

EDUCATION WEEK

April 27, 2011

Poor Teaching for Poor Children ... in the Name of Reform

By Alfie Kohn

[This is a slightly expanded version of the published article.]

Love them or hate them, the proposals collectively known as “school reform” are mostly top-down policies: divert public money to quasi-private charter schools, pit states against one another in a race for federal education dollars, offer rewards when test scores go up, fire the teachers or close the schools when they don’t.

Policy makers and the general public have paid much less attention to what happens inside classrooms -- the particulars of teaching and learning -- especially in low-income neighborhoods. The news here has been discouraging for quite some time, but, in a painfully ironic twist, things seem to be getting worse as a direct result of the “reform” strategies pursued by the Bush administration, then intensified under President Obama, and cheered by corporate executives and journalists.

In an [article](#) published in *Phi Delta Kappan* back in 1991, Martin Haberman, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, coined the phrase “pedagogy of poverty.” Based on his observations in thousands of urban classrooms, Haberman described a tightly controlled routine in which teachers dispense, and then test students on, factual information; assign seatwork; and punish noncompliance. It is a regimen, he said, “in which learners can ‘succeed’ without becoming either involved or thoughtful” -- and it is noticeably different from the questioning, discovering, arguing, and collaborating that is more common (though by no means universal) among students in suburban and private schools.

Now, two decades later, Haberman reports that “the overly directive, mind-numbing... anti-intellectual acts” that pass for teaching in most urban schools “not only remain the coin of the realm but have become the gold standard.” It’s how you’re *supposed* to teach kids of color.

Earlier this year, Natalie Hopkinson, an African American writer, put it this way in an

[article](#) called “The McEducation of the Negro”: “In the name of reform... education -- for those “failing” urban kids, anyway -- is about learning the rules and following directions. Not critical thinking. Not creativity. It's about how to correctly eliminate three out of four bubbles.”

Those who demand that we “close the achievement gap” generally focus only on results, which in practice refers only to test scores. High-quality instruction is defined as whatever raises those scores. But when teaching strategies *are* considered, there is wide agreement (again, among noneducators) about what constitutes appropriate instruction in the inner city.

The curriculum consists of a series of separate skills, with more worksheets than real books, more rote practice than exploration of ideas, more memorization (sometimes assisted with chanting and clapping) than thinking. In books like *The Shame of the Nation*, Jonathan Kozol, another frequent visitor to urban schools, describes a mechanical, precisely paced process for drilling black and Latino children in “obsessively enumerated particles of amputated skill associated with upcoming state exams.”

Not only is the teaching scripted, with students required to answer fact-based questions on command, but a system of almost militaristic behavior control is common, with public humiliation for noncompliance and an array of rewards for obedience that calls to mind the token economy programs developed in prisons and psychiatric hospitals.

Deborah Meier, the educator and author who has founded extraordinary schools in New York and Boston, points out that the very idea of “school” has radically different meanings for middle-class kids, who are “expected to have opinions,” and poor kids, who are expected to do what they’re told. Schools for the well-off are about inquiry and choices; schools for the poor are about drills and compliance. The two types of institutions “barely have any connection to each other,” she says.

Adds Kozol: “The children of the suburbs learn to think and to interrogate reality,” while inner-city kids “are trained for nonreflective acquiescence.” (Work hard, be nice.) At one of the urban schools he visited, a teacher told him, “If there were middle-class white children here, the parents would rebel at this curriculum and stop it cold.”

Among the research that has confirmed the disparity are two studies based on data from the periodic National Assessment of Educational Progress. One found that black children are much more likely than white children to be taught with workbooks or worksheets on a daily basis. The other revealed a racial disparity in how computers are used for instruction, with African Americans mostly getting drill and practice exercises (which, the study also found, are associated with poorer results).

Yet another study, by a researcher at Michigan State University, discovered that students in more affluent neighborhoods were given more choice in their reading, more opportunities to talk with one another about books, the chance to analyze and write poetry and to learn skills in the context of real literature.

