

## LEARNING

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*They Always Test Us on Things We Haven't Read: Teen Laments and Lessons Learned.*  
Kathleen W. Gershman. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books. 2004. ISBN:  
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The University of Indiana has launched a massive campaign called the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) to describe and document student engagement in secondary schools. Through self-reported responses to questions such as, “How many hours per week do you spend doing volunteer work?” and “How many papers have you written between 3 and 5 pages in length?” researchers at HSSSE hope to diagnose what’s wrong with American high schools (McCarthy, Watson, So, Harris, and Winstead, 2005).

The latest federal Department of Education budget targets \$1.5 billion specifically for high school, including additional funds for more testing. In February 2005, the National Governor’s Association met with policymakers from six philanthropic foundations—the Gates Foundation among them—to announce that they were donating millions of dollars for the “reform of high schools.”

Clearly, the focus of educational reform has shifted from young children to adolescents. So, what’s wrong with America’s high schools?

Bill Gates points to the inequalities of a system that prevents children from fulfilling their potential due to factors beyond their control—“their zip code, their skin color, or the income of their parents” (2005). Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings thinks schools are ineffective because teachers have low expectations and are not held accountable. HSSSE researchers hypothesize that high school courses are, across the board, too easy.

Although well intentioned, these high-profile initiatives offer sometimes abstruse, often contradictory prescriptions for what ails America’s high schools. In truth, spending a few hours at the local high school can be more

illuminating than reading through volumes of survey data or plowing through the caustic tripe of public relations materials.

Kathleen Gershman spent a year in high schools—attending classes; talking with students, teachers, and administrators; showing up at social and sporting events; hanging out with teenagers. Her book *They Always Test Us on Things We Haven't Read* describes life in high school from the vantage point of a well-educated adult sitting at the back of the room. When writing of the problems of public education, Gershman writes with perspicacious wit:

There is something of a disconnect, even in a school as bland as a beet field, between what adults intend to happen and how the students there actually experience it all. Miraculous moments of learning and sincere support happen throughout the day, but overall there is a lot of time and money going into an effort that tends to fall flat—unless the intents of public education are to teach punctuality, politeness, orderliness, and respect for extrinsic reward systems—then in that case it is rather successful. (pp. 6–7)

Gershman spent time at three high schools in two cities in North Dakota, where 98% of students graduate from high school and 80% admit that they love or like their school. Although Gershman seems a bit sheepish that she is not reporting from a beleaguered school in downtown Detroit, her observations have as much resonance for urban education as for the well-supported, orderly, “beet field” schools of North Dakota.

The bottom line is that students in high schools in both North Dakota and Detroit seem to be bored out of their minds, way beyond the usual bounds of teen angst. They “feel indifferent about the curriculum, negative about most of the teaching and positive about the group of which they are a part—when they feel a part of it” (p. 7).

Although empathetic with the demands of teaching, Gershman places much of the blame for student apathy on misguided priorities and the blatant ineffectiveness of teachers. From her observations, teachers seemed to fit one of three broad categories: 1) the lecturer, 2) the do-nothing, 3) the caring enthusiast.

Lecturers spent almost the entirety of every class period talking, usually about the subject-at-hand but occasionally about anything else that popped into the teacher’s mind—anecdotes about the weather, opinions on celebrity gossip, etc. . . . Do-nothings rarely spoke to students except to announce due dates for seatwork. Do-nothings required students to read textbooks, fill-in worksheets, and take frequent, multiple-choice tests—all in silence.

At the schools where Gershman observed, lecturers and do-nothings were dominant, while caring enthusiasts (teachers who actually learned

students' names, showed concern for their welfare, and taught with passion) comprised a small, but lively minority. Although not always the smartest or most dazzling teachers, the caring enthusiasts were the only ones students considered worthy of respect.

Again and again, Gershman contrasts the grim sterility of the school environment against the topsy-turvy, emotional tumult of students' lives. A happy, immaculately groomed girl rushes into class one day, disheveled and sobbing, places her head on the desk with her arms over her head. Meanwhile, the teacher writes out state-approved objectives on the chalkboard, takes roll, and proceeds as if nothing had happened. "All it takes to be aware," writes Gershman, "is to *look* at them in the course of a period" (p. 117).

