeare because it fit better into our child care responsibilities or our bowling nights. And although we did love literature (we could have gotten our master’s degrees in psychology or any number of other fields and gotten the same pay raise) we had practical, down-to-earth reasons for studying it. Knowing literature enabled us to pass certification exams, and we looked forward to the day when we would teach in “better” schools where we might venture reading a Shakespeare sonnet in our classes.

We judged everything that John Carter, or any other professor, taught us by one criterion: How would it work in my classroom? That meant that anything that got a little too aesthetic was out. And we didn’t think John Carter, or any other professor, had anything to tell us about what would work in our classrooms. We were out there in the trenches and we took no advice from anyone who wasn’t out there with us. I think that’s what John Carter meant when he said we were hard bitten.⁵

Many of my students are hard-bitten school teachers. They are practical and down to earth, and they judge everything I say by one

criterion: How would this work in my classroom? They are dubious about whether I have anything to tell them about what would work in their classrooms. True, I taught school for eight years, but that was thirty years ago.

And because I teach education rather than English there is an aspect to our relationship that was not present in John Carter's relationship with me and my classmates. If John Carter rhapsodized over "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," I could go along and smile at his naivete in thinking that "a summer's day" would be greeted by anything but howls on Chicago's south side. But when I suggest to my hard-bitten students that poor children are not being as well educated as they could be, they are not amused. They take it as a personal attack from someone who has been living in an ivory tower for the last thirty years, and they resent it—a lot.



So my getting through to these students is a good deal more complicated than John Carter's getting through to me. Benign amusement is replaced by thinly veiled hostility. Unlike my self-consciously political students who sometimes disagree with me on ideological grounds, these hard-bitten school teachers take differences of opinion with me personally.

My hard-bitten teachers have taught me a lesson that I, like many academics, needed to learn: Don't be so damned superior! Don't look down your nose at people out there teaching real children in real and sometimes dreadful circumstances. Don't question their intelligence, or their commitment, or their motives. I hope I have learned this lesson well enough so that I don't set up barriers between them and me such that they are not able to listen to my story and consider my position.

And so I think I've thought it through, and I hope I've learned to deal with the realities of teaching and not to be too smug while assessing problems and suggesting solutions, because no matter what the solutions are, it's hard-bitten school teachers who will need to implement them.