A Dangerous, Lucid Hour: Compliance, Alienation, and the Restructuring of New York City High Schools

PAULA M. SALVIO

I

Despite the enduring descriptive background against which sociologists, from Willard Waller to Dan Lortie, have described the classroom as the specific domain of teachers’ influence and control, teachers throughout the United States continue to feel that they live in a reactive state devoid of influence and stripped of power. This is particularly the case given the national and state government moves to implement high-stakes testing, exemplified, for example, in the No Child Left Behind Act. The irony is that the No Child Left Behind Act has been passed at a moment in history when students are facing one of the most profound betrayals of our time—the resegregation of schools.

In this chapter, I consider the specific ways in which the professional labor of New York City literacy teachers is in the process of being redefined by the Michael Bloomberg and Joel Klein administration, particularly within the context of school resegregation, high-stakes testing, and the move to “ramp students up” to grade level. Drawing on interviews with teachers, students, administrators, classroom observations, and interactive video clips taken by high school students, I consider the extent to which the “Ramp Up to Literacy” program teaches students and teachers compliance with authority and inadvertently distorts memories of our past history of school segregation. I turn to the humanism of Karl Marx, specifically to his ethical theory of secular humanism, to present a critique of the common levels
system of behavior management embodied in the “Ramp Up” program, while questioning the extent to which this program contributes to estranging high school teachers from their students and from their academic interests, and, in turn, creating a strange lack of coherence in their professional lives. Furthermore, I explore the extent to which this approach to literacy contributes to generating a sense of professional melancholia among teachers.

Rather than cure the professional melancholia of educators, I suggest we treat melancholia as a lyric lament through which we can protest our culture’s narrow prohibitions on who can rightfully claim loss and which losses are worthy of attention. I would like to suggest that the expression of melancholia could be used as a resource for teaching. Because melancholia is structured in ambivalence, it has the paradoxical capacity both to incorporate and to challenge that which it criticizes. Freud’s portrait of melancholia offers us an important position from which to take some direction. The plaints and endless lyric laments of the melancholic proceed, according to Freud, from an attitude of revolt, a mental constellation by which a certain process has become transformed into melancholic contrition. I want to proceed from the position of revolt and lyric lament that characterizes much of the teacher’s discussions about “ramp up training” to the classrooms where they teach. As I do so, I want us to keep in mind that while the melancholic may in fact be overpowered, she refuses to be tamed or domesticated.

There is a paradox inherent in each of what I will refer to as the “incorporative tactics” of the teachers I present in this essay. They simultaneously incorporate the loss or lack of professional integrity in their bodies and disincorporate the authority of the central administration. Since the issuance of Joel Klein’s 2003 summer memo to literacy teachers throughout New York City, the group of eight teachers I work with in the Kingsbridge section of the Bronx continually refraimes the Ramp Up program, perhaps most importantly by reassembling a sense of community in their school that enables them to rearticulate and avow academic kinships, tastes, professional affiliations, identifications, and passions.

II

In a recent essay in Educational Theory entitled “Love and Despair in Teaching,” Dan Liston eloquently describes “a growing and enveloping darkness” in many teachers’ hearts. Although this darkness may not be as profound and wrought with despair as, notes Liston, the clinical depression experienced by William Styron in Darkness Made Visible or the anguish of manic depressive illness that Anne Sexton or Kay Redfield Jamison lived with daily, the sense of despair felt by many educators amounts to a devastating sense that the teaching life we have hoped for or once loved and known has been foreclosed. Distinguishing between despair and disillusionment, Liston
notes that despair requires a radical personal or contextual transformation that does not include an adjustment to that situation but rather a deep sense of loss and sadness. Disillusionment, on the other hand, implies that one may in fact come to terms with a difficult situation, make reasonable adjustments, and move on. What are the social and historical conditions upon which teachers’ sense of despair and loss take hold? Can attention to loss open up conversations about teaching in a postindustrial economy that may otherwise be foreclosed? Can such conversations lift the weight of sadness and restore a degree of integrity to the professional labor of educators and, in doing so, perhaps ease the sense of estrangement they feel from their academic interests and their students?

III

The lure of reform—the baffling, seductive hook—is that it promises to recast the past, to make amends, to evoke a reckoning. But the promise to make amends is easily thwarted when reform efforts ignore history and fail to cultivate a substantive knowledge of the past. What happens when we mistake repetition for reform? What impact does the refusal of history have on the professional lives of educators? Michael Bloomberg’s move to centralize education resonates, as I will discuss later in this chapter, with the early twentieth-century reform efforts that David Tyack referred to as the “one best system.” The reappearance of a centralized educational administration in New York City during the summer of 2003 reflects a failure to regard history as a source of critical reference. Among the most serious failures of address made by the Bloomberg administration pertains to the resegregation of schools. The impact of this phenomenon on students, communities, and educators is virtually absent in the discourse of reform. Yet this is the historical background upon which Bloomberg’s new initiatives unfold.

In fact, in January 2003, five months before Joel Klein issued a memo to high school principals to “round teachers up” for literacy training, Gary Orfield and his colleagues at Harvard University published a report documenting the extensive move to resegregate schools in this country. Before I formally begin my essay, I want to take a moment to summarize sections of Orfield’s report on the current status of school segregation, for it is the ground upon which my account of Bloomberg’s literacy reform efforts is told.

