Downside UP

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Note: *Downside Up invites readers to write back about whatever thoughts or memories this article inspires in them. I will edit and organize the responses anonymously for an upcoming issue. -- RGW*

ADHD, Testing, and the Dumbing Down of American Public Schools: Observations and Lamentations of a Grandfather/Parent/Teacher

In Florida, school has been in session since the first week of August. By September, it will be in session throughout the rest of the country. As school starts, so also will begin in so many places, the deadly focus on testing, and, simultaneously, the identification of those who, unable to conform to the increasingly rigid structure of our schools, are to be labeled with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

What folly! I can admit the existence of children who can't sit still or pay attention, are too active or too passive in response to their school environments. I can see the value of labeling problems because they help us to accept that they exist and to address them. If we truly help these children by designing special programs to meet their needs, I say "hooray." Yet I am more and more convinced that most of those we are identifying as ADHD today would have managed in the schools of my day and my children's day. It is the schools and the culture which have changed not the children. We are blaming the victims of an educational system – and a society -- which has become obsessed with testing and, to meet testing requirements, has perverted the educational process. Order has taken precedence over learning. We are dumbing down education by imposing a system whose primary purpose is to enable lots of politicians to pretend to be doing something about education when their real interest is only in lowering taxes.

There is a big problem out there with the inability of some children to succeed in our schools. There are genetic factors behind the behavior of many of these children. There are also environmental factors deriving from experiences preceding entry into, and continuing on outside, the school system. But far more of the problem is with what the country has asked the schools to do. Their response, imposed upon them, has been to create an increasingly rigid -- indeed authoritarian – environment which takes the creativity and joy out of learning. Far from addressing the learning needs of all children, our schools are leaving behind more and more who could learn but cannot adapt to our schools' behavioral expectations.

There are solutions and they don't necessarily cost a lot of money. The most important is "active learning," an approach to learning which emphasizes small groups, student-student interaction, projects, problem-solving, and discussion. Unfortunately, in the current political environment, obsessed with lower taxes and

deeply divided over so many issues, it is hard to imagine our society summoning up the honesty, courage, and commitment to change direction. Even worse is the real possibility that the educational system we are creating is what those who are running the country really want: dumbed down for an uncritical population more accepting of authoritarian manipulation.

ADHD: It's the Society and the Schools, Not the Kids

This article extensively references, among many I have read, the reports of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) on Ritalin, the drug of choice for treating ADHD, and especially the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) on ADHD itself.[1] What most strikes me about these two articles is how central is the word "school" -- to the point that it would appear there would be no ADHD without schools. Obviously, school is where most kids are most of the time, but the very emphasis on schools raises the question of what kids are, or would be, like outside school or without school, and how much the problem of ADHD is with our schools not with our kids. What, after all, is "normal" behavior, the other ever-present notion looming over the NIMH analysis.

The NIDA study estimates that "3-7 percent of school-age children have ADHD," with 2.4% of 8th graders, 3.4% of 10th graders, and 4.4% of 12th graders using Ritalin. The NIMH report estimates 3-5% rates of ADHD. ADHD is characterized by "a persistent pattern of abnormally high levels of activity, impulsivity, and/or inattention" and is usually "diagnosed during the elementary school years." Ritalin is by far the most common of the many stimulants used to treat the "disorder" and apparently acts by "[amplifying] the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter, thereby improving attention and focus in individuals who have dopamine signals that are weak."

I am probably not being fair to react negatively to the sober, academic, psychological tone of the articles. After all, in doing their studies, psychologists and psychiatrists are supposed to regard people as objects to be studied not sentient human beings. Yet from their pious call for "help, guidance, and understanding from parents, guidance counselors, and the public education system" to their recommendation of a "system of rewards and penalties" to "modify a child's behavior," the NIMH article reeks of what child psychologist and syndicated columnist John Rosemund loves to call "psychobabble."

There are three types of what is called ADHD: predominantly hyperactive-impulsive, predominantly inattentive, and a combination of the two with the first often preceding the second. Hyperactive children may be characterized – in school – as "can't sit still," "disruptive," and a "discipline problem." They "squirm and fidget in their seats or roam about the room…in situations where sitting or quiet behavior is expected." They "wiggle their feet, touch everything, or noisily tap their pencil." Impulsive children "blurt out inappropriate comments," "often report needing to stay busy," and "act without regard for the later consequences of their conduct." They can't wait for things or to take their turn. They may hit when they are upset.

