Stephen Metcalf’s deconstruction of the relationships between a large corporation, President George W. Bush, and legislation that influences what teachers may do in schools with children is quite chilling. Appearing in the popular press, Metcalf’s critique goes on to explain the ways in which research on reading appears “disinterested and rigorous,” but in reality is based in the interests of a large corporation rigorously working to increase its profits (p. 22). During his first presidential campaign, Bush held up the Texas Miracle as the model that could be used to fix all the reading problems in the United States. That miracle involved the supposed raising of all test scores in the great state of Texas. The reality was that although scores increased on the state-level test, the state’s performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was basically unchanged. The miracle was a myth (Coles, 2003), manufactured for the sake of electing Bush while profiting a corporation. The heyday for corporations with roots in Texas spread as they waited for opportunities to sell their wares around the country. The corporate infiltration of schools is growing as reading and phonics programs, test-preparation materials, tests, and scoring and interpretation of tests appear in schools in response to the demand that the corporations themselves were
instruments in creating. These materials and services can be reduced to one word: profit.

**Profits Soar as Context Is Ignored**

Although the damage caused by the No Child Left Behind legislation and the reading policies born of it is becoming clear in classrooms (Coles, 2003; Allington, 2002), policy makers seem to be barely budging. Corporations are becoming richer as more and more of their materials are ordered for use by teachers and children. The remarkably powerful part of this dynamic is what I refer to as *nonstick surfaces*. No matter what literacy researchers and teachers in a particular context (such as a city or state) find, our evidence does not seem to stick in policy makers’ minds in any way that substantially alters what is being imposed upon teachers and children.

In New Mexico, the context in which I presently work, here’s what does not stick. In NCLB and in Reading First, we hear a lot about scientifically based research. In terms of reading, that means the report of the National Reading Panel (2000). That report includes no studies of diverse or second language learner groups. Apparently it does not matter (or stick in the minds of policy makers) that 51.4 percent of the students in New Mexico schools are Hispanic; 11.2 percent are Native American; and fewer than 33 percent are Anglo. Diverse students total at just under 70 percent. It does not matter (or stick) that dropout rates for those first two groups are 7.76 percent and 5.81 percent respectively (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2004). In other words, our state, the first state to be a majority of minorities, is *not* represented in the “science” being used to make our children and teachers seem defective. But we continue to pay millions to companies to supply us with materials that are sold as *scientifically based reading research*. This is bad science (Coles, 2000) being used for profit on the backs of the children of this state.

In New Mexico, more than one-fourth of our children live in poverty by U.S. census standards; more than 47 percent of our students receive free lunch; the free and reduced total is 57 percent. A recent report looking at the social health of the state, by the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy (2004), placed New Mexico at the bottom in the nation. This is our second year with this status. We earned the lowest marks in child poverty and insured children. We earned an F in graduation rates, unemployment, wages, suicide, drunken-driving deaths, teenage drug abuse, and homicides. More than 26 percent of New Mexico kids live in poverty; in contrast, in Maryland the rate is 7 percent.

Another recent demographic report, the Kids Count study (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003) rated New Mexico in the pits; 11 percent of our
children live in extreme poverty. Child poverty, health insurance, and graduation rates must be neatly factored out of the scientifically based work we’re to rely upon in teaching, teaching teachers, and research. The numbers don’t stick, so they don’t matter; they don’t influence policy or decisions about curriculum, student learning, and teacher agency. But the corporations get richer.