In a study conducted by the Harvard Civil Rights Project in January of last year (2003), entitled “A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?” the report’s authors, Erica Frankenberg, Chungmei Lee, and Gary Orfield find that in the last seven years, in the wake of U.S. Supreme Court rulings that make it easier for school districts to declare themselves “unified” or desegregated, nearly fifty districts across the country have had their court-ordered desegregation plans abolished. Moreover, the authors
document a significant racial transformation of U.S. schools. Since 1968, black student enrollment in public schools has increased nearly 30 percent and Latino student enrollment is up 283 percent. This contrasts starkly with the public school enrollment of whites—which is down 17 percent. In every region of the country, the public school population has become less white. In fact, the Harvard study reports that, on average, whites are now the most segregated group in public schools—attending schools that on average are 80 percent white—and this statistic is even more searing if you place it alongside the fact that minority students make up nearly one-half of the public school enrollment.

What does it mean to reckon not only with the singular issue of resegregation but also with the emotional impact that this inevitable repetition and betrayal has on teachers and students working in schools that lack resources and are cast as “in need of improvement”? There are clashes of loyalty bonds in resegregation narratives, in part, I think because the emotions associated with this national betrayal hold the shock of old histories. The fears and betrayals that collect around the resegregation of schools suggest that we have not, in the words of Toni Morrison, worked through the history of slavery, the legacy of exploiting immigrants, and our anxieties over the ownership of property.

One lesson that Freud offers us in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” is that melancholia is a kind of perversion or distortion of memory—a refusal of a salutary remembrance of a loss, a refusal to mourn, that condemns the subject to a futile “acting out.” Melancholia, as defined by Freud, is identified as an inability to recover from a loss, thereby thrusting a person into a profound state of despair. The melancholic/depressive is dominated by sadness; in fact, sadness becomes one of the most prominent objects of attention in one’s life. What is particularly difficult, I believe, is that in the context of professional loss, there is no actual object for the melancholic, and this is often evident in teachers’ discussions of reform. What is evident in discussions is an attachment to a sense of sadness and loss—what Julia Kristeva refers to as an “ersatz object.” There is a vague, indeterminate something that causes the melancholic to experience a loss of words, a loss of meaning, and a loss of desire in one fell swoop. Melancholia can be brought about through the loss of a loved one, a home, an ideal, a sense of purpose, or the lost fulfillment that Marx characterizes in his description of alienation. For Marx, alienation is accompanied by feelings of misery, exhaustion, and lost creativity. In one interview, New York City high school teacher Geoff Simpson describes this feeling as “ennui.” “I feel,” says Simpson, “I think many of us feel, that there is little meaning we can give to the initiatives coming in from the Regional offices—meaning is assigned for us—our job is to deliver the goods. This makes some of us feel lousy most of the time, pretty much at a loss—as if our professional insights are insignificant, as if we’re not trustworthy.” Sitting in the teacher’s lounge one
winter morning discussing a set of recent literacy initiatives, Sandra Reid, a
teacher who moved from Jamaica to New York in 1990 and has been teach-
ing at this high school for ten years, describes her sense of lost fulfillment
with a gust of passion: "They are taking our professional status and judg-
ment away from us while we sit before them with our eyes wide open!"

As much as Bloomberg seeks to break with the past, to create a new kind
of educational system that will prepare students for future socioeconomic
realities and rigorous college courses, there exists a melancholic compulsion
to keep the past history of segregation, as it were, encrypted within
education's own anticipation of the future, as is made evident in the poli-
cies that make it easier for schools to resegregate students and communities
and allows minorities to become ever more isolated in separate schools. In
an earlier 2002 paper published by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard Uni-
versity, Erika Frankenberg and Ching-mei Lee report that Latino students
have been experiencing a steady rise in segregation since the 1960s, and there
have been no significant desegregation efforts passed outside of a handful
of large districts. The pattern of resegregation unfolds within the context
of an increasingly diverse public school enrollment, particularly with respect
to the Latino population in the past decade, which as of 2002 had risen to
more than 7 million. Additionally, the pattern of segregation is strongly
linked to segregation by poverty, and, as Frankenberg goes on to explain,
poverty concentrations are strongly linked to unequal opportunities and
unequal outcomes. How can Bloomberg and his administration claim to
create a common preparation for citizens in an increasingly multiracial soci-
ety if there is such limited attention paid to the inequalities that impact the
high schools in New York City?

When Bloomberg's reform efforts are read against Tyack's description of
eyearly twentieth-century reforms, the melancholic strain in education can be
felt as more salient—one can sense the strain of a futile "acting out." In ways
akin (but not identical) to the earlier period of reform, we have today stu-
dents attending schools who are largely poor, children of color, recently
immigrated, highly mobile, and learning to speak English. While this stands
in contrast to the large Catholic, Irish, and southern European immigrants
of the last century, in both instances, students are perceived as "half-bro-
en" and in need of cure from the ignorance they carry with them from their
homes. Bloomberg's new corporate structure has rearranged the manage-
ment of schools into a unified, streamlined system that includes a standard-
ized curriculum and a set of promises that bespeak a desire to rid the New
York City schools of poor teaching, thereby restoring health to the economy,
for Bloomberg too believes in a functional view of education and ignores
the economic and social realities of the majority of students and teachers
working in public education. In short, Bloomberg's administration assumes
that if students are more functionally literate, they will be more capable of
obtaining and holding down jobs. According to this logic, the decline of
American industrial productivity is linked to a perceived decline in literacy skills among American workers. The “correspondence principle” that links the organization of work in schools with the workforce is overly simplistic and mechanistic. Moreover, this principle works to eclipse the phenomenon of resegregation by focusing on test scores and pedagogical methods. “The relationship among literacy, work and education,” argues Alan Luke, “is far more complex than commonsense correlations between rates of literacy, rates of employment and economic competitiveness would indicate. The causes for employment, structural changes in labor markets, national debts, economic and technological expansion and exploitation, and so forth, lie elsewhere in economies and societies—not in their literacy rates, and certainly not in the methods of teachers.”