Because much of these behaviors don't seem that abnormal to me, I can hardly resist sarcastic remarks about the NIMH's analysis of hyperactivity and impulsivity. Yet, the analysis of inattention seems even more bizarre, indeed, self-contradictory.

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[1] www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/adhd.cfm, www.nida.nih.gov/Infofacts/Ritalin.html

The NIMH report says that the inattentive child "may get bored with a task after only a few minutes. If they are doing something they really enjoy, they have no trouble paying attention. But focusing deliberate, conscious attention to organizing and completing a task or learning something new is difficult." "Homework is particularly hard for these children…[It] is often accompanied by frustration for both parent and child." To which I respond: **But what if the work IS boring. Homework is notoriously a boring repetition of material the student may already understand. The fact that the child can still pay attention to something she or he enjoys demonstrates to me that the problem is not inattention in and of itself so much as the material to which the child is supposed to pay attention.**

While admitting that the "disorder" may be difficult to diagnose, the NIMH report outlines criteria for distinguishing "inappropriate" behavior for an age group. It notes that inattention is harder to diagnose because the child may "sit quietly, unobtrusively, and even appear to be working but not fully attending to or understanding the task and the instructions." The report also says that the behavior must appear early, continue, and "create a real handicap in at least two areas" of life. The report bends over backwards to emphasize that children are different and mature at different rates, but once again the issue seems to boil down to schools as much as children. It even grants teachers a special role in identifying behavior which diverges from the "average."

What the NIMH report never considers is the possibility that the problem is not with the child but the schools, especially changes which have taken place in the schools over the past decade or two. It would seem that the analysis should focus on the environment – schools – first, then modifications in that environment, thirdly special assistance for the child, and, only as a last resort, drugs to be taken by the child.

Testing: Saving Dollars, Losing Children

Long-term readers of Downside Up may be surprised that they have read so far in this article without a single comment on George W. Bush and his "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) program. There is no question that I oppose this massive, top-down bureaucratic monster imposed on our nation's public schools. I find it more than ironic that the program was created by a Republican Party which ran in 2000 on an anti-government, abolish-the-Department-of-Education, no-unfunded-mandates platform. At the time, it was one of only two things I actually liked about the Republicans – along with Bush's commitment to the Kyoto Accords on global warming!

The truth is that Bill Clinton was pushing more testing long before the Republicans adopted the idea. Indeed, the Republicans adopted NCLB for the same reason they created the monstrously bureaucratic and confusing Medicare Drug Benefit: because the Democrats had a popular program in that arena and the Republicans decided they needed to blunt the Democratic initiative in order to win election. Substituting more testing for better learning was a bad project of centrist Democrats, especially state governors, long before it was Republican legislation.

The result is testing run amuck in our public schools. As Anna Quindlen said in a June, 13, 2005 Newsweek column, "Constant testing no more addresses the problems with education than constantly putting an overweight person on the scale cures obesity." Governor Jeb Bush's Florida represents both the purpose and the effects of the testing obsession – as well as a vision of the future for all our schools.

Making a great hullabaloo about testing is the façade behind which tax cutters hide their real objectives. Improving schools is pretense. Reducing state expenditures is the goal. Testing is really the blame game with schools, teachers, and children the victims.

As Jeb leaves office this year after his term-limited two terms as governor, he boasts of the great progress made in the state's schools over his eight years as governor. It is an absurd boast. The state remains 50th in per capita education funding, 50th in graduation rates, $5,000 to $6,000 below the national average in teachers' salaries, 6th highest in elementary school class sizes, and 2nd highest in secondary school class sizes.[2] Bush has pushed hard to repeal the state referendum setting minimum class sizes, dragged his feet on implementation of the law, and promoted charter schools as public alternatives to regular schools – while exempting them from the performance testing required of public schools! While cutting taxes by several billion dollars annually, he argues that the state can just not afford to have the smaller classes required by the referendum.

