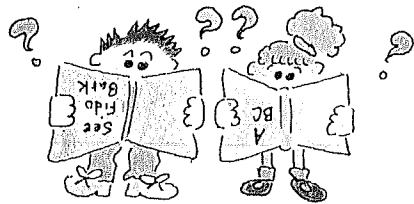


# The Richest Country in the World: a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fable by laj

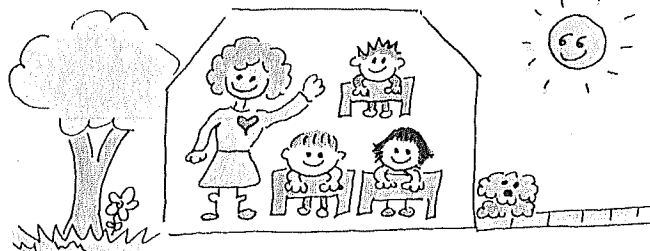
Once upon a time there was a beautiful country where many children could not read.



"Let's create public schools to educate all of our children," said the people, "because everyone in this wonderful land of the free deserves a decent education." And so...

Public schools were created and they were good.

Children of all ages gathered in one room to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. They learned to mind their manners and their teachers.



Meanwhile, clever people were designing machines to make life easier. For every manual labor they created a machine. The country made more money and more money.

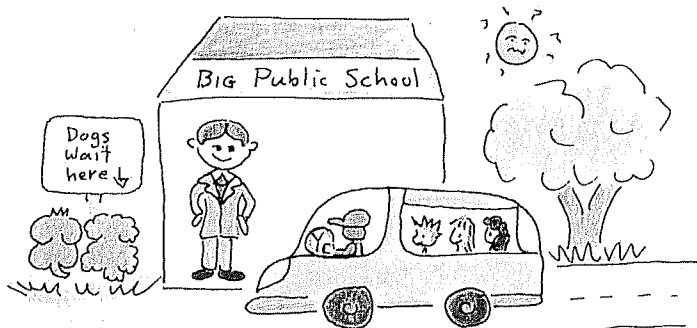
Then a terrible war erupted. Fathers went to fight for freedom. When they returned, the brown fathers who had fought for their country argued that their children should be allowed to go to the same schools as the white children.



A mini-war erupted in the streets until the government ruled that all children of all colors would go to school together.

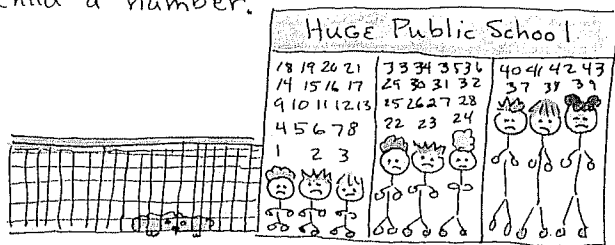
And whether some people liked it or not, it was good.

Then the clever people said, "See how much money we have made by putting many machines in one place." And they built bigger schools and bought big yellow buses.



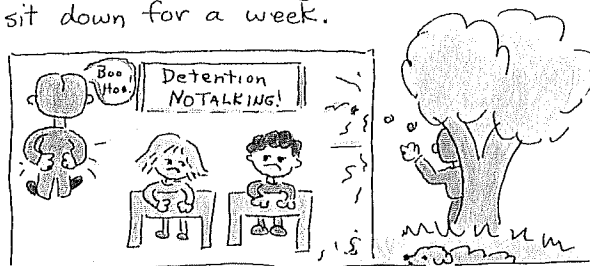
They hired important men in 3-piece suits to supervise all of the children who went to the big schools.

Soon, the schools became so big that the men in 3-piece suits couldn't remember all the children's names, so they assigned each child a number.