In a 2001 lecture Luke gave in Australia entitled “Making Literacy Policy Differently,” he goes on to argue that educators should be addressing the changing places and contexts where students are using literacy for their communities’ cultural interests and capital gains, where people are being ripped off with and through literacy, where people are constructing, hybridizing and using traditional and emergent texts, where people are engaging with new technologies with mixes of print and non-print and so forth. How could you drive a whole state policy simply on the basis of some belief in a particular method or spreadsheets of benchmark test scores? To do so would be naïve.

In fact, the initiatives set forth by the Bloomberg administration can be described as a kind of “commodity purchase” that subscribes to a single method of teaching literacy and would most likely be assessed by Luke and his colleagues as naïve and actively forgetful of our nation’s past. This “active forgetfulness” is made manifest in progressive projects that slip into what Cleo Cherryholmes terms a “vulgar pragmatism.” This form of pragmatism gets caught in the nips and snare of the postindustrial demand for back-to-basics curriculum and outcomes-based assessment as made evident in the Ramp Up to Literacy program. For example, one claim by the authors of the Ramp Up program holds that because it is keyed to international standards, it prepares students to enter the international marketplace at an advantage. Cherryholmes cautions against this form of pragmatism, referring to it as “vulgar” precisely because it takes, as Dennis Carlson notes in a gloss of Cherryholmes’s text, “a means-ends perspective on the curriculum,” serving to elaborate on and build a corporate and bureaucratic state project of restructuring education that in fact undermines the principles of a participatory democracy. Vulgar pragmatism is most often associated, as Carlson goes on to explain, with basic skills and state-mandated minimum competency testing, each of which holds stated intentions to ensure that students disadvantaged by class and race will leave school with the skills they need to
succeed in life. Yet, after decades of basic skill reform efforts in urban schools, the school’s role in reproducing and maintaining socioeconomic inequalities has been further accentuated, setting students up, primarily male Latino youth, to enter the military and to take up entry-level positions in the service economy.\textsuperscript{15}

To be fully emancipated, work must hold meaning; it must afford persons the opportunity to engage with what is necessary as well as with what is fulfilling. Alienation is the manifestation of a person’s loss of freedom; it is that condition under which, notes Marx, “the object produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an alien being, a power independent of the producer.”\textsuperscript{16} Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein’s ninth-grade Ramp Up to Literacy program stands in as just this sort of object—an alien curriculum, created by a power—America’s Choice Corporation—that indeed is designed independent of New York City high school teachers.

\section*{IV}

It is June 2003. High school principals throughout New York City are faxed a memo from Chancellor Klein’s office informing them of a summer program that will be made available for all high school teachers. Principals are strongly encouraged to “round up” as many literacy teachers as possible to participate in what is termed “ramp-up training.” It is a tough call. Most teachers have already made plans for the summer, but, nonetheless, principals do what they can to encourage literacy teachers to attend, particularly because the subtext of this memo reads: “Ramp-up training will eventually be mandated for all ninth-grade students reading at least two grades below grade level.”

The ninth-grade “ramp-up curriculum,” designed by the National Center on Education and the Economy, an organization established in 1989 and based in Washington, D.C., and founded and directed by Marc Tucker, is not confined to New York City reform efforts. It has been purchased and implemented in school districts such as Plainfield, New Jersey; Duval County, Florida; and Rochester, New York. Among the schools currently using this curriculum are Sheldon Clark High School in Inez, Kentucky; J.E.B. Stuart Middle School in Jacksonville, Florida; and Evans Middle School in Washington, D.C. (see www.ncrel.org). As noted earlier, the stated primary goal of America’s Choice Curriculum is to prepare students to reach internationally benchmarked standards through the implementation of what is described as an innovative and highly supportive curriculum.

The Ramp Up to Literacy program combines a balanced literacy approach to reading with select principles from reading recovery. Both reading recovery and balanced literacy are rooted in a progressive tradition that is intent on teachers nurturing a particular kind of reader and a specific type of reasonable subject. Based on studies that have explored what “good readers do”
when they read, both programs emphasize the importance of making reasonable connections between literature, self, and world as one reads or, to put this another way, "to activate schemata" as students engage texts. Additionally, students are taught to navigate through the syntactic, graphic, and pragmatic structures of text while at the same time learning to "attack" the problems they encounter with unfamiliar vocabulary and difficult concepts and ideas that interfere with reading comprehension. In sum, the Ramp Up to Literacy curriculum works toward cultivating what are described as the seven habits of good reading. If you were to walk into a ramp-up classroom, you can expect to see the following habits displayed on poster paper on the wall:

THE SEVEN HABITS OF A GOOD READER
1. Monitors for Meaning
2. Determines Importance
3. Makes Inferences
4. Creates Mental Imagery
5. Questions the Text
6. Activates Schemata
7. Synthesizes Information

A typical ramp-up lesson begins with Independent Reading, followed by the mnemonic Ra-Ta-Ta, which stands for Read-Aloud, Think-Aloud, Talk-Aloud. For example, during the first part of September, all high school ramp-up classes were required to read Monster by Walter Dean Meyers. Lessons are structured according to this sequence: Students enter the classroom and begin reading books of their choice that they have selected from the classroom library, with some initial guidance from the teacher. This part of the program is described as Independent Reading. The practice of Independent Reading is distinct from the less structured practice of Sustained Silent Reading in a very specific way. During Independent Reading, students read with a purpose, whereas Sustained Silent Reading offers students opportunities to read for pure pleasure. Moreover, Independent Reading requires that students read books that are challenging yet can be read on their own. While students are reading independently, teachers are expected to conference with select students about their books and to conduct informal reading assessments.