This is not just using dollars and class size as a stand-in for quality. Florida has long had a miserable educational record and Jeb Bush has done nothing to improve it. Even our conservative local newspaper, The St. Augustine Record, saw fit to complain about Bush and his Education Commissioner's manipulation of the state's graduation rates. In December of 2005, Bush and Education Commissioner John Winn announced that the state's graduation rate had climbed to 72%. But that didn't count just students who entered 9th grade and graduated from 12th. The numbers not only included students getting a GED, special diplomas, and certificates, but also counted students who transferred in and graduated during the previous four years—without adding them to the 9th grade total a school started with! The Record pointed out that an independent study by the Manhattan Institute fairly comparing Florida with other states pegged Florida's graduation rate at 56%, a drop from 47th in the country to "dead last." After this ploy failed, Winn proposed that the state eliminate "retention" altogether – that is allow all students to pass to the next grade level and graduate![3]

Whether testing will do the trick and raise graduation rates remains to be seen, but it will do little or nothing to improve student learning. Today, in Florida, testing overshadows everything that happens in our schools. Last fall during the children's time at our church, the adult leader asked the children, mostly in the early elementary grades, what they worried about. Without prompting, one child spoke up: "FCAT," the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.[4]

Florida's testing goes way beyond the requirements of NCLB, but, for that, it is by no means untypical. Florida tests reading and mathematics in grades 3-10; Science in grades 5, 8, and 11; and writing in grades 4, 8, and 10. FCAT looms over the schools. You can't get a high school diploma if you don't pass the Grade 10 FCAT's. It is recommended that third graders be retained if they don't pass their FCAT in reading. Schools are graded (literally, A, B-, C+, D, etc.) by their FCAT scores. They are given additional funding if they score high or low. If they score too low for too long, they are punished by having their children given vouchers – money -- to go

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[2] The St. Augustine Record, March 9, 2006, p. 8A.

[3] "Dumbing Down gets new meaning in Florida," December 18, 2005, p. 2C

[4] For more than you want to know about FCAT, see its home web page: http://firn.edu/doe/sas/fcat.htm

elsewhere, even private schools if Governor Bush has his way. Scores are not relative – counting progress for lower achieving schools even if they fail to attain the levels of schools at the top of the heap. And it is all compounded by the undeniable fact that test scores vary in direct relationship to the socioeconomic status of the students taking the tests – the lower end easily measured by the percentage of students who qualify for free lunches.[5]

I have looked at the FCAT tests They are difficult but, according the Manhattan Institute, the same organization which impartially assesses graduation rates and whose data contradicts the governor, they measure knowledge well.[6] If used primarily for learning, they could be helpful. Although most questions are multiple choice, requiring a single answer, many are open-ended and require written explanations.

The problem is that with their schools and districts on the line, teachers must "teach to the test" at the expense of creativity, joy, and discovery. On the FCAT web page, the intent is clear. In the teacher section it asks, "Is there a simple way for every teacher to help students be prepared for FCAT? Yes! Incorporate FCAT-like questions into regular lessons, activities, and assessments." The publicity about school scores is huge, front page news. Inevitably, interesting issues must defer to necessary topics. Alternative understandings are threatening. Open-ended questions can be even more threatening than multiple choice because their grading is discretionary. Learning is about grinding out rote memorization: for parents, FCAT offers "flash cards" for children to use to prepare at home. Not only must students learn at the prescribed "normal" rate – or at least not any more slowly -- teachers are forced to drive every student to that rate in the identified subjects, missing those who are ahead as well as those who cannot keep up. Along the way, even with more school and more homework, the likes of art, music, physical education, and history drop by the wayside.

Just in case teachers didn't get the message, Governor Bush, like Arnold Schwarzenegger in California, proposed a way to keep them on task: salary increases geared to student scores in each teacher's class, regardless of the socioeconomic level of the students themselves. The ultimate blame game: not only are schools and children on the line, teachers are too. The difference is that the Republican legislature in Florida passed such a law and California did not.[7]

Children Are Different from One Another

The crux of the educational problem is that all children are different one from another and schools over the last decade or two seem to have moved – raised – the behavioral bar for "normal." Most all children can learn if given some kind of equal chance and individual response to their individual needs. Certainly, there are patterns and groupings but even those are diverse. I would lay a lot more on genes than I would have 10 years ago but most of the differences in learning are probably still the result of environmental factors – principally family life and circumstances.

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[5] The St. Augustine Record, "Grades in: St. Johns does well," by Paulette Perhach, and "Bush: A, B schools outnumber poor performing ones," by David Royse, June 9, 2005, pp. 1A and 4A.

[6] Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "Does FCAT Pass The Test?," www.manhattan-institute.org, February 12, 2003

[7] Peter Whoriskey, "Tying Teacher Pay to Student Performance," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, March 27-April 2, 2006, p. 31.

