

Below is an excellent piece written by the assessment reform coordinator from Missouri. In their state, many schools have been privatized through a company called Edison. Alfie Kohn described the company in a book written a few years ago about the education business. They are also discussed at length in Jonathon Kozol's latest book.

Peter's observations are quite accurate. Please read.

Here's a revised version (1,500 words) of a piece I wrote a while back. Thanks to Monty and Jennifer Booher-Jennings for their feedback. And thanks to Peter Farrugio for his insight on the relationship between noise, chaos, and discipline.

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In October 2005, a board member took me on a tour of Confluence Academy. Located in the heart of inner-city St. Louis in one of the most economically-disadvantaged areas of the city, Confluence Academy is a charter school run by Edison Schools, Inc., a for-profit educational management organization (EMO) headquartered in New York City. This board member knew I was skeptical about Edison coming in. But, he assured me, he had taken many skeptics on a tour of the school, and they all emerged as firm supporters. I, however, did not emerge from this tour as a supporter. Rather, what I saw that day shook me.

It's not that I object to Edison and Confluence Academy per se. I understand that they are logical expressions of our contemporary system of education, especially the way that we educate poor minority children. Edison is profiting – literally and metaphorically – from the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind law. But Confluence and Edison are symptoms of a much larger social disease, a disease that creates the conditions for these companies to exist and thrive and for these schools to be regarded as models for our future.

The most troubling thing about my visit to Confluence came when I observed what actually happened in the classrooms. I visited six classrooms at various grade levels. I did not observe a single white student. Every child I saw was African-American. The students were dominated and controlled in ways that were reminiscent of a trainer working with frightened, caged animals. The children seemed utterly unchildlike, utterly joyless. In one first grade class, I observed students who had all of their body movements tightly controlled. They responded in automaton-like fashion to instructions from the teacher. Instead of smiles and engaged looks of curiosity, the faces of these six-year-old children expressed a kind of dull affect. The teachers taught at the students, and the students simply responded in parrot fashion to the teacher. The students' role was clear: obey orders, do not do anything that the teacher does not tell you to do, sit and be quiet. This was often taken to the extreme: in one case, a teacher had a group of first graders lined up for lunch. The boys' line could not go forward because one of the boys was wiggling as he stood in line. He had to become absolutely still before the teacher would let them go to lunch. The teacher, a white woman, stood and leered at the six-year-old black boys for more than 30 seconds. Her face was filled with judgment and contempt for these wiggly little boys. This degree of total control over the students affected the way that teachers

taught; in only one of the six classrooms I visited did I see a teacher who seemed like she was having fun; the others were very short with the students, quick to pounce on any undesirable, uncontrollable behavior. The teachers constantly berated the children for the slightest infraction. For example, in the middle of a fourth grade math lesson, the teacher sensed some rumblings in the background and suddenly blurted out, "Hands folded! Everyone sit at attention." I was frightened by this sudden explosive outburst. All the students suddenly snapped into place at their seats, and the lesson continued in the context of "Be quiet and pay attention – or else."

In defense of the heavy discipline, the board member said, "Sure, the structure of the Edison schools is a bit tough. Yes, we make the kids walk in lines wherever they go. But it works. You don't have to waste 6 minutes at the beginning of class, telling Johnny to sit down and be quiet. And you don't waste 15 minutes in the middle of every class, trying to get students to be quiet and stay on task. Even the very brightest kids can't learn in an environment like that. No one can." But being quiet and paying attention to the teacher should not be taken as unquestioned and unqualified virtues in themselves. There's something very troubling about white teachers telling students of color to sit down, shut up, and do as they are told. In a rigid structure such as that imposed by Edison, there is no room for student or teacher creativity or spontaneity. The only room for freedom of expression is either (a) do what the teacher tells you to do or (b) resist what the teacher tells you to do. Given the kind of power and authority structures that already exist in white-dominated society, it's little wonder that students of color are tempted to act out and lash out. If they don't act in this manner, then both the implicit and explicit power relationships and inequities are reproduced in the classroom: docile brown bodies controlled by powerful white bodies. This is even more troubling given the fact that no white, wealthy, suburban district would ever consent to a school that controlled its students and its teachers in this way. Indeed, these schools pride themselves in their individuality, their creativity, and the professional autonomy of their teachers, who are viewed as experts in assessing what is best for each student.

Teaching and learning at Edison schools are driven by computer-based benchmark assessment systems. Tungsten, a division of Edison, provides a web-based diagnostic test that features a series of multiple-choice questions designed to help children practice for the state standardized test. But the time spent preparing for the benchmark tests, reviewing the results of the benchmark tests, and remediating student performance based on the results of the test cut into instructional time for subjects outside of reading and math, currently the only subjects tested under No Child Left Behind.

The fact that teaching and learning are inextricably linked to test performance is further complicated by the fact that pay for senior teachers in Edison schools is linked to test score performance: better scores yield better pay. While rewarding teachers for being good teachers might make sense, reducing "good teaching" to a test score not only makes no sense, but it also provides an incentive for teachers to teach at the most superficial level possible.

Many people have been taken on the same exact tour of Confluence Academy that I was taken on and emerged gushing about how great the school is. "Look how well-behaved they are!" or "They're all so quiet!" I'm told are typical reactions. As I was sitting in the classrooms, I was certainly aware of how quiet the students were. And, at times, it struck me that they might actually be learning. But then I turned my attention away from the teachers and looked at the children in the room. This was hard to do, as all the teachers completely, without stopping for a breath, dominated

every moment of the classroom. I looked at the kids that weren't shouting out the correct answers to the teachers' almost-incessant calls for the correct answer. They sat there. Quietly. Very quietly. Not disturbing anyone, least of all the teachers. If you had given a benchmark diagnostic at that moment, all the kids who were following along and shouting out the correct answers would be the higher achievers in the classroom. Those that were shouting out on occasion or with some reservations would be "the bubble kids." And those that were sitting there quietly, so well-behaved, would be the low achievers. If the teachers can get the bubble kids over the passing bar, that's all they need to do. And at Edison, if they can get just enough of their scores up, not only will they get to keep their jobs, but they'll also make more money.

Unlike the Hollywood depiction of classrooms, in which "good" classrooms are quiet and arranged in neat rows of desks, effective classrooms tend to be a bit "noisy." As a teacher, I seldom led classes that were quiet. Because my classes almost always used group activities and hands-on, project-based work, they were usually pretty noisy. So I never thought of the issue of whether the class was quiet or not. Quite honestly, the issue was irrelevant. What concerned me was whether the students were engaged or not. Engagement, in my experience, comes by being able to allow students a great deal of say in the manner of what they learn and how they learn it. "Having a say" means that students use their voices. For voices to be heard, they cannot be quiet. The literal and metaphorical implications of silenced voices, particularly the silenced voices of historically silenced people, cannot be emphasized enough. Any system that demands that historically oppressed people be silent should be subject to scrutiny and skepticism. But in an educational system that is responsible for educating future citizens, this forced silence and compliance should do more than give us pause. It should make us angry. Unfortunately, the Board members of Confluence Academy have apparently bought into the notion that "noise = chaos," at least for non-white kids. Thus, for non-white kids, there must be rigid "discipline" as seen in the military and prison.

Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, students in these academic settings will be forced out of school and will have nowhere to go but the military or to prison. The one comfort may be that if this fate does befall them, they will have been well-prepared.