During the Read-Aloud, Think-Aloud, teachers read aloud from a book chosen as a key part of the ramp-up program, books such as The Red Scarf Girl by Ji Li Jiang or Living up the Street by Gary Soto. Students are instructed to follow along during this time in their copies of the same book, but they do not attempt to ask questions or make comments during this time—they are instructed to attend to the teacher, who is demonstrating one "habit" that "good readers" engage in, for example, making inferences. Teachers are told not to emphasize more than one habit during this time—one habit alone will do.
In this brief description, you may have noted that literature is used in the classroom rather than textbooks. Multicultural literature is in many ways a staple of the curriculum; students are provided with time, not only to make choices about the books they will read but also to respond to literature in ways that are personally and socially meaningful to them. In fact, the ramp-up component of America's Choice Curriculum draws deliberately from the progressive practices of process pedagogy. In a mission statement presented by Tucker, the literacy component of the America Choice School Design is structured around the Readers and Writers Workshop. The reading and writing workshop is an approach to literacy that is associated with a whole-language philosophy and a strong progressive tradition rooted in the social reconstructionist and child-centered movement. To be a bit more specific, it would be fair to say that the ramp-up program is founded on a set of principles of learning that are associated with a tradition of student-centered pedagogy rooted in cognitive psychology (and hence, a strand of scientific humanism). Among the goals embodied in the cognitive principles underscoring the work of Lauren Resnick (one educator who has worked very closely with Tucker over the years) is the ideal of production of student control through self-control and self-regulation within social settings.

The overt design of ramp-up assumes that the workshop setting will transform classrooms into active sites of learning. Teachers are expected to group desks into tables, not rows; individual assignments and textbooks are replaced with classroom libraries and shared literature. Mayor Bloomberg has assured all teachers that they will be provided with a classroom library. True to his word, all classrooms are now equipped with a collection of books, although continual problems arise with respect to providing teachers with the adequate number of books they need for their students. Most teachers have approximately thirty students in a class—ramp-up appears to have planned for small classes of fifteen. From the perspective of the New York City Board of Education, all teachers at the high school level have been offered the opportunity to receive "ramp-up training." From the vantage point of teachers, however, many of their opportunities have been limited, consisting of disparate arrays of workshops, many of which do not address what they see as the most important facts needed to get a program underway—adequate books, ramp-up manuals, assessment tools, and a recommended pacing that makes sense within the time structure of school. Jake Fitzgerald, a high school teacher who is participating in the ramp-up program, wrote a memo in early October to his colleagues outlining his concerns about what he describes as a most "inconsiderate curriculum":

Assessment is not addressed fully. The classroom library does not have all texts needed. *Monster* paperback falls apart. Paperback books do not last long. The program was based on 15–20 students per class. When class size reaches 30–35,
taking a “status of the class” becomes too time consuming when performing this assessment requires 1–2 minutes per student: 60–70 minutes of a 90-minute period. Missing procedural lesson for Appropriate Behaviors during A Whole Class Meeting. Also, they allude to the “five finger rule” but they do not explain it anywhere in the books. The program is not considerate of practical time schedule for student centered learning. . . . Because of the practical application of time instructing a student-centered classroom is not taken into consideration, lessons frequently take up two to three days to complete, causing conflicts with sequences of instruction. . . . No consideration of classrooms being shared by more than one class and multiple teachers. The artifacts created by each class are supposed to be displayed on walls to give each class a chance to think, create and feel invested in the class. When a classroom is shared by more than one class and by multiple teachers, this practice becomes time-consuming and impractical, as there is not enough wall space to hang all the documents; in order for each class of students to be allowed the chance to create these documents, the other classes’ documents must be taken down, and then replaced when they enter the room.

As an experienced teacher who has taught at the college and high school level, Mr. Fitzgerald brings substantial experience to the ramp-up program. He participated in the summer workshops offered by Region I, and he has been asked by colleagues in his school to lead the team of eight teachers who are putting the principles of ramp-up into practice. “Initially, I think ramp-up worked to create a sense of collegiality among the teachers participating in the program—a kind of ‘we’re all in this together’ mentality—but now, as we’re moving closer to the Regents exams, teachers are pressed for time, short with one another and they want to use their prep periods to catch up—not to talk about planning lessons and so forth, as we did in September and October.”

One of the harsh realities Fitzgerald and his assistant principal of English, Sara Maar, face as teachers teaching in what has been designated a “low performing school” in the Kingsbridge section of the Bronx is that if they and their colleagues cannot master the ramp-up protocols by the end of the year; their school, already designated as “in need of improvement,” will become even more vulnerable to either being closed down or restructured into a set of “small learning communities.”