How can one possibly expect the same of a child growing up in a non-verbal household – where people don't ever have conversations – that one expects of a child growing up in my and my parents' households where all the adults had college degrees and talked about social and political issues? How could it possibly be fair to treat the same children who haven't a single book in their home and children whose parents have read to them from before they could sit up by themselves? It is an unjust society which does not at least try to counteract this difference in opportunity; I don't think such a society can ever claim to be democratic. Without massive countervailing intervention, such a society is bound to perpetuate vast inequalities from generation to generation – as the United States has done especially with regard to African Americans, the dirt poor whites of Appalachia, American Indians, and most Hispanics.

Children are also different, vastly different, from one another as individuals, regardless of socioeconomic background. There is no doubt in my mind that if I were entering school today, I would be on target for labeling as an ADHD child – hyperactive-impulsive. Those readers who know me will laugh, believing what I say. But my day was in fact very different from what I see ahead for my grandchildren who go to school. Neither I nor my wife can recall having any significant homework in all of elementary school. Aside from a few home projects, homework began in junior high school.

In elementary school, we had a morning recess, an afternoon recess, and an hour for lunch. We played sports – kickball I remember especially – during recess and during the lunch break. I ran – RAN! – the half-mile home for lunch and back, up a hill and down each way, and then played more kickball before lunch was over. When I got home after school, I'm not sure even rain was enough of an excuse to stay in the house, certainly not snow. I was expected to be out all afternoon until dark. I played football; I played basketball; I played baseball. Then maybe I could come in and watch Howdy-Doody. I would call that a great day: about 50-50 school and active exercise. I was healthy and happy. What did it matter if I was hyperactive? I got to blow off all that energy and then sit down in class.

It really surprised one of my daughters when I told her that her Ph.D., intellectual, reader father hardly read a book for his own enjoyment, except from time to time as required by my mother, right through high school and college. As a child, I read comic books -- Walt Disney and Bugs Bunny were my favorites -- but nothing more. I collected baseball cards (which, like the comic books, my parents threw out after I left home, not knowing they would be worth thousands of dollars twenty year later). Perhaps most illustrative, I have this vivid memory of my super brilliant cousin, just 18 days older than I, as a 6th grader reading War and Peace while simultaneously listening to the Boston Red Sox game on the radio and telling me that he would play with me when the game was over! I also remember the general state of shock in which my presence always left my aunt when I came to visit her. She was used to two considerably less kinetic boys! My mother, with a love I never doubted, was fond of joking that before I came along she had planned to have four children but after me she stopped at three!

The NIMH report proposes that ADHD children be eligible for special education. It seems to me that all children, in so far as possible, need special education in the sense of individualization to their needs.

As I look back on what school would have been for me in today's environment, I think a lot about what it is now for my grandchildren. Five out of six are boys. I will suppress my feminist instincts enough to say that I concede that either by genetics or socialization, girls as a whole are less likely to be kinetic – but many still are and, like boys, should be treated as individuals. One of those boys, the oldest, is a bloody genius. By the time he was two he talked in full sentences. By the time he was four he had memorized a books-worth of information about the Civil War -- such that a trip to Gettysburg was what he wanted for his fourth birthday present. By the time he was 11, he talked and wrote with a college level vocabulary. At least as smart in math, he is now taking college math classes at 13. He reads all the time. And he loves playing sports.

But there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that in most schools in the United States today, he would be absolutely killed. He cannot sit still. He may be able to think while sitting down but mostly he stands up and wanders around when he is thinking. He has broken as many things around the house as I did – speaking of shocks to my poor aunt. I doubt that there are many elementary schools in the country which would not have instantly branded him ADHD. Many schools would have given him special help in and out of the classroom but many more would have taken him out of the regular classroom and condemned him to perpetual "weirdness." Lucky for him, he is home-schooled – or rather, what my daughter calls "unschooled" now that, at 13, he has covered everything he might have been taught through high school.

This grandson is dysgraphic, meaning he can barely perform the physical act of writing and, indeed, has trouble making the connection between his brain and what he writes with his hand – but writes with brilliance, wit, and sophistication on a computer! Both of his brothers and one of his cousins have exceptional small muscle motor skills, and are able to work with the smallest legos from a very early age. His two-year old brother already shows impressive potential as an obsessive-compulsive like his maternal grandfather. I really like my and other players' scrabble tiles to be placed perfectly in their squares – and adjust others' as well as my own to be so. The two-year old doesn't just pile up the things he picks up; he puts them in neat rows as he has since before he was one.