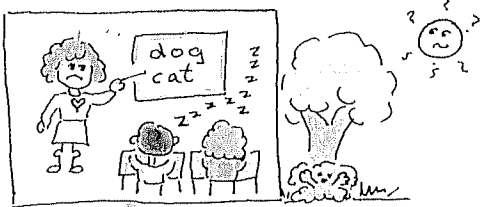
"We are not numbers!" cried the children. "Be quiet!" warned the clever people. "We must have a system to keep track of you all." And so most of the children kept quiet.

Occasionally, one little number refused to be quiet, and he was sent to detention or paddled so severely that he couldn't sit down for a week.



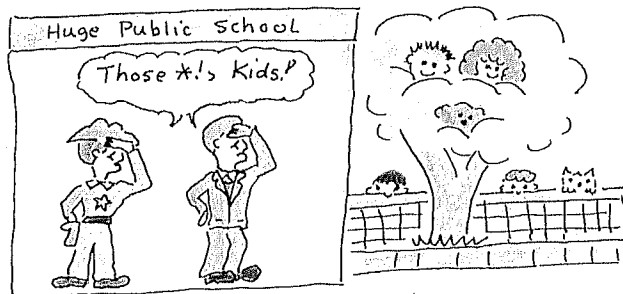
The other little numbers kept quiet, but they carved their initials into their desktops and broke the windows and the toilets. They scrawled obscenities on the walls -- and they refused to learn to read.

"If you don't learn to read, you can't go to college," warned the clever people. "We don't care," said the little numbers. "We care!" boomed the colleges. "We need students." So the suits told the teachers to give the students passing grades.



"But children should not go to college if they cannot read!" cried the teachers. "It is your fault that the children cannot read," answered the clever people.

Many little numbers refused to accept the easy grades. Some of them sneaked out of school in broad daylight. The suits hired people to hunt down the truants.



They locked up the worst little numbers and threw away the Key. "That will teach them," said the suits. But it did not teach them and it was not good.

Then, one day a very important report was published.

Very Important Report

Who can read:

- most Europeans
- everybody in Costa Rica
- most Australians
- Africans who go to school

Who cannot read:

- people in poverty-stricken third-world countries
- Many children in the richest country in the world

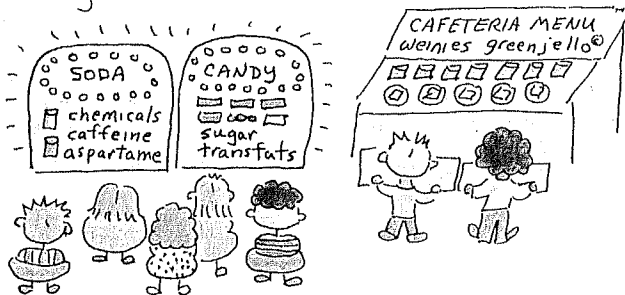
The clever people were appalled and enraged. "We have the wealthiest athletes and the most TV talk shows!" they cried. "How can they say our children cannot read? We'll show them." And they built even bigger schools.

They hired so many adults that they broke the school budgets. "We need help," the clever people told the government.



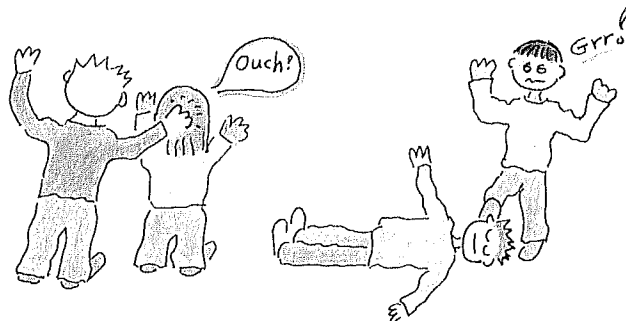
"Oh no! We have no money for schools," said the powerful people (whose own children attended private schools). "You must help yourselves."

So, the clever people closed many schools. They cut fine arts programs. They opened their doors to the soda and candy vendors who paid millions to put their irresistible shiny machines in the schools.