There are other issues contributing to a low quality of life in New Mexico, as we are last in social health policies; forty-ninth in homicides; and forty-fourth in drunken-driving deaths (is it any wonder residents self-medicate?); and only 65 percent of eligible households receive food stamps. We are sixth in child abuse in the United States; and we earned an F in suicide. Brian Street (1995) points out that being able to read is not a prerequisite to fixing poverty and the complicated issues around it. In fact, reading is not at the center of these social issues, a basic fact ignored by the National Reading Panel and the authors of NCLB. Children will learn to read when they are not in pain, when their families are not in crisis, and when they are provided with medical and dental care. I’m not interested in anecdotes about a state legislator who “pulled himself up by his bootstraps” to leave poverty. That’s an n of one. I am interested in the children that are left behind in neighborhoods where they are in too much physical, emotional, and spiritual pain to learn. I’m concerned that their needs and interests cannot be considered by their teachers because of policies and mandates that are hurtful.

Lois Meyer (2003) compiled two sets of data that suggest the complexity of corporation-ignored issues influencing children’s success in school. In 2003, ten Albuquerque elementary schools were rated exemplary, exceeds standards, or meets standards by the New Mexico Public Education Department. Let’s consider those ten; they have

- less than 27 percent students who receive free or reduced-price lunch (one as few as 2 percent)
- more than 55 percent Anglo students (six have more than 70 percent)
- no more than 35 percent Hispanic students (four have less than 15 percent)
- fewer than 7 percent Native American students (four have less than 2 percent)
- no bilingual education programs (some do not appear to have ESL programs, either)

Meyer then considered ten Albuquerque elementary schools that were rated probationary or have barely missed being rated probationary at least once in the last three years; they have
at least 88 percent students who receive free or reduced-price lunch (five have more than 96 percent)
less than 12 percent Anglo students (six have less than 5 percent)
more than 73 percent Hispanic students (six have more than 90 percent)
less than 10 percent Native American students (six have less than 2 percent)

bilingual programs

It is frightening that some individuals might interpret these numbers to mean that being an English language learner is a deficit and probably the cause of reading difficulties. But that’s what is happening as bilingual programs are under so much heat that they are evaporating via legislation or public opinion being shaped by individuals like Ron Unz (Crawford, 2004). The tiny three-year learning window to master English as dictated by NCLB in order to be tested in English effectively diminishes and debilitates bilingual programs. Programs won’t demonstrate success when they are forced into unrealistic time frames for language learning.

It is time to consider poverty as a significant problem and diversity as a relevant issue. It’s difficult for a nation, state, or city to face what such consideration means, but a corporation can find virtually no profit motive for honestly addressing issues of poverty, language, and culture. For example, in the Albuquerque area, Intel, with profits in the billions, is but a few miles from inner-city poverty that is beyond sad; it’s embarrassing. Cornel West (2004) admonishes industry for its extreme wealth in light of social issues such as this. He argues, and I agree, that ethics and morality demand that industry assume responsibilities beyond distant shareholders to the place where the industry thrives. This idea is met with more nonstick attitude. The corporations continue to show up at district offices throughout the state and at the legislature, offering scientifically based solutions to problems they refuse to consider in any significant depth, scientific or otherwise (and here otherwise includes moral responsibilities).

The previous description is the context in one state. Now let’s shift our attention to a wonderful, caring, smart, and reflective teacher whose teaching life and students are embedded in such a profit-motivated context. The teacher’s perceived vulnerability, which is quite accurate, demands that I give few specifics about where she teaches.

Karen

Karen described her primary classroom as a “joyous” place because of her district’s trust in her decision making about teaching and learning. Daily reading
and writing workshops provided evidence of what her children knew, and Karen’s use of assessments such as miscue analysis (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987) helped her decide what she needed to teach. Each piece of her students’ writing (in journals, stories, and other genres) suggested what children were coming to understand and what they might benefit from learning more about in strategy lessons Karen tailored to their needs. Grand conversations (Peterson & Eeds, 1990) about texts and discussions about connections to other texts, grammar, vocabulary, and phonics arose in response to Karen’s and her students’ questions and needs. They read, discussed, and wrote about many topics, including their identities as White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic Americans. More than one-fourth of the children received free or reduced lunch, and poverty was also a topic of discussion reflective of some of the literature Karen chose to read with her students. Karen explained that she taught phonics “all day!” She said, “We always talk... about letters, sounds, rhymes, and more.” I wanted to learn more about how the children in her classroom became literate, so I initiated a study there.