Another grandson, of my other daughter, tracks closely the NIMH concept of at least a borderline ADHD kid. I fear for him and pray he can work through what may lie in store for him. In first and second grade, he hated homework, fidgeted in class, dropped things, and liked PE best. He has an on-the-edge inclination to disobedience. Since he often knows what he is doing – he has told me so – I am not sure it fits the definition of ADHD, but for his behavior, by NIMH criteria, he could easily be labeled even worse than just ADHD: "Oppositional Defiant Disorder" (ODD). I wonder if the labels are not in fact driving the perception rather than the other way around. His teacher has talked to my daughter about him. He much prefers sports to school – and makes no bones about it. He is lucky if he gets a third of the exercise time I got as an elementary school kid. His unhappiness and his response are very conscious and articulated.

As I do with my oldest grandson, I identify strongly with this child but, since he is in school, worry much more about what will happen to him over the next 10 years. My gut tells me that if there is any pathology involved, it is with the system, not the child. Is he really "abnormal"? Or are the schools abnormal? The NIMH report requires that an ADHD diagnosis demonstrate that a child's behavior is "inappropriate for the person's age," but it seems to me that what has happened is

not a change in children but a change in the definition of "appropriate." The "disorder" derives from the change. It is like the problem I see with parents who take a three-year old to a fancy restaurant – I suppose because they don't want to pay a sitter or think it would be a "good experience." The child is normal; the problem is the appropriateness of the parents' expectations. It is rarely a good experience for anyone. The parents should take the kid to McDonalds or Pizza Hut.

This grandchild will concentrate for over an hour on playing Sorry with my wife or Blackjack with me. Is it sane in any circumstances to expect an eight-year old to sit still without moving? I will never forget his mother's wonderful first grade teacher describing how, looking through a window in the door to the hall, she watched my daughter, bored to death in second grade, trying to keep busy by alternating several different pencils to fill in the answers to questions she knew the answers to in kindergarten. To the unknowing observer or uncaring teacher, that might look like ADHD behavior, but not to her first grade teacher. I know in fact that this grandson reads to me at well above his grade level and can do mathematics in his head at an even higher level. I fear his teachers have been so focused on order and discipline that they don't even know what he knows. And I strongly suspect a high pressure test is not the way to find out.

When, to the school structure itself, you add homework and the heavily scheduled requirements of modern suburbia for out-of-school music lessons and sports, there's not a whole lot of free time left. There is no room for spontaneity and creativity. Not all homework is mindlessly boring but it is still way too much for most children in first grade! How did we get the notion that more work and less joy was the way to more learning? Where did we get the notion that working through hours of repetitive work was knowledge? Where did we get the notion that learning was something to be endured rather than sought? Where did we get the notion that children would learn more if they played less and gave up music and art? When we know that children learn differently, at different times and different rates, why do we force them into classrooms that pretend they are all alike and should be able to learn in the same way at the same time?

The NIMH report seems far too ready to "blame" the child without considering his or her school environment. The report opens the way too readily to drugs as a "cure" without enough attention to how the children themselves might learn to control their behavior. Since my borderline grandchild is so conscious of what he is doing, he may not fit the pattern and could choose to change. My oldest grandson has learned, with parental support and guidance, to curb his impulsive and excessive explanations of things no one really wants to hear about.

The NIMH report would allocate scarce resources to a few children as special education for individuals. I would like to think more about what could be done to individualize instruction and environments for all children.

As my home-schooled grandchildren demonstrate, there is not really that much knowledge that needs be learned and plenty of time to learn it if you take out school bus rides, excessive repetition, constant testing, "discipline," and all the paperwork of school bureaucracies, especially, today, those like FCAT's. If you can read, write, and do mathematics, you can do anything and knowledge comes along for the ride. When set in a positive environment where the child has some choices about when and how basic skills are learned, and what subjects are studied, learning is not only not that hard, it is fun. There is no reason why the same levels must be reached by

all children in all subjects at the same time.[8] American educators – and politicians -- often talk about lengthening the school year so children will learn more and compete with Europeans and the Japanese. It won't work.

A Better Way: Active Learning

As I began thinking about writing this article, it came to mind how, when I worked at the State University of New York at Potsdam, the Human Resources Office would regularly send out information about, and announcements for workshops on, "stress reduction." I always had the same response, often saying it out loud to my poor wife: "Instead of treating the symptoms of stress, why don't they do something about the bad management which creates the stress in the first place."

