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# Panopticon of the Second Kind

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## PANOPTICON OF THE SECOND KIND: SELF-REFORMING DURING THE ERA OF EXCELLENCE

Era of Excellence is a period of educational reforming in the United States from 1980 until now; in all likelihood, it will extend into the future. The name applies to a “generation of educational policies intended to enhance student learning.”<sup>1</sup> This paper uses Michel Foucault’s general framework to report on an important innovation in the political economy of power, and suggest possible strategies of resistance. This is not a case of Foucault scholarship; my intentions are limited to use of his concepts and do not include a fuller understanding or a new interpretation of his work.

### **Roots**

The aims of the current reform continue a long tradition of educational reforming. The same set of social issues connected to urban poverty, unemployment, and breakdown of the family moved reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The same concern for the educated work force motivated the Sputnik era reformers.<sup>2</sup> The *No Child Left Behind* act signed by President G.W.Bush in January of 2002, has promised “a new era in education.” Yet its key points are familiar: “Accountability, local control and flexibility, new options for parents, and record funding for what works.”<sup>3</sup> The broad bipartisan support in Congress indicates that the Era of Excellence will extend well into this century. Era of Excellence is interesting in its methods, not its ideological content. The methods may or may not be new, but their systematic application and synergy are worth examining. Joseph Murphy breaks the Era of Excellence into three sub-periods according to the dominating reform strategy: Intensification era (1980-1987), Restructuring era (1986-1995), and Reformation era (1992 to present). The progression is from using the government as a traditional vehicle of reform, to more and more decentralization in form of site-based management, and school choice. The top-down reform is gradually replaced with... well, another, much more powerful version of top-down reform that has an outward appearance of a bottom-up reform.

What one may call “self-reforming” seems to be the evolutionary trend of the Era of Excellence. Self-reforming is closely related to the family of quality improvement methodologies developed by global industry. Total Quality Management, or TQM is associated with ideas of W. Edwards Deming (1900-1993), although he did not use or like the term.<sup>4</sup> Deming worked in Japan in the 50-s and is credited for the remarkable progress in quality control the Japanese industry had made after the World War II. In the 80-s, his ideas became popular in the United States. The TQM movement produced an enormous literature output, to which I refer for further detail. The Federal government became concerned about the quality of American products, and in 1987, has established the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award,<sup>5</sup> named after Reagan’s Secretary of Commerce killed in an accident. Finally, there is the International Standards Organization,<sup>6</sup> which

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Murphy, “Reforming America’s schools 1980-2000,” *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 36 No. 5, 1998, 426.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Katz, *School Reform: Past and Present*. Boston: Little, Brown, © 1971.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Education, *No Child Left Behind* website, <<http://nochildleftbehind.gov/start/welcome/index.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter B. Petersen, “Total quality management and the Deming approach to quality management,” *Journal of Management History*, Vol. 5 No. 8, 1999, pp. 468-488.

<sup>5</sup> National Institute of Standards and Technology, *Baldrige National Quality Program* website, <http://www.quality.nist.gov/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> *International Standards Organization*, < <http://www.iso.ch/iso/en/ISOOnline.frontpage>>

administers the so-called ISO-9000 series of quality standards. The differences between these various systems of quality control management are significant, but their family resemblance is unmistakable. For the purposes of this paper, I want to emphasize the self-regulating aspect of these systems. Essentially, an organization devises its own set of goals, operational practices, and methods of quality control, and then shows to a third party how it carries out these procedures. The modern quality control is an exercise in meticulous, preplanned self-policing. Even more importantly, it is an exercise in *designing* the self-policing procedures.

A sizeable body of writing in organization theory examines quality control methods within Foucault's theory of power relations.<sup>7</sup> Sewell and Wilkinson<sup>8</sup> point out that the TQM (for simplicity, I will use this as a generic term for all quality control methodologies listed above) is an extension of Foucault's Panopticon. It looks like workers get more control over their own work and the organization. In fact, the means of control become less visible, and power more precisely distributed. Surveillance substitutes hierarchy and bureaucracy. Sewell even quotes empirical studies demonstrating that autonomy can coexist with tight control, which seems to be obvious even without the empirical proof.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there is something in TQM that reminds Foucault's notion of disciplines as a technologies of domination: the meticulous self-control, the rationing of small doses of punishment, the impersonal character of submission.

