

## EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: March 4, 2014

Published in Print: March 5, 2014, as **On the Front Lines in the War on Poverty**

# On the Front Lines in the War on Poverty

**By Deborah Meier**

In the early 1960s, before the War on Poverty was declared, I was deeply involved in the local Chicago civil rights movement. But when the youngest of my three children reached school age, I decided it was time to earn a little money. I looked into becoming a substitute teacher.

I began to substitute twice a week at K-8 schools on the city's South Side. I almost always worked in all-black schools. These schools were a novelty to me—having been educated after 3rd grade in elite private institutions. I was impressed that the kids came back day after day, that teachers closed their doors and coped, and that some kids learned what they were taught. Further, behind those same closed doors, some remarkable teachers did amazing things.

But I couldn't get over the gap between the kind of education I had experienced and what I saw going on in these schools. I was learning, not about teaching, but about the kind of schooling far too many children were exposed to.

In 1962, there were stirrings of change that soon created a staggeringly vibrant civil rights movement. The 1963 March on Washington, which my family attended, offered a vision of racial harmony that was contagious, as did increasing agitation in Chicago.

Back in the school system, the media and many schools of education taught us to think about poor (especially black) children as not yet fully "ready" for higher-order thinking, or for self-discipline. This message was then, and remains, at great variance with my own firsthand experience, not to mention common sense. I lived half in and half out of a poor black community and had casual contact morning, noon, and night with self-reliant, articulate black adults and children.

My years in Chicago's largely black South Side schools helped me understand the contradiction. Indeed, the children in the lower grades were docile and silent. Their parents were wary of the schools and the schools of them. The parents sent a clear message to their

### **about This Occasional Series**

To recognize the **50th anniversary of the War on Poverty**, Commentary will run an occasional series of Perspectives on the federal initiative and its impact on schools

children: Be quiet and obedient, and wary. They tried.

and children today. The series starts with this essay by Deborah Meier.

Alas, as kids got older they had lots to say—and said it out loud and in school. They took advantage of every adult weakness to take over the classroom and ignore (mostly white) adult authority. Nervously keeping order and surviving day after day was the goal of school adults, and I was praised any time I could accomplish this. I got better at it.

When we moved for a year to Philadelphia in 1965, I became a Head Start teacher. Our orientation included the same litany about the culture of poverty and how Head Start hoped to overcome it. The one difference, a much-welcomed one, was the focus on including mothers in the educational process, although it wasn't always done respectfully. There were also more black teachers. But parents were still seen as the problem, not the solution.

I had only a dozen 4-year-olds in my Head Start class and a wonderful full-time paraprofessional. School was over after lunch. We gave an IQ test in the fall and again in the spring and were expected to prove that we could raise IQ scores. (So much for innate intelligence.) The tests covered vocabulary, alphabet, numerals, and recognition of common objects (from cows to sewing machines). Scores went up.

I heard the same talk about "deprived" children in the largely orderly school in central Harlem when we moved to Manhattan in 1966. But now, luckily I had the support of the remarkable Lillian Weber and her City College Workshop Center in assuming that all children were smart and thoughtful, came into my classroom with ideas of their own, and had parents who were allies both of the children and of me. Several teachers joined me and, with the principal's permission, we started a small school-within-a-school for four pre-K through 2nd grade classes. I began to write accounts of our work and the rich language and intense engagement that emerged in our classrooms and its shared corridor and play yard.

Because of two earthshaking New York City teachers' strikes in 1967 and 1968, my kindergarten classes met outside school (after I left the picket line). Many parents joined us for play in Central Park and visits to libraries and the Museum of Natural History. Together, we saw the children's curiosity and independent spirits in a new light.

This was during the heyday of the short-lived War on Poverty. Kindergarten classes citywide had no more than 15 children and a full-time paraprofessional. Supplies were plentiful, and we also enjoyed being an all-day neighborhood school—the wraparound idea was popular at the time. Such schools were part of national policy, and the money followed the words, until the war on Vietnam, and New York's own 1970s fiscal crisis, replaced a war on poverty.



Deborah Meier holds one of her students in New York City in 1968.

—Courtesy of Deborah Meier

The strikes had led in 1969 to a compromise on local autonomy and 32 New York City K-8 districts with increased voice and power. One local superintendent, Anthony Alvarado, invited me, out of the blue, to start a small K-6 school in East Harlem. I jumped at the chance—and started the first of a network of small Central Park East schools in 1974. Many more such schools followed in East Harlem, so that by 1980 there were 52 schools in 21 buildings. They survived the city's fiscal crisis, but at the price of the closing of school libraries and art programs, larger class sizes, and

the end of many city-supported efforts to reach out to communities of color.

Despite this, more New York City districts and teachers picked up on Alvarado's and Lillian Weber's ideas, to mention just two of the many pioneers of this period. For a time, there seemed no limit to the possibilities—if we were willing to make do, scrounge, and depend on the energy of the new young teachers attracted to these newer approaches.

But by 1990, another "reform"—with a renewed focus on standardized testing and businesslike ideas of accountability—was picking up steam. "Reformers" thought that we needed sterner approaches, more rigor (rigidity?), and more standardized tests. The pejorative narrative about the poor returned with a vengeance—focused again on "pathologies" of poverty that led to poor discipline, lack of language, limited intellectual capacities, and the need for step-by-step instruction and unremitting sternness. There was a war on "the culture," not the poverty. I was accused of standing in the way of progress and supporting the status quo.

In this brave new world, poor children didn't need expensive small classes and engaging materials, and "personalization" could wait for 21st-century technology. We returned to worksheets (sometimes on the screen), programs that come with 100 percent guarantees, "no excuses," test-centeredness, and an end to "play." We're even back to a discredited 19th-century idea: paying teachers by their students' test scores. "Walls of shame" (data walls) are the latest fad, and dunce caps will soon be popular. Unless ...In the 21st century, we're even on the brink of abandoning the once untouchable experiment in public education itself. The unthinkable has become doable! Meanwhile, poverty is more intense and widespread, and inequality has gone haywire.

The War on Poverty didn't fail. Rather, it ended not long after it started—a victim of the more visible war in Vietnam. Today, we've adopted backward-thinking K-12 "de-forms." We demand evidence, but ignore it. We cut back on food stamps and unemployment benefits and tell poor people to behave themselves, try harder, have fewer children.

My "golden age" in New York, the one that allowed a variety of experiments in trust to flourish, happened not by accident and not just because of a few good administrators. It was possible because of a short-lived sea change in the national political conversation. It came because for a while there was a public commitment to wage a war on poverty and on behalf of racial equality. While it ended much too soon and has been followed by decades of retreat, there's a restlessness abroad in the land right now that just might, *might* augur another sea change. None of us saw "the '60s" coming, or the '90s. So perhaps better days are just around the corner. Meanwhile, friends, hang on. Maybe we will be wiser next time and stick with a generous view of our fellow beings for a lot longer.

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