In counterpoint to insensitive teachers and anemic academics are moments of total engagement when students come alive—between classes, and especially after school, as members of a sports team (apparently, hockey is very big in North Dakota), club, or particular clique, including those with memorable appellations such as the Burnt-on-Arrivals, Innocent-By-Standers, and The Y'know What-The-Hell-Is-*He*-Doin'-In-Band-People. Gershman found that the best part of school for most students, even the Burnt-on-Arrivals, was what happened out-of-school.

It is puzzling, then, why Gershman advocates disbanding sports teams as a way of improving high schools. Rather than rid schools of one of the few sources of joy for students, a more logical plan might be to develop more after-school activities, more teams, more clubs, more community involvement.

Unfortunately, Gershman lapses into Harvard Graduate School-approved (where she received her Ph.D.) sermonizing upon occasion. She contends that competitive sports are evil, racial discrimination is rampant, and gender bias is pandemic, despite the abundant evidence she presents to the contrary. She describes how a black student and a white student are paired off for a group project. When the two boys do not launch into an animated conversation within the first minute, she makes allusions to discrimination and prejudice. Yet, her description depicts the typical reaction of two boys forced to work together on an ill-defined assignment for school. If anything, the two boys seemed overly amiable and understanding.

In portraying the horror of "neglected girls" (an entire section of the book), Gershman resorts to platitudes, such as "Updike said the world runs on push. Maybe it's boys who learn this attitude as youngsters" (p. 84), "Even natural allies like female teachers can favor the boys' presence in class" (p. 85), and "the frequent high ratio of male teacher to male students may well have contributed to the comfort level of male students to engage in conversation—and to the discomfort level of the female students." Say what?

Finally, she describes the case of Liz, a high school junior and one of a few girls in an industrial arts class. According to Gershman's description, Liz

asks the teacher questions “every five minutes,” and interjects off-topic comments such as, “Curt (her old boyfriend) used to eat paper. He used to eat little tootsie rolls with the paper still on it. Put the whole thing in his mouth” (p. 88). When the teacher steps out of the room and says, “Make sure Liz doesn’t cheat,” Gershman takes the comment as an inexcusable insult—“What this attitude of the teacher’s did, it seemed to me, was give every boy in the class permission to undervalue Liz’s presence and contribution there. And they did undervalue it” (p. 89).

Meanwhile, in the real world, it is the boys in industrial arts who are more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities, more likely to spend some time in jail, and much less likely to attend college (Bauza, 2005; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2005).

Despite brief lapses of hokum, Gershman’s book is well worth reading, if only for the zingers of insight that she offers from time-to-time.

Curriculum texts obfuscate the presence of the student in the classroom. Like diagrams of dance footsteps, there is not even the remotest hint of rhythm on the paper. (p. 8)

An overbooked high school teacher doesn’t worry about quiet students; he thanks God for them. (p. 74)

Small group work and cooperating learning have become the open classroom movement of the nineties. (p. 133)

Actually participating in one’s education is the first step towards accomplishing it. (p. 137)

Gershman’s central thesis is that the quality of instruction in high schools can be improved only if the relationships between teachers and students are ameliorated. To this end, she suggests a maximum class size of 12 students. She reasons that smaller classes would allow teachers to become more concerned with the whole student (rather than only on the student’s test score); allow for more complex, writing-intensive projects; and promote more interaction. Her emphasis on restoring warmth and humanity to high schools that have become desensitized and overly bureaucratized through the live-or-die mandate of standardized testing is welcome and wise. She emphasizes a goal that many well-intentioned reformers often overlook—America’s high schools should help children, not just measure them.

The publisher of this book, Hamilton Books, a new imprint of University Press of America, was established to publish scholarly materials for limited audiences. The quality of paper, cover, and binding of *They Always Test Us on Things We Haven’t Read* was of professional quality. However, because

Hamilton Books requires authors to submit print-ready pages, the manuscript likely did not receive a thorough “going over” by editors prior to publication. Minor problems include the title (which would lead most readers to conclude that the book is about assessment), misspellings (*Hemmingway* is one that made me wince), and issues of style (Gershman cites Alfred Lord Whitehead more than a dozen times). Nevertheless, if *They Always Test Us on Things We Haven't Read* is any indication of the quality of manuscripts to be published by Hamilton Books, then the imprint will provide an invaluable service.

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*Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning*. Arnetha F. Ball and Sarah Warshauer Freedman (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2004. ISBN: 0521831059, 349 pp.