Teachers in Mr. Fitzgerald and Ms. Maar’s school continue to have serious reservations about the academic content of this program. They suspect that it focuses more on managing students’ reading behaviors than on engaging students in substantive discussions and analyses of literature, social issues, and their lives. One January afternoon, as Ms. Maar was preparing spreadsheets and schedules for students and faculty for the Regents exam the following week, she looked up for a moment, her eyes brimming with tears. “The ramp-up program has taken up most of my time—I realize that I
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haven't had the time I need to work with faculty and students to prepare them for the Regents exam—and there are dire consequences for students if they fail to pass.

The principal at this high school, Ms. Enberg, holds reservations about ramp-up as well. She is not convinced that ramp-up will prepare students for the Regents exam. The Regents exam is of particular concern given that, despite students' academic histories, desires for the future, or language backgrounds, they must pass the Regents to obtain a high school diploma. This example of “high-stakes testing” offers yet more evidence of the means through which the discourse of “high standards” inadvertently disguises the mechanisms used to urge low-income, immigrant youth to drop out of high school.

Given the high stakes faced by teachers and students to pass national and state exams, it would be unreasonable to criticize any program that made classroom libraries available to students and teachers or that required students to engage in reading and writing practices that created opportunities for exploration, discovery, and expression within a wide range of genres. Yet, over the past three years that I have consulted in middle schools and high schools in Region I, where Mr. Fitzgerald, Ms. Reid, and Ms. Maar teach, I am haunted by questions that make me feel unreasonable. I cannot help but feel that, despite the apparently reasonable assumptions underlying these initiatives, something is amiss. As I drive home in the evenings, I wonder what makes me feel so uneasy. What makes me feel as if a dangerous hour is upon us? That, in fact, ramp-up training is one manifestation of what Marx has described as “alienation in action,” a painful and incoherent process through which a person experiences a profound sense of estrangement during the activity of production. In other words, the activity of producing “curriculum,” or “teaching,” fails to accrue significance, in part because the labor of “ramping students up to literacy” is assigned meaning by agencies and constituencies that are external to the professional lives of the teachers who are responsible for putting the curriculum in place and who live with it daily. Marx provides some very specific guidelines when he speaks of alienation in action. For one, he emphasizes that such labor is coerced, forced, and results in what he believes to be a labor of self-sacrifice. This labor, as Marx goes on to explain, belongs not to oneself, but to another, resulting in a loss of self. Inevitably, by the time I turn left onto Fordham Road, I return to the same questions: What does the project of accounting for ramping students up to literacy exclude? What tastes does it seek to cultivate among teachers and at what cost? What is left beyond the pale of discussions about the reform of high schools in New York City literacy classrooms?
VI

If asked, Tucker and his colleagues, Bloomberg and Klein, would that the workforce of teachers currently teaching in New York City stands as “under review” because it is performing below the standards set by the state. Consequently, teachers are being “trained” (word educated is rarely used) to teach poor youth so they may become productive and engaged citizens, productive workers, and advance themselves. There is a high turnover rate of teachers in poor schools, and are many new teachers who are either working without credentials participating in the New York City Fellows Program. The Bloomberg administration’s project of standardizing the curriculum, as made evident the Ramp Up to Literacy program and his move to centralize admission, is designed with the intent to solve these problems.

Among the most important criteria used to determine how well a school performs in New York City are Regents English cohort pass rates; Regents Math cohort pass rates; Cohort graduation rates; Cohort drop out rates; and Cohort Regents diploma rates. In other words, the board of education in New York City takes into account standardized test scores, drop out rates, and attendance records. Despite the knowledge that the tests by New York City are badly written and biased against race and class, administrators continue to use the English Language Arts Exam and the York English as a Second Language Achievement Test as indicators of how well a school is “performing.” Teachers are expected to pitch their curriculum to these tests, and there are implicit and explicit expectations that teachers whose students do not do well on these tests will themselves be under severe scrutiny by their administrators. However, the Bloomberg administration, like administrations throughout the country, has traded in the discourse of testing for the discourse of accountability.

In a 1965 essay, Max Horkheimer expressed concern that education was becoming far too schematized. He notes: “In a given historical situation, regulation, however clearly reasonable, can turn into an obstacle and symptom of regression. . . . It is true enough, of course, that social freedom is never achieved without force. Numerous unsavory activities are required if society is to be held together, including the maintenance of prisons and the production of murderous weapons.”20 What is it about the language of accountability that generates cynicism among the high school teachers I interview? In proponents’ accounts about the value of the ramp-up program specifically the progressive principles of choice and “freedom” are mentioned, thus echoing Horkheimer’s claim that “social freedom is never achieved without force.” Apparently, centralized systems must be put in place to ensure a more democratic, just education for students. Placing the writing reading workshop at the heart of the curriculum—particularly for students who are struggling readers—offers students choices and the potential . . .
experience engagement in what they read that they certainly did not experience in conventional remedial programs. Nonetheless, as I pass by the Sears building on Fordham Road, across from which are housed the regional offices, I continue to feel ambivalent about these practices, anxious, controlled.