TQM made inroads first in higher, and now in K-12 education. Higher education accreditation procedures more and more rely on the TQM-type methodologies. Consider, for example, this fragment of an accrediting organization's mission statement: "Through standards that focus on systematic assessment and performance-based learning, NCATE encourages accredited institutions to engage in continuous improvement based on accurate and consistent data."<sup>10</sup> The Baldrige framework, which is defined as "a self-assessment framework in education" is one of the biggest buzzwords in today's schools, and is actively promoted by several state governments. The relation to business practices is very straightforward and unapologetic. For instance, if you want to write to the Baldrige in Education Initiative, you have to put "C/o National Alliance of Business" in the address.<sup>11</sup> I do not want to make the list of examples and connections longer than necessary; it is sufficient to show that the Era of Excellence is inspired by the TQM and similar business practices. The connection itself is neither ethically nor theoretically suspicious; I simply want to point out that the Era of Excellence reforming is just a case of a larger historical trend, and reflects changes occurring in the larger society.

However, the ease with which business practices cross over into educational territory is somewhat worrisome. In the United States, the policymakers more and more operate under the assumption that there is no significant specificity to the educational sphere. Education is seen as a sphere of social life very similar to industry, and therefore reformable and improvable according to industrial models. Good management, they believe, is good management, quality control is

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<sup>7</sup> See good overview of such research in Marta B. Calas, "Past postmodernism? Reflections and tentative directions" *Academy of Management Review*, October 1999, <[http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m4025/4\\_24/57786854/p1/article.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m4025/4_24/57786854/p1/article.jhtml)>.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Sewell and Barry Wilkinson. 1992. 'Someone to Watch Over Me': Surveillance, Discipline and the Just-In-Time Labour Process. *Sociology* 26(2):271-289.

<sup>9</sup> Graham Sewell, "The discipline of teams: the control of team-based industrial work through electronic and peer surveillance." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, June, 1998, <[http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m4035/n2\\_v43/21073410/p1/article.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m4035/n2_v43/21073410/p1/article.jhtml)>.

<sup>10</sup> National Council For Accreditation of Teacher Education, Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education. 2002 Edition, <[http://www.ncate.org/2000/unit\\_stnds\\_2002.pdf](http://www.ncate.org/2000/unit_stnds_2002.pdf)>, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Baldrige in Education, <<http://www.biein.org/default.asp>>.

quality control, whether in school or at a manufacturing plant. This idea sounded quite revolutionary in the 20-s and 30-s of the XX century, when the teachings of Frederick W. Taylor made their first impact on American schools. Yet an idea only acquires real power when it no longer sounds revolutionary, and is therefore exempt from questioning. Some believe that ideas are powerful when people pay attention to them. This is not true; the most powerful ideas are ignored by most people because they sound obvious.

## ***Pseudo-empowerment***

The key evolutionary trend of the reform is toward delegating the responsibility to states, school districts, and individual schools, in connection with certain procedural controls. The reformers will not or cannot tell schools what to do; they simply provide standards, give or promise funds, and let the educators figure out their own course of actions. On the matters of structural and organizational change, districts and schools are more and more often left alone to decide what is best. In theory, such an arrangement should produce widespread enthusiasm among educational practitioners, which somehow is not happening. The self-reforming is turning out to be neither democratic nor empowering.

Educational theorists have argued for years that in educational reform, a cookie-cutter approach does not work. John Goodlad, Theodor Sizer, Deborah Meier, and other educational authorities finally broke through to policymakers with an idea that each school is an individual social organism, and the same policy or technique may not apply to all schools. I doubt these three would like to claim credit for the victory of self-reforming, although their influence seems likely. The underlying idea here is a belief that empowering teachers and administrators will know the context better, will be more flexible, and finally, more motivated to implement programs they author. I would like to share such a belief; however one is forced to face the reality of self-reforming. The individualized, locally-controlled reforming is not necessarily democratic or liberating. The educational reform debate now seems to concentrate on the forms of accountability (standardized tests versus more “authentic” forms of accountability). Yet I venture to predict that even locally controlled forms of accountability like those proposed by Deborah Meier,<sup>12</sup> will not diminish the perverse domination of self-reforming. The theorists of educational reform may have missed the danger of Foucault’s Panopticon.

