Johnny can't read if teachers can't teach

by Leo F. Scanlon

War Against the Schools' Academic Child Abuse
by Siegfried Engelmann
Halcyon House, Portland, Oregon, 1992
215 pages, paperbound, $20

For over a decade and a half, it has been common knowledge that American schoolchildren are being systematically shortchanged by the dismal quality of the instruction they are receiving in school, and that reading and computational skills of high school graduates rank at the bottom in any comparison with the students of any other advanced country in Europe or Asia today. It is little known, however, that the U.S. government conducted an extensive nationwide comparison of model instructional curricula, and discovered a means of instruction which allows "disadvantaged" students to perform above national reading norms, overcomes "dyslexia" and related "learning disorders" which are alleged to be components of the rising rates of illiteracy, and routinely allows grade school children to master basic computational skills which often elude high school students today.

One might expect that this breakthrough development would be enthusiastically transmitted by the Department of Education to local school districts, would be adopted by the "back to basics" movement for educational reform, and would be receiving development funds from the major corporations which are pumping billions into the "school reform" movement. Right?

Wrong. The study, called Project Follow Through, was the largest educational experiment ever conducted, at a cost of $1 billion, in 1968. And the results have been sitting on the shelf ever since. Dr. Siegfried Engelmann, the developer of the DISTAR instructional methods which swept the 1968 competition, has written an arresting book which shows that his work was rejected by an educational establishment which has abandoned any commitment to the welfare of the children it holds in thrall.

The concept of Project Follow Through was that the entire spectrum of curriculum approaches would be put into a controlled study, with each approach being designated responsible for training teachers and implementing its model in a variety of districts. It would measure an array of performance indicia, and, hopefully, clear the air of rhetoric about which approaches worked, and which didn't.

Engelmann's program was labeled Direct Instruction (from which comes DISTAR) and was assigned to over 9,000 children in different districts. In many cases, the school administrations were intensely hostile to the approach, but nonetheless, at the end of the evaluation, which was conducted by Abt Associates in connection with Stanford Research Institute, the researchers found that the children who started Direct Instruction in kindergarten achieved: first place in reading, arithmetic, spelling, language, basic skills, academic cognitive skills; they also took first place in positive self-image. They took first for urban sites, first for English speakers, first for non-English speakers. Disadvantaged students performed near the 50th percentile—i.e., at an average level—while no other approach was able to turn in results better than the 20th percentile for these students, and many came in at 15 and below.

The response: Engelmann ran into a buzzsaw of opposition organized by the curriculum mafia and the National Education Association (NEA). The Follow Through experiment was effectively sent down the memory hole, and Engelmann was labeled a "behaviorist." He was accused of tying teachers to scripts, damning kids to rote memorization, and destroying classical literature in the schools.

In fact, as he describes it, DISTAR is basically a phonics-based reading program which provides a strictly controlled graduated program of instruction, with a systematic series of tests which allow the teacher to discover, correct, and retest for errors and misunderstandings that occur in the course of instruction. It was developed in classrooms, and refined in classrooms, until each step of the procedure was shown, in a classroom setting, to accomplish the objective of teaching these basic skills. Whatever the limits of the approach, it certainly cannot be equated with the deliberate abuse built in to the programs in use today.

'The sorting machine'

In his most recent book (he is the author of more than 30 instructional programs and numerous trade and professional books on the subject of teacher training), Engelmann indicts the educational bureaucracy for conspiring to commit "academic child abuse" on a grand scale, and proves that the curricula in use by the major school districts in the United States were designed by and for a closed circle of academics who administer what he aptly labels "a sorting machine."

The sorting machine has its origins early in the history of the modern public school system, Engelmann points out, and its rhetoric has one primary purpose: to convince the uninitiated that learning (or "intelligence") is fundamentally

determined by biological (including racial) or social conditions. Typical of this effort are the commonplace beliefs that there is a mysterious rise in organic disorders ("dyslexia," for example) which correlates with the abysmal reading skills of grade school children, or that psychological conditions ("attention deficit disorder" and similar pop-psychology pathologies), or sociological conditions ("the poor are simply ineducable") explain each specific instance in which a child fails to master basic reading and mathematical skills.