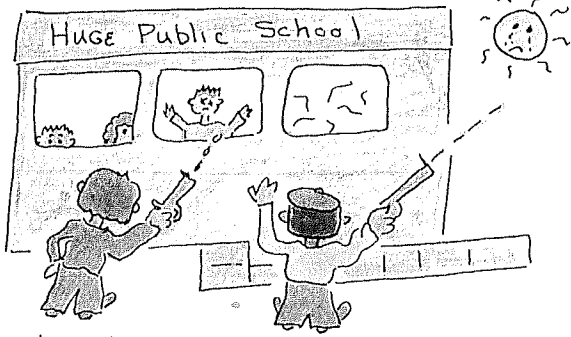
The children grew fatter every year, and many of them developed diabetes.

With no elbowroom, and no music or art to brighten the long days, the poorly nourished little numbers became even more disruptive. Some became cruel and tormented others.



But the schools were so huge that the suits couldn't catch the bullies. They didn't know the bullies' names.

The numbers continued to complain and misbehave and try to escape from their educational prisons. And like their adult counterparts, some planned violent takeovers.



They brought weapons into the schools and blasted their anger into the walls and the chalkboards and their fellow numbers.

"What is wrong with these children?" cried the clever people.

"It's television!" shouted some people.

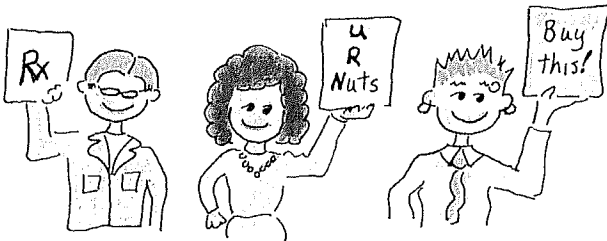
"It's sex education," suggested some poorly educated people.



The business community offered to help. But, alas! Some of them had lost sight of their mission...

"We can make people feel good about having something wrong with them," said the money-hungry sector of professional people helpers.

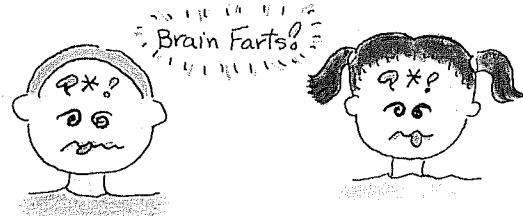
"And we can make them buy whatever we tell them they need," said the advertisers.



"People love prescription medications," said the pharmaceutical companies.

This psychological-pharmaceutical-advertising conglomerate came up with a most clever idea...

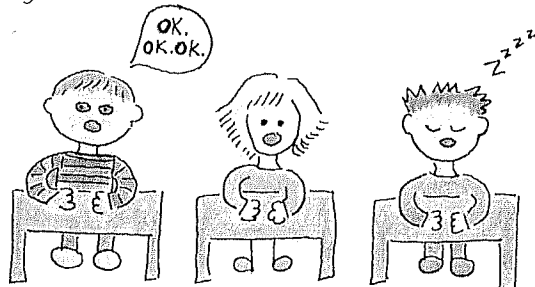
There was something wrong with THE CHILDREN'S BRAINS!!!



The clever conglomerate designed special tests and drugs and advertisements. They created a psychological condition and diagnosed the little numbers who hated school.

They prescribed drugs to calm down the little numbers and make them sit in their chairs and stop trying to escape,

The clever conglomerate told the parents that they weren't to blame for their children's behavior and the parents were so grateful. And indeed many little numbers became very docile.



