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When Is School Reform Not Enough?

By Ann Evans de Bernard

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My state of Connecticut, like many others across the country, has received much attention lately for its so-called school reform movement. The movement targets primarily children of color in poor neighborhoods, using low test scores as the justification, and then creates unilateral plans for improvement, as if the children were part of some prewar colonial empire. The millionaires who are sponsoring school reform, in turn, pretend their paternalistic views on "other people's children" are benevolent.

Connecticut's most-touted school reform accomplishments boil down to new textbooks, school construction, changes in administrative categories and duties, hiring America's "brightest and best" through Teach For America, hooking teacher evaluations to test scores, and the creation and funding of charter schools. So far, that's what we have.

One would hope that, by 2014, school reform efforts might include actual progress toward equalizing educational opportunities for vastly unequal groups of children with vastly unequal housing, language backgrounds, and lives. Instead, I see a growing disregard for the cultural integrity of real children living real lives, as if being poor made them part of some unacceptable caste. Was it always like this? How do "school reform efforts" today compare to education when I was growing up? Forgive me while I reminisce.

My education began in Pittsburgh in 1950 and continued in several other large industrial cities. While some parts of America were racing headlong into the battle for school integration, I attended both Catholic and public schools that were somewhat diverse. More than half a century ago, parochial and public schools were not distinguished by income or racial segregation. There were wealthy Catholic school students, but there were just as many who struggled with money and English.

To help with classroom extras, we all made donations and sold candy and raffle tickets. When the old books wore out, we got new ones—which were just books in the 1950s, not a part of a school reform agenda. And before test preparation became a driving force behind the design of reading programs, primary books could actually be read by young children. They had colorful pictures and simple text. (How many of us started to read with "Oh, look!") Pages weren't cluttered with sidebars highlighting complicated strategies for finding the main idea or

summarizing the theme. If reform means improvement, we need to take another look at the books we are pushing on our children.

But let's move to another reform effort: school construction. I was born in 1946, with millions of other babies. When I started school, I sat in classrooms with more than 75 children until cities and parishes could build new schools to accommodate the postwar population explosion. After spending 2nd grade in the gym, where I and 100 other children sat in desks nailed into long rows, we finally moved into our new school, and class size dropped to 50. That was 1954. It wasn't called reform. It was called education.

Another recent reform effort involves Teach For America. This program brings inexperienced, uncertified trainees into the classrooms of our poor neighborhoods; school reformers tell us that simply because these trainees attended expensive universities, they'll be good teachers. St. Ann's in Pittsburgh tried that in 1955. Her name was Miss Lagloria. I have no idea what certification teachers had when I was growing up or whether Miss Lagloria had any certification at all. But I do know that I learned very little in 3rd grade because whatever else Miss Lagloria might have known about education, she had no idea how to manage a class of 3rd graders. By noon each day, she lay weeping on her desk while the good kids copied off the board, and the bad kids ran around the room. The idea of bringing inexperienced college kids into schools and calling them teachers didn't work in 1955, and it doesn't work now. A college degree never made anyone a good teacher.

So what is school reform anyway? If it's not new books and buildings or punitive evaluations systems or hiring unqualified trainees for our inner-city classrooms, then maybe it is moving public school money into charter schools, like the Achievement First network in Connecticut, that tout higher test scores and better discipline for their students, but where children may experience high rates of suspension and undergo harsh disciplinary procedures. Will this type of reform actually allow children to learn at high levels and enjoy the economic benefits of the American dream? Maybe the answer can be decided at one of those endless meetings where political, corporate, and education reform leaders wring their hands over the achievement gap, apparently unaware that they created it, they benefit from it, and they perpetuate it.

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As a nation, however, our answer to that question will make the difference in whether we survive as a democracy. If reform means transformation or improvement, then for huge numbers of poor children, it isn't working. The current "reform movement" does nothing more than highlight purported deficits and use them to justify paying already-wealthy people to fix the problems that they themselves identified and named.

For children who lack the basic resources taken for granted by millions of other children, reform needs to be refocused on the issue of educational access—not on the juggling and rejuggling of education's components by players motivated by ego, politics, and profit. And by access, I do not mean busing children off to some hypothetically superior suburban school where their poverty and color may actually work to marginalize them further.

On the one hand, children living in poverty need access to the same types of experiences affluent children enjoy, the same high expectations for learning, the same enriched curriculum,

and the same learning environments. To achieve this, we do not need programs like Teach For America that consider our cities third-world countries where the missionary spirit can thrive. Nor do we need the types of charter schools that require poor children to stifle their creativity and listen ad infinitum to ideas about their needs, which are rooted in the condescending belief that certain children need boot camp instead of education. To put it bluntly, poor children need access to the same education affluent children have.

On the other hand, those who would call themselves teachers must access the minds and hearts of their students. Learning can happen only when children are met where they are and led to where they need to be. That type of teaching requires all educators, including leaders, to truly believe that there is something worthwhile inside the mind of every child and that the experiences they bring—some horrible, some anti-social, some loving, and some wonderful—are worth accessing and using in furtherance of education. If we do not know and accept our students for who they are, for what they know, and for what they've done, we cannot educate them.

The charge, then, for those hired and paid handsomely for "school reform efforts," and for the corporate sponsors who fund them, is to enter into the neighborhoods they presume to preach about, meet the parents they claim to want to engage, know the children whose lives they play with, and truly understand the system they wish to reform. Perhaps then we can see real change in our K-12 public schools and in the lives of the children they are supposed to serve.

Ann Evans de Bernard, a retired principal of Waltersville School in Bridgeport, Conn., is currently an adjunct professor of education at the University of St. Joseph in Hartford, Conn.

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