The same kind of thought comes to me when I think about ADHD and our country's educational dilemmas: instead of assuming the problem is with the children and trying to "fix" them, why don't we look at the educational system and fix it.

To reiterate, I understand the value of labels. We all feel better when what is bothering us gets a name. It helps one feel no longer just odd. It enables us to fit somewhere and have our needs addressed. But labels drive perception and I worry that schools are too ready to convert symptoms into "disorders" because they have a name for them.

I support public education. I am a public school teacher, albeit at a college level. I am not for throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Society today is imposing enormous pressures on the schools. They are expected to create self-discipline in children growing up in chaos, a love of learning in children who spend several hours a day in front of a television, and a knowledge of basic skills in children who arrive at school not knowing the alphabet. They must deal all at once in the same classroom with the highly verbal and the non-verbal, upper class brats and lower class act-ups, quiet kids and loud kids, girls and boys, high energy and low energy, brilliant and clueless. ADHD, to the extent it exists, is but one part of this problem. Add in aggressive parents, absentee parents, the social and cultural pressures of a consumer society, drugs, and politicians constantly trying to cut school budgets; it is a wonder the schools accomplish anything.

Pre-kindergarten programs like Head Start are an important answer for the underprepared child. Once again over the objections of their governor, Florida voters passed a referendum to make pre-kindergarten available to all Florida children. But given all the challenges our schools face, it is no wonder that teachers and administrators turn to highly structured environments and massive testing as a way out of the morass of difference among students. Nor is it surprising that teachers tend to emphasize a need for smaller classes, that there is increasing interest in single-sex classrooms and schools, and, if it were not so socially unacceptable, that many teachers and school officials would love to go back to the days of "tracking" kids according to their alleged ability to learn.

I am not totally unsympathetic with any of these ideas, but I am concerned that they may be regarded as panaceas. I worry about the social segregation they would promote, and I think that diversity in fact promotes learning. If they didn't work, moreover, we would be left, as the NIMH report recommends for ADHD children, with

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[8] A recent letter to Business Week asserts that children in France are not taught to read until they reach the third grade but by the 6th grade they are tested to be "the best readers in the world." July 17, 2006, p. 14.

massive amounts of special education funding for the increasing number of children who do not fit into an increasingly rigid behavioral straightjacket. Such individual attention may still be necessary but I think there is another alternative we should at least try first: more child-centered, interactive learning generally referred to as "active learning."

Active learning is not a new concept. Nor is it an unpracticed concept, especially in elementary schools. It involves a lot of student to student interaction, one on one and in small groups, from two to five or six children. It assumes that children/students learn more rapidly and more deeply when they interact with others about their ideas than when they work alone or listen passively to teachers feeding them information. Teachers become assigners of tasks and facilitators of thought more than tellers of answers. They have more time for individual help. More skilled students help less skilled students. Students solve problems together. Strikingly, Business Week reports that "just as the U.S. is embracing more standardized metrics," China, with a massive and costly effort to improve its schools, is "shifting away from lecturing and exam-based grades" and towards "in-class experiments and discussions."[9] Even before the testing craze, we needed active learning, and now we need it even more.

Active learning requires carefully structured activities. Not at any level can a teacher just ask a question or assign a task and expect untrained students to develop coherent and rational answers and projects. At least initially, they need a script to work their way through. By this method, active learning in small groups recognizes and incorporates a variety of learning styles. It sometimes works best when the classroom itself, with moveable walls, can be broken up into physically separate areas with different groups of students working together, often on the same task. Some students can actually be standing up and walking around as they think and talk! Speeches, plays, debates, re-creations, simulations, games: all are welcome.

Because nostalgia for the "good old days" builds upon some erroneous assumptions, I hate to give credence to those who argue that learning was better when children learned in single-room, multiple-grade schools, but that is, in many ways, my model. The error of those who have nostalgia for the old days is in assuming that these single-room schools were in fact monolithic, teacher-centered places where teachers talked and students darn well listened – or else. To some extent, maybe, but they were also places where older students helped younger students and teachers worked with multiple groups at multiple levels of learning in multiple subjects. School days were shorter because many students had to come a long way to and from school and do physical chores before and after. The number of students was often small even with multiple grades. They exercised a lot without the need for organized activities during school.