The U.S. Federal government has developed its own ambitious Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program.<sup>13</sup> It requires a school reform to be comprehensive, which means involving the whole school. This is not a very big, but also not an insignificant program: in 2003, \$308 million were allocated for it. Schools are referred to dozens of reform models to choose from; some based on theoretical assumptions entirely opposite to others. Among the models offered is the strictly behaviorist *Direct Instruction* approach, and the constructivist *Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound*.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the United States Department of Education directly tells us that the content of reform is irrelevant; only the process and result of reforming count. This is a paradoxical development, which is worthy of a close examination. Schools and school districts are increasingly asked to reform themselves, by designing their own reform models, and procedures of quality control. They are not told exactly what to do; instead, they are expected to find that out on their own. Although significant research has been done to

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<sup>12</sup> Deborah Meier, *Will standards Save Public Education?* Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRDP),  
<<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/>>.

<sup>14</sup> NW Regional Educational Laboratory, *The Catalogue of School Reform Models*, Updated 8/31/01  
<<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/catalog/search.asp>>.

assess effectiveness of different comprehensive reform models, its results are inconclusive due to relatively short existence of most models.<sup>15</sup>

This shift toward self-reforming may make one somewhat optimistic about the effectiveness of educational theory. After decades of sustained effort, and dozens of high-profile books, interviews, and public debates, the idea of school uniqueness has become more acceptable. Of course, one can be more cynical, and argue that it not so much the leaders of educational thought, but the influence of the industry and its quality improvement techniques that made the difference. Who gets credit for the self-reforming ideology is not that important anyway; perhaps Goodlad and Deming share important philosophical assumptions about the nature of organizations. Right now, the tendency is to allow schools to figure out how exactly they want to change, and provide evidence of improvement. Thus, the combination of self-reforming and accountability more or less defines the landscape of K-12 educational reforming. Yet, as Elizabeth Ellsworth once famously put it, why doesn't this feel empowering?<sup>16</sup> A short answer is that an important component of self-reforming is the pseudo-empowering, which is a discipline technique based on delegating authority down the hierarchy without changing the nature of that authority. Of course, even the terminology I use implies that there can be also a true form of empowerment (and I believe that), but the constraints of this paper do not allow me to explore those other possibilities in depths. In addition to pseudo-empowerment, I describe two more closely related technologies, the ritual writing and perpetuation of change.

Let me examine in more detail how the pseudo-empowering works. In 1997, the Ohio General Assembly had required creation of a statewide performance accountability system; hardly an unusual demand in the Era of Excellence. In response, the State Department of Education required all school districts to develop their continuing improvement plans (CIP). To facilitate this process, the Department offers a well-designed web-based interactive tool called iCIP, for interactive Continuing Improvement Plan. Anyone can try it on-line;<sup>17</sup> it is fun and easy to use. The tool works like a wizard, which takes you step-by-step through a certain process, while providing help along the way.

First, you create district's Beliefs, Vision and Mission. The next big step is entering the district events calendar (there is also an address book). Then there is the library of district's documents. Finally, you will see the State Performance Standards page. Very conveniently, your districts test data is already collected and presented to you in comparison with the state averages. Where your district lacks, for example, in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, the numbers will be highlighted in red. However, in the next page you will be asked to identify your goals and priority areas. If you are tempted to say that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics will be your priority area, because it was highlighted in red, well, you said it yourself, no one was forcing you. You are not forced to choose anything; you are only asked to be logical and think through what you are going to do. Of course, the State did not create these things to make you and I laugh; this business of self-reforming is dead-serious. Once sold on the idea of empowering teachers, state governments will go to all lengths to make sure the teachers are properly and efficiently empowered, whether they want it or not.

