

Block, A.A. (1997). *I'm only bleeding: Education as the practice of violence against children*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 190 pp. (Softcover).

Alan Block's book argues that "social violence" is endemic in schools. He describes social violence as the result when children are denied opportunities to create healthy identities based on self-discovery and imagination. The author deliberately focuses on the institution of school, separating it from the social context in which schooling occurs. He chooses not to take up the complexities of physical violence in children's homes and communities because "we might disingenuously and self-righteously distance ourselves. We could say, that is not our home: I am not part of that crime" (p. 3). But using the word "violence" this way trivializes the physical and emotional trauma that many children suffer. However, Block's choice of this charged word raises an important question. What is the more unspeakable – to break the spirit, or to violate the body? When the body is violated, through whatever kind of abuse imaginable, what happens to the spirit?

The use of object relations theory provides a coherent framework for Block's assertions, and he attempts to make the value of this perspective clear to the reader. While the book suffers from a repetitive writing style, and a too-heavy reliance on Bob Dylan's lyrics, it should be read by a wide audience. However, the assumed audience for this work is not clear. Perhaps Block is correct in thinking that his readers will be professional educators, or child advocates well-versed in the politics of schooling. Its emphasis on our collective fear of imagination as the root of psychological violence is thought-provoking and of interest to a broad cross-section of readers.

Block raises the issue of neo-conservative ideology currently in vogue in all strata of society. From the perspective of this ideology, schooling operates within a narrow set of values: what is good for the economy is good for everyone. Broader social, environmental, and cultural concerns are ignored in favor of a single marketplace ethic. But even as Block alludes to the dangers of "schooling for work," the fact that people *do* need

livelihoods is ignored. If we believe that all members of society should be able to participate in meaningful ways, then we must acknowledge the importance of work in all its variety. Block's call for classrooms full of possibilities is commendable and even achievable, but its appeal is diminished by the implied elitism and sneering references to work.

Block's critique of schools is based on the view that "the separation of the physical from the mental denies the reality of mind and promotes an education that denies learning" (p. 119). This allusion to the need for integration of the disparate elements of the school experience is familiar, especially to those who understand that we teach *people*, not isolated units of subject matter. Teachers who have tailored Wassermann's (1990) ideas about play in classrooms to fit their own situations, or who base their work on respect for the child's strengths as suggested by Carini (1989), have already known for some time that there are productive ways to fulfil the need for classroom environments which support the child's creation of self. In other words, Block's idealistic and vague suggestions have already been developed more fully in both theory and practice.

At the end of the book, Block says that children are "denied hope of establishing creative and healthy relationships" (p. 172). For many children, regardless of social or economic status, school is the only safe place in their lives. The classroom offers the acceptance and security missing in other areas. Block's comment does an immense disservice to the efforts of caring, thoughtful teachers who are genuinely responsive to children as individuals. His description of school as a holding tank for children contributes nothing new to the discussion of how to create educational settings which are respectful and full of possibilities.

Block describes the current situation of schooling and attempts to suggest an alternative to despair, with his call for more creativity in schools, but nowhere does he make specific recommendations for action. Early on, the author scorns ready-made handouts and workbooks, so apparently believes that concrete suggestions would detract from teachers' own creativity in struggling with this problem. Teachers are seen as unwitting or unwilling accomplices to the situation because "[school] does

not provide space for the teachers to be good enough so that they might provide space for the education that is good enough for our children" (p. 20). Unfortunately, Block does not define what "good enough" might be, nor what conditions need to be in place for teachers to fulfil this expectation.

Most regrettably, the author misses an opportunity to draw comparisons among the way children are treated in school, the way teachers are treated by the educational bureaucracy, and the way education as a whole is situated in present society. Block points out that, in his view, society does not trust children for two reasons. Firstly, they are "strangers" to the orderly discipline of schools and a threat to that stability. Secondly, they are "weak and innocent" – unable to think like adults, irresponsible, and in need of constant supervision. Just so, administrators at every level don't trust teachers as creative, able decision-makers but persist in supplying materials which publishers subtly (or overtly) suggest are "teacher proof." If we accept Block's assertion that social violence is being perpetrated against children in classrooms, surely teachers are also victims.

The bigger picture is equally sobering – society, as represented by the mass media, mistrusts the educational establishment. Currently, schools are under attack for a number of reasons, but most obviously because they are not producing a quality "product," competitive within a global economy.

I'm Only Bleeding provides a portrayal of significant problems in education, but Block's response is unsatisfying. The creation of environments which support the child's development of self is happening, because of the efforts of dedicated people who see children as individuals with unique preferences, strengths, and viewpoints and understand that what they do together is mutual learning. Others are in the process of working out the dilemmas that fuel Block's armchair critique.

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