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Arnetha F. Ball and Sarah Warshauer Freedman, editors of *Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning*, have an impressive aim: to help better prepare teachers and students for literacy learning in the twenty-first century. Underscored by Bakhtin's heteroglossic notion of multivoiced discourses and a sense of ideological becoming in a changing world, at its core is an inherent sense of advocacy for praxis—a term with much currency for practitioners of critical pedagogy/literacy—one that offers a “framework for mediation, a way to consider the kinds of dialogues that could lead to change” (p. 28). In this way, the book meets its mark.

Yet, while the desire to authenticate the disenfranchised through critique of a singular, authoritative literacy is laudable, when so many of the contributors come from high-profile institutions such as Stanford, Brown, and Purdue, we might be forgiven for wondering if the text's promise to be a "model of heteroglossia" is in itself imbued with ivory-tower authority. If there is multiplicity, it's not so much in a diverse array of voices as it is multidisciplinary application—from the contexts of adult learning, to multiculturalism, to second language acquisition and sub-literacies, to literacy in the sciences and the performing arts. The editors invite readers to "push the boundaries of current thinking on Bakhtinian theory," but in terms of critical pedagogy/literacy, overall the text too often endorses mere acknowledgment of—and respect for—many voices rather than addressing the very real potential for de-authentication of voice when there is a *lack* of genuinely critical discourse. Paradoxically, however, the omission of this important distinction is both the weakest part of the text and yet quite possibly also its greatest strength.

Arranged in three sections, with a fourth serving as a reflective summary, many of the chapters offer a starting point for critical discourse. Part I, "Ideologies in Dialogue: Theoretical Considerations," opens with Freedman and Ball's cross-national perspective on literacy teacher-training drawn from extensive research in Rwanda and Bosnia Herzegovina. This chapter traces the "ideological becoming" of Dorene, a South African teacher for whom strategically designed readings "helped her to gain the strength . . . to be an active agent of change" (p. 16). Yet, examination of Dorene's narrative reveals a proliferation of generalizations and little evidence of the internalized tension that can result from strong dialogical inquiry. "I have come to the realization," Dorene writes, "that in order for the teacher to be effective . . . she needs dedication . . . should be supportive . . . and not have a teacher-centered class" (p. 16). Where is the challenge to authoritative discourse here? Where are the "clashes that occur when disparate people come together" (p. 3), as promised by the authors? What's the alternative? That teachers are *not* dedicated to what they do? *Not* supportive? The unanswered question is whether Dorene has critically reflected on what "teacher centered" or "supportive" or "dedicated" means, or if she has just "learned the lingo" of contemporary critical pedagogy? On this note, readers will need to know the Deweyan lingo of transactional, interactional, and self-actional learning experiences in Mark Dressman's dry chapter that merges the theories of Dewey, Rosenblatt, and Bakhtin, because no explanation is provided and, moreover, the diagrams are inexplicably confusing. And, while Charles Bazerman blends discursive intertextuality with Bakhtinian parody as a critical tool to examine the power structures on which language and literacy rest, it is difficult to wrangle with the Kristevian conundrums defining intertextuality as "a mechanism

whereby we write ourselves into the social text, and thereby the social text writes us” (p. 54) and almost unforgivable that Bazerman takes Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, yet neglects to convincingly present the importance of parody and satire as a critical tool of transgression. Finally, although Guadalupe Valdés presents a nicely balanced look at the discursive gap between TESOL and K–12 ESOL communities (dys)functioning “like the blind men hoping to describe the elephant” (p. 81), in a chapter that discusses the role and place of ideology—and in a section of the book that takes this word as part of its title—it is surprising to see that the seminal work of Louis Althusser, specifically in regard to the workings of ideological state apparatuses, is relegated to a small “see also” reference.