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<sup>15</sup> The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform,  
<<http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/pubs/ib.htm>>.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297-324

<sup>17</sup> Ohio Department of Education, *Interactive Continuing Improvement Plan* website  
<[http://www.osn.state.oh.us/icip\\_demo/default.asp](http://www.osn.state.oh.us/icip_demo/default.asp)>.

We are witnessing an instance of the old confusion of choice with freedom. Pseudo-empowerment relies on an ability of individuals and groups of people to choose. However, the circumstances and limitations of the choice make those who choose less free in their future abilities to choose. In a sense, this is true for all choices; almost every choice reduces future choices. True empowerment enlarges the scope of possible choices, and should not be too closely tied with an opportunity to choose. Pseudo-empowerment is an act of choice that limits subsequent choices. It is an act of choice that acquires great significance as such, regardless of the content and consequences of choice.

There exists a whole range of manipulative technologies that can produce any needed results through careful organization of group choices. I have had an opportunity to witness a school restructuring process, where teachers went through a whole year of seminars, group activities and exercises in order to develop their own vision of restructuring. At every step of the process, they were asked to think, to write down their preferences, to reflect on their own personal experiences and beliefs. Never once did university helpers force the teachers to do something they did not want to do. It appeared that the very logic of this collective thinking process dictated the next step. Large sheets of paper and color markers brought into a meeting room more often than not set a stage for pseudo-empowerment.

The result of this long process was a multi-page framework, no better and worse than any other, with some changes to scheduling, governance, with a new system of incentives for good students, etc. The crucial difference is that the teachers felt some authorship over this document. In the past, when governments prescribed exactly what to do, teachers could blame the government if the reform went wrong. The forcibly empowered teachers and administrators are given only a multitude of standards, but are free to decide which specific model of reform to undertake. Therefore, if anything goes wrong, they have no one to blame but themselves. They are put in a situation of perpetual guilt. "But you decided on all this yourselves!" – became a leitmotif of the new relationship with authorities. The pseudo-empowerment brings individual conscience into the relationship of power. Instead of ineffective ways of coercion through purely administrative means, we can now shame teachers into the active obedience.

The idea of Panopticon from the beginning relies on some sort of autonomy. According to Foucault, the prisoner does not know whether he is watched, therefore, he gets in a habit of watching himself: "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment: but he must be sure the he may always be so."<sup>18</sup> It takes an autonomous decision-maker to make a good Panopticon prisoner. Yet now the prisoner gets to design the Panopticon for himself. The ghost of J. Bentham, the inventor of the original Panopticon, now wants every prison, factory, and school to get busy designing the blueprints for their own custom-built panopticons. Besides watching oneself, the new Panopticon creates a sense of community among the prisoners. The collective body of prisoners becomes the guard; each individual remains a prisoner. Standardized panopticons are out; individually designed are in. The community exerts certain peer pressure, and therefore makes watching almost omnipresent. The prisoners can no longer conspire against the authorities, because the authority belongs to all other prisoners. Why would anyone want such a thing? For three primary reasons: so that each Panopticon fits to specific circumstances; so that it is flexible and constantly perfected, and so that the inmates consider it their own.

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, Second Edition, 1995), 201.

## ***Ritual writing***

Another key instrument of the new Panopticon is the ritual writing. I have mentioned it already, but it deserves a special attention. Again, all Ohio school districts are asked to write their Mission, Vision, and Belief statements. These three together constitute the Core Values. Of course, there is help available at each of these steps. For example, "Vision is the school district's picture of its future. A well defined vision would identify the broad areas of knowledge, skills, and understandings which students should be able to demonstrate." But "Beliefs are the principles and ideas that govern the district's decisions and actions." So, if you work for the Adams County/Ohio Valley Local, your core values should be different from people working for Allen East Local. If you are not quite sure what beliefs people can have, there are three examples offered: (1) All children deserve an equal opportunity for education. (2) All schools in our District should be safe for students and teachers. (3) Strong proficiency scores enable students to be successful.