The study began as an investigation into the uses of predictable texts in the teaching and learning of reading. During the study, the district shifted its stance on reading curriculum. Second-grade test scores had been reported in the local newspaper and the drop in scores led to an outcry in many forums, most notably from a few business groups. I could not trace the direct path, but based upon what Metcalf (2002) discussed in his article, conjecture leads me to believe that connections via the Business Roundtable quickly connected the district with a corporation that would “solve” the problem.

The district responded to the pressure being exerted by adopting and mandating the use of a systematic, direct, intense phonics instruction program. The types of texts used in Karen’s reading instruction shifted from predictable books to phonetically regular texts that were referred to (by the publisher) as predictable and decodable but actually consisted of phonetically regular words organized into sentences that strain young readers’ sense making (see Chapter 7 in this volume). Teachers were told that they were to follow verbatim the scripted lessons of the phonics program. Karen described the change:

I was told by [a district reading administrator] that for too long teachers in this district have thought that their job was to create curriculum. I was told that is not our job. Our job is to “deliver” [making quote signs in the air with her fingers] curriculum.

Life in the classroom changed in response to the phonics mandate because the lessons consumed time. Karen said, “My students need to hear
stories. They need to be involved with real literature . . . although [now] I always feel like I’m battling the clock” because phonics takes so long. She explained that the mandated program is so oriented to preciseness that her students are less willing to take risks as readers and writers. That, in combination with less time for authentic reading and writing, makes Karen wonder about all the possibilities that are lost: possibilities for teaching, for learning, and for young readers and writers to express themselves, their ideas, their hopes, their dreams, and their imaginations.

Each day, Karen is required to do one lesson of this systematic, direct, intense phonics program. One day, after I observed an entire lesson, Karen dismissed the children for lunch. After they left, I commented, “That took a long time.” Karen explained that when she told a district reading administrator that phonics was taking up to ninety minutes on some days, she was told that she had a “personal problem.” Again, she made little quote signs in the air when she said personal problem. “What does that mean?” she asked, looking at me.

“I don’t know,” I told her, because I had no idea.

The total time spent on phonics on this day was sixty minutes. The entire lesson is described in depth elsewhere (Meyer, 2001), but I’ll recap the main events of the lesson here.

The Phonics Lesson (in Brief)

The phonics lesson began at 10:00. Karen read the script almost without interruption and verbatim because she has been warned about serious repercussions if she fails to do so. The children were on the rug, in a clump, facing Karen as she sat on a chair with the corporation-provided teachers guide in her lap and a dry-erase board behind her. She read a story from the script, but at every fifth word (or so), she read the phonemes in place of the word. The children then had to say the word. Karen said /k/-/r/-/o/ for crow, /t/-/r/-/ee/ for tree and so on. They didn’t stop to discuss the story because the instructions did not say to. The story took five minutes and then Karen, without explaining the shift to her students, turned to the board and wrote superman on it. A precocious reader screamed out the word. Many of the children echoed it. Karen erased the n in superman and replaced it with a d to make supermad. A child said “supermad” and a few others echoed. One of the children asked what supermad means. Karen was about to explain that it’s not a word, but one of the children suggested that if you are very mad at someone, you “are supermad at them.”

Karen went through this process of changing real words to nonsense, changing superman again, this time to supermand. “What is supermand?” asked a child after some children said it, others echoed it, and others were silent.
Karen said, “It is not a word.”

Then, she followed the guide and had the children read other words that she changed: baboon to baboot, alphabet to alphabed, schoolbus to schoolbun, and recess to reced.