In *Knowledge and Power in the Global Economy*, David Gabbard astutely points out that the language of accountability not only implies a hierarchical institutional structure, it also presumes a specific economy of power that is essential to the maintenance and vitality of its operations. Gabbard emphasizes that what strengthens and sustains this economy of power is rationality itself. I find it difficult to argue against the principles embodied in writing process pedagogy when I see students engaged in writing projects that excite them and that generate interest and commitment. And it appears unreasonable to criticize any curriculum that requires students to read multicultural literature or to engage in reading and writing practices that create opportunities for exploration, discovery, and expression within a wide range of genres. In fact, during my discussions with students, I find that they actually enjoy reading and discussing Meyers’s multigener novel, *Monster*, and they enjoy reading books of their choice during the Independent Reading sequence of the ninth-grade literacy block.

Yet, at the same time, I struggle with the idea that any one program be mandated by a central administration. I am suspicious of any progressive project that becomes a universal mission. And despite how unreasonable I sound each week as I work alongside teachers and students in classrooms, questioning the value of independent reading, “accountable talk,” and the writers workshop, I remain suspicious of discourses that ask professional educators to be held “accountable” when they are rarely included in the central discussions about what constitutes an “educative experience” for their students. Who determines what students and their teachers should be held accountable for? In what ways do the limited standards that our nation has for equal access to education, equal distribution of resources, and a commitment to desegregate schools get taken into account when the practice of accountability gets underway? How can we account for the slow erosion of public education? What indeed stands as reasonable to me is that we somehow hold contemporary reform efforts accountable for their participation in one of the most profound betrayals of our time: the resegregation of schools. As Kathleen Kesson reminds us—it is an old lesson taught to us by Marx—such liberal reform efforts, while cloaked in the language of liberty, equity, and excellence, are in fact designed to consolidate state power and perpetuate the inequitable status quo.

The act of resegregation that our nation is currently undergoing indeed raises questions about accountability. Who is accountable for these shifts in policy? What specific policies are instituted to set segregation in motion yet again? And why is the process of resegregation being left out of the discussion of the New York City reform efforts?
VII

In the context of a reform movement where curriculum is centralized, “progressive education” can only flourish if teachers defer their subjectivity. While the strain of progressive education underscoring the Ramp Up to Literacy program defines “good teaching” as an activity that stands opposed to “authoritarianism,” it creates, as Doris Santoro describes in her essay “The Space of Good Teaching,” an unnecessary and debilitating dichotomy that assumes there are only two positions possible for teachers—student-centered and teacher-directed.23 The notions of good teaching that inform the Ramp Up to Literacy program are apparently infused with rational, enlightened thinking about how students learn, what best practices engage students so that learning is enjoyable, and how students are engaged in active inquiry and discovery on a daily basis.

What strikes me as absent from the ramp-up program is the subjectivity of the teacher—her intellectual interests, desires, and attachments. Throughout this program, teachers are instructed to “observe” student learning. In fact, no student has been so carefully observed so that they can be set along the right path. The irony, as Valerie Walkerdine points out, is that, in such progressive classrooms, there is no discipline of the overt kind. Interference is limited and surveillance is everywhere. Walkerdine continues: “The ultimate irony is that the student [child] supposedly freed by this process to develop according to its [sic] nature was the most classified, cataloged, watched and monitored in history. Freed from coercion, the child was much more subtly regulated into normality.”24 Given Walkerdine’s observations, I would like to return, for a moment, to Mr. Fitzgerald’s memo to his colleagues. Note his concerns about the call to observe student learning in a class of thirty students:

The program was based on 15–20 students per class. When class size reaches 30–35, taking a “status of the class” becomes too time consuming when performing this assessment requires 1–2 minutes per student; 60–70 minutes of a 90-minute period. . . . The program is not considerate of practical time schedule for student centered learning . . . lessons frequently take up two to three days to complete causing conflicts with sequences of instruction.

Teachers are not, as educators such as John Darling point out, expected to be knowledgeable about their subjects or various pedagogical approaches, but rather, they are expected to be learners of child behavior. What is lost to the teacher in this scenario of good teaching is intellectual life, intellectual companionship, and the potential for cultivating teaching selves other than those prescribed by central administration. Drawing on Dewey, Darling further notes, “the teacher becomes a co-planner of work, whose expertise is based less on academic knowledge—though a broad general
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knowledge will be necessary—than on an understanding of children and groups." The discourse of good teaching in student-centered pedagogy eclipses the academic interests and desires of the teacher, rendering her, as it were, a passive participant in classroom life. This image of the teacher as a passive participant resonates too much, I'm afraid, with the image of female passivity and eventual invisibility and silence that characterizes the good teacher—ever nurturing and prepared to care for her students—an image that is strongly associated with education's past. Let us take a moment to look at a snapshot of a New York City classroom in 1924. In this scene, a young female teacher is being observed by her supervisor:

Here, the teacher, worried nervously, checks her watch as she listens to students apathetically recite from their readers. The observer of this teacher grimly notes that the problem in this classroom is far larger than the teacher. The teacher herself was "as aware as anyone else of the futility of the performance. Still, was she not as trapped as the children? Her timetable called for so many minutes of reading daily and the course of study prescribed this particular reader. She must drive relentlessly ahead, in appearance only more free than the driven."

Although this scene may appear to stand apart from what unfolds in a ramp-up classroom, as Mr. Fitzgerald notes, teachers involved in the ramp-up curriculum continue to feel as trapped by timetables and prescriptions for teaching reading as this teacher did in 1924. Despite the apparent "teacher-directed" ethos fused in this scene, the teacher here is bound to the initiatives of central administration. She is compelled, as her supervisor notes, to "drive relentlessly ahead, in appearance only more free than the driven." She finds herself smack in the middle of Marx's depiction of alienation in action. Like teachers in more student-directed classrooms, she too practices an ideal of self-negation and dependence on authority that is defined, as Walker did so eloquently argues, in terms of a fictional, invisible, masculine norm.