Ritual writing is of a very special kind. The act of writing in general is not a manifestation of human agency; in a certain sense, it is the human agency. In literacy-dominated societies, writing and the idea of authentic self have been intricately connected. The authentic self implies significant difference among individuals; and writing is one of several ways to produce and document such difference. The authentic self implies that human beings have inner depth,<sup>19</sup> and writing provides access to this depth. I am different from you because I have my own unique thoughts, which I can express. These thoughts acquire significance, permanence, and special presence when they are written down. Modern democratic agency is very hard to imagine without the authentic self. We are all expected to use our own heads when we act; blind conformism and obedience are not worthy of a democratic citizen. Hence, we all go through a process of developing a more or less unique authentic personalities. But no one is born with an authentic self. Therefore, we speak and then write in order to produce difference. Creation of a text makes sense only when it records something new and different.

In "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote," Jorge Luis Borges tells a story of a writer who rewrites *Don Quixote*. He goes through numerous changes, and editions, and at the end comes up with a text that is exactly like that written by Cervantes. The paradox that Borges exploits does not arise from the fact that it is impossible, but because it is useless. One does not write a text when it already exists. The originality of a new text is the essential characteristic of writing that distinguishes it from copying. Such an understanding of writing is relatively new in Western civilization. Copying and authorial writing did not appear substantially different for centuries. A large middle ground between these two practices was filled with compilations and commentaries throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Yet the modern European writing is intimately connected to the idea of authorship. Ancient forms of writing did not need an author in our contemporary sense of the word; the author was accidental, unimportant, or conveyed the divine Truth rather than his own authentic self (e.g. Aristotle, Aquinas, etc.). Only the modern writer, especially the fiction writer becomes permanently attached to his or her unique texts. The authentic self is partly a product of writing, such as diary writing, just like it is a product of confessions and psychotherapy. The authentic self is a product of certain practices, in which the inner depths of a human personality become manifest and acquire importance.

Ritual writing is a power technology that converts the special relation between the self and its writings into power relations among individuals. When a group of people is required to come up with a statement of values and beliefs, the hope is not to produce a new and original writing.

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard, 1992).

Reading of the vision and mission statements shows just that. Toledo Public Schools, for example, is “a client-driven organization which exists to enable all students to reach their full potential as productive and contributing members of our global society. In a culturally diverse, urban environment we pursue innovation in teaching and collaboration in decision making to respond to the diverse needs of our stakeholders. We educate in partnership with the whole community to provide the academic and social skills necessary for students to succeed as responsible citizens in the future.”<sup>20</sup> In translation, it simply means that Toledo Public Schools is a school district. The text itself is intentionally meaningless; it is not intended to be read for any other purpose except to check that it is there. I bet most of my readers skipped over some parts of this 74 words-long mission statement, precisely because it is not written for reading. The not-for-reading text is a fascinating contemporary phenomenon that deserves serious attention. Let us try another one: Delaware, Ohio city schools have a mission “to design lessons, materials, and activities that result in all students learning the knowledge and skills needed to be productive members of our free and democratic society.”<sup>21</sup> In translation, it means that the Delaware City Schools is also a school district. It professes 13 beliefs, like “It is the school community’s obligation to engage students in quality work experiences that challenge them to learn more.” (Translation: we are a school district, so we teach children).

In fact, such a text has no use-value. Like a student essay, it serves to generate the process of writing. Vision and mission statements are very thinly concealed learning exercises. There has been much of Dilbert-style humoring of the mission statements, and I do not wish to contribute further to that genre. Let me just quote the title of Stuart Davies and Keith Glaister, paper: “Business Schools Mission Statements: The Bland Leading the Bland?”<sup>22</sup> Most of them are bland, all right, but this is not the point. The quality of the mission statement does not matter, the process of writing does. The act of collective writing that the State of Ohio requests from its school districts is not really writing; it is entirely different phenomenon, with different purposes and different governing rules.