With none of her usual (and expert) explanation about transitioning into a new activity (because the script provided no such explanations), Karen took out a puppet and used a slightly different voice to articulate phonemes that the children had to combine to say a word. For example, the puppet said /t/-/r/-/u/-/ck/ and the children said “truck.” They did this with a long list of words, with some children saying, some echoing, and others remaining silent. Without discussion or segue, Karen moved to holding a large poster of the letter d and read the script, which told the children to write it in the air with their fingers. Some air-wrote, others mimicked the air writers, and others air-scribbled.

It was 10:14, and I looked around at the group of young children. Some were watching Karen; others were not. One child had carefully rolled up one leg of his jeans and was working at unraveling his sock. He was making a little ball with the string of elastic as he unwove it. Since he was unwaving only the threads that were parallel to the sole of his foot, he was leaving a sort of skeleton of his sock that started to slip down his leg as he unwrapped it further. A few of the children were rocking back and forth, seemingly not paying particular attention to Karen (although at this point in time it is conjecture to suggest they were not paying attention merely because they were not looking at her). One child was quietly making the sounds of bombs dropping (“eeeeyowwwwwww plichhhhh”) as he moved his hand above the rug and dropped it slowly down. One of the children was picking his nose; another was playing with her ears; one was rubbing her hands up and down her braids (later she undid and redid them).

The children were then required to say the isolated sound of /d/ as Karen read a story with that letter in it. The story was projected onto a screen so all could see. Without discussion, Karen moved to the part of the script that required her to read a list of words to the children so they could tell her if each began with d. The children were restless, exaggerating the behaviors described earlier, so Karen interrupted the script and read them a book from the school library. The bizarre behaviors stopped as the children listened to, responded to, and discussed the book. She dismissed them to write in their journals for a few minutes and then told them to return to the rug “for more phonics.” Karen won’t call the lessons reading, she explained, because the children aren’t reading when they grunt, groan, and say nonwords.

Karen followed the scripted instructions for work on the board with initial consonant substitution (making dad into mad) for about ten words.
Then she gave the children letter cards with m, n, c, d, and a on them (one letter per card) and asked them to make words. A child suggested that he could make candy if he had a y. Karen said, “That is harder than we’re supposed to make.” This was the only time during the lesson that she looked over the children at me. Her eyes filled with water. Later, when I asked Karen about her feelings when she responded to that child, she explained that the program underestimates some children and confuses others. “It’s just not for every child,” she said with a sigh. But every child must sit through each lesson. No one leaves; no special help, no pullout teachers, and no interruptions of any kind are permitted during phonics.

The lesson ended with the distribution and reading of a piece of paper that was folded in half to form a four-page book about a cat. The cat’s owner was illustrated as being annoyed at the cat’s choices of places to nap. All of the words (except some sight words) supposedly had the sound of /a/ as in cat. The only words in the book were the, cat, had, nap, on, a, mat, pad, in, pan, and cap. Following the script cost the children and their teacher one hour of uninterrupted literacy time.

**Who Owns What?**

Karen’s implementation of the program is monitored by her principal, who can stand in a corner of the first-grade pod (four classrooms with walls that an adult can see over) and observe the four first grades at one time. This is an eerie place to stand because as each teacher administers the program, an observer hears the same exact words coming out of the four first-grade teachers’ mouths just slightly out of unison. The scripted voices sound like the teachers’, but they are owned by the company. The following questions and responses examine issues of ownership underlying the mandated phonics program.

**Who Owns the Definition of Reading?**

The company does.

Karen’s students are learning what reading is by the way it is operationally enacted day to day in school and out. The focus here is in school. Although Karen refers to it as phonics, the children are learning (from the script that constantly says “read . . .”) that reading is making sounds. They are learning that reading is the production of something orally so that we can move on. Say reced or schoolbun and move on. Although we heard the children’s quest to find meaning in some of these words, the intention of the program is to have children string together sounds. The final consonant substitution
activity teaches children to expect nonmeaning as an accepted reality of reading. Say *baboot* and move on. Remember, Karen told a child, “It’s not a word,” when that child asked about *superman*. Being told to *read* a word (by the script) and that what they read is not a word (by their teacher) is confusing at best and may, in a larger sense, be teaching children that their reading is not supposed to make sense and that they are not meaning makers (Wells, 1986).