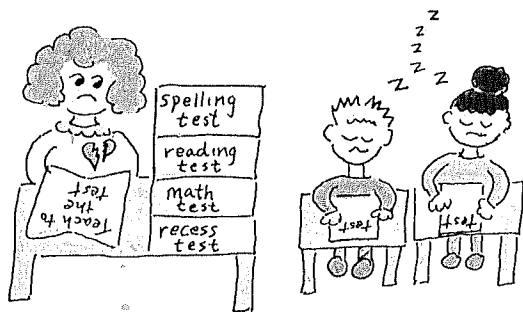
But other little numbers refused to believe that their brains were broken.

"We are not numbers!" cried the children in despair. "If you treated us like human beings, we would show you how smart we can be."



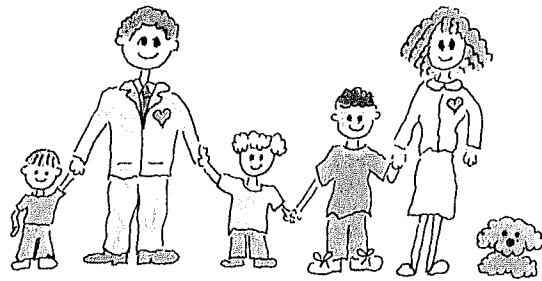
More and more numbers refused to learn to read. "They can learn," insisted the clever people. "They are just stubborn-but we can make them learn."

"We will give them terribly hard tests," said the clever people. "If they do not pass, they can stay in the same grade until they rot." They told the teachers to teach the tests.



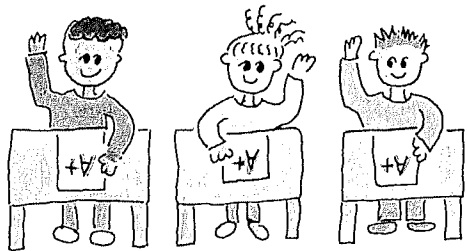
"We do not want to teach children to take tests," cried the teachers. "We must teach them to read and write and think and create."

"Piffle!" said the clever people. "If students fail the tests, we'll test you and prove that you are the reason they cannot read." "Let us use our brains," the students cried, but the clever people ignored them.



And some compassionate adults listened. They created personal programs for students.

The compassionate adults welcomed all students to their programs - rich and poor, gifted and troubled, chocolate and vanilla and peach and caramel.



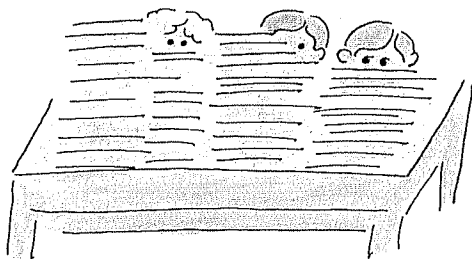
They spent the budgets on children, not adults. They called the children by name. The children behaved and learned their lessons and it was very, very good.

Soon, there were dozens, then hundreds of small personal programs. The small programs blossomed and thrived - and the clever conglomerate became jealous.



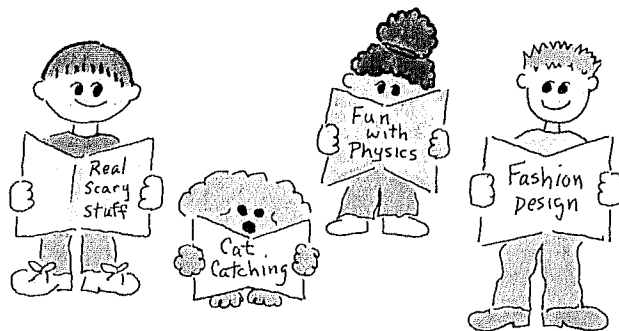
"We look bad," they whispered among themselves. "Whatever shall we do?"

"We could try to be more like the small personal schools," suggested a clever person. "What a brilliant idea!" cried the others. They held many important meetings.



They discussed and debated and designed and designated. They reorganized and researched and rescheduled and revised. They coordinated and delegated and overhauled and updated.

And, finally, in the richest country in the world...



The children began to learn to read

**The Beginning**