I am not implying in any way that ritual writing is not effective just because it is bland. A very thorough compilation of research data by the National Center for Education Statistics shows otherwise: “Whether called shared vision, shared beliefs, shared values, or common goals, a clear sense of purpose with participant buy-in is a key ingredient in any successful social organization, including schools.”<sup>23</sup> The report acknowledges that what exactly those goals are, is not important, as long as they “become part of the school fabric and all activities are aimed at achieving them.”<sup>24</sup> The ritual writing works, but it has nothing to do with the quality or content of the texts produced. What is at work is the process, the ritual of writing. How exactly does it work?

Teachers at a junior high school I regularly visit, use “think sheet” to keep their kids busy during in-class detentions, and make the experiences less enjoyable. The “think sheet” has a number of questions, and blank spaces a student is required to fill out:

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<sup>20</sup> *Continuous Improvement Plan 2000-2001 School Year Through the 2002-2003 School Year*. Toledo Public Schools, 2000, Page 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Delaware City Schools Continuous Improvement Plan*, Draft adopted by Board June 5, 2000, Page 7.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Davies and Keith Glaister, “Business Schools Mission Statements: The Bland Leading the Bland?”, *Long Range Planning*, Volume 30, No. 4, 1997, 594-604.

<sup>23</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *Monitoring School Quality: An Indicators Report*, Statistical Analysis Report, December 2000, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001030.pdf>, Page 40.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



What did I do wrong? \_\_\_\_\_  
Who was bothered by what I did? \_\_\_\_\_  
What should I have done instead? \_\_\_\_\_, etc.

Ironically, the teachers are also engaged in writing acts in connection with their school restructuring, which is very similar to the think sheets. They are asked to brainstorm on the restructuring process. Their ideas about restructuring are all theirs, only questions are asked by an outside party, which happens to be a consortium of several universities that received a large federal grant. The difference between a think sheet and the large sheet of newsprint paper with color markers is minimal.

The purpose of such writing is subjugation, the assertion of power. The ritual writing is thus similar to other power rituals, such as reciting the Chairman's sayings, saluting the Führer, or toasting the Generalissimo. However, it is different in one very important respect: it involves the self to a much greater extent. Ritual writing is much more invasive than other submission rituals; because it makes the authentic self indistinguishable from the outward behavior. Ritual writing reaches deep inside one's self in pulls it all out. Even in the case of forced confessions that President Clinton had to perform on TV, one who speaks can be suspected of being insincere. When Clinton says: "I deeply regret..." one may suspect that he is saying it for the audience, and that deep inside he may have different thoughts. One may dislike a liar, but the liar at least has to have some agency in order to conceive her lies. When you are asked gently "What do you *truly* believe about education?", it is a very different story. Your authenticity is at stake precisely because you are not forced to say anything in particular. In fact, there is no audience to exercise pressure on what you say. I don't think a single state department of education have ever challenged, or rejected a mission statement or a restructuring plan for being incorrect. All they want the teachers and administrators to do is write it down, please.

If we believe Charles Taylor,<sup>25</sup> the authentic self can be understood as a defense against domination, a sacred inner space where one can be oneself. Foucault argues that the authentic self is created by such practices as confession, and later, psychotherapy.<sup>26</sup> His understanding of the self is much bleaker: the self is a part of power relationship. Having a heightened sense of self may mean better, gentler, more efficient domination. The issue is too large for this paper to handle, and both Taylor and Foucault are probably right. Yet the case of ritual writing supports Foucault's more than Taylor's. The self indeed blends with the technologies of coercion; the ritual writing of educational reforming is one example of such a blend.

The authorship of the ritual writing texts is unclear; it is supposed to be a product of collaboration. These texts not only lack readers; they also have no author, no personal responsibility, and no individual shame for a job poorly done. They are the realm of the absolute freedom, freedom *ad absurdum*. For the anonymous writer, the only judge is one's conscience. Yet this freedom brings the ultimate subjugation, for one does not know what to resist. When you have nothing to say, you will say nothing that sounds like something. When you said it yourself, you have to believe it. What you say is the reflection of your inner self. Saying meaningless things thus obliterates parts of your very self. The logic of ritual writing is very simple: The self is created by what it writes. If we can force someone to write empty, meaningless text, the connection between the self and the text will not break; rather, the self will change to reflect this empty, meaningless writing. By producing empty vision and mission statements, the literate self

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*. (Random House, 1988)

literally obliterates itself, thus making resistance to the reform efforts very difficult. Authoring the meaningless text is the ultimate form of subjugation, which clears possible resistance out of the way of self-reforming.