Willis (1997) suggests that the various views in the ongoing debates about reading fall into one of three categories: (1) seeing reading as a skill that can lead to success; (2) seeing it as something you have to do to succeed in school; and (3) seeing it as needed to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) by transacting (Rosenblatt, 1978) with texts. The phonics lesson fits into Willis’ second category. And the appearance of that category in Karen’s classroom occurred because she was forced to defer her definition of reading to the one explicitly presented by the program in her classroom daily. The very essence of what reading is has been appropriated by the company that supplied the program, turning Karen into a conduit for a delivery of that definition of reading. This stands in sharp contrast to the lessons Karen teaches throughout the rest of the day, when her goal is that children appropriate important questions readers ask themselves, such as *Does it make sense?* and *What does it mean?*

We do not yet know the impact of such conflicting definitions of reading. We do know that Karen’s students now write less, read less, and listen to fewer high-quality pieces of literature because there’s just no time.

**Who Owns and Distributes Professional Knowledge?**

The company does.

When she asked the district reading administrator about this crucial issue of the definition of reading, Karen heard a strong and clear response. “Teachers in this district have acted as though they are self-employed and they are not self-employed and they need to stop acting as though they are,” the administrator told her.

“What does that mean?” I asked her.

“It means,” Karen said, her eyes once again filling with tears, “that we are not allowed to think for ourselves or make decisions.”

This program leaves no decisions in the minds of the teacher. The teacher cannot decide who needs such intense work with sounds, how much, and for how long each day. The district demands that all teachers do it every day. Karen explained that when a teacher asked at an inservice about the usefulness of the program for her entire class, the company representative said,
“Trust me. This program is good for every child in your class.” Karen does not have that kind of trust because she is a smart teacher. But her district and the company do not trust her knowledge. Her decision-making rights have been stripped away by the district’s withdrawal of trust in her as an informed professional. The company is heralded as the expert and teachers’ knowledge is not honored, sought, or welcomed.

Who Owns (by Identifying and Responding to) Children’s Needs?

The company does.

Karen is a “systematic observer” (Taylor, 1993, p. 34) of children; she is smart about child development, teaching, and learning. But her smartness is bracketed during phonics, when the corporation usurps her power to respond to what her children's behaviors are telling her. Some children follow the lesson, some echo what others say, and others are silent or call out anything they have on their minds. This doesn’t matter; the lessons continue, line by line, page by page, day by day for the entire school year. What occurs during the daily lessons substantiates (for all children) what Fine and Weis (2003) write about minority children:

> The intellectual, social, and emotional substance that constitutes minority students’ lives in this school was routinely treated as irrelevant, to be displaced and silenced. Their responses, spanning acquiescence to resistance, bore serious consequences. (p. 26)

The serious consequences are yet to be determined as we watch these children during the coming years. Presently, the children's behaviors indicate their responses to the content of the lesson. Finding phonics cognitively and affectively barren, many initiate and communicate (by their actions) a search for stimulation, contact, and meaning (Snell & Brown, 2000). They find it in their noses, along their ears, and in their clothing. They find it as they suck a bracelet or touch a friend. Their behaviors communicate the mismatches between learners, curriculum, and the interactions children expect in a social learning setting (Durand, 1990). The phonics lesson forces kids to have “tunnel vision” (Smith, 1997, p. 25) about reading as they focus on sounds rather than read to construct meaning.

Since the children’s diverse needs are bracketed during the phonics lessons, Karen tolerates some of the children’s aberrant behaviors at this time of the day. She explained that she cannot in good conscience ask them to focus on something that is void of meaning. That’s one reason she looked up at me teary-eyed during the lesson. She understands that the bracketing of her knowledge is also the bracketing of her students’ learning because
she is not available to them to help address their cognitive, social, and spiritual needs.