Indeed, teachers working with the ramp-up program feel dependent on the region's initiatives before they can make long-term decisions about their curriculum. They are, for example, continually waiting for more "ramp-up training" and inevitably, after they return from training, they feel disappointed and let down by the lack of content addressed. Additionally, teachers are continually working to locate adequate numbers of books for their students, they await decisions from the regional office about how formal their assessment of students should be, and how best to prepare for the impending visits by the "team of experts" coming from the regional offices. This position of "waiting to be notified" marks a position not only of passivity but also of containing—containing the investments and initiatives of other, more powerful figures, thereby being stripped of authority and professional judgment.
But there is more. Because working-class and immigrant children, children of color, and girls rarely conform to the ideal student, they present a problem for the teacher. These students seem to demonstrate either deviant behavior or passivity, which means, observes Walkerdine, that they must be lacking in reason and, in turn, they must be compensated for this lack. The teacher’s responsibility is then to contain this lack and to transform it into reason, thereby turning the physical violence and deviance presented by these students into symbolic violence—mastery of language and the law. Reason enters our discussion yet again, setting off a chain of associations for me: Rousseau’s reasoning woman as a monster who must be domesticated. Enter Sophia, who, in contrast to Emile’s education, which took the route of discovery, learned the art of being subservient and pleasing to men. While Emile could pursue his attraction to ideas, Sophia was forbidden such pursuits and was taught to confine her attraction to men. Throughout history, women and minority men and women have played Other to rationality. They have been excluded from this discourse and deemed incapable of sufficiently mastering the intricate moves necessary to act reasonably. The odd irony here is that the passivity that is feared in students, particularly because it is imagined to undermine notions of democracy and freedom, is the very quality being asked of teachers. Teachers are tacitly required to forsake not only their academic passions but also their sense of agency and professional judgment.

Given these details, why, you might ask, should we complicate a discussion of literacy and the alienation of teachers from their professional lives with the weighty terminology of melancholia? Marx and Freud not only directed their attention to the phenomenon of loss, but both turn their attention to the potential that work—cultural work—has for easing the anguish of loss. In fact, Freud believed that work was one viable cure for melancholia. In Marxist terms, persons can only overcome the condition of alienation by means of “self-activity, labor and industry” the cornerstone to Marx’s ethical philosophy and secular humanist project. While work can function as an apparent “cure” for a strong sense of estrangement, work that generates a sense of estrangement can also function to disavow the despair a person feels over a lost ideal, a lost sense of purpose, or the loss of dignity. To draw on melancholia as a resource for pedagogy does not call upon educators to aggressively repudiate or separate from unjust mandates, however strongly motivated. A melancholic pedagogy poses the question of reform differently and responds to the loss and betrayal of resegregation with imagination, speculation, and a repertoire of “tactics” that cultural historian Michel de Certeau described as constantly manipulating events in order to turn them into opportunities and counter conformity. Opportunity is “seized on the wing” and, it depends on timing and repartee. Let me provide you with a brief example.
A SMALL LYRIC LAMENT

In Mr. Rae’s and Ms. Meryl’s ninth-grade classroom, students began one independent reading lesson with a brief demonstration presented by Ms. Meryl on attending to the images that are generated during reading—a process referred to as “visualization.” This lesson was brief and included a discussion led by Ms. Meryl of the images that came to her as she read Living up the Street by Gary Soto. In this brief demonstration, however, Ms. Meryl departs in subtle ways from the ramp-up protocol. She is meant to ask students what they visualize when they read a particular passage, and she is meant to model this for them. Instead, she picks a set of passages that she finds difficult to visualize, a series of images that she can barely hold in her imagination given their horror:

MS. MERYL: Well, in the book I’m reading, Living up the Street, which is a book we will be reading together soon, the kids were so bored on this street that they liked to fight. Well, Soto talks in this one story about one afternoon when they took cats and they put them in a knapsack. They decided to take the cats in the knapsack and beat people up. I can’t even imagine, I’m trying to visualize and I can’t even imagine that scene—I had to put the book down. So that was my visualization. This image makes me think about the images that come up in our reading that are too terrible to visualize, too painful.

TIARA: Well, I’m reading Annie’s Baby—I’m reading about it. I can visualize her going to the park and I can visualize her getting ready to have sex. I can visualize her being scared and she’s nervous, she doesn’t know what’s going to happen to her.

MS. MERYL: It sounds like a good book. What is it that happens in the books with language when you can visualize? What kind of language does the author use?

TIARA: It’s not really about cursing. This is a diary that she wrote, about her own life—there are not really too many curses.

MR. RAE: How is the scene described?

TIARA: As that, like, she’s uncomfortable. She doesn’t want to be at that place. But also, she loves this boy—she’s scared because he was rough and drunk.

MR. RAE: So she’s describing the feelings she has.

MS. MERYL: Ok, I think that Shadina, Natasha, Lenin, and Jose all read A Child Called It. How did you feel when you visualized poor David when
his mother made him eat his own poop? What makes you visualize... What words does the author use?

MR. RAE: What craft does the author use to convey these images?

SHADINA: I can visualize them fighting and him pushing her out of the car. She screamed and she felt as if she had been raped.