### ***Perpetuation of Change***

The third instrument of the self-reforming is the perpetuation of change. The idea of continuous improvement represents a significant shift in use of change in power relations. All reforms of modern times were envisioned as last ones. Of course, the individual reformers knew that someone would come after them and propose to change again, but the intent of a reform was to fix things once and for all. History of education is of course a history of perpetual reforming since the beginning of public schooling. However, every new reform assumed certain finality. The progress seemed to be an uneven, discrete process, with changes followed by periods of stability, and then more change. The very notion of reform, and progress in general implied the opposite state of no reform, either in the past as “Ancien Régime,” or in the future as a golden age of prosperity and harmony. The TQM thinking brought with it the notion of permanent improvement, and of homogeneous time. This shift from heterogeneous social time to homogeneous one brought to life an altered perception of change. We now do not expect sudden leaps, and periods of calm. Reforms collapsed into a steady evolution, an evolution as improvement, but not as an emergence of something new.

Natural history moves in the opposite direction: from classical Darwinian view of gradual evolution to Gould’s theory of the punctuated equilibrium.<sup>27</sup> The social sciences and humanities always operated under the assumptions of heterogeneous time; the cycles of war and peace, revolution and stability are very difficult to ignore. Yet the gradualist continuous improvement model seems to penetrate educational theory effortlessly, without any challenge. I would argue that this is a tremendous step backwards in thinking about education and educational organizations; not only politically ultra-conservative, but also methodologically flawed. While the former is a matter of conviction, the latter is not. I do not have the space here to develop the methodological critique of homogeneous time. Let me only mention that human understanding often fails to penetrate homogeneous objects, because any understanding involves differentiation.

The continuous improvement concept does a double trick to the idea of change. It makes the reform an every-day, routine activity, and by doing this, eliminates the reform. It lowers the expectations, but increases effort by spreading it over long time periods. Continuous improvement is an innovation in the tool kit of power relations. Perpetuation of change is trying to put all educational change to an end by appropriating the very notion of change. Within the constraints of the self-reforming model, there is no space for imagination, for inventing something genuinely new, for a quantum leap of any sort. Reform itself has become a mechanism of control. Teachers and school administrators are kept in check by allowing them to change their organizations.

Perpetual change disallows any change at all. Changes are sliced so thin, and spread out in time and space, they lose accumulating effect. The Era of Excellence reform is not a reform at all; it is a large-scale maintenance of the existing educational system. In education, we witness the strange End of History phenomenon, like that predicted by Fukuyama<sup>28</sup> for the whole world, but materialized only in American education.

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda's Thumb : More Reflections in Natural History*. W.W. Norton & Company; Reissue edition (August 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Penguin, 1992).

Governments must have reached a conclusion that schools operate close to their maximum capacity at producing an educated workforce. Due to certain intrinsic limitations, which I explored elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> they just cannot do much better in the area of training. Yet their normalizing, socializing potential is far from being exhausted. Schools are becoming an intricate and omnipresent technology of power delivery, which assures just-in-time, exact distribution of power. Ladies and gentlemen, progress is over; perpetual perfection of the status-quo has begun.

## **Resistance**

Allow me take a few steps back from the bleak picture of anti-reform conspiracy painted in this paper. I don't really worry that schools will not change any more, or that there is no room for a genuine reform. How schools actually change has very little to do with the reform efforts, including the current self-reforming model. Barry Gold, for example, did 23-year long study of an elementary school,<sup>30</sup> and found that "Innovation and organizational failure—ironically, the result of rational administrative change—set the stage for punctuations followed by periods of equilibrium that produced exchanges between period types to create continuous change that accumulated to significantly modify the organization. After punctuations, the requirements for constructing organizational legitimacy explained the complexity and dynamics of change that indicates that community and national institutional orders did not bestow unconditional and permanent legitimacy on the school."<sup>31</sup> In other words, real change occurs despite, not because of reform efforts. Moreover, teacher's resistance to outside reforming is certainly a constructive force in school change. Just like Foucault's disciplines can never create a perfectly docile human body, the self-reforming can never produce a perfectly docile social body of a school. My worry about the self-reforming is that it somehow changes the balance between administrative reforming and teacher resistance.