**Who Owns Curriculum?**

The company does.

Curriculum, according to Dewey (1938), is *what happens* in classrooms. It *may* be enriched by the many relationships that thrive at the intersections of definitions (teacher’s and students’) of reading, teaching, learning, language, cultures, and experiences. It *may* be multiple voices that join for a moment in an infinite conversation that began long before the moment and will continue long after it (Bakhtin, 1996). Curriculum *may* be a setting for multiple possibilities of expression (Short & Burke, 1991). The phonics program, with its views of teachers as incapable and children as needing intense lessons about the sounds of the language, limits what *may* happen in school. The view of children as needing tiny bits of language, just a little at a time, with abrupt and frequent changes, and little regard for sense making, limits the possibilities of children’s understanding and uses of language.

Karen and her students are being held hostage by the corporation’s curriculum because she fears being fired for noncompliance. She and other teachers were coerced into compliance with the program when their jobs were threatened with comments such as the administrator’s remark about self-employment. Such coercion is a form of violence (Stuckey, 1991) because Karen’s professionalism was systematically reduced by threats and intimidation (violent tactics). Relying on the manufactured panic about reading scores (Berliner and Biddle, 1995), corporations moved into this district with strategic plans for convincing teachers (and many others) that the company’s program would rescue the students. As the publisher gets rich, the mandated program “dismiss[es] the possibilities of teaching and learning that exist as potentials waiting to be realized” (Meyer, 2001, p. 82) in favor of profit and the promise of homogeneous results.

The curriculum, with its “good for all” message, is essentially about compliance. Teachers are forced to comply with the script. Students are forced to comply with a meaning-void view of reading that teaches them to act like learners in a situation that lacks the essence and substance of what readers do and why readers read. I could find no one in the district with decision-making power that found it objectionable that one of the “pedagogical implications” (Perrone, 1991, p. 24) of the phonics program is that it teaches compliance. The company’s de facto curricular goals are at odds with demands for higher performance and better readers who can become responsible and active members of a democracy (Strauss, in press).
Who Owns the Power over Whether to Provide Culturally Responsive Teaching?

The company does.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) means that teaching and curriculum are constructed with, from, and for students. This brief section is a discussion of cultural relevance and responsiveness in the phonics program.

There is none.

The corporate program does not take into consideration the differences among and between learners’ languages and cultures. It does not take into consideration the needs of English language learners, who in past years in Karen’s classroom benefited from learning through culturally responsive thematic units and inquiry (Freeman & Freeman, 2000). The program ignores or dismisses the complexities of teaching in a diverse society.

Some might argue that for one hour a day children might very well benefit from focusing on the sound system of the English language. As Karen explained at the beginning of this article, she taught that all day before the mandate. She taught phonics in contexts that were meaningful to her students and respectful of their linguistic (including dialectical) and cultural diversity. She taught it in specific response to their needs as she assessed those daily. For an hour each day, Karen is now forced to ignore the individuality of her students and the specificity of instruction she could provide. Her students read less, write less, and find their identities less integrated into their classroom. The long-term effects of this remain to be seen.

Invisible and Silenced Laborers

Teachers like Karen teach all over the United States. Children like the children in New Mexico live and go to school in a variety of places all over the United States. A problem emerges when outside companies, unfamiliar with and not responsive to the individuality of a given school or classroom, work to make a profit on the backs of children and teachers. The corporatization of our public schools is a reality. As children sit in classrooms, they labor on materials created far from the children’s lives and experiences. The children labor through workbooks, worksheets, and nonsensical (supposedly decodable) texts. Physically, their bodies labor to behave and focus on tedious work that leaves their minds weary from lack of stimulation and their bodies aching from the physical act of investing their energies in meaningless and uninteresting activity. Our schools are becoming corporate-dominated sweatshops where children are at the lowest level of labor and teachers are
low-level management whose job is to keep the laborers involved in the task.