MS. MERYL: To scream, she felt as if she had been raped.

Ms. Meryl and Mr. Rae’s questions exemplify an appeal to the progressive principles embodied in the Ramp Up to Literacy program—generating accountable talk, independent reading, and making text-self connections. At the same time, however, their questions and Ms. Meryl’s “modeling” appeals to an emotional register that alters the timescape of ramp-up by introducing awe, fear, and confusion. This emotional register drives a wedge, as it were, into the reasonable, smooth, controlled practices that constitute America’s Choice Curriculum and that would confine “accountable talk” to five minutes or so. The visual images of terror, confusion, and violence that come to Tiara as she reads Annie’s Baby and to Ms. Meryl as she reads Living up the Street possess the generative, evocative energy of a kind of melancholic protest precisely because their acts of reading are both a repetition of the ramp-up protocol as well as a new iteration of it. Or, to put this another way, Ms. Meryl, Mr. Rae, and their students perform a kind of repetition with a difference—to put on the demands of ramp-up with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off. The readers in this classroom are involved, not as the objects of persuasion—demonstrate to me how you visualize—but as co-readers of a particular sort. In this classroom, teachers and students use reading as an uncertain, provisional practice of engaging material that calls upon them to perform in at least three worlds: the world they live in, the world they share in the classroom, and the world defined by the demands of Bloomberg’s reform efforts.

As the effect of a social relation and as a mode of cultural and historical action, the melancholic revolt of the two teachers in this small scene throws off the norms promoted by the ramp-up program for an explicit, alternative pedagogy that simultaneously incorporates the ramp-up protocol and challenges it: Do not tell me about your visualizations, but tell me what you find so horrifying you cannot visualize it, or let’s explore the half-spoken images in these stories we have been asked to read about—fascism, racism, loss, violence, and betrayals. Such questions enable teachers to work within a tension of opposites that, if sustained, neither capitulates to the demands outlined by America’s Choice Curriculum nor succumbs to a state of despair and loss that renders one silent, isolated, or forgetful of one’s own academic passions or national histories. Teachers like Ms. Meryl, Mr. Rae, Mr. Fitzgerald, Mr. Simpson, and Ms. Maar are not seduced by romantic fanta-
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If asked, Tucker and his colleagues, Bloomberg and Klein, would assert that the workforce of teachers currently teaching in New York City schools stands as "under review" because it is performing below the standard expectations set by the state. Consequently, teachers are being "trained" (the word educated is rarely used) to teach poor youth so they may become productive and engaged citizens, productive workers, and advance socially. There is a high turnover rate of teachers in poor schools, and if there are many new teachers who are either working without credentials or participating in the New York City Fellows Program. The Bloomberg administration's project of standardizing the curriculum, as made evident the Pensation Up to Literacy program and his move to centralize administration, is designed with the intent to solve these problems.

Among the most important criteria used to determine how well a high school performs in New York City are Regents English cohort pass rates; Regents Math cohort pass rates; Cohort graduation rates; Cohort dropout rates; and Cohort Regents diploma rates. In other words, the board of education in New York City takes into account standardized test scores, dropout rates, and attendance records. Despite the knowledge that the tests used by New York City are badly written and biased against race and class, administrators continue to use the English Language Arts Exam and the Regents Exam as a Second Language Achievement Test as indicators of how well a school is "performing." Teachers are expected to pitch their curricula to these tests, and there are implicit and explicit expectations that teachers whose students do not do well on these tests will themselves be placed under severe scrutiny by their administrators. However, the Bloomberg administration, like administrations throughout the country, has traded in the discourse of testing for the discourse of accountability.

In a 1965 essay, Max Horkheimer expressed concern that education was becoming far too schematized. He notes: "In a given historical situation, however clearly reasonable, can turn into an obstacle and be symptomatic of regression. . . . It is true enough, of course, that social freedom is never achieved without force. Numerous unsavory activities are required if society is to be held together, including the maintenance of prisons and the production of murderous weapons." What is it about the language of accountability that generates cynicism among the high school teachers I work with? In proponents' accounts about the value of the ramp-up program specifically the progressive principles of choice and "freedom" are mentioned thus echoing Horkheimer's claim that "social freedom is never achieved without force." Apparently, centralized systems must be put in place to ensure a more democratic, just education for students. Placing the writing and reading workshop at the heart of the curriculum—particularly for students who are struggling readers—offers students choices and the potential to
27. See also Cremin, Shannon, and Towsend, p. 217.
28. Ibid., p. 118.
29. Ibid., p. 90.
30. Ibid., p. 91.
31. Ibid., p. 28.
32. Ibid., p. 30.
33. Ibid., p. 31.
34. Vaugh, p. 5.
35. Ibid., p. 34.
37. Ibid., p. 44.
38. Murrow.

CHAPTER 4


CHAPTER 5


5. For a more detailed discussion about the position of revolt taken up by the melancholic, see Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967); Reprint of *Peau noire, Masque blanc* (Paris, 1952).


10. Here, once again, I turn to Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia.”


15. Ibid.


CHAPTER 6

1. This chapter is a slightly revised version of "High-Stakes Testing and Standardization: The Treat to Authenticity" originally published in *Progressive Perspectives* 3, no. 2 (winter 2001), John Dewey Project on Progressive Education, University of Vermont.


4. Ibid., p. 11.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.


8. Ibid., pp. 24-25.

9. Ibid., p. 25.