These arguments are myths, and Engelmann has proven it, repeatedly. Worse, these myths serve as the primary defense of the administrative practices which are destroying children. Since as many as 80% of junior high school students do not meet the standards established by the various institutions responsible for shaping basic curriculum programs, the "sorting machine" has called in the services of an army of psychologists and guidance specialists who are employed to place the blame for this failure on the students, or on the parents.

Dr. Engelmann refuses to accept this cultural defeatism, and exposes the self-serving propaganda of the academic establishment by insisting on the principle: "If the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught." The phrase is deceptively simple (and causes the NEA types to react like vampires exposed to the sign of the cross), because it reflects a universal truth: that except in the case of a child suffering from extreme organic brain disorders, *all children are born with the natural curiosity, desire, and ability* to master the written, spoken, musical, and mathematical languages which are the prerequisite to acquiring scientific knowledge. For Dr. Engelmann, this is not a "theoretical" proposition. He has taught the "dyslexic" to read, the deaf to speak, and the "low performer" to outperform the "gifted." He has done this with children from the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds. He has developed curricula which allow "ordinary" teachers to repeatedly turn out world class students, and has proven that this can be done at a fraction of the cost in money and manpower now spent by the sorting machine apparatus.

The theoretical premises

It is necessary to digress briefly into the history of "educational theory" to show that Dr. Engelmann's accusation of "child abuse" is not hyperbole.

From the days of William Torey Harris, who was the first commissioner of public education in the United States, the administrative apparatus of the public school system, *as distinct from the cadre of teachers,* has been dominated by a virtual cult of Rousseauvian theorists. Their prejudice against the divine aspect of man causes them to insist on viewing man as a purely biological organism. At their worst—as for example, the case of textbook guru William Thorndike, who published a 400-plus-page tome on his eugenics theories in 1947—they are outright racists. This is not to imply that such people are merely "prejudiced" against particular skin colors: They believe that the majority of the population, true to its biologically determined nature, is *genetically ineducable,* and they have created a system which attempts to "administrate" that reality.

Before there were John Dewey and William Torey Harris, there was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Swiss Calvinist philosopher who developed and elaborated a determinist image of man which infects all modern social theory. Rousseau's seminal work in this area—his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men,* and his treatise on education, *Emile*—was updated for the 20th century by another Swiss radical, Jean Piaget, the founder of the Institute for Genetical Epistemology in Geneva.

Dr. Engelmann quotes a paper written by Robert Floden, the associate director of the National Center for Research on Teacher Education, in which he explains how Piagetian methodology shapes teaching: "Pupils make sense of instruction in ways that depend on what is already in their minds. Psychologists use the concept of schema to organize what they know about human perception, learning and memory." Piaget viewed the activity of the mind as a direct extension of the biological organism, and postulated that the mind reorganizes its internal "schemas" in response to exposure to new experiences (social, intellectual, or sensual). Piaget further asserted that the organism experiences new knowledge as "dissonance," which it tries to resolve by refining the organization of its "schemas," thereby creating a new "equilibrium." All learning, therefore, occurs because of this innate, biological striving for "equilibration," and learning can be induced by creating specific forms of "dissonance" in the mind of a child.

Floden, and the "cognitive psychologists" who fashion themselves as expert analysts of the various stages of mental organization, are the dominant force in curriculum development because the entire system is premised on this determinist model. The psychologist shapes the evolution of the curriculum *as a device for inducing anxiety in the student.* The teacher merely "facilitates" the process, by engaging in probing dialogue, designed to determine which schema the child is using to shape his or her current knowledge, and plans out a strategy to make the student "dissatisfied" with that schema. Floden cautions, "To get pupils to switch to the appropriate organizing framework, the teacher must make this seem attractive."

This is child abuse. It is the deliberate torture of the minds of children, who are being treated as soulless biological organisms—animals.

Whole language and whole math

The most systematic forms of child abuse chronicled by Dr. Engelmann occur at the hands of the Piagetian theorists

who have shaped the "whole language" and "whole math" curricula. Dr. Engelmann dissects representative selections of the writings of this school in a dry, witty fashion which would be hilarious if the subject matter were not so serious. Space does not permit a full recapitulation of his case, nor a detailed examination of Piaget himself, but even without this, it is possible to see the workings of the philosophical prejudices of this modern Rousseau in the programs analyzed by Dr. Engelmann.