Reflective, sensitive, and informed teachers, like Karen, understand what they are doing and they are pained by it. They are pained because they know that their students’ needs and interests are bracketed and dismissed in order to serve the corporation. They labor and suffer under coercion and threats of losing their jobs if they fail to comply and if they fail to force children to comply. And the corporation gets richer.

Quite honestly, I’m confused and angered by this situation, yet it is becoming increasingly commonplace for me to visit a school and witness a preservice or new teacher becoming indoctrinated into the culture of compliance. I’m confused because I just don’t understand how (or don’t want to believe that) anyone with a sense of consciousness about issues of social justice could play a part in this culture of compliance. I’m angered when I consider the possibility that I have failed my own students in my college of education because I have not brought these issues sufficiently to their consciousness nor have I equipped them to deal with what they are being forced to do. They leave my classroom with such hope and passion, but less than a year later, in their first year of teaching, they succumb to the culture of curricular oppression (Meyer, in press).

More than thirty years ago, Paulo Freire (1970) taught us that reading is a complex process that involves much more than reading the word. Freire’s ideas about “reading the world” focus on a process of “conscientization,” or consciousness raising, about the distribution of power, wealth, access, justice, and equity. Working with adult students on their basic literacy skills, Freire began teaching reading through an understanding of the questions that readers brought into the classroom. Words and worlds were part of the curriculum because the curriculum was rooted in the words and worlds in which the students lived. Freire’s sense of democracy was strong and urgent and he knew that for citizens to be productive and participatory members in a democracy, they must read both the word and the world.

Karen’s students are being denied access to thinking about or acting upon their worlds, and their reading of the word is often tainted with nonsense. If we teach that the word is nonsense, then perhaps for some students it is not much of a leap to believe that the world is nonsense. The world is nonsense if children are taught that they have no agency in it. It is nonsense if they are taught to believe that they have no control over their thinking and if they are taught that schools exist to teach one to comply. It is nonsense if school becomes a place to focus on form, or what Bloome (1983) calls procedural display, rather than substantive content.
The corporation gains by such a configuration of school because questions are not asked. The children stop asking questions, the teachers stop asking questions, and the corporation produces a new edition of the program that is marketed as even more effective than the last. The new boxes arrive, the new editions are distributed, the new workbooks and worksheets are completed, and our children leave school learning that school is not a place to learn. More fortunate children return home to rooms full of books, family members with time to read to them and listen to them read, and all the rich stuff of quality literacy lives. Less fortunate children return home to environments that may be rich in literacies, but not the literacy valued by the mainstream or measured by standardized tests (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). The more fortunate students learn in spite of school; the less fortunate are ultimately blamed for not learning and forced into special needs programs or forced out of school. They are the ones pushed into silence (Fine & Weiss, 2003), anger, depression, and the highest category of risk: the risk of not caring.

I do not mean to create a scenario that is simply dichotomous, suggesting that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. There are exceptions, of course. And the literacy landscape is more complicated than a simple dichotomy. But as I survey that landscape, driving around New Mexico, I wonder how many Karens are crying as they drive home from school, how many children find school irrelevant and empty of meaningful content, and how many billions of dollars corporations are making in a context that they helped to create and work feverishly to protect.

The children in Karen’s classroom, the children of New Mexico, and children and teachers around the country are becoming invisible and silenced laborers in the corporate-created factories that used to be schools. Reflective teachers are forced into management roles that focus on delivering a standardized curriculum; thoughtful school leaders are reduced to administering ill-conceived corporate models of teaching and learning; and at the bottom of this weighty pyramid are the flattened minds, bodies, and souls of our children. They are being crushed as their creativity is replaced by a sweatshop mentality in which they do the work but reap none of the profits.

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