An example I lovingly steal from a friend who taught teachers to teach science in elementary school, started with several 35mm film canisters containing something unknown to the students: "a steel nut suspended from a horizontal wooden beam by a rigid copper wire," a "plastic divider, mounted diagonally inside the canister" with a "steel BB" in the bottom half," or a "steel ball bearing…with a small amount of sand." The task is to practice the scientific method, applying a series of working

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[9] "'Students cram and recite,' says She Baiyu, director of curriculum development at the Education Ministry in Beijing. 'They remember, but they don't understand.' The lack of creativity, says Shen, is 'a fatal disadvantage of Chinese education.'" "No Peasant Left Behind," August 22-29, 2005, p. 102.

hypotheses and tests to determine what is in the container. A group of children can test by weighing the container, shaking it, putting it in water, or anything else but opening it. With the third canister above, they discover: "upon shaking," there is "a massive thud accompanied by a raspy, sand-like noise"; "in the presence of a magnet, the thud disappears, leaving only the sand-like noise"; but the "box attracts no external steel." The teacher never tells them what is actually in it – because that is not the point. In the example, a "magnetic marble in sand" would also be a correct answer.[10]

Although active learning tends to decline the higher the grade, I used the approach often in my college history classes – perhaps in part, I admit, because I am such a hyperkinetic person myself. My favorite question was always this: "After the Great War for Empire, was England or its colonies in North America more reasonable and justified in their actions: England by its imposition of greater authority, control, and expectations of revenue from its North American colonies, or the English colonies by their rising hostility to the imposition of these policies and measures?" It had never occurred to most students that there was a legitimate English side to the story of the American Revolution. Even the FCAT offers more than just single answer questions to be corrected by optical scan machines. Many of the questions could be explored fruitfully among students in small groups. Even better, for real learning experiences to excite students' interest and occupy their attention, there is always the real world full of uncertainties, dilemmas, and squishy answers

Dumbing Down Society

NCLB actually proposes that by 2014, all children, even special ed students, reach a standard of "proficiency" in reading, math, and science equal to what only 60% of them have today.[11] Our schools could surely do better than they are doing now, but the idea that every child – 100% of them -- by 2014 could be made to score higher on FCAT-like tests than 40% of them score today simply exposes the absurdity of the testing mania. Under that kind of regimen we can be sure that all our children will be ADHD and none will pass the tests. Thereupon, those who all along have wanted to de-fund our public schools will claim they tried their best but the schools' failure only proves they should be abolished and all education privatized![12]

ADHD is real. Some children need special counseling, education, and sometimes drug therapy to learn even in an active learning environment. Yet, across the United States, the pressure on children to meet proficiency standards as demonstrated by standardized tests is cutting out what little time and patience there has been for active children to be active. Testing is driving the fun and creativity out of learning and the change is raising the bar on what it is to be a "normally" active child. In response to a massive testing bureaucracy, we have created a smaller but even more insidious diagnostic bureaucracy. The failure is with our society and the schools it is creating not with the children we are sending to those schools.

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[10] Steven J. Wirt and Thomas C. Alman, Science Joy Wagon, courtesy of Timothy Schwob, 30 Main St., Potsdam, NY

[11] Jerry Parks, "No Illusion Left Behind," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, September 29 – October 5, 2003, p. 27.

[12] While I may be exaggerating, this is a standard anti-government tactic initiated by Ronald Reagan: reduce funding of social programs, weigh them down with bureaucratic rules claimed to make them more "business-like," and then cut them more when they fail to perform.

Even scarier is the possibility that our schools are being dumbed down for the passive and malleable child because that is the kind of citizen the people who are running this country prefer. Perhaps there is more going on than tax cuts and the blame game between politicians and our schools. Perhaps teaching to the test for answers which are largely predefined helps mold people to see the world only in black and white, good guys and bad guys, evil empires and morally superior countries, literal interpretations and wrong interpretations. Perhaps, after all, the consequences of our school decisions are more intended than unintended. Perhaps we are creating a society, one part of which is silenced by a cornucopia of psycho-behavioral drugs and much of the rest simply incapable of critical thought -- with both groups willing to accept an increasingly controlling and manipulative government.

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Downside Up

Web Site: Downside Up has had a web site, and may have one again, but I haven't figured out to create one without tying myself down with blog management. If you need a back issue, email me at downsideup2@bellsouth.net.

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Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous.

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