Resistance for me is not necessarily a politically charged word; it is also a philosophical notion, an element of a well-lived life (a life without resistance is not worth living). The evolution of power relations in education is somewhat natural, and certainly effective. Many good things may very well come out of it. Foucault on many occasions noted that power cannot be viewed as pure evil; it simply is an evolving function of society. Every page of *Discipline and Punish* is marked by a paradox; on one hand, Foucault incessantly shows his disdain of the manipulative technologies of power; on the other hand, he maintains the voice of an objective analyst. My graduate students sometimes confuse his irony with his own voice. He looks for logic, efficiency, and even certain "naturalness" of the power evolution process. Writing his books was an act of resistance in its own right. Seeing the invisible mechanisms of power makes those mechanisms less effective. The resistance is thus an important component of the social ecology, whether it is successful or not. In other words, I am not sure if I wish the efforts of self-reforming to fail. But I am absolutely sure that these efforts cannot go unexposed, and unresisted. As long as school teachers and administrators resist the self-reforming, there is hope and a future. There is no such a thing as futile resistance; those who resist can never be fully controlled.

It is hard to resist the rubbery pressure of the self-reforming efforts. School folks have been caught off-guard by all this sudden interest in their opinions, and the power given to them. The pseudo-empowerment gives them an illusion of power. The ritual writing strips them of a capacity to produce independent thought. The perpetuation of change eliminates the very idea of

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<sup>29</sup> **Insert reference after blind review.**

<sup>30</sup> Barry Allen Gold, "Punctuated Legitimacy: A Theory of Educational Change" *Teachers College Record* Volume 101, Number 2, Winter 1999, pp. 192–219.

<sup>31</sup> Barry Gold, "Punctuated Legitimacy," 217.

change. These techniques are very hard to resist because of their appearances. The first important step is to recognize them for what they are.

Most importantly, teachers, parents, school administrators—all those caught in the web of self-reforming—must master the new technology of power and use it for their own purposes. A simple refusal to reform does not work; passive resistance only makes things worse. The most effective forms of resistance I had a chance to observe involve playing the game of self-reforming, but also high jacking the game, manipulating its rules to serve what the teachers believe is right in education. What I call “the subversive resistance” deserves a special paper and hopefully, a field study. In this paper, let me just list some possibilities, so a reader can recognize certain patterns of behavior she probably observed or in which he has been involved. The teachers I work with clearly distinguish things that have to be done “for show” from things that really make sense, and bring more joy to themselves and better educational experiences to their students. They use some linguistic markers to separate an official conversation from an unofficial talk about school, kids, etc. The listening audience is carefully screen for outsiders who may no share teachers’ convictions. The teachers routinely conspire to divert resources—money, work time and space—to accomplish more practical, and more beneficial aims than those stated in official documents and school reform policies. Their reporting practices artfully blend the reality of school life with the appearances of self-reporting. Although profoundly cynical towards the aims and methods of self-reforming, they retain important ethical standards in relationships with students. They distrust writing, yet honor oral agreements; avoid doing the observed, officially sanctioned tasks, and yet spend unordinary amount of time on small, unobserved, and unreported tasks of teaching. In short, the efforts of self-reforming are treated in the same way as regular school bureaucracy—not as much an enemy as an inevitable condition of teaching, something largely beyond one’s control and something to adapt oneself to, like the social realities of students, families, and neighborhoods. The success of the subversive resistance largely depends on the degree of teacher solidarity, and strength of informal networking.

The purpose of this paper was to diagnose the problem, not to offer a full treatment plan. I only invite others to think how the pseudo-empowerment can be countered by stealthy self-empowerment; the ritual writing—by inventing alternative discourses that reflect and uphold the self; the perpetual reforming—by dissociating the real change from reforming.

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