Well before his brief tenure last year as New Jersey's Commissioner of Education, Bret Schundler expressed considerable enthusiasm about the sort of teaching that involves constant drill and repetition and "doesn't allow children not to answer." This approach is "bringing a lot of value-added for our children," he enthused. *Our children?* Does that mean he would send his own kids to that kind of school? Of course not. "Those schools are best for certain children," he explained.

The result is that "certain children" are left farther and farther behind. The rich get richer, while the poor get worksheets.

To be sure, the gap is not entirely due to how kids are taught. As economist Richard Rothstein reminds us, all school-related variables combined can explain only about one-third of the variation in student achievement. Similarly, if you look closely at those international test comparisons that supposedly find the U.S. trailing, it turns out that socioeconomic factors are largely responsible. Our wealthier students do very well compared to other countries; our poorer students do not. And we have more poor children than do other industrialized nations.

To whatever extent education does matter, though, the pedagogy of poverty traps those who are subject to it. The problem isn't that their education lacks "rigor" -- in fact, a single-minded focus on "[raising the bar](#)" has served mostly to push more low-income youths out of school -- but that it lacks depth and relevance and the capacity to engage students. As Deborah Stipek, dean of Stanford's School of Education, once commented, drill-and-skill instruction isn't how middle-class children got their edge, so "why use a strategy to help poor kids catch up that didn't help middle class kids in the first place?"

Essentially the same point has been made by one educational expert after another, including two prominent African Americans in the field: Linda Darling-Hammond (who observed that the "most counterproductive [teaching] approaches" are "enforced most rigidly in the schools serving the most disadvantaged students") and Claude Steele ("a skills-focused, remedial education...virtually guarantee[s] the persistence of the race gap").

Rather than viewing the pedagogy of poverty as a disgrace, however, many of the charter schools championed by the new reformers have concentrated on perfecting and intensifying techniques to keep children "on task" and compel them to follow directions. (Interestingly, their carrot-and-stick methods mirror those used by policy makers to control educators.) Bunches of eager, mostly white, college students are

invited to drop by for a couple of years to lend their energy to this dubious enterprise.

Is racism to blame here -- or perhaps behaviorism? Or could it be that, at its core, the corporate version of “school reform” was never intended to promote thinking -- let alone interest in learning -- but merely to improve test results? That pressure is highest in the inner cities, where the scores are lowest. And the pedagogy of poverty can sometimes “work” to raise those scores, which makes everyone happy and inclined to reward those teachers.

Unfortunately, that result is often at the expense of real learning, the sort that more privileged students enjoy, because the tests measure what matters least. Thus, it’s possible for the accountability movement to *simultaneously narrow the test-score gap and widen the learning gap*.

What’s to be done? In the short run, Deborah Meier is probably right when she remarks, “Only secretly rebellious teachers have ever done right by our least advantaged kids.” To do right by them in the open, we would need structural changes that make the best kind of teaching available to the kids who need it most.

And we know it *can* work -- which is to say, the pedagogy of poverty is not what’s best for the poor. There’s plenty of precedent. A three-year [study](#) (published by the U.S. Department of Education) of 140 elementary classrooms with high concentrations of poor children found that students whose teachers emphasized “meaning and understanding” were far more successful than those who received basic-skills instruction. The researchers concluded by decisively rejecting “schooling for the children of poverty . . . [that] emphasizes basic skills, sequential curricula, and tight control of instruction by the teacher.”

Remarkable results with low-income students of all ages have also been found with the [Reggio Emilia](#) model of early-childhood education, the [“performance assessment”](#) high schools in New York, and [“Big Picture”](#) schools around the country. All of these start with students’ interests and questions; learning is organized around real-life problems and projects. Exploration is both active and interactive, reflecting the simple truth that kids learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. Finally, success is judged by authentic indicators of thinking and motivation, not by multiple-choice tests.

That last point is critical. [Standardized exams](#) serve mostly to make dreadful forms of teaching appear successful. As long as they remain our primary way of evaluating, we may never see *real* school reform -- only an intensification of traditional practices, with the very worst reserved for the disadvantaged.

A British educator named David Gribble was once speaking in favor of the kind of education that honors children’s interests and helps them to think deeply about

questions that matter. Of course, he added, that sort of education is appropriate for affluent children. For disadvantaged children, on the other hand, it is . . . *essential*.

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