Both "whole language" and "whole math" are the products of a school which derives from Piaget and calls itself cognitive psychology. In practice, Engelmann points out, these people are merely updating the "look-say" teaching methods pioneered by Dewey and Piaget. This method has been packaged and re-packaged decade after decade, and until this generation, good teachers were able to ignore the rhetoric and at least teach most kids to read. But the aggressive paganism of the modern classroom environment (and the general culture as well) has combined with the pernicious influence of Piagetian psychologists, to make the latest incarnation of these ideas particularly dangerous.

Engelmann indicts the educational bureaucracy for conspiring to commit "academic child abuse" on a grand scale, and proves that the curricula in use by the major school districts in the United States were designed by and for a closed circle of academics who administer what he aptly labels "a sorting machine."

Kenneth Goodman, president of the powerful International Reading Association, is a typical exponent of whole language instruction. The core of his contribution is a notion called "miscue analysis," which asserts that children who guess at the identity of letters and the meaning of words—the normal result of the look-say reading technique—are performing marvelous linguistic feats. For Goodman and his colleagues, a knowledge of the alphabet is not essential to reading. Goodman says that "no research has produced any information to suggest a reader must know this letter, this sound, this word, or this syllabic rule before some other." In fact, "we concluded that a story is easier to read than a page, a page easier than a paragraph, a paragraph easier than a sentence, a sentence easier than a word, and a word easier than a letter. . . . It is through the errors . . . that we've learned that reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game. . . ." Students are taught to "sound out" and "guess from the context" when they come across an unfamiliar word or letter. Engelmann quotes a fourth grade teacher who had been using whole language with low-performing kids who actually told him: "My kids just love books. Of course, they can't read, but they love them."

The real nature of the torture system is made clear by Engelmann's discussion of the related program known as "whole math." (These programs are marketed under different names, and administrators are trained to dissemble if you ask about it, so don't assume that they don't exist in your school district, just because you haven't heard the label.)

Lauren Resnick is a leading light of the "meaning oriented" educators who push whole language and whole math. In a recent article cited by Engelmann, "Teaching Math as an Ill-Structured Discipline," she puts forward the insane argument that mathematics is a matter of one's personal opinion: "Good reasoners in political science and economics . . . and good science problem solvers . . . all tend to treat learning as a process of interpretation, justification, and meaning construction. As in these other fields, students who understand mathematics as a domain that invites meaning constuctions are those most likely to become flexible and inventive and mathematical problem solvers. All of this suggests that we urgently need to begin investigating possibilities for teaching mathematics as if it were an ill-structured discipline. That is, we need to take seriously, with and for young learners, the propositions that mathematical statements can have more than one interpretation, that interpretation is the responsibility of every individual using mathematical expressions, and that argument and debate about interpretations and their implications are as natural in mathematics as they are in politics or literature."

These fanatics are committed to teaching every basic subject as though it were merely a stage set for a group-therapy session in the classroom. Quite literally, in their view, the operation "2+2=4" can only be understood if the schoolchild organizes a consensus agreement among his peers. As one outcome-based education theorist enthused, "You get your peer group behind you, and once you've got that, then you're going to succeed."

Resnick explains further: "If we want students to treat mathematics as an ill-structured discipline—making sense of it, arguing about it, and creating it, rather than merely doing it according to prescribed rules—we will have to socialize as much as instruct them." This gets to the core of the methodology of the cognitive psychologists, who deliberately orchestrate psychological tension in young children in order to induce "learning."

In 1989, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (the body that dictates curriculum trends among math teachers) issued a set of standards which codified this ap-

proach for all mathematics teaching.

The whole language schemes also are designed to incorporate the "collaborative learning" techniques which are touted by the outcome-based education reforms now being implemented throughout the country. Phillip Gonzales, a leading advocate of this method, is quoted by Engelmann, and his babbling points to the tyrannical—and always "politically correct"—environment these techniques allow the teachers to create.