Part II, “Voiced, Double Voiced, and Multivoiced Discourses in Our Schools,” opens with Eileen Landay’s valuable chapter that examines a critical gap between public voice and private reflection. Claiming that authoritative discourse, and students’ passive resistance to challenging it, can be overcome through combining literacy and theatrical performance, Landay draws from Bakhtin’s sense of critical interanimation, or what happens when “discourses come into dialogic relationship with one another” (p. 111). Moreover, her discussion of a correlation between low socioeconomic class and high dropout rates has salient application to the issue of retention—a point echoed in Cynthia L. Greenleaf’s and Mira-Lisa Katz’s chapter that considers the ways urban students are “often positioned as unable, unwilling, unknowing, and/or unskilled” (p. 172). Pointing out that teachers are often resistant to change, this excellent chapter chronicles “the voices of participating teachers themselves” as they struggle to reconcile “multiple internally persuasive discourses” (pp. 173, 178) and who, in the process, discover tangible ways to “enact new literate identities and practices in the classroom” (p. 172). Similarly, Carol D. Lee considers ways in which teachers might authenticate the “double-voiced discourse” of African-American Vernacular English as literate practice without diminishing the identities of those who use it. Lee, however, does not provide much evidence of her students moving beyond what they know, nor does she address the very real risk of mistaking expression of cultural voice for authentic, critical discourse. The final chapter, Christian P. Knoeller’s foray into student narratives of “rethinking” through his own narrative of “rethinking,” is a potentially intriguing application of Bakhtin’s sense of outside-oneself, yet falls short of the mark. Although Knoeller claims that Eva, the student on whom he focuses, demonstrates Bakhtinian notions of appropriation and dual voicing that involve internalizing the words of others, the evidence is unconvincing.

Part III, “Heteroglossia in a Changing World,” crosses both geographical and paradigmatic borders to consider what literacy in the 21st century might look like. Melanie Sperling’s chapter, providing a detailed linguistic

analysis of teachers struggling to reconcile conflicts between the ideal and the real within the U.S. school system, is particularly useful here, as is Judy Kalman's insightful glimpse of rural Mexico and the infrequently addressed topic of adult literacy education. Jabari Mahiri's web-based graduate course, "used as a 'text' for discussion and analysis" (p. 213), shows how a dialogic community of learners use technology, specifically asynchronous communication, as a means to both posit and reflect on ideas and beliefs. A word of warning, though: Despite Mahiri's claim that the program prepared new teachers for the challenges of e-learning, those expecting cutting-edge discourse over online pedagogy may be disappointed. The jewel of Part III, however—indeed, the whole book—is James Paul Gee's chapter. Although asserting that he has "nothing novel to add to Bakhtin scholarship" (p. 298), Gee's work is startlingly and critically acute. Drawing from contemporary television culture and fantasy game-playing, Gee posits that because the world has moved from an industrial Fordist age of old capitalism to a globalized and high-tech new capitalism, we need to recognize the overlap between old and new literacies. Rather than achieving a minimum standard of literacy, one that will perpetuate existing class divisions, Gee outlines a literate practice characterized by what he calls "portfolio shape shifters." In light of the current emphasis on mandated testing and the implications of the No Child Left Behind policy, Gee's discussion raises urgent questions about the ways we are preparing our students for a changing world.

Reflecting a commitment to engaging discourse, each of the book's three parts concludes with contributions entitled "Voices in Dialogue." Ostensibly to demonstrate the use of dialogue *as* discourse, these sections record exchanges between students and the text's contributors about each of the chapters. From a perspective of critical discourse, however, the dialogue is disappointing. Vague, generalized assertions such as "Knoeller's response . . . brought forth opportunities for us both . . . to construct new ways to mean" (Delp, p. 207), "we can now engage in more meaningful interactions with Bakhtin's texts" (Brettschneider, p. 103), and that "machines and new technologies . . . [will] help us to more fully realize the expression of our humanity" (Miano, p. 313) do not demonstrate critically reflective inquiry, nor engender the type of critical tensions that underscore the possibility of change. And yet, this may be a useful point of convergence to examine in a classroom setting, bringing me back to where I began in relation to the paradox of this text. The act of, in Bakhtinian terms, applying a "publicistic discourse" that criticizes and polemicizes the words and ideas of these authors can engage us in critically examining the points of view in which they are grounded (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 353). This process can open the possibility to reflect on our own selves, our own sense of literate place, and how that might affect the ways that we teach and learn. For Bakhtin, communication is "concerned with what happens when real people in all the contingency of



their myriad lives actually speak to each other” (Holquist, 1986, p. xvi). Such a concept, poignantly articulated by Gary Saul Morson in his concluding chapter of this text, involves striving for honesty and openness in a world of difference and uncertainty. For language and literacy educators, those involved in professional development programs, and their students, *Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning* provides a theoretical place for such conversations to begin.

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