Gonzales explains: "The student, in understanding literature and in creating his/her own texts, employs all of the language arts; skills of reading, writing, and speaking. Each does not need to be taught separately nor in any presumed sequence. . . . The teacher, no longer viewed as the translator of the world for students, is now able to motivate and facilitate a generation of new ideas, conceptualizations, interpretations, and evaluations, among all students. . . . In collaborative learning, students all share responsibility for performance. Each student is responsible for the learning of others. Students are expected to help and encourage others so that all can succeed."

This is what Engelmann calls classic "sorting machine" language, designed to relieve the administrator and the teacher from accountability. Learning is the responsibility of the children, who may choose to learn or not—it's up to them. The teacher just provides the "context" for "negotiating the understanding" of the lesson. Just stop in on criminal court if you want to meet the children who have learned to "negotiate understandings" about fundamental rules of society. You won't find these "curriculum developers" in the docket, of course; you'll only find their victims.

The growing hostility to literacy and dependence on video media (and "icons" in computer systems), which characterize a majority of the younger generation of Americans today, could reasonably be attributed to the pervasive use of these educational methods. Engelmann points to studies of drop-outs which indicate a common disorder: As they read, they guess at word meanings and come up with diffent interpretations even for the same word, as it reappears throughout a several paragraph lesson. The victims of this "miscue analysis" report that they simply cannot make sense of a classroom discussion.

Their decision to escape such a psychedelic torture is not so irrational as it might at first seem.

Those students who learn to read outside of school—from parents or grandparents, or older siblings—generally have little problem with the guessing games, and parents may not suspect just how insane the instructional material is. Dr. Engelmann shows that the racketeers who cook up these schemes, such as the National Council of Teachers of English, are never held accountable for the failures they produce, and unfortunately, it is the parents who are letting them get away with it.

A philosophy of 'empathy for kids'

Engelmann emphasizes that his philosophy, which considers children first, is not a slogan, "it's a way of life. It means that kids are capable of learning if we show our empathy not through cheap rhetoric, but through deeds. We look at things from the kids' perspective. We carefully assess what the kids know, always with the understanding that kids are the final authority and that their misconceptions are reasonable responses to what they have been told and shown. We start out where the kids are and where they can succeed—even if the starting point is pretty far from where we'd like it to be. Then we teach carefully, using the kids' performance as our only reference point for measuring our success. If that kid fails, we failed, and we'll have to go back to the drawing board and learn more about doing a better job. . . . We must play the game straight. If we take credit for the kids who succeed, we must take credit for those who failed."

Engelmann's specific approach to curriculum is not the last word on the subject, but that is not what this book was written to discuss. What he has done is to forcefully pose the issue: Who will take responsibility for these children, who are being denied the ability to read and write? He warns against the arrogance and deceptiveness of the administrators who preside over this crime, and he draws the conclusion that "changing parts of this system won't work. The sorting machine must be scrapped, from the conceptual level, and replaced with a philosophy of empathy for kids."

Engelmann notes that there are stronger advocacy groups for the spotted owl than for America's schoolchildren. "Paradoxically, millions of our kids are endangered," he writes. "They will fail in school. They will suffer a very real form of child abuse, yet these kids have far less real advocacy than the spotted owl does. . . . This situation doesn't have to be. Our kids can succeed, even those born in poverty. Our kids can receive the support, sensible legislation, and the kind of monitoring that other endangered species receive. But such advocacy will not come about from the establishment. It won't happen unless you help make it happen."

Engelmann admits that "after all these years I'm still not sure I understand why it was so important for the establishment to discredit Direct Instruction. It's true that we do not do things the way they do it in traditional classrooms. But what we do works and what they do doesn't. If society is concerned with kids, it would seem reasonable to find what works and to use it, regardless of what our prejudices might be." And here is the real limit of Engelmann's approach. He appears to believe that he is confronting merely stupidity and bureaucratic inertia. But as *EIR* has emphasized, the destruction of U.S. education is a result of deliberate cultural warfare by specific, evil people (see, for example, *EIR*, Nov. 12, 1993, "The British Racists Behind America's School Reforms"). Unless this evil is directly attacked